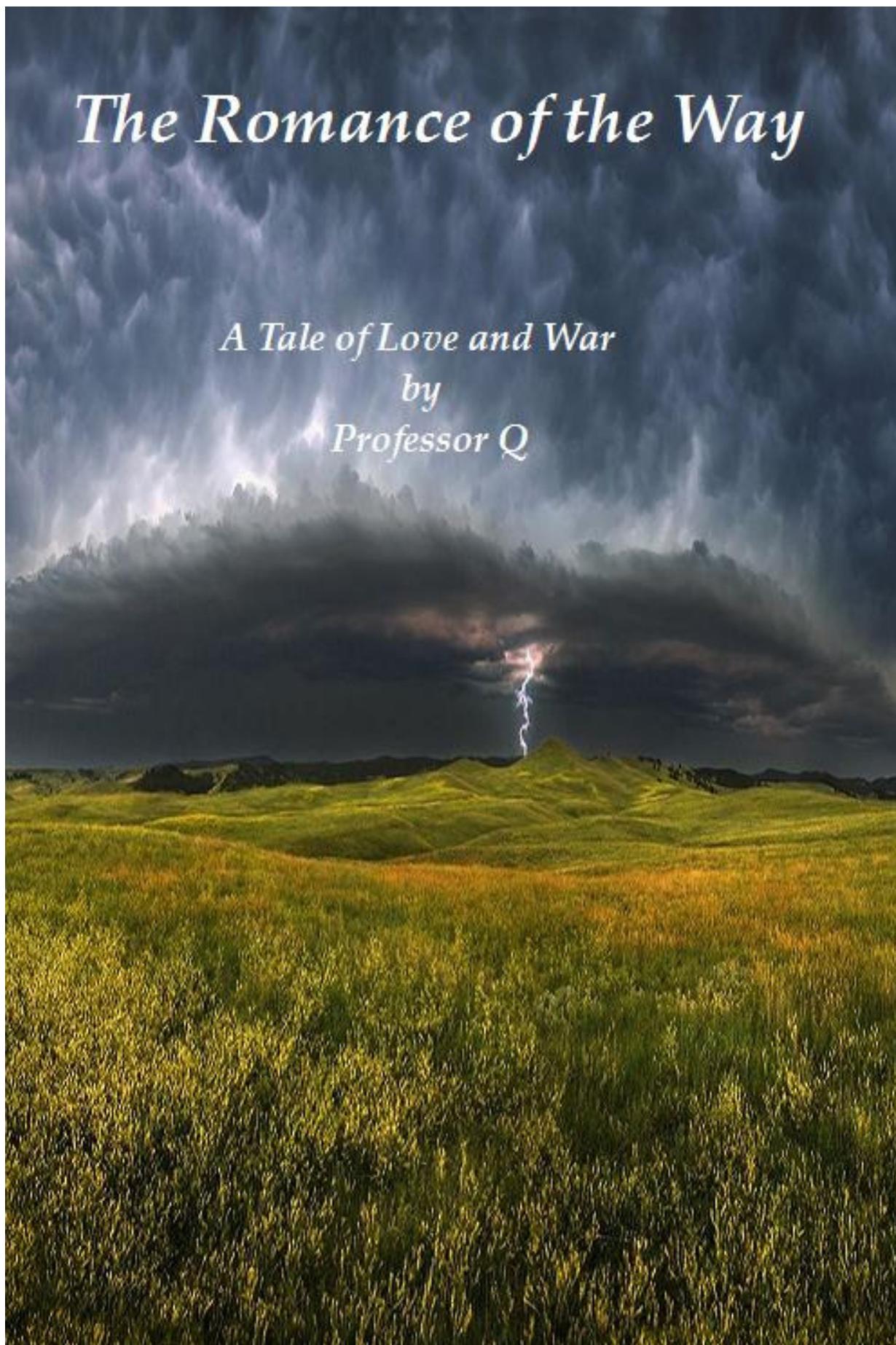


The Romance of the Way

A Tale of Love and War

by

Professor Q



The Romance of the Way

*“Love is itself the fulfilment of all our works.
There is the goal; that is why we run:
we run toward it, and once we reach it,
in it we shall find rest.”*

- Saint Augustine of Hippo

Dedication

To Admiral Styles, *melior artifex*.

And to C., the *raison d'être* of this story.

Introduction and disclaimer

“**The Romance of the Way**” is a work of fan-fiction – a novel set in a fictional universe that another author has created, and which is intended as a tribute to the original writer.

In this case, the universe being explored is that of Admiral Styles’ admirable role-playing game, **Love and War**, which has been my constant companion for the past two years. **Love and War** can be downloaded for free at <http://antioch.snow-fall.com/law/downloads.shtml>, and is warmly recommended.

For reasons of plot – and as a further tribute – **The Romance of the Way** also borrows elements from two other role-playing games: **The Way** by Lun Calsari, and **Romancing Walker** by FLARE. Though these games are worlds apart – the former is a dark and thought-provoking epic, the latter a light-hearted and conventional fantasy romp – they remain personal favourites of the author’s, and provided the perfect background for the current story’s historical setting and detail.

While a knowledge of these games is not essential to enjoying this story, a working acquaintance with **Love and War** is helpful, especially for the reader who finds the first few chapters confusing. (A brief summary of the plot of **Love and War** is provided below, but cannot fully capture the essence of the original.)

Finally, this is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual places, people or events – though inevitable, given that this story deals with human characters and a society similar to ours – is purely coincidental and unintentional.

Love and War: the story so far...

Disclaimer: the following brief summary of the *Love and War* canon, up to Act II, is provided only as an aid to the curious reader. It cannot substitute for the experience of actually playing both games, which can be downloaded for free from <http://antioch.snow-fall.com/law/downloads.shtml>.

Love and War is a story set in the fictional Kingdom of Galvenia, a country with a parliamentary monarchy somewhat similar to the modern United Kingdom. Besides Galvenia, there are four other nations on Terra: the Varald Directorate (a totalitarian state akin to Soviet Russia or East Germany), the Zion Empire (an old-fashioned Imperial state ruled by a strong Emperor and Viceroy), Itaria (a peace-loving, religious country with some parallels to the real-world Vatican) and the Fulton Republic (a loose confederation of states with wide variations in culture, religion and language). All these five countries are centrally supervised by the Commonwealth, situated on Unity Isle, whose representatives are democratically elected from among their citizens.

As **Act I (“The Ties That Bind”)** opens, we meet Ryan Eramond, a young man of eighteen from the town of Davenport, Galvenia, who has just graduated from high school. He has just broken up with his girlfriend, Marianne, after accidentally walking in on her kissing another classmate. Seeing that he is uncertain about his future path in life, his father ropes him in to the family business of delivering packages. On his first such jaunt, with his friends Henrik and Armin, he meets a mysterious figure named Lugner, and saves a town from an attack by venomous snakes.

On his second journey, he is accompanied by his childhood friend Lavender (“Lavie”), who is in love with him – though, given his recent situation with Marianne, these feelings remain unrequited. Just prior to his departure for the town of Glendale, Ryan is accosted by Makarov Juno, a classmate who bears a grudge against him for an unknown reason. Annoyed by Juno’s attitude, the two duel, and Ryan emerges victorious.

Doing a little detective work, they recover a package that was stolen by the Mayor of Glendale, Samuel Talmadge, and his aide Kodenai. They are trapped in Glendale overnight and forced to stay together at an inn, during which Lavie eagerly waits for a romantic overture from Ryan. However, her hopes are disappointed, leaving her frustrated and angry with him.

A little later, Ryan heads off with Henrik and Armin to save the town of Alton from the attacks of a mysterious creature, named the “Gorn Jabola”. During their quest, they encounter Juno, who is also seeking the reward for saving Alton. However, Juno is stopped by the enigmatic Lugner, who defeats him convincingly and leaves him wounded. Ryan and his friends advise

Juno to return and seek medical aid, and they defeat the Gorn Jabola, which strangely turns into dust as it dies.

In the meantime, Ryan's father Theodore has a job for him, but Ryan is away in Alton, so he entrusts the task – the delivery of a package to Mann Island – to Lavie instead. Lavie completes the errand successfully, and also meets her grandmother Anne, who talks to her of life and love.

In Ryan's final adventure in Act I, he is summoned by the Galvenian government to the capital city, Lorean. There, he is requested by the Prime Minister, Martell Socius, to hunt down Kodenai, who has escaped from jail and may be involved in treason. Taking his friend Henrik along, the two follow Kodenai's trail into the depths of Mount Lorea Mine, where they meet Juno – who thwarts them – and then Lugner, who prevents Juno from progressing. Despite this, both Ryan and Juno set off in pursuit of Lugner, but are stopped by an attack from a giant worm, which they successfully defeat. Agreeing to a truce for the sake of capturing the traitor, Ryan and Henrik set off with Juno in search of Kodenai. Their search ends on the top of Davenport Peak, where the three of them defeat Kodenai in battle. He surrenders, but before he can be taken back to Lorean, Juno kills him for unknown reasons. Ryan is outraged by this brutal act, and is about to fight Juno, when Henrik suddenly intervenes, knocking Ryan out with a punch and allowing Juno to escape. Feeling betrayed, Ryan says little to Henrik on the journey back, and Henrik covers up for Juno by telling the government that Kodenai was accidentally killed in a scuffle.

As Act I ends, Ryan is given an exciting assignment by his father – to travel to Caledonia, in the Zion Empire, and deliver a package there. There is one catch – he will be accompanied by Lavie (his father harbours hopes that the two will make a match of it), much to his annoyance, though Lavie is delighted. As a coming of age present, Ryan's father also gives him a gift – the sword that belonged to his grandfather, Gustav Eramond, a war veteran whom Ryan idolizes. However, due to spending too much time dressing up for the occasion – which she sees as a golden opportunity to win Ryan's affection – Lavie misses the ship to Caledonia, and Ryan leaves alone. (Chapter One of *The Romance of the Way* picks up this thread.)

Interspersed with these scenes are events from the Commonwealth – we see that relations between the Varald and the Zion are deteriorating, and the new President-Elect, Junzio Koketsu of Zion, is mysteriously assassinated on board his ship.

In **Act II (as yet untitled)**, Ryan leaves for Caledonia, sparing only a few seconds to feel sorry for Lavie. He has a good time on board the *Paradiso*, a luxury cruiser, and on his third day aboard, he meets a charming young lady who has stowed away. Rising to the occasion, he chivalrously offers her Lavie's ticket when she is about to be arrested by the ship's guards, and she reveals

that she is actually Carranya, the Crown Princess of Galvenia, and that she is heading for Caledonia to meet the Zion Emperor, Charlemagne, to try and head off a war between the Zion and the Varald (whom the Zion blame for Koketsu's death.) As they spend the day together, Ryan and Carranya become friends, and even take on the lead roles in a play on board the ship, based on the true stories of Carranya's ancestors, Prince Derren and Lady Penelope of Galvenia. After the play, Carranya seems to be on the verge of confessing something to Ryan, when the ship's engines suddenly explode and the ship is boarded by pirates. Ryan and Carranya realize that the pirates must be after Prince Wilhelm of Zion, who is also on board the ship, returning after military negotiations with Carranya's father, the King of Galvenia. They rush to his rescue, but find that he has been assassinated by a man who suddenly disappears when Ryan tries to shoot him. Realizing that they must secure their own escape, the pair fight off the pirates, and Ryan kills their leader, Captain Blackheart, when he tries to use Carranya as a shield. The story ends on a cliff-hanger, with Ryan comforting a terrified Carranya, and telling her that they have to try and escape using the life-boats. (Chapter Four of *The Romance of the Way* begins here.)

Interspersed with this main plot are two scenes: one of them is the death of Ryan and Henrik's mentor, Colonel Whitworth, a war hero and swordmaster, with Henrik at his bedside; the other depicts Makarov Juno leaving home, claiming that the time has come for him to prove his worth as a warrior. (Chapter Three of *The Romance of the Way* begins here.)

There is much more to the original story, of course, but most of the remaining details are either covered in this story, or must be experienced first-hand by playing *Love and War* itself.

A more detailed but less formal look at *Love and War* and its characters can be found at *TV Tropes*: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/VideoGame/LoveAndWar>

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 17, “The Third Way”, contains – for purposes of parody – brief excerpts from **“Redeeming Love”** by Francine Rivers, copyright 1997-2009, Random House. (Names have been changed and some language toned down, both for consonance with the story’s universe and for a G rating.)

All Biblical quotations in the text (the chapter epigraphs) are taken from **The New Jerusalem Bible**, copyright 1985, Doubleday.

The Romance of the Way

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

*"Paint a picture, using only gray
Light your pillow, lay back, watch the flames
I tell a story, no one listen that long
It's hard to imagine, it's hard to imagine..."*
- Pearl Jam, "Hard to Imagine"

Many tales have been told about the strange and wondrous events of C.Y. 300, and what came after.

Some of them are almost certainly true. Some of them are probably poetic exaggerations. And yet others are sheer legends, of the sort that inevitably emerge after any sort of world-changing event, whether for good or for evil.

The story you are about to hear draws on all these sources. I have tried, after careful discussion with my fellow scholars at both King's College and Zion University, to separate the wheat from the chaff, but after almost two generations have passed, this is not as simple as it sounds. However, this version of events, though it may still be coloured by legend, still explains a good deal of what really did happen during that fateful time. I present it not so much as a history lesson (for history is not my subject) but simply as a story, one that many of the good citizens of Terra have drawn comfort and meaning from. Beyond this, I can make no guarantees.

I have also drawn extensively upon "Romancing The Way" by Karl Tremfein, Jr., the popular account of the Crisis of C.Y. 300 that is traditionally performed once a year aboard the cruiser ships of the Kingdom of Galvenia and the Zion Empire. My very title is but a slight modification of this work's. But Mr. Tremfein, being a playwright and the descendant of playwrights, has almost certainly exaggerated some things and omitted others that are a part of the historical record - and I have taken the liberty of modifying his text where more reliable chronicles exist.

"Here, then, we shall begin our account without further ado; it would be nonsense to write a long preface to a story and then abbreviate the story itself." (2 Maccabees, 2:32)

PROLOGUE: FOR WANT OF A CRATE

Author's note: For ease of reading, and to prevent the gentle reader* from sinking into monotony, I have taken the liberty - like most historians - of reconstructing conversations and speeches by the principal characters. Where these are available in documentary form, as is the case for Professor Spenson's lectures, I have reproduced them faithfully; in other cases, as in the current narrative, some free reconstruction has been used, without tampering with the facts.

"These were the heroes of days gone by, men of renown." (Genesis 6: 4)

For all its current, harmless appearance, the Children's Recreation Club at Lorean has had a long and chequered history. It was not seventy years ago that this modest-looking building was known as the Explorers' Guild - nominally a guild recognized by the King of Galvenia, but in truth a place of doubtful reputation, where mercenaries, rogue mages, and conspirators could meet under conditions of relative anonymity. Later, in the aftermath of the second Crisis, the Guild was used as a base for operations by underground resistance forces, until they were able to move more freely. About a decade ago, in C.Y. 352, the Galvenian Government - torn between consigning a place with such a dubious history to oblivion, and recognizing its brief association with the heroic events of generations past - decided to reconstruct it as a centre for the amusement of the children of Lorean; and thus did it pass from the explorers to the guilds of storytellers, minstrels, and teachers of Galvenia. *Sic transit gloria mundi*, as the Itarians would say.

Today, at the Club, a group of young children - aged between seven and ten, and enjoying a half-holiday from Raymond Chester School - were listening with rapt attention to one such storyteller, though it must be confessed that, if you were asked to guess his occupation from his appearance, you would probably hazard that he was a Palace guard, so impressive a physical specimen was he. His baggy green trousers and simple white singlet made him look like a trainee at the Military Academy, but his voice was surprisingly gentle. This man's ancestors - like the Club he now worked for - had played their own part in the legendary events of yesteryear, but he - like his Government - was quite content to live peacefully in peace-time.

"Arr," he said in a broad Northern Galvenian accent, picking up a large stack of books that lay on the table, "I be a book lifter." The children giggled; they had seen him indulging in similar feats of strength earlier, and knew that when he began this way, he would always have a tale of adventure and bravery to follow. He never told the same story twice - at times, he would talk about the first men and women who had ever lived on Terra, the "first Generation"; at other times, he would tell them about gentle St. Mikhail, or about the great empires of days gone by, whose only remnants were exhibits in museums. But today, he was telling them a tale of much more recent events, and it was clear that this was a subject that was especially dear to him.

BOOK LIFTER: And now I must introduce you all to some of the heroes and heroines of this story. First of all, there was a young girl from the town of Davenport, whose name was Lavinia Regale...

LITTLE GIRL: Lavender!

The Book Lifter looked around for the source of this quite unexpected interruption. She was a young girl of about ten, with long brown hair that had been arranged - apparently with much parental attention - in a rather aristocratic fashion, but wearing a simple green dress. She looked down at the floor for a moment, as if embarrassed at having spoken out, but then looked up again to face him. Strangely, he did not remember having seen her before this day.

BOOK LIFTER: Arr! I beg your pardon, little lady?

LITTLE GIRL (blushing): Sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Book Lifter Man, but her name was Lavender, not Lavinia.

BOOK LIFTER (smiling): Arr, right you are! I canna think how I came to make that mistake. But tell me, my young friend, how did you know?

LITTLE GIRL (in a low tone): I just...knew, that's all!

BOOK LIFTER (beaming): I say, you may actually grow up to be a Storyteller yourself, Miss...

LITTLE GIRL: Emily. Emily Anderson.

BOOK LIFTER: Arr... that's a nice name. Let's have a round of applause for Emily here, friends...

The little incident gone by, the Storyteller resumed his tale, and time flew away gently, until a bell began to ring, loud and slow, chiming twelve times.

BOOK LIFTER: Arr... that's twelve o'clock now, my bairns. And you know what that means...

CHILDREN (all together): Aww! That was such a great story, Mr. Book Lifter! We want to hear more of it!...

BOOK LIFTER (booming above all the children's voices): Sorry, little ones. I canna lift the bell from the clock tower, after all. But we'll meet again in just two days more, and....

CHILDREN (all together): Yay!

BOOK LIFTER (smiling): Run along, then. Your folks will be waiting for you, that's for sure!

The story over for the day, the Storyteller's young audience rushed excitedly out of the Club, and into the lane where their parents, grandparents, and elder siblings were waiting eagerly to take them home for the weekend. Or rather, they all rushed out, except one, who was looking sheepishly at the Book Lifter, as though she wanted to ask him a question, but was not sure how to.

BOOK LIFTER (kindly): Arr, run along, little Emily! Your mum and dad must be waiting for you, and I promise I'll tell you the rest later...

EMILY (taking her courage in her hands): That's not it, Mr. Book Lifter... I just wanted to...

BOOK LIFTER: Ask me a question, perhaps? Arr, ask away. As long as it's not a question about crates!

EMILY (puzzled): Crates?

BOOK LIFTER (laughing): Just my little joke, dear. Now, what was it you wanted to say?

EMILY: Mr. Book Lifter... that story you just told us... Is it.... really true?

BOOK LIFTER (kindly): Arr, of course it is, child. You'll even find it in the history books when you're a little older, though I do say my version's a lot more fun! (chuckles)

EMILY (quickly and breathlessly): So....does that mean my Gran really did all those things you said?

BOOK LIFTER (surprised): Your...Gran?

EMILY (brightly): Yes! My Gran's name is Lavender Regale... or, rather, that's what she was called, before she married Grandpa.

BOOK LIFTER: Arr, I... see. (Cautiously) And what is your Grandpa's name, Emily?

EMILY: Ryan Eramond. Just like in your story.... (looks down) ... was that part also true?

BOOK LIFTER (very, very surprised!): Well, I never!..... So you're their grand-daughter, I see. Arr.. strange, very strange. If I'd known.... Well, Emily, yes, it is all true. You know... why don't you ask your Gran about it? Maybe she could tell you the story better than I could. (laughs)

EMILY: Ask Gran? But...

BOOK LIFTER (smiling): Arr? Doesn't your Gran tell you stories, child? Mine certainly did....

EMILY (a little sadly): Well... she used to. I used to come and visit her often, here in Lorean, with Mummy and Daddy, and she'd tell me a story every night. But last year...

BOOK LIFTER (understanding all of a sudden): ...your Grandpa... He passed on, didn't he...

EMILY (wiping tears from her eyes): Yes..

The Book Lifter pulled an enormous, checked red handkerchief from the back pocket of his pantaloons, and slowly dried Emily's face with it.

EMILY (trying to smile): Thank you..

BOOK LIFTER: Arr, think nothing of it. So do you still get to see your Gran now?

EMILY: Yes, Mr. Book Lifter. After...that happened, Mummy and Daddy brought me here, and I've been staying with Gran for, umm, almost a year now. They thought she might feel better if I was around.

BOOK LIFTER: Arr, I'm sure you must be making things a little cheerful for her!

EMILY: Oh, I do try! And Gran's happy to have me around, I know! It's just that (looking down, sadly)... she doesn't tell me any more stories. When I ask her for one, she just smiles - but she doesn't look

happy, and she says, "Emily, there's one story I must tell you some day, but I'm not sure if you're ready to hear it, or if I'm ready to tell it. Some other day, Emily..."

BOOK LIFTER: Arr, I know just the thing!

EMILY (looking up): You do?

Without a word, the Book Lifter lifted Emily up - gently, but surely - with no more effort than if she had been a stack of books. Taken aback for a moment, Emily began to laugh at the sheer unexpectedness of it all.

BOOK LIFTER: Arr, I be a.... little girl lifter! (laughs)

EMILY (laughing): You're funny, Mr. Book Lifter!

BOOK LIFTER (seating her on a chair): I'll tell you what, Emily. It looks like your Gran's a Storyteller, like me. And we Storytellers... well, we know things about each other. So here's what you should do. Listen carefully. (drops his voice to a whisper)

EMILY (conspiratorially): What should I do?

BOOK LIFTER: When you go home and meet your Gran, say that you want to tell *her* a story today. Then tell her all the things I just told you about. And watch what happens.

EMILY: Do you really think I should do that?

BOOK LIFTER: Arr, trust me, Emily. Us Storytellers *know*. Trust me, and try it out. But now you'd best be getting home, you've got a story to tell!

EMILY (throwing her arms around his neck): Thank you, Mr. Book Lifter, thank you! Thank you!

BOOK LIFTER (blushing): Arr, it's nothing, my little friend. Run along, now.

Emily needed no further encouragement, and ran happily out of the Club, while the Book Lifter smiled to himself and nodded slowly.

"Arr, the spitting image of her grandmother, she be. She's going to hear the greatest story of her life *now*, that's for sure..."

The old lady came running down the lane to meet her granddaughter, with a bounce in her step that belied her eighty years.

OLD LADY: "And what was my favourite granddaughter in the whole world doing in there for so long? Tell me about it!"

EMILY (slipping her hand into the old lady's): "I've got a story to tell you, Gran."

OLD LADY: "A story? Now isn't that nice. You know, when I was your age, I used to love listening to stories... and telling them, as well. It looks like you're taking after me in more ways than one."

EMILY: "But this story is *special*, Gran!"

OLD LADY: "Every story is special, Emily, as long as you tell it right..."

EMILY (insistent): "This one is *more* special than any other old story!"

OLD LADY: "Oh dear, what *are* they telling you at that Club these days? Let me guess. When I was your age, I loved stories about sailors and ships. Has that Storyteller been telling you stories about them? Did I guess right?"

EMILY (smiling): "Wrong guess, Gran."

OLD LADY: "My, my. I'm getting old, Emily. But let me guess again. Ah... I've got it! Pirates! You look all flushed and excited, dearie. He must've been telling you about pirates!"

EMILY (laughing): "Wrong *again*, Gran!"

While they were chatting away in this agreeable manner, the little girl and her grandmother - walking briskly, hand in hand - had come to a small but elegant house, tucked away in a corner of the northern district of Lorean.

OLD LADY: "Wrong again? I see you've inherited my brains as well, young lady!" (chuckles) "But here we are at home, sweetie. You can tell me all about it once we get inside."

EMILY: "I will, Gran!"

With an ease born of years of familiarity, Emily reached up to grasp the large knocker on the gate - shaped strangely like a crocodile - and brought it down firmly against the gate. As if on cue, a plump, middle-aged woman in a black dress, with her white cap slightly askew, came running up to it with a look of concern on her face. "Good afternoon, Ma'am! And Miss Emily! I was just starting to worry about the two of you. Goodness, what kept you for so long? I do hope you've been careful!"

OLD LADY (laughing): "You always say that, Maria. As did your mother before you. But we're always careful, aren't we, Emily?"

EMILY (laughing): "Yes, Gran, we always are! I was just telling Gran about a story I wanted to tell her today!"

MARIA (beaming): "A story! Now isn't that clever, Miss Emily! I must hear this too."

EMILY: "No, Maria, this is a story I have to tell Gran first! We'll tell you about it later, I promise, but Gran has to hear it first!"

MARIA (smiling): "Is that so! Well, come on in, you must be starving! I've made all your f..."

Emily, on hearing this last statement, had already begun to run into the house excitedly, to conduct her own investigations in the kitchen.

OLD LADY: "Emily! Don't forget to wash your hands, sweetheart! Goodness gracious, that child is the living image of me, when I was her age..."

MARIA: "So my mother always said, ma'am."

OLD LADY: "Your mother! Goodness, *that* brings back memories. Why, it seems like only yesterday that Carmen would be calling after me, or cleaning up after my, ahem, first efforts at housework. How time does fly.."

MARIA: "Indeed it does, Mrs. Eramond, ma'am. Indeed it does."

CHAPTER ONE: A GRANDMOTHER'S HEART

*"Listen to me, my child, and learn knowledge,
and give your whole mind to my words."*

- Ecclesiasticus, ch. 16, v. 24

After having washed their hands, Emily and her grandmother were both seated at table, waiting eagerly as fascinating smells wafted in from the kitchen.

"Just a little while more, Ma'am," Maria's voice came from the same direction, echoing through the large dining hall. "It should be almost..."

Mrs. Eramond smiled. Maria was quite a dear, especially when she tried to faithfully copy the Lancaster family recipes. She usually succeeded, but got so flustered in attempting to do so that she often provided her employers with a fair share of comic relief. "I think we're going to have quite an interesting lunch today, sweetie," she whispered to her granddaughter.

Emily giggled. "Poor Maria. She does try so hard, doesn't she? But I still prefer Mummy's cooking, when she gets the time to cook... and yours," she added loyally.

"Mine? Emily, dear, it may surprise you to know this, but I used to be quite awful at cooking. In fact, your Grandpa was one of my sternest critics. Why, he even used to call my brownies the 'Kitchen Katastrophes'. Oh, that man..." She paused, and chuckled quietly.

"That's mean of Grandpa!" Emily protested. "Or was he just kidding? Your brownies are the best, Gran!"

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Eramond said, still smiling broadly, "but that was after many, many years of practice. You know what they say, don't you. Practice makes perfect. And, of course, I had good teachers. My own mother, and my own Gran..."

"Your..." Emily remained silent for a while, trying to digest the fact that her own grandmother had, long ago, once had a grandmother of her own.

"So while we're waiting for Maria to get things straightened out, why don't you start telling me your story, darling? It will make the waiting easier," her grandmother went on.

Emily began to open her mouth, then stopped.

"Are you very hungry, dear?" Mrs. Eramond asked, sympathetically.

"I *am* hungry, Gran," Emily replied, "but I was just thinking about the story. You see, Gran, it's a story about you!"

"About...me?" Mrs. Eramond replied, amused. "Why on Terra was that Storyteller telling you a story about *me*, of all people? It couldn't have been very interesting. You know, maybe he was one of those men from the Storyteller's Guild, who bought one of my pies at last year's Commonwealth Cook-Off! Poor man, I hope he got good value for his money. Was he telling you a story about my pie, then?"

“No, Gran, no! It wasn’t about you *now*, it was about you....” She paused for a moment, doing a little mental calculation. “.. Sixty-two years ago! That’s what he said, ‘in the year 300’. That’s sixty-two years ago, isn’t it, Gran?”

“Very clever, dear,” her grandmother replied, with a twinkle in her eye. “I see you’re coming along well with your arithmetic. But you know, I was just a schoolgirl then! Perhaps just a little older than you. What could he possibly....” She suddenly stopped, and her face grew grave. She looked at her little granddaughter intently. “Tell me, Emily dear, what *exactly* is this story about?”

“It was awesome, Gran! It was about how you went to school with Grandpa, and then you fought a giant lizard, and then you became a detective and put a mean old robber in jail! And...And he said there was lots more, but he’d tell us next time, and he got your name wrong, and I told him that your name was Lavender and not Lavinia, and then he told me you were a Storyteller too, and he told me to tell you this story, and....” Emily began, excitedly, the words spilling out of her.

Mrs. Eramond was far too well-bred to let her jaw drop, but she was sufficiently surprised to let her mouth hang open for more than a few seconds. “I...see,” she said, and it was not clear whether she was trying to laugh, weep, look stern, or do all three at the same time. “I see.”

“Gran?” Emily looked at her grandmother with concern. “What’s the matter?”

Mrs. Eramond sighed. “Oh, don’t be sad, dear. Here I was, waiting for the right time to tell you all about it, and it looks like the time has come at last. Those silly, silly Storytellers. Infinity bless them.”

“You mean...” Emily pondered this for a moment. “I know Mr. Book Lifter told me it was all true. Is it really, Gran? Is it *really* true?” Her eyes were wide with amazement. Emily’s grandmother was her best friend, her teacher, and her confidante – especially when her parents were away on their archaeological expeditions in the Varald Republic – but she still had a hard time picturing her as a detective, or as a fighter of any sort.

“Oh, dear”, Mrs. Eramond said, and there was something in her expression that made Emily climb down from her seat, walk over to her side, and lean against her. “It looks like my past has caught up with me at last, and I must say, I’m sort of glad it did. If you’re old enough to hear it from that Crate Lifter...”

“Book lifter, Gran,” Emily corrected her, automatically.

“...you’re old enough to hear it from me. Come here and take a seat, dear. You’re not too old to do that, I hope!”

Emily climbed onto her grandmother’s lap.

“Will *you* tell me the story, Gran?” she asked, softly.

“Why, Emily, I believe I will. Now I want you to imagine the city of Davenport. You’ve been to Davenport, haven’t you, sweetie?”

“Loads of times, Gran, when I’ve gone to visit Grandpa Anderson along with Daddy and Mummy. Mummy even took me to see your old house, once, a couple of months ago!”

“Did she? Oh, Penny, I *told* you...” Mrs. Eramond said, laughing. “Did she show you *all* the rooms there?”

“Mummy didn’t have the time, Gran,” Emily replied. “She said she’d come by one day with you, and you’d show me all around.”

“Thank you, Penny,” Mrs. Eramond said, too softly for even Emily to hear her. “Well, I want you to imagine the town of Davenport, just as it is now. It hasn’t changed too much, you know. Well, in that house, there was a family – mother, father, and a little girl. Well, maybe not such a little girl – she was, let’s say, just about seventeen. She looked a lot like you, sweetie, except that you’re much prettier.”

“Aww, Gran!” Emily said, blushing. “*That’s* not true.”

“Isn’t it?” Mrs. Eramond replied, laughing. “Well, then let’s just say she was *as* pretty as you are.”

“That’s much better,” Emily replied.

“Now, this young girl had just finished school, but she’d already got herself a little job, delivering packages for a nice man from the town of Davenport. Her name was Lavender, but everyone called her Lavie, because it was easier to say. On this day, when our story begins, Lavie was rather unhappy, I’m sad to say...”

Emily listened quietly, as her grandmother’s heart took them both back across the years...

“I’m very, very sorry, Lavie,” Theodore Eramond said, looking rather uncomfortable. “You said that he tried to stop the ship, but it was already moving..”

“Yes,” Lavie Regale replied, sadly. Mentally, she was kicking herself. How could she have been so stupid? This was going to be the greatest moment of her young life – and she’d now ruined it completely, just because she wanted to look her best. Though she was still angry with Ryan, she knew, deep inside, that what had just happened was partly her fault.

“I know you were looking forward to this,” Mr. Eramond said, tugging at his moustache. “And I must say, I did hope that by going on this trip with him, you’d...”

“I’d..what?” Lavie asked, her ears perking up.

“...Well, keep an eye on him, and keep him out of trouble!” Mr. Eramond replied, hurriedly. “Frankly, that boy of mine is just a little too self-willed for his own good. He won’t settle down to anything, but when he sees something, he just dashes off on his next adventure! The whole town is now talking about how he went snake-hunting in Trinden, and while I must say I’m proud of his courage, I do wish he’d listen to his old man a little more!”

"I don't know if I could have done that," Lavie replied, slowly. "After all, even when I accompanied him to Glendale, he managed to go... um... hunting.." She shuddered slightly, remembering her brush with the Crocogator, and then blushed most becomingly, remembering how kind Ryan had been to her after the battle, when he'd seen how frightened she was. Really, she could not understand him. How could he be so nice at times, and positively hostile to her at others?

"Hunting?" Mr. Eramond looked up. "Look here, Lavie, do you mean he dragged *you* into one of his..."

"It wasn't really his fault, Mr. Eramond," Lavie said truthfully. "You see, we found that the necklace had been stolen, and the clue to nail the criminal was with an annoying little kid, and that kid wouldn't give it to us until we brought him a pet frog, so we went off to Blackwater Park, and we were just about to make it out safely with that stupid frog when we were attacked by a scary lizard thing..." She shivered again. "I guess you could say that Ryan saved my life, really."

"Take it from me, Lavie, that boy is going to be like his grandfather some day, if his adventuring doesn't bring him to a sticky end first. I wish Father could see him now," Mr. Eramond mused.

"A sticky end?" said Lavie, alarmed. "Don't even....Don't even say that!"

Mr. Eramond chuckled. "Sorry, Lavie. As long as he sticks to the fauna and flora of Galvenia, I don't think he can get into too much trouble. But if he wants to become a soldier or a sailor, well..."

"He did talk about being a sailor once, Mr. Eramond, but that was ten years ago, and he seemed to have forgotten all about it..." Lavie replied ruefully. "But I do wish I could have gone on that trip with him..."

"Hmm." Theodore Eramond looked at her appraisingly. "Tell me, Lavie, if you don't mind my asking... I know an old man shouldn't ask such questions, but do you really care for that reckless son of mine?"

Lavie did not reply, but her blush spoke louder than a thousand words.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'. Frankly, Lavie, I think that'd be quite the thing for him, though I doubt he'd listen to me. I was like him at that age; I thought girls were annoying, and was more interested in going on commercial trips or listening to Father's war stories. That's why I wasn't too surprised when he began training with Walter in earnest, and idolizing his grandpa; we Eramond men are like that in our youth, even when we settle down to a boring career in business later on."

"He doesn't think *all* girls are annoying," Lavie said, bitterly.

"Oh." Theodore Eramond hesitated for a moment, then decided to speak. "Well, since I'm being quite frank with you, Lavie, I must say I was never too happy when he and that Robertson girl began dating. I don't want to sound snobbish – after all, I'm hardly nobility myself – but they just weren't our kind of people. And I've heard stories about Robertson's trading practices, and how he obtains antique pieces by less than honest means - not at all the kind of thing that our family would go in for. In fact, when he broke up with her just before that Senior Prom, I could barely prevent myself from saying, 'I told you so, son!' Ah well, it's puppy love. He'll get over it..."

Lavie was cheering inwardly during this monologue, though she tried not to show it. “Then you think...”, she began.

“Lavie, I’m just a businessman, not a psychologist. I don’t claim to understand what makes people tick. But I do know that most boys go through a phase of being fascinated by someone at school, but then they grow up and find someone else – someone they can truly share their lives with. I know marrying your ‘high school sweetheart’ is a favourite trope in the works of Roxanne Winters, but real life doesn’t always work that way. Heck, my father was the heart-throb of his school – being a swordmaster and all – but he eventually settled down with my mother, whom he mercilessly ignored when he was younger! I’ve heard it all from her. It takes time, child, time and patience.” He patted her shoulder encouragingly. “I know that, at seventeen, such things seem like the end of the world. But they aren’t.”

“Mr. Eramond, you are... you are the *coolest!*” Lavie replied, her eyes shining. “I... I don’t know what to say, really...”

“Say no more. Lavie, would you really like to go on that cruise?” Mr. Eramond said quietly.

“You mean... you mean the next time? There’s another package that has to go to the Zion Empire?” Lavie asked, her voice full of hope.

“I mean *this* time. You see, my company’s recently been testing out a fleet of small boats, which can carry light amounts of cargo over a distance in remarkably short times. I’ve had to shell out a pretty penny for them – they’re the latest technology from Lorean, and Socius’ taxes don’t help! – but I’ve now got four of them, two of which are at the Davenport docks. One of them, coincidentally, has to take a trip to the town of Issachar, in the Zion Empire; there are some ancient documents that the Palace is sending them as a gesture of goodwill.”

“Issachar? But isn’t that... isn’t that quite far from Caledonia?” Lavie asked tentatively. Geography had never been her favourite subject.

“Indeed it is. But the HMS *Paradiso* will have to stop at the Commonwealth checkpoint of Arlia, which separates the waters of Galvenia from those of Zion. My cargo boat can reach the checkpoint in a couple of days, comfortably ahead of the *Paradiso*, and you could board it from there if you were willing to wait a little while, maybe stay at the inn there for a day or two. I know it’s a long wait, but would you like to try?”

“*Mr. Eramond!*” Lavie exclaimed. “You’re... you’re like a miracle straight out of Itaria! Are you sure the Five Angels didn’t inspire you to think of this, or something?”

“Not at all, Lavie. You and Ryan grew up together, and you’re almost like a daughter to me. Your father and I are old friends, even if we haven’t kept in touch that much of late. And most of all, you did me a huge favour back there on Mann Island – I would have had to pay Joshua Evens almost \$50,000 if you hadn’t turned up right on time! It’s the least I can do, Lavie. Ask your parents if they’re okay with it, and if they are, then meet me at the docks by five in the evening. My skipper, Williams, will set sail then.”

“Wow... \$50,000 for a hair growth formula?” Lavie asked.

“Well, ever since the Journeymen disappeared, magical goods and items are very expensive, Lavie. In fact, I used to keep telling Sigmund that they were an even better investment than old books, but he wouldn’t pay attention. But, now, let’s not get sidetracked. Would you like to come along, Lavie? Williams is a good man, and I can trust him with you.”

“What a question! Of course I will, Mr. Eramond, I’d *love* to.... I’ve just got to go and tell Mom and Dad, *now!*” Before Theodore Eramond could say anything further, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek, and ran out of the Eramond home as fast as her legs could carry her, heading for Casa Regale...

“Well, I hope I’ve made the right decision,” Mr. Eramond said calmly, watching her run past his window.

A blonde head popped into his office, and he smiled.

“Well, what did she say, honey? Did she agree?” Sheila Eramond asked, her face flushed with excitement. “It’s just like you, Theo, coming up with ideas like this. You old softie.”

“Of course she did, dear. It could hardly have been otherwise. Now let’s see if *Ryan* will agree,” he replied dryly.

“I’m not sure,” Sigmund Regale said heavily, “that this is such a good idea, Lavie.”

“Daddy!” Lavie protested. “You were all right with my accompanying Ryan on the trip, and you even told him that you trusted him to protect me! So how is this different?”

“When did you hear me say that, young lady?” Sigmund asked, with a frown on his face.

“Well, next time you’re giving Ryan Eramond your top-secret, man-to-man talk, you might want to speak a little more softly. And leave the library door closed,” Lavie replied, teasingly.

Sigmund chuckled. Even when he and his daughter disagreed, she could always bring a smile to his face.

“Well, that was Ryan, Lavie. You’ve known him all your life. And so have I, and so has your mother. But going out on a tiny boat, with no company except one of Theodore’s sailors... I don’t know, but it just doesn’t seem right to me.”

“Come *on*, Daddy! I survived that trip on ‘Famous’ Ray’s wreck of a ship, didn’t I? This can hardly get worse than that!” Lavie argued.

“Lavie, you’re being obtuse here. A short trip to Mann Island is very, very different from travelling to the border checkpoint of another country. It’s just not safe. The papers have already been talking about how Socius has shut down the borders for routine patrolling, and Socius is a careful man. He wouldn’t do that unless he thought there was a danger of some sort. As your father, I can’t send you off into a risky situation, with no one to look after you!” Sigmund said, an edge creeping into his voice.

“Well...” Lavie saw that she had reached an impasse, so she switched tacks. “Mom, what do *you* think? Isn’t Daddy being unreasonable here? Why can’t I just go along! Mr. Eramond says it’s safe...”

“Well, I can’t say it would do much harm,” Emily Regale said slowly...

“Emily? Was your Mummy also called Emily?” the current bearer of that name asked, brightly. “Was I named after her, Gran?”

“Well, yes, dear. Your father and mother couldn’t make up their minds what to call you, so they asked me, and I suggested giving you the name of my own dear mother. She’d be very proud of you if she could see you now, you know.”

“That makes me happy, Gran...”

“Me too, sweetie. Let’s get on with the story, though!”

“Hmph!” Sigmund snorted. “Lavie, don’t try using that hang-dog expression of yours on your mother. It’s not safe for you to go alone. And let me remind you that if you hadn’t spent so much time primping, you wouldn’t...”

“Really, dear,” Emily said – catching the beginning of a red glare in her daughter’s eyes, and anxious to head it off, “I think you’ve told her that already. Lavie’s sorry that she made a mistake. But I think a trip like this would be good for her. She’s led such a sheltered life, Sigmund. She’s growing up, and she needs to have some experience of managing things on her own, rather than having Carmen clean up after her.”

“You have a point,” Sigmund conceded, “but it’s still not safe for her to go alone.”

“Why don’t you go along with her then, dear?” Emily asked, innocently. “I’m sure she’d be perfectly safe with her own father to look after her, and it’s just for a couple of days.”

“I? I go along?” Sigmund spluttered. “But how could I...”

“Just reschedule your meeting with Alex Robertson, honey, and you could easily do it. I’m sure Lavie wouldn’t mind, would you, Lavie?”

“Of course not!” said Lavie, who, by this time, would willingly have accepted Armin Tamas or even ‘Famous Ray’ as an escort, if only she could get to the Paradiso – and Ryan – somehow. “Daddy, *will* you come with me? *Please?*”

“Who’s Armin Tamas, Gran? His name sounds funny,” Emily giggled.

“Oh, Armin was a friend of your Grandpa’s. I never liked him too much as a girl, mainly because one of his favourite hobbies was making fun of my cooking!” Mrs. Eramond answered, laughing at the memory. “But you know, he was always loyal to Grandpa, and helped him out of a couple of tight spots. You’ll hear more about him during our story, dearie. But let’s go on for now.”

“Well...” Sigmund hesitated, but he knew that he was already lost.

“Please, Daddy? Mr. Eramond wouldn’t mind, I’m sure!” Lavie continued.

“Well, Lavender, since you seem to be determined on going, I can’t let you go alone. I shall come along, and maybe even ask Eramond if he could let me have a look at those documents of his. I can easily get back on a passenger ship, too. But I expect you to be on your best behavior during this trip. You’re a young lady now, and you must conduct yourself as befits your position. Is that clear?” Sigmund said, but he sounded more weary than stern.

“I promise, Daddy. I’ll be as proper as you want me to be, I’ll even act like we’re going to the Queen’s silly old garden party, with all the curtseys and bows. Thank you, Daddy!” She gave her father a hug that would have softened him even if he had been in a worse mood, and he smiled. “I’ll just pack a few things, and I’ll be ready as soon as I can!” Giving her mother a grateful embrace, she ran upstairs to her own room to make her preparations.

“Emily.” Sigmund’s voice was almost an accusation. “I know we agreed to let her go with Ryan, but aren’t we spoiling her just a *little* too much here?”

Emily Regale sighed. “Look, Sigmund, I haven’t the heart to disagree with you here. But you know she’s also had a tough time of late... and you do know that at least some of that is *your* fault.” She looked at him squarely. “Now I’m not going to dredge up the past, dear, but Lavie feels these things strongly. And something like this will help you make it up to her.”

Sigmund looked stricken, as if reminded of an inconvenient and painful truth. “Yes, dear, you’re probably right. I’ll just pack a little suitcase, tell Robertson to meet me next week, and I’m off. One must make amends, after all. To her - and to you as well.”

“There’s hope for you yet, Sigmund,” Emily said kindly, as he disappeared up the stairs.

Mr. Eramond was kindness itself. “Of course, I understand, Sigmund,” he said cheerfully. “You want your little girl to be safe, and I totally agree. The ‘Chespa Bay’ is perfectly safe, and can accommodate up to five passengers. You could even fit your entire family on board, and hardly feel the pinch! Be my guest.”

“Thank you, Theodore,” Sigmund said gratefully. “For the return journey, I’ll just...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Sigmund, it so happens that I can help out there, too. My second cargo ship, the ‘Lady Penelope’, is also taking a little trip to Darington, for a shipment of Galvenian herbs and flowers to the Zion Academy of Plant Sciences. She’ll just take a small detour and bring you home, if you can stay at the inn for one night after Lavie boards the *Paradiso*. What do you say?”

“The ‘Lady Penelope’?” Emily said doubtfully. “Mummy was named after a...ship?”

Mrs. Eramond laughed out loud. "No, you silly girl. Mummy was named after a very brave young lady, who once helped to save the Kingdom of Galvenia. The ship was also named after her, you see. You'll learn about her soon enough, once you start your Galvenian history lessons next year."

"A brave lady? Like you, Gran?" Emily asked, wide-eyed.

"Flattery will get you everywhere, dear," Mrs. Eramond replied, beaming. "No, I'm afraid Lady Penelope lived hundreds of years before I did. However, I did get the chance to meet one of her descendants... but that's in the next part of the story. Let's move on, shall we?"

"Yay!" Emily exclaimed.

"You know, Theodore, I'm starting to think that the Commonwealth Special Forces did you an injustice in refusing your services," Sigmund said appreciatively. "You're such a good strategist."

"Heh, the art of war and the art of business aren't that dissimilar, old friend. Have a safe journey! And Lavie, be sure to give my regards to Ryan when you see him, all right?" Theodore said, as he waved them goodbye.

"I most surely will, Mr. Eramond... or *die trying!*" Lavie replied. Both fathers burst out laughing at her catchphrase, which they hadn't heard for quite a while. "Goodbye, Mr. Eramond! Tell Auntie Sheila that if we make it back safely, she can cook up a banquet for all of us!"

"Very funny, Lavie," Mr. Eramond said, as father and daughter began to walk briskly towards the docks.

CHAPTER TWO: THEIR GAZE SHALL GET US HOME

*“He reduced the storm to a calm,
and all the waters subsided,
and he brought them,
overjoyed at the stillness,
to the port where they were bound.”
(Psalm 107, v. 29-30.)*

It was now a good four hours since the *Chespa Bay* had left Davenport, and was making its way merrily towards the Commonwealth Checkpost of Arlia – a small naval base, often mockingly called “Checkpoint Bravo” by the few military guards stationed there. They weren’t complaining – their duties were infinitely simpler than those of the officers at “Checkpoint Alpha”, which marked the northern end of the Kingdom of Galvenia. Lavie, getting up from her comfortable little bunk, looked out of the window, put down her book, and decided to stretch her legs a little.

“Let’s see what Daddy’s up to,” she thought. “Probably reading one of his boring books! Poor Daddy, I know he doesn’t like travelling – it was nice of him to come along, though I’m sure Mom must have talked him into it.” A quick walk down a small corridor brought her to another cabin, much like her own, and she knocked on the door smartly.

“Come in!” a voice came from behind the door, muffled by the hum of the ship’s engines.

“It’s me, Daddy!” Lavie said. “What are you reading, hmmm?”

“Dearest! Did you have a nice nap, then? Do sit down, Lavie. The trouble with fine literature is that it must be taken in small portions, and I’m glad to have you along to help me break it up.” Saying this, he laid a thick paperback book – *Gravity’s Thundercloud*, by Alphonse Spenson – face down on the table, and looked up at her. “So tell me about this summer job of yours... I’m sure it’ll make for a more interesting story that whatever poor Alphonse can come up with.”

“Oh, dear,” Lavie said, laughing. “I wonder what Henrik would say to that.”

“Now, don’t tell him I said it, dear,” Sigmund said, warily. “Alphonse is a fine man, and a fine writer... it’s just that he’s too subtle for the likes of me.”

Lavie picked up the book, and thumbed to the last page quickly. “Nine hundred and forty-six pages of subtlety? Surely that’s just a *little* too much,” she observed, with a sly smile.

“Heh. You’ve got me there, my daughter. But I guess I’m just an old fogey, who likes the old classics. I still think one *Krieg der Gotter* is worth twenty of whatever Spenson can come up with, though I’m sure its author didn’t go to Zion University like Spenson did.”

“*Krieg der Gotter*? Wow, Daddy... I’m sorry, I didn’t even tell you! When I went to Mann Island, the Headmaster, Joshua Evens, conducted a quiz show! And the last question was about *Krieg der Gotter*,

and I wasn't sure of the title, and then I remembered seeing it on your nightstand, and I got it right! Aren't you proud of me?" Lavie said, beaming.

"A quiz show? Well, I must say I am, Lavie. Today you've remembered the title of one of my boring books, and tomorrow, you might actually start reading one!" Sigmund chuckled.

"Daddy! That's not funny," Lavie protested, though she was laughing too. "Look, I even won this bangle!"

"A bangle?" Lavie held out her wrist, and her father took her hand and looked at it slowly, as its red surface gleamed under the glare of the electric light. "That's pretty, Lavie, very pretty. It suits you well. In fact, I'd say it's quite valuable! I wonder how Evens laid his hands on it."

"Oh, this was a prize, Daddy," Lavie went on, glowing at her father's praise. "Mr. Evens only gave me this because I cleared both the quiz show and an archery test, and he said I was a Level Ten archer! And he also told me that if I scraped an arrow against it, and then fired it, it would burst into flame!"

"Into flame? Hmm...." Sigmund looked at the bangle more carefully. "Now I understand.... A Fire Elemental. I didn't think they could be found so easily. Lavie, my child, you're a very lucky girl. I couldn't swear to it, but I'd bet good money that this little decoration dates back to the times of the Journeymen themselves."

"The Journeymen?" Lavie's brow wrinkled. "I've heard of them... Ryan talks about them, sometimes. They were ancient magicians, right?"

"Right you are, Lavie," Sigmund said proudly. "Your bangle makes use of a magical effect known as the Fire Elemental, in order to set your arrows on flame. Have you tried it yet?"

"Not yet, Daddy," Lavie replied. "Maybe we could go hunting one day, and I could try it out!"

"Ah, yes, it's a long time since we paid Vincent a visit! I'll tell you what, Lavie, when you get back from your cruise, we'll take a little hunting trip to Trinden, and you can show me how it works. I've always had a fascination for all things magical, ever since I took that course on 'Magical Artifacts of the Kingdom of Gyrus' when I was at University."

"Gyrus?" Lavie pronounced the name tentatively; she'd never heard it before. "Where's that?"

"Some spell it Gyrus, and some make it a word of three syllables – Gaia-Rus. Gyrus was an ancient kingdom that existed thousands of years ago, in what we'd now call the Varald Directorate, in the continent of Ghetz. Apparently, the magicians of Gyrus were extremely powerful; legend says that they could even neutralize the forces of gravity, and create a city floating in the sky."

"Wow, that sounds cool!" Lavie said, impressed. "Though I'm sure it's certainly a legend."

"Well, I'm not so sure myself, Lavie. It's rumoured that some of the craft of Gyrus still survives to this day, and was in fact used by the Zion Empire against the Varalds, a few centuries ago. But we'll never

know, unless Emperor Charlemagne allows scholars to have access to the chronicles of that war – and I doubt he will.”

“That’s interesting, Daddy...” Lavie said, appreciatively. “You always were good at history. Do you remember the stories you used to tell me when I was little? About the First Generations?”

“I do remember, Lavie”, said Sigmund, with a much softer expression than he had worn on the entire trip so far. “My, but you do have a good memory. Apparently Gyrus was one of the first kingdoms to emerge when the First Generations were wiped out, during the Catastrophe. Goodness, it’s all coming back to me now.”

“The Catastrophe? Wasn’t that a flood, or a tidal wave, that wiped out most of the cities of the First Generation?” Lavie said, her memory suddenly refreshed.

“Well, scholars are divided on what it really was, dearest. I know the Itarians’ *Evangelium Infinitate* – their Holy Book – describes the Catastrophe as a flood, but more recent archaeological findings – such as the excavations sponsored by King’s College along the routes connecting Itaria and Ghetz – suggest that it wasn’t a world-wide flood; people were probably dying in large numbers due to war and insurrection, and the flood was probably just in one part of the world; it didn’t kill *everything* on Terra. But the Itarians had one thing right – it was a sad time, Lavie.” Sigmund closed his eyes, remembering his childhood lessons in Itarian, when he’d had to translate long passages from the Holy Book under the watchful eye of one of the few Infinitus priests in Galvenia.

“War...how horrible,” Lavie said, looking pained. “I wonder, why must there be wars in the first place?”

“Because we humans find it extremely hard to agree on anything, or to coexist peacefully, even if it’s for our own good,” her father observed, in a harsh tone of voice. “My old history professor, Father Zebulon from Zion, taught me that long ago.”

“Hmmm.” Lavie looked down for a moment, as a fresh idea suddenly came to her. “You know, when I went down to Mann Island on my errand, I paid Gran a visit...”

It was Sigmund’s turn to look pained. “Look, Lavie...”

“Wait, Daddy!” she said, speaking quickly. “And she said she’d be happy to have us over one day, and she’d cook up a grand feast for all of us! She said, ‘Even Sigmund, if he wants’...” She paused, waiting for his reply.

“‘Even Sigmund’? I must say, my child, that she’s treating me with a lot more consideration than I treated her,” Sigmund said, softly. “You know, I think that’s a good idea. Maybe we can go down to Trinden later. I’ll tell you what, when you get back, let’s go down to Mann Island and pay the old girl a visit. Even Ryan, if he wants. I think she has a soft corner for that young scamp.”

“Daddy...” Lavie blushed, remembering the gift her grandmother had given her. “You know, she gave me these...” She took them out of her pocket, and handed them shyly to Sigmund, who looked at them with

a connoisseur's eye. "What a magnificent pair of cufflinks! From the time of King Arlbert and Queen Mother Penelope, if my years at university have served me well. They must be heirlooms from the house of Lancaster, Lavie! Don't tell me you've been carrying them around in your pocket," he said, looking slightly shocked.

"Um, no, I... I just brought them along to show you, Daddy," Lavie replied, not very convincingly.

"So why did your grandmother give them to you?" he asked, admiring them as they sat in the palm of his hand.

"Well, she said.." Lavie began, and then started to stammer. "S-She said, 'Lavie, when the time comes..'"

"Yes?" Sigmund said, encouragingly.

"'Give them to the man you're going to marry, Lavie.' That's what she said, Daddy.." said Lavie, hiding her face with her hands.

"You know, ordinarily, I'd probably get annoyed with her even for something like this," Sigmund reflected. "But you know, in all fairness, I think she's given you a wonderful gift, and I'm sure you'll put it to good use someday. Beyond that, I shall say nothing for now." He smiled at her, and patted her hand. "Lavie, Lavie. You're growing up a little too fast for my liking, and that can't be helped. But I'll never understand one thing."

"What's that, Daddy?" Lavie said affectionately.

"Why the three of you – your mother, your grandmother, and even yourself – put up with me patiently for so long. Are you sure you haven't all joined the Church of Infinity on the sly, or something?"

Lavie laughed. "No, Daddy. I've done some crazy things in my life, but the Church..." She shuddered. "I mean, even their dress code..."

"I see you've inherited some of my common sense, young lady," Sigmund said, laughing quietly. "And I must say, I'm glad we've had this little talk."

"So am I, Daddy," Lavie replied, looking out of the window with a smile on her face. "So am I."

A whole day had passed now. And on the whole, things were going well so far, Lavie mused. Of course, Daddy had insisted on having rather more than one glass of wine after dinner, and had woken up in the morning looking the worse for wear, but even hung over, he was still his friendly self, telling her about the ill-fated Kingdom of Gyrus and its legendary rulers. Still, the length of the trip was beginning to bore her. She flipped through her book – Roxanne Winters' *The Heart of the Mountain* – but couldn't quite concentrate on it, and decided to take a walk on the deck, just for a breath of fresh air. "Or, as Jennifer would put it," Lavie thought to herself, grinning, "a 'fresh of breath air'. How anyone can be as silly as her, I can't imagine."

She was strolling along the deck, leaning over one of the sturdy railings, when the ship's skipper walked up to her. "Good afternoon, Miss Regale," he said in his booming, friendly voice, "can I help you with anything?"

Lavie looked up at the sailor. Everything about Tobias Williams was on a large scale – his massive physique, his voice, his laugh, and even his beard, which reached well down to his chest. "No, thank you, Mr. Williams," Lavie replied. "I was just feeling a little cooped up downstairs, and Daddy's taking a nap after lunch, so I thought I'd come up here for a spell."

"Getting your sea-legs to sprout? Well, for someone making their first trip on a little boat like this one, you're doing fine, Miss. I used to work on passenger ships, and some of those noble ladies... they weren't just sea-sick, they were 'hyper-sea-sick', as they say back in the Republic!"

"Oh dear," said Lavie. "I must count myself lucky, then! I've been on ships before, of course, but never on a long journey. This is sort of different. Rather more fun than I thought, actually."

"You know, Miss Regale, my good-for-nothing nephew was telling me a little about you," he said, laughing loudly. "That boy'll never be a sailor, no matter how hard he tries. He should get a job delivering papers or something, that's more his speed!"

"Your nephew? You mean – ohmygosh, is 'Famous Ray' really your nephew?" Lavie asked, wide-eyed with surprise.

"I'm ashamed to say so, Miss." Tobias pulled something out of his pocket, and began to chew on it furiously. "Don't mind me, it's just chewing gum," he said. "Ray's my sister's son. He's had a hankering to be a sailor ever since he was a little lad, but he just doesn't have the feel for it; he doesn't take pride in his work. By the Five Angels, I squirm with embarrassment every time I see that excuse for a boat that he keeps on display at the docks."

"You mean the 'Saucy Maiden'?" Lavie began to laugh. "Oh, dear. I've had a ... pretty interesting journey on board that...boat, you know."

"Oh, were you one of his victims? You poor girl," Tobias said sympathetically. "I only hope he wrecks it completely some day, and is unable to repair it. 'Saucy Maiden', indeed. It should be called the 'Fish Finger', for what it's worth." He laughed loudly, as was his wont.

"Mr. Williams, where do you think the Paradiso would be, right now?" Lavie asked, looking out to sea.

"Her Majesty's own Paradiso? Oh, yes, I forgot you were trying to catch up with it. Well, Miss Regale, the Paradiso's a strange ship. In clear waters, it can actually go faster than we do, thanks to the latest in Zion technology. I don't claim to understand how; I man the helm, not the engines!" He placed his hand on the bar, and rested it there. "But when it comes to less tranquil waters, or to narrow passages and rocks, then the Paradiso either has to take it very slow, or make a detour. So it actually will reach Checkpoint Bravo a day or so later than we do. Roughly speaking, it'll take three days, maybe a bit less, to get there. Once you reach land at Bravo, you may have to wait half a day or so – maybe a little more."

"I see," Lavie said, her eyes following a seagull that flew by. "Thank you, Mr. Williams."

"Going on a pleasure cruise and missed the boat, eh? Good thing old Toby's there, that's what I say, Miss. We'll have you there well ahead of time."

"It's not exactly a pleasure cruise, Mr. Williams," Lavie said politely. "My business partner and I have to deliver a package to Caledonia, and then come back."

"Business? Ah, yes, Mr. Eramond told me about it, and it just slipped my mind," Mr. Williams replied, tugging at his beard. "I call that plucky, Miss Regale. Plenty of young ladies just like you wouldn't lift a finger on their own, and who'd expect their housemaids and governesses to come running at the drop of a hat – or a hatpin, indeed. And working with the boss' son, too. Heavens, my own sons might end up working for you before the game is through!" He let out another burst of laughter at the thought."

"Well," said Lavie, "I'm not sure if I'm going to become a package-delivery businesswoman, to be honest, Mr. Williams. It just seemed like a fun thing to do for a while, after school. Actually, I haven't yet made up my mind about a lot of things..."

"Plenty of time for that," the skipper said indulgently. "Enjoy these days while you can, whether on sea or on land, Miss Regale. You know, when I was your age, I was just starting out with the Merchant Navy. Ah, those were the days!"

Absorbed in their conversation, Lavie had not noticed the darkening of the sky, and was surprised to suddenly find herself dodging raindrops. A flash of lightning lit up the sky, giving even the birds flying by a ghostly appearance for a moment.

"Oh no," Lavie said, sadly. "Is this rain going to slow us down?"

"Not at all, Miss," Mr. Williams said, in a reassuring tone. "In fact, the wind will speed us up a little bit, if I steer carefully now. Give me an hour or two, Miss, and I'll have you at Bravo at least two hours earlier than we thought."

"Thank you again, Mr. Williams," Lavie said, shaking his huge hand. "I guess I'll... just head down to my cabin, for a while, then."

"Oh, you're welcome," he replied, as he marched towards the ship's navigation system.

"I never did like rain," Lavie thought to herself as she climbed down to her cabin. "But if Mr. Williams says it's good news this time, maybe I ought to believe him. Still, I wish this would end soon... I wish the sun would come out by the time we reach that checkpoint."

"Land ahoy!" Tobias Williams' voice boomed out, his stout index finger pointing at a speck on the horizon. "That's Checkpoint Bravo, and you'll soon be there safe, ladies and gentlemen. Less than an hour, now."

Lavie and her father, who were both leaning over one of the deck rails, followed his finger until they could see a solid building, much like a castle, but shorter and flatter. The weather today, Lavie noted with gratitude, was as fine as could be wished. "The place hasn't changed much from my student days, Skipper," Sigmund observed. "It still looks like a prison."

"Aw, come on, Daddy, I'm sure it won't be all that bad," Lavie reassured him. "I'm sure they must have built in *some* creature comforts in the last, um, how many years was it since you went to University?"

"Oh, a long, long time ago," Sigmund joked. "At least twenty-five, give or take a few. And Theodore did mention that they'd got an inn there, as well as a small Church of Infinity chapel for travelers. It's unlikely to be all that bad on the inside, you're right. It's just that, for a young man leaving the comforts of home for a university in Zion – and remember, we and the Zionese weren't on such good terms back then – *everything* looked like a prison."

"Oh dear," said Lavie, laughing. "Well, I wonder if I should go on to college some day."

"Time enough to decide about that later, Lavie," Sigmund reflected. "You're still young, my girl, a good year younger than Ryan and young Spenson. Take your time while you still can, and don't be in too much of a hurry to decide."

"You're probably right, Daddy," Lavie replied, then leaned forward to get a closer look at Bravo. "What are those boats there, all around the fortress? Is that the Commonwealth fleet?"

"Hmm..." Sigmund squinted, adjusted his spectacles, then took a more careful look. "Those don't look like Commonwealth ships to me, at least from here. They haven't got the Commonwealth colours, which are usually blue and white. They could be Galvenian, judging by the red-and-gold markings on their hull. Those are usually Royal Marine ships. Perhaps they're just training, or refueling."

"Royal Marines, you say?" Tobias Williams broke in, walking up beside Sigmund to make his own reconnaissance. "Right you are, Sir, right you are. Those are Royal Coast Guards, and I wonder what on Terra they're doing here. They don't normally come here, unless..." His voice trailed off.

"Coast Guards?" Sigmund drew in his breath sharply. "Aren't those supposed to escort the Royal Family, and other high dignitaries? What are they doing here?"

Tobias consulted a large pocket-watch, with a small silver anchor hanging from its chain, then broke into a smile. "Well, Sir, it's obvious why they're here, I should think. Look at the date."

"The date?" Lavie looked at her own pocket-watch, a dainty gold model that her mother had given her for her last birthday. "Today is the twenty-second of April.... Oh, I see. I see."

"What do you see, dearest?" Sigmund asked, intrigued.

"Daddy! Don't you remember? Today is the Princess' nineteenth birthday. Our silly Royals must be pulling out all the stops, inviting dignitaries from all over Terra, just to celebrate her 'coming of age'.

Hmph. As if turning nineteen automatically makes you fit to rule Galvenia, when you've spent all your life sitting on your duff, and..."

The skipper's eyes widened.

"Lavie!" Sigmund warned. "I don't think this is the time to enter into a discussion of the merits of monarchy... Mr. Williams, I'm sorry. We're not very 'pro-royal' at home, and I think Lavender has learnt that from me, I'm afraid."

Tobias was laughing to himself quietly. "Aye, Miss, not to say that I don't agree with you. Their Royal Majesties are just a little out of touch with the rest of us ordinary folks. And I feel sorry for that Princess, poor lassie."

"Sorry for her?" Lavie said, with a snort. "Why should anyone feel *sorry* for her, when she just has to snap her fingers, and she can have everything she wants? Including the right to live off *our* hard-earned money?"

"I take it you and your father are Pragmatic Conservatives, then," Tobias said, tugging at his beard. "But I'll tell you, I was once taking a walk on Davenport Beach – it must have been eight or nine years ago – and I saw a little girl with red hair, being dragged away by a couple of guards. She didn't scream or cry, but the look she gave me went straight to my heart. Any father can tell when a child is unhappy, and that girl was unhappy, no matter how many crowns they could give her to wear."

"And that was the Princess?" Lavie exclaimed. "But why were they dragging her away?"

"I didn't know she was the Princess at that time," the skipper replied. "But just as I began to walk away, a couple more guards set upon me, and told me that I wasn't to breathe a word about what I'd just seen, at least not to the newspapers. I'm afraid I don't like being told what to do – us sailors and them soldiers don't get on that well! – and I asked one of them what in the Reaches was going on. Pardon my language, Miss."

Lavie laughed. "The Reaches? That's a new one. All the boys at the Academy just say 'Hell', even when we girls are around! You're a lot better-mannered than they are."

"Aye, is that so?" Tobias replied, amused. "Well, those Palace lads sure weren't polite with *me*. They told me, using language that I daren't repeat in front of you, that they were ensuring the safety of the Crown Princess of Galvenia, and that if I knew what was good for me, I'd just beat it and keep my mouth shut. I would've given them what-for right then and there, but then their commanding officer called out to them, and they trotted away like good little boys. That's how I found out. Poor girl. Life can't be much fun inside a cage, even if it's made of silver and gold."

"Times are changing, Mr. Williams," Sigmund broke in. "Maybe the Royals could treat their kids that way in the days of Derren and Penelope, but I don't think it'll work any longer. Sooner or later, that Princess of theirs is going to come smack up against the real world, and she's going to rebel. That should make for interesting times, after His Rubber-Stamp Majesty King Arlbert and his pet poodle, Socius..."

“Daddy! You’re just as bad as me!” Lavie said, giggling. “Many people like Socius, though. Henrik Spenson thinks he’s the greatest thing since King Richard Lionheart.”

“Does he? What a pity, an intelligent boy like him. He has a lot to learn,” Sigmund commented.

“But you know, Mr. Williams, now that you’ve told me that, I do feel sorry for her... a little,” Lavie conceded. “It must be terribly lonely to be a Princess, if they treat you like that.”

“That’s it, Miss, that’s it. She may be a princess and you may just be a Davenport girl, but you have the freedom to walk here on the deck, and she doesn’t.” Tobias’ face looked grim.

“They should take a lesson from our Zionese neighbours, whose royal children are allowed to travel, study in regular schools, and even live as ‘commoners’ for a little while, to toughen them up,” Sigmund said. “Take their Prince Wilhelm. He’s just a little older than Carranya, but he’s accompanying *his* father on diplomatic trips, and joining the regular cadets for the exercises at Mount Meiji. That’s what a future ruler should be like.”

“Look, Daddy, look!” Lavie broke in, excitedly. “Those Coast Guard ships are moving – and they’re coming right towards us!”

A quick glance was enough to assure Sigmund that his daughter was not seeing things. A small detachment of three Royal Coast Guard ships had broken away from the rest of the fleet, and was heading towards the *Chespa Bay* in a V-shaped formation.

“Well, I’ll be danged,” Skipper Williams said, with a sober look on his face. “What do they want with us?”

“We’ll soon find out,” Sigmund replied, straightening himself up.

The first of the three boats veered closer to the *Chespa Bay*, slicing through the waves as it drew even closer. A tall Marine officer, surrounded by armed privates, stood on the deck, and raised the megaphone he was holding to his lips. “This is the Royal Coast Guard, at His Majesty’s service,” his voice boomed out, echoing across the water. “Lieutenant Ross at your service. Stop your engines.”

Tobias quickly darted into the control room, and complied.

“What?” Lavie cried out, frightened.

“Oh, bother,” Sigmund said irritably, as if he would have liked to use a stronger word.

“Now don’t panic, Miss. It’s probably nothing,” Tobias said calmly. He picked up a megaphone of his own, which was lying near the control console, and called out in reply. “This is Skipper Tobias Williams, of the merchant ship *Chespa Bay*, bound for Issachar. The engines have been cut off. Now, what seems to be the trouble, Lieutenant?”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to let us board your ship for a moment, Captain,” the Lieutenant with the loud voice replied. “Draw closer.”

“What on Terra for?” Tobias asked.

“Ask no questions. This is a matter of national security.” The Lieutenant’s voice clearly suggested that he would brook no opposition.

“Daddy, what is...” Lavie said, shivering, as Sigmund drew her beside him. “Now, now, you heard the skipper, Lavie. Don’t panic. We’re both here with you. You’re safe.”

“That’s right,” said Lavie more confidently. “A deputy can’t complain!” She managed a weak smile, though the sight of the armed Marines was still deeply unnerving to her.

“That’s the spirit, dear,” Sigmund said encouragingly. “I’m sure it’s all just a mistake.”

In the meantime, Tobias had deftly steered his ship to allow the Naval officers to board, and was looking at them speculatively. He gave a gasp of recognition as the Lieutenant boarded.

“Well, well, Edmund. You’re looking well, especially after that thrashing I gave you in our last arm-wrestling match, you Royal land-lubber!”

The Lieutenant’s grim face broke into a broad smile. “Tobias, you old pirate! Working for Davenport now, I see! Well, you see, I’m afraid that...” He suddenly gave a gasp of surprise – even shock – as his eyes fell upon Lavie. “Well, well, what do we have here....”

Sigmund, annoyed by the soldier’s suspicious stares, put a protective arm around his daughter. “And what do you want, Lieutenant?” he asked, in a far from pleasant tone.

The Lieutenant pulled out a small picture from his pocket, studied it carefully, then took a step closer, his expression relaxing a little. “Miss, what is your name?” he asked, but his tone was not as menacing as it was earlier.

“L-Lavender Regale,” Lavie stammered, her face turning red.

“Look here, Lieutenant,” Sigmund broke in, “my daughter’s a minor, and I’d like to know....”

“Hold out your left hand, Miss Regale. Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you.” The Lieutenant’s voice was kind, but firm.

Lavie stretched out her left arm, hesitantly. The Lieutenant took her hand in his gloved hands, looked at it carefully, then let it drop. “Miss, are you wearing coloured lenses to improve your vision?”

“Not at all!” Lavie replied, indignantly. “What do you think I am, some kind of cr...”

“Patience, Miss. Patience. Private Burns, could you come here for a moment?” the Lieutenant said, relaxing even further. One of the armed guards drew closer, and Lavie could tell that the Marine in question was a woman.

“Lieutenant, I really must object,” Sigmund said, taking a step forward, his hand raised.

"You would do well to remain silent, Sir," the Lieutenant said, with an edge in his voice. "Private Burns, tell me if that girl is wearing a wig."

"A...*wig*? This is...this is the most crazy thing I've ever seen in my life!" Lavie protested. "Of course I'm not wearing a wig, you...you.....Ouch! What was *that* for?" she yelped, for as she spoke, Private Burns had come closer to her and given one of her brown tresses a nice, firm tug.

"It's real, sir," Private Burns said, hiding her face with her glove to stifle her laughter.

"Good, good! You're all clean, then. We'll just need to take a little look below decks, and in the rooms, and we should be done."

"Would you mind explaining to me what this is all about, Lieutenant?" Sigmund said, angrily. "You board our ship, you scare my daughter, and you pull her hair.... Is this some sort of Marine hazing?"

"Well, you might as well know, Sir," the Lieutenant said, "and I apologize, Miss. But as I said, this is a matter of national security. The Crown Princess of Galvenia is missing."

"*What?*" Lavie and Sigmund exclaimed, in chorus.

"She was last seen at the Palace three days ago, and she seemed in good health and spirits. Early in the morning, day before yesterday, her maid-in-waiting was surprised to find that she hadn't woken up at the usual time, and went into her room to check on her. Strangely, the door was unlocked, and when we checked her room, her bed had clearly been slept in, but she wasn't there. A window was open, and there were footmarks outside her window, leading to the stable – the footmarks of a pair of woman's shoes. We've been searching for her on sea and land ever since," Lieutenant Ross said, shaking his head, "but we've found nothing. You actually looked a little like her, Miss, which is why we had to... make sure. Once again, I apologize. We must do our duty, I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, I understand," Lavie said, smoothing down her hair gently. "Goodness, I didn't realize I looked like the Princess... in fact, I don't even know *what* the Princess looks like!"

"So do I, Lieutenant. No hard feelings, I hope," Sigmund added, holding out his hand. The two men shook hands, and then the Lieutenant went on.

"We think it's very unlikely that she left by land," he said, placing his gloved fist under his chin, "because it's very hard to get out of Lorean by road, even for an experienced criminal. In fact, the Palace police are almost certain that she was taken from her room, perhaps after being given a numbing or stunning potion of some sort, and taken out through the window, down to the stables, where a carriage was probably waiting to spirit her away by sea. A good driver could quickly make it to Serin's Peak, and she could be out on the seas by now."

"Excuse me, Edmund," Skipper Williams interrupted, "but are you sure you should be telling us all this?"

"Well, I know you, Tobias, and I'm sure any passengers of yours are all right. I'm telling you this because I don't think we're going to find her that easily. Already, the Palace has had to postpone her birthday

celebrations, giving out the news that she had taken ill and was under the care of the Physician Extraordinary. Sooner or later, this story is going to break. And someone like you, Toby, might actually stand a better chance of stumbling upon her than we have. Mark my words, we're dealing with a cool hand here."

"Stumble upon her? Well, stranger things *have* happened, Ed," Tobias replied. "But you're welcome to search the rest of the ship. Miss Regale is stopping over at Bravo to catch the *Paradiso*, her father will be getting back to Davenport on another of my boss' ships, and I'm heading up to Issachar, as I told you...." He stopped suddenly, as an idea grabbed him. "You know, Ed, that might actually be a good idea."

"What? Issachar? Don't be daft, Tobias, they couldn't have got that far, unless they used magic," Lieutenant Ross replied, irritably.

"Not Issachar, you freshwater sailor," Tobias said affectionately. "A big cruise ship, like the *Paradiso*. Think about it. It'd actually be easier to smuggle a young lady out on a big ship like that, maybe get her across the lines to Zion. All they'd need to do is say that she was 'hyper-sea-sick', and couldn't leave her cabin, and no one would ask any questions."

"You always did catch on fast, old friend," the Lieutenant said, as his troops completed their search of the rest of the ship. "We're waiting for her here. The minute the *Paradiso* reaches here, our men will comb the ship inch by inch. And Miss Regale..."

"Yes?" Lavie said, breathlessly, fascinated by the Lieutenant's story despite herself.

"I'd like you to keep your eyes and ears open once you board that ship, Miss. It's entirely possible that she may have left partly of her own accord, though the Palace poges aren't willing to admit that yet."

"What's a 'poge'?" Lavie interrupted.

"Oh, it's short for 'People Other than Grunts'. It's a military rude word for our superiors," he said, laughing to himself. "Anyway, those armchair warriors didn't think of the obvious, which is that a girl of nineteen, even if she's watched every moment, might just have made a dash of it with a boyfriend of hers. Royals can be very oblivious sometimes."

"So you mean she might be travelling with a young man, as some sort of honeymoon couple? How romantic!" Lavie said, intrigued. "Leave it to me, Lieutenant! Detective Lavie Regale will find your missing princess, or..."

"Lavie!" Sigmund broke in.

"...*die trying!*" she concluded, triumphantly, and all three men laughed. "Well, don't go dying on us, Miss. But if you do find something, we'll place one of our people on board, and you can just drop her a quick word to the wise. I believe you've already met," the Lieutenant said, as the woman known as Private Burns walked up to her, with a friendly expression on her face.

"I'm sorry about your hair, Miss Regale," the young Marine said, "but we 'grunts' must do our duty, as they always say."

"No hard feelings, Miss," Lavie replied, shaking hands with her. "And please, call me Lavie."

"Thank you, Miss Lavie," Private Burns replied, saluting.

"And now we'll leave you to cover the last few minutes up to Bravo," the Lieutenant said, as he and his men returned to their ship. "Have a safe journey, and remember."

"I will, Ed, no fear," the Skipper called out, as the two boats slowly moved apart.

Before they realized it, they were at the entrance to Checkpoint Bravo. The guards at the entry gate looked at them warily, but asked them few questions, and then brought them into a spacious, but rather bare, waiting room. "Someone will come to attend to you shortly, sir, ma'am," a young, nervous-looking soldier, dwarfed even by the pistol he wore at his belt, said quickly, before hurrying off to whatever duty was in store for him next.

"I guess this is where we say farewell, Miss," Tobias Williams said, tipping his merchantman's cap to her and to Sigmund. "It's been an honour, and I do hope I get the change to look you up the next time I'm in Davenport. Good luck catching your ship, and please be careful. Goodbye, Sir. My friend should be here to pick you up by tomorrow night, so in the meantime, enjoy your stay in Bravo." He shook hands with Sigmund, bowed expansively to Lavie (who curtseyed back), and began to leave.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Williams!" Lavie replied, brightly. "I won't forget our adventure in a hurry, that's for sure!"

"Yes, thank you very much, Captain," Sigmund added.

"Aye, that's kind of you to say that, Miss. Good luck to you!" he said, as he walked towards a counter in the next room, from where he would have to collect his papers in order to proceed to Zion.

"So..." Lavie began. The Skipper's footsteps had slowly died away by now, and the large hall felt strangely empty. The sun was beginning to set, and the electric light was, for reasons best known to the military, working at half-power, so that she had the impression of sitting in a candle-lit room. "Nice place, isn't it?"

"I hope they have better," Sigmund said, dryly. "But according to what the Skipper told me, they're generally quite nice to passengers; they even have 'guides' who'll help you find the inn, the restaurant, the tax-free shop, and anything else you might need. We'll just wait here for one to come along."

Hardly a minute had passed when a young green-haired lady, barely older than Lavie, came into the waiting-hall. She wore a long blue dress which swept across the floor, and was carrying a clipboard.

“Good evening, Sir, good evening, Miss,” she said brightly. “My name’s Ellen Thompson, and I’ll be your guide for today. You must be Mr. Regale and Miss Lavender Regale, am I right?”

“That’s us!” Lavie said, getting out of her seat with a sudden movement. “So are you going to give us a guided tour of the military base, or something?”

“I’m afraid not, Miss,” Ellen said. “There is a small Commonwealth Naval Museum within the premises of the base, but it closes at five, so you’ve just missed your turn today. The military facilities proper are off bounds to guests, unless you have business with the officers here. Do you resemble that remark?” She winked at Lavie, who winked back.

“Not at all! In fact, I’m just waiting here for the *Paradiso* to arrive! I was supposed to board it at Davenport, but I sort of... missed it,” Lavie said, embarrassed. “Fortunately, a friend of ours helped my daddy and I to get here, and he’s just looking after me!”

“I resemble that remark,” Sigmund said, laughing. “So if the military’s doors are closed to us, what could you guide us to, at this hour?”

“Well, Sir, we’d be honoured to have you dine at the ‘Rose of Lorean’, our establishment for fine cuisine. Later on, you could check in to the guest house, where you could spend the night, complete with a free breakfast! For the shoppers around here” – she looked meaningfully at Lavie – “we do have a little tax-free shop, selling fine fashion items and souvenirs of Galvenia. And if you believe that the Infinity and the Five Angels have brought you here” – her hands touched the cross that was hanging around her neck, lightly – “there’s our chapel, which is open twenty-four hours for believers of the Church. If you need medical attention, our physician would be glad to help, and if you have any more specific needs at the chapel, please tell me, and I’ll contact our chaplain. That’s all!” she said, finishing somewhat out of breath, but happy at having finished it soon.

“You haven’t been doing this long, have you?” Lavie asked.

“Goodness, Miss, how smart of you to notice that! No, actually, this is a sort of a summer job for me. Actually, I’m working to become a Sister of the Church of Infinity, but my family couldn’t afford the whole of the dowry, so I’m trying to make up the rest of the amount myself..”

“The ‘dowry’? I thought Sisters didn’t marry, at least not officially,” Sigmund said, chuckling.

“*Daddy!* Don’t be mean,” Lavie protested. “She means the sum of money that all women have to pay to the house where the Sisters and their disciples stay. It’s sometimes called a dowry, at least in common language. Am I right?”

“You *are* smart, Miss, I’ll give you that. I bet you must be top of your class! Are you a believer, too?” Ellen asked, brightly.

“Not with that dress code, I’m not!” Lavie replied. “And no, I wasn’t the topper, though I *did* come in third. But I do think you Sisters are wonderful people. Do you know Sister Miriam, from Davenport? She’s a friend of ours.”

“Ouch,” Ellen said, looking from her old-fashioned dress to Lavie’s elegant purple outfit. “Well, I can see how the dress code can be a stumbling block to some. And, in fact, I do know Sister Miriam!” Ellen said. “But where did you learn that, Miss Lavender, if you aren’t one of the Church?”

“I read it in a novel,” Lavie said, beaming at her. “It was called *The Bride of the Infinity* by Roxanne Winters, and it was about this Sister, and this wounded soldier she was nursing, and....”

“Oh, dear,” Ellen said, laughing out loud. “I *have* read that one. It was quite entertaining, even with all the factual errors – about us Sisters, and our vows, and the Church...”

“It’s what I always tell my daughter,” Sigmund said to Ellen, apologetically. “You can’t learn history out of romance novels.”

“But history books are generally *boring*,” Lavie shot back, making a face.

“Anyway. Speaking of Sister Miriam, she actually happens to be here tonight. Would you like to see her?” Ellen asked. “She may be a little busy now, but she should be free in an hour or so.”

“Ohmygosh, she’s here? How come?” Lavie said, excitedly.

“Well, that’s a long story, Miss. Perhaps you should ask her to tell you about it herself. I’ll tell her that you’re both here, when I get to meet her. I’m sure she’ll be delighted. But in the meantime, what can I do for you?”

“I think,” Sigmund said, picking up his suitcase, “we should probably get a room for ourselves, and freshen up a little. We’ll take it from there.”

“Follow me!” Ellen said, as she led them down a dimly-lit corridor.

An hour and more passed, and Bravo’s latest guests were just beginning to settle down into their room.

“Mr. Regale?” Sigmund, who was just coming out of the door of his room, almost bumped directly into Private Burns, the Marine who had tested the authenticity of Lavie’s hair, military-style. “Could I have a word with you for a moment, please?”

“Certainly. I’ll just call Lavie, she’s busy combing her hair..”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea yet, Mr. Regale. I need to speak to you alone, first.”

“This is most mysterious, soldier,” Sigmund said, a frown on his face. “May I know why...”

“Sir! It will all be clear when you hear what I have to say, sir,” Private Burns said, with a stiff salute.
“Please follow me.”

Totally mystified, Sigmund followed the Marine down a series of corridors and intersections, until they reached a new building – one that was even darker than the waiting hall, its corridors lit by thin rows of yellow lights. “Where are we going?” he asked.

“This way, Sir,” Private Burns said, leading him into a small room to his left. Sigmund entered the room cautiously. There was no one else there, except an older man in ceremonial uniform, wearing several military decorations and the distinctive cloak of a Commonwealth official.

“Ah, Mr. Regale,” the man said, pointing to an armchair opposite his own. “Please sit down. Permission to leave, Anastasia.”

“Sir, yes, Sir!” Private Burns said, clicking her heels and saluting as she turned and left. “Sorry to drag you here at this hour, Mr. Regale. I’m Commander Arnoldus, from the Commonwealth Special Forces. I’m in charge of Checkpoint Bravo, and all that happens within its walls. Pleased to meet you.”

The two men shook hands firmly. “Arnoldus? Is that a Varaldian name, Commander?”

“No, in fact, it’s an old family name. My grandfather, who used to be big on our family’s history, says it dates back to the pre-Imperial kingdom of Factorius, or Factoria as the military historians call it. But enough about me. I’ve called you here, Mr. Regale, because we have a bit of a situation here, and I’d like you to break the news to your daughter.”

Sigmund leaned forward in alarm. “Good heavens, Commander, what are you talking about?”

“You see, Mr. Regale,” Commander Arnoldus said, getting up from his chair and turning to face the wall, “of late, we’re able to track sea traffic in the surrounding waters, even at fairly long distances. We haven’t made this public, of course, but Bravo is one of the places where this technology is operational. Well, we have our reasons – nothing to do with Galvenia, Mr. Regale – for wanting to track the *Paradiso*, because there are important passengers on board. Well, while we were tracking it, we did trace a group of large ships in the waters between Arlia and Ghetz, which was probably the Varald Vanguard Fleet. But we also picked up a number of unknown, smaller ships, which seemed to be following the course of the *Paradiso*, just close behind. We have reason to believe, from what Naval Intelligence has told us earlier, that these may be pirate ships.”

“Pirates! Sweet Infinity!” Sigmund’s hands gripped the arms of his chair, and his knuckles turned pale. “Do you mean they intend to attack the *Paradiso*?”

“I’m afraid so, Mr. Regale. They have their own reasons for doing so, which I can’t get into at the moment. We’ve tried alerting the Commonwealth Special Fleet, but I’m afraid they’re far from the force they used to be, and even if the very gods of the winds aid them, they won’t quite make it on time. The lives of all those on board the *Paradiso* are in danger. I don’t know if it will even reach Bravo, going by the number of pirate ships we detected.”

“But how can you be sure they’re pirates?” Sigmund probed. “Couldn’t they be military escorts, especially if there’s someone important on board?”

“They could be, Mr. Regale, except that the important people on that ship are travelling quite quietly. They’ve just completed an important mission, and it’s vital that this mission remain secret for now. They wouldn’t want to draw attention to themselves with an escort of any sort. I don’t want to alarm you, but I fear the worst.” The Commander turned back around to face Sigmund, who was deep in thought.

“Look here, Mr. Regale, I’m telling you these things because I know your daughter wants to travel on that ship. For all I know, she may have a friend, or someone she cares about, on board....”

“You’ve got that right,” Sigmund replied, heavily. “There *is* someone on board that ship whom she cares for, deeply. But....” He looked around helplessly. “Damnation. I’m just not good at these things, Commander. I love my daughter, but I’m just not the right person to tell her about this.”

“I’m afraid it’s rather you than me, Mr. Regale. I’m sorry, I truly am. But we live in dangerous times. Have you heard about..” he began, but then grew silent. “I’m sorry, we’re not supposed to talk about that. We’ve even sent a warning message – coded, of course – to Captain Konda aboard the *Paradiso*, but we haven’t received a reply so far. We can only hope.”

“Pirates...” Sigmund said, darkly. “Well, Commander, though this is the worst news I could possibly hear right now, I thank you for giving me fair warning. I only hope Lavie...” His voice broke off.

“Thank you, Mr. Regale. That will be all for now,” said the Commander, sinking back down in his chair as Sigmund, his mind in a whirl, began to make his way back to his room.

Lavie, in the meantime, had decided to do a little exploration on her own. “Silly Daddy,” she thought. “He must have sneaked off to the bar to have some Italian wine while I wasn’t looking. Not that I mind, really, but...” Thinking along these lines, she walked past the bar and the restaurant, then climbed a flight of steps one floor up, attracted by a red light that shone all the way down the stairs.

“Hmmm, I wonder where that’s coming from!” she said, as she reached the top. Looking around, she saw that the red light was coming from a large room at the end of the first-floor corridor, and walked towards it curiously. The entrance to the room, rather than being a door, was an ornately carved arch.

“This must be the Chapel which our tour guide was talking about,” Lavie thought. “Well, it can’t hurt to have a look. Some of those old church buildings are awesome!”

Lavie stepped into the room, which was warmer and more brightly lit than the rest of the guest facilities. A bright red light, arising from a lamp behind an altar at the rear of the room, filled the entire space, and below it were statues of three men, all portrayed in the stylized robes of Italian priests. She could recognize Saint Mikhail in the centre, but not the other two, and decided to have a closer look.

"I don't think I'm allowed to go behind the altar itself, only their priests can do that," Lavie remembered. For all that Daddy said, you *could* learn something from Roxanne Winters! "But I guess I can go closer and try to read the inscriptions.."

As she walked past the threshold of the chapel, she saw a woman stooped over a small stand. On the top of the stand were a row of candles, many of them burnt out, but a few – perhaps three or four – still burning brightly. The woman deposited a coin in the box beneath the stand, picked up a fresh candle from a small pile next to the box, and began to light that.

"Hey, I've heard of those!" Lavie said, recalling an old story her grandmother had told her. "You make an offering, light a candle, and pray for something good. Maybe I should try it..." She waited till the woman, whose back was still to her, had moved forward and was now kneeling in one of the pews. Then she placed a ten-dollar note in the box, picked up a pair of candles, and lit them. "That's for me... and that's for Ryan!" she said, and laughed out loud. "I hope something good happens tomorrow..."

"Do you, indeed, young lady?" the woman said in a low tone, getting up and walking up to her. "Well, 'something good' is rather vague, I'd think. But as the Holy Book says, the Infinity knows what we really need, even when we can't put it into.... Good Heavens, Lavie, what are you doing here?"

"Hi, Sister Miriam! Wow, I knew you were here at the base, but I didn't think I'd find you so easily...You know, that disciple of yours, downstairs, told me you were here. Isn't that cool?" Lavie replied.

"The word is 'novice', Lavie, rather than 'disciple'. A disciple is someone more fully trained, more qualified in spiritual things. But never mind. Come and sit here for a while, child, and tell me what brings you here," Sister Miriam said kindly.

"Oh, I'm here to catch the *Paradiso*, and then go with Ryan to Galvenia, on a business trip! Daddy's here to keep a watch over me until I get on board," said Lavie. "But what brings you here, Sister?"

"The *Paradiso*..." Sister Miriam stopped suddenly, looking troubled. "I see. Well, Lavie, I'm here doing what I'm always supposed to do: instruct others in the Faith! You see, there's a Galvenian soldier here, who's marrying an Itarian girl. And you know that according to our Church, any child who has a parent from the Church must also be brought up as a follower, even if the other parent declines to join us."

"Really? That's interesting, Sister. But I thought your Church didn't really allow members to marry non-members, or has that changed?" Lavie asked, with a frown.

"Well, it is permitted, when we are satisfied that the other parent is sincere, and intends to allow the child to grow up an Infinitus," Sister Miriam said placidly. "So I was just spending time with the two of them, making sure that they understood what our Church teaches about marriage and children. They're a lovely couple. I hope to be with them on their day of blessing."

"So are you now here full-time, Sister? Or do you have to go back to Davenport after this?"

"I'll get back there soon, Lavie. Our Church's boat is waiting here, and it will take me back tomorrow morning. So tell me, what were you praying for there?" Sister Miriam laughed.

Lavie blushed and looked down. "Oh, dear, nothing really, Sister."

"Well, whatever it is, Lavie, I do pray that you get what you wish for. Just remember, Lavie, that the Infinity works in mysterious ways. You may feel that all your requests fall on deaf ears, but in the end, I do believe that He knows best. Have a little faith, Lavie. And be at peace, even when things seem troubled. I must be about my evening prayers, now. Infinity bless you." She placed her hand over Lavie's head in a gesture of benediction, then slipped away quietly.

"Even when things seem troubled?" Lavie said, puzzled. "What did she mean by that? Oh, well, I'd probably get back to the room, Daddy must be waiting for me."

However, as she was about to cross the threshold of the chapel, she suddenly stood face to face with her father. "Lavie, dearest! What are you doing here? I was searching for you everywhere!"

"I was just talking to Sister Miriam, Daddy. She's come here to give some advice to a soldier who's marrying a girl from her church, she said. But why are you looking so scared? You know I won't leave this place until the *Paradiso* gets here, and I certainly wouldn't leave without telling you!" Lavie said, taken aback at her father's somber expression. "What's the matter?"

"Sit down, Lavie. There's.... something I must tell you."

"Something?" Lavie sat down on one of the benches, and her father sat down beside her.

As they did so, a gust of wind came howling through an open window, bringing a sudden chill into the room. The little row of candles was blown out, leaving the room bathed only in the red light above the altar.

"Yes, dear. Now listen to me, and be brave..."

"No," Lavie said, as the word 'pirates' left Sigmund's lips. "No, no, *no!*" Her voice had risen almost to a scream, but it was a cry of anguish rather than of anger. "I can't believe it..."

"Lavie, I'm afraid it's true. I heard it from that Commonwealth Commander himself. But we mustn't lose hope, you know. He did say that the Special Fleet had been mobilized. If they can reach those ships before they can board the *Paradiso*, then everyone on board should be safe."

"Do you think they'll get there on time?" Lavie sniffed, dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve. "What did the Commander say, Daddy?"

"He said that both the captain of the *Paradiso*, and the Special Fleet, had been warned. If the captain changes his course, or the Fleet gets across, then there's nothing to worry about, Lavie. But we just have to wait, and to hope for the best..."

“Hope...” Lavie said wanly. “Yes, hope... Ryan....” Her voice broke, and she began to sob. Sigmund, feeling quite useless, rested her head against the lapels of his jacket, and placed his arms around her.

“Now, Lavie. Don’t despair. You’re a brave girl. And you know that even if pirates attack, they’re going to go after the Commonwealth dignitaries, and not after Ryan, who’s just an ordinary boy. He’s not their target.”

“But Ryan is so...” Lavie began, before a sob cut her short.

“Reckless? Heroic? He certainly is. He’s his grandfather’s grandson. But remember, he’s been trained by Whitworth himself. You even told me that he saved you from a giant reptile, at Blackwater Park. Don’t write off Ryan so soon, Lavie. We just have to be strong, for his sake.”

“But I’m scared, Daddy,” said Lavie, in a feeble voice. “I know I shouldn’t be, but I am.”

Sigmund took an expensive, monogrammed handkerchief from his shirt pocket, and gently dried Lavie’s eyes with it. “Now listen to me, Lavie. It’s natural to feel scared. But just promise me that you won’t give up hope. You know I’m here with you, come what may. Come, now, we might as well go to our room. If the Infinity can hold off those pirates, though, I hope he does his job.”

Lavie allowed her father to lift her from the bench, and she leaned on his arm as he led her out of the chapel. However, as she was about to leave, she stopped suddenly.

“Come along, now,” Sigmund said, kindly. “What’s the matter?”

Lavie was looking at the inside of the stone arch, which bore the carved figures of five angels – two on the right, and two on the left. These four were lifting a drowning child from the sea, while a fifth stood above and guided them.

“The Five Angels of the North,” Lavie whispered. “If they could save Ryan...”

“The Five Angels?” The words brought a memory, long dormant, to Sigmund. “You know, Lavie, back when I was a boy, and had a tutor who taught me Italian, he used to make me translate a prayer into Common for him – a prayer to the Five Angels. Would you like me to... say it?”

“Can you... can you say it slowly, so that I can repeat it after you, Daddy?” Lavie asked. “So that we can both say it?”

“Of course, Lavie, of course. Now let me recall how it went.” He closed his eyes, remembering the translation he had labored over, so many years ago. “Ah, I have it now. Listen closely, Lavie.” She huddled closer to him, as he recited slowly:

“Oh, saints of the Galvenian sea, and of every sea and ocean, hear our prayer.”

Lavie knelt down and clasped her hands together. “*Oh, saints of the Galvenian sea, and of...every sea and ocean, hear our prayer,*” she repeated, obediently.

“Protect the lives of those in your hands, by the power that the Infinity has bestowed upon you”.

“Protect...the lives of those in your hands, by the power that the Infinity has bestowed upon you,” Lavie repeated, closing her eyes.

“Across the thousand leagues, preserve the souls of those we love, from every danger,” Sigmund said, firmly and clearly.

“Across the thousand leagues... preserve the souls... of those we love,” – there was a catch in Lavie’s voice, but she forced herself to continue, *“from every danger..”*

“And under your merciful gaze, lead them safely to the haven they seek. So let it be.” Sigmund cleared his throat, then turned round and bowed respectfully to the carved angels on the arch.

“And under your merciful gaze,” Lavie repeated, her voice growing stronger, *“lead them safely to the haven they seek. So let it be.”* She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, stood up, and joined her father in bowing before the angels. “Thank you, Daddy. I think I’ll just go and lie down for a while, or something.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Sigmund asked.

“It’s all right, Daddy. I just need to be...alone, for a little while, that’s all.”

“As you wish, dearest.” He looked on regretfully as Lavie slowly climbed down the steps, back to their room. “You Angels”, he said, sternly, “had better hear her prayer, because nothing short of a miracle can help them now.”

With which closing comment he, too, turned on his heel and left.

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CHAPTER THREE: THE LAST ADVENTURE

*“Someone who has never had his trials knows little;
but the travelled man is master of every situation.
I have seen many things on my travels,
I have understood more than I can put into words.”
(Ecclesiasticus, ch. 34, v. 10-11.)*

*“Gran?” Emily looked up at her grandmother, whose eyes were closed, with a gentle smile on her face.
“Are you okay?”*

*“Yes, dear,” Lavie said, opening her eyes and stroking her granddaughter’s head. “My, but this does
bring back memories. You know, all those things happened sixty years ago, but now that I’m here, telling
you about them, I can see myself again in that little chapel. Me, and my father...I’m not sure what I
would have done, if he hadn’t been there.”*

*“Are you feeling tired, Gran?” Emily asked, with a sympathetic look in her eyes. “Maybe you should rest a
little, and tell me more later. You haven’t even eaten yet.”*

“I’m not tired, Emily. And since Maria hasn’t quite finished yet, I think I may as well go on,” Lavie replied.

“Were you very frightened, Gran, when you heard that Grandpa’s ship was in trouble?” Emily asked.

*“I was, darling, I was,” said Lavie, slowly nodding her head. “But don’t you go getting frightened. Your
Grandpa managed to make it out safely – if he hadn’t, you wouldn’t be sitting on my lap right now!” She
laughed a little.*

*“That’s right, Gran! I almost forgot,” Emily said, looking relieved. “So what happened next? Did you go
searching for Grandpa?”*

*“No, dear, I didn’t, though I’m sure that, at that time, I would have willingly tried to do something of the
sort,” Lavie said affectionately. “How well you know me. But now I must tell you about what was
happening back in the town of Davenport. Someone new had just landed in town, and she didn’t exactly
get a warm welcome at the first place she went to...”*

Davenport was in mourning. It did not mourn elegantly, as Lorean did, or dramatically, as Caledonia did. But there was no doubt that things were not the way they usually were. Most shops – even Clarissa Crenshaw’s “souvenir” shop – were closed, the Galvenian flag atop the Mayor’s house flew at half-mast, and from time to time, men and women – both soldiers and civilians – would walk slowly down the path to the graveyard, some carrying flowers.

As Henrik Spenson walked slowly away from the gravestones and back to his house, he reflected on how quickly things had changed. It was just four days ago that his life had seemed like the most pleasant of dreams; he had been accepted at King’s College, an honour that any student in Galvenia would either die or kill for. And then... things had happened. He and Ryan had gone adventuring, and it was on the

top of Davenport Peak – when he had been forced to intervene to prevent bloodshed – that his friendship with Ryan had come to a tragic halt, perhaps permanently. And the very next day, he had been summoned to the bedside of Colonel Whitworth – his mentor, a man who in many ways was like a father to him – to find that he lay dying of the illness that had threatened his valiant life for seventy years.

Davenport had mourned him, and was mourning him. Even Mayor Saunders, notorious across the kingdom for his sloth, had made a rare public appearance and delivered a brief but heartfelt eulogy. Now Walter Whitworth lay, buried with as much pomp as Davenport could summon up, in the graveyard, along with Franz Juno, Gustav Eramond, Lord Flynn... and Henrik's own mother, Barbara Spenson. His wooden sword, his sentences that invariably ended with "what what?", his master swordsmanship – all these were no longer on Terra. As he had said with his last breath, he was now embarking upon his last, and greatest, adventure – his journey to the Infinity, to his final reward.

An age is ending here in Davenport, he mused. With the passing of men like Lieutenant Juno, Gustav Eramond, and now the Colonel, Davenport has no more of its military heroes, no more brave men from a generation that still valued courage and determination. Now we live in an age of peace and compromise, of trade and negotiation; an age that belongs to Mayor Saunders rather than to Colonel Whitworth. Father was right after all. The real world was changing, and adventure would soon be a thing of the past.

While reflecting in this vein, he had reached his house, and stepped across the threshold with a sigh.

"Henrik," his father said, in his usual cold voice. "I'm glad you've returned. I know you need to study, but could you help me with something?"

"Yes, Father," Henrik replied. "What is it?"

"There's a woman who came here some time ago," Alphonse Spenson said. "She said she was collecting donations for the Galvenian Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, or something of that sort. I told her I was busy, but she said she wanted to distribute some...literature pertaining to her organization. Could you kindly see her off?"

"Of course, Father," Henrik said, puzzled. *What is the GRSPCC doing collecting funds now?*

"I've told her to wait out in the backyard until you came back. I cannot be interrupted now, Henrik. Please see what she wants, and make sure that she leaves me alone."

"I'll take care of it, Father," Henrik said. *Poor woman, I don't think she would have expected that cold a response. Not that Father was always like this; it was only after..* He brought himself back to the present with an effort, and walked around the house into the backyard.

"Good afternoon, sir," a voice called out from behind him. "Were you searching for me? I'm sorry, I was just admiring your silk-pod tree. It is quite impressive!" Henrik turned to look at the person who had just addressed him. She was much slighter in stature than he was, with wavy blue hair and a rather pale complexion, and the delicate slant of her eyes suggested a woman of the Republic, rather than a

resident of Arlia. She wore a simple blouse and a long skirt, almost a school uniform, but perched on her head was a rather large and incongruous blue cap, shaped almost like a mushroom. She could not have been much older than he was.

“Er, good afternoon,” Henrik replied. “I’m not sure if you should be calling me ‘sir’. We must be about the same age!”

The woman smiled – no, beamed would be a better word. “If you say so,” she said, holding out her hand. Henrik shook hands with her. “So what brings you here, Miss...er...” he began.

“Oh, I apologize, I haven’t yet introduced myself!” she said, kindly. “My name is Bernadette Ellis Aquary, but most people just call me Bernadette. It’s an honour to meet you.”

“Henrik Spenson,” Henrik replied. “Well, Miss Aquary, how can I help you?”

“Allow me to explain,” Bernadette Aquary said, looking earnest. “I’m a freshman – or rather, a *freshwoman* – at St. Nealus’ School of Divinity, which is in the town of Alton.”

“St. Nealus’? I’ve heard of it,” Henrik said, encouragingly. “Isn’t it the only college in Galvenia that is run by the Church of the Infinity?”

“I see you’re well informed, Mr. Spenson,” Bernadette replied. “Anyway, King’s College has just launched a course on the study of Religious Literature, and St. Nealus’ was keen that one of their students should take the course. I managed to make it past the qualifying exam, thank the Infinity, and I’ll be going down to King’s College this semester. Unfortunately, none of my credits from St. Nealus’ can be transferred, so I’ll be starting as a freshman again.”

“King’s College has a course on religious literature? That’s pretty interesting! I’m heading to join King’s College as a freshman myself, once the summer vacation’s over.” Henrik informed her.

“Goodness, that practically makes us classmates!” Bernadette smiled. “I’m glad that I’ll have at least *one* familiar face to look out for when I make it there!”

“I guess so,” Henrik replied, sensing her nervousness, and trying to put her at ease. “Are you from Alton, Miss Aquary?”

“Not really, Mr. Spenson, I just study there. My ancestors were Zionese, but my parents settled down in Darington just before I was born – and soon after, we moved to Hartridge, which is where I grew up. Both my parents are Church members – in fact, they’d first wanted a son, so that he could train for the priesthood, and they were going to call him Bernard, after the Varaldian saint. They got me instead, and to make up for it, they’ve always encouraged me to study the Holy Book from my childhood onwards.”

“I’m a Church member, too,” said Henrik. “But tell me, why did you come to visit us? My father mentioned that you were from the Galvenian Royal Society for...”

“You are? How nice!” Bernadette said brightly. “To answer your question, St. Nealus’ still wants me to complete a month of witnessing, before I leave for King’s College. One of our assignments is to distribute literature about the GRSPCC and its aims, because the Society receives substantial charitable aid from the Church at Itaria. I’m not soliciting funds – in fact, I tried to explain that to your father, but the poor man was very busy – rather, I have to hand over at least five of these pamphlets at Davenport.”

“I see,” Henrik said, sympathetically. “Well, I’ll definitely take one of those, Miss Aquary, and I can give you this for your pains, as well.” He pulled out his wallet, which was pleasantly full from his recent expeditions with Ryan, and handed her a hundred-dollar note. “The GRSPCC has been doing excellent work, especially under Martell Socius’ government, and I’m always glad to contribute to a good cause.”

Bernadette’s face changed colour, as she handed over a pair of pamphlets to Henrik. “Mr. Spenson, I can’t...”

“Please accept this, Miss, it’s the least I can do. I’m afraid you’ve come here at a bad time, though. One of our city’s most respected men has just passed away, and many people are staying indoors as a mark of respect.”

“My condolences, Mr. Spenson,” Bernadette replied, taking the note from him. “Did you know him well?”

“Yes, to be honest,” Henrik replied with a sigh. “He was my trainer and mentor, Colonel Walter Whitworth.”

“Colonel Whitworth? The same Colonel Whitworth who fought at the battle of Chespa Bay?” Bernadette exclaimed. “Good heavens, how sad. Is there anywhere I can pay my respects?”

“He’s buried in the town graveyard. You just need to go a little north from here, and then take the path going west,” Henrik explained. “His grave is right at the top, next to the grave of a man named Gustav Eramond.”

“Then I must be going,” Bernadette said, bowing slightly towards him. Henrik, recognizing the gesture – an archaic, but time-honoured salute among older Church members – bowed back. “It was a pleasure, Mr. Spenson. Thank you very much. Do keep me in your prayers.”

“I certainly will, Miss Aquary. Good luck. You could try the Regale house, over to the east. They’re the ‘first family’ of Davenport, so as to speak, and their housekeeper belongs to the Church. Peace be with you,” said Henrik, with a friendly expression.

“And also with you,” Bernadette replied, smiling back as she walked away towards the cemetery.

Nice girl, Henrik thought appreciatively. Well, I’m glad I don’t have to go about handing out pamphlets, but I can always admire those who do. Maybe I’ll take that course on Religious Literature she was talking about, myself. I could probably learn a bit from her.

Feeling a little lighter, Henrik entered the house, where his father was waiting. "Has she gone at last?" Alphonse Spenson asked.

"Yes, Father. She was a student from the College of Divinity at Alton, and they'd asked her to hand these out; they call it witnessing."

"*Witnessing*, indeed," Alphonse said coldly. "I'm glad you never went in for these things, boy. Now I'll be in my study, so try not to disturb me."

"I won't, Father," Henrik reassured him. "I still have some revising to do."

"Good, good," Alphonse said, though his expression remained unchanged. "Remember, Henrik, those entrance examinations are difficult. I'm glad to see that you've realized that. You can't keep dashing off on adventures, as you used to do as a boy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father," Henrik said quietly, as he returned to his books.

Several hours later, having fit as much into his mind as he possibly could that afternoon, Henrik decided to take a walk along Davenport Beach. Laying aside his books with a sigh of relief, he slipped quietly past his father's study, where Alphonse Spenson was typing away furiously. "Father," he called out, "I'm just going down to the beach to stretch my legs for a while. Is there anything I can get you?"

"Nothing for now, boy," Alphonse's voice said in reply. "If you see Melody Tamas, though, tell her that her last dinner left much to be desired."

"Yes, Father," Henrik answered as he left. *Actually, Mrs. Tamas' cooking isn't half bad, especially for a couple of single men such as Father and myself. It's just that when he's busy working out an idea, he can be quite demanding*, he thought indulgently. Though he understood little of his father's writings, he was finely attuned to his moods and whims.

I wonder how that girl from St. Nealus' is getting on, he thought. *The only people who might give her the time of day would be Mrs. Juno, and maybe Mrs. Regale. Anyway, it's none of my business, really.* As he followed the path down to the beach, lost in his own thoughts, a soft voice broke in on him.

"Henrik, could I speak with you for a moment?"

Henrik recognized the voice instantly, and turned to face Constance Juno, Franz Juno's widow. Living alone with her son since the death of her husband, twelve years ago, Mrs. Juno tended to keep to herself; Henrik's late mother had been one of her few friends. Though hardly twice Henrik's age, her hair was already greying, and the veil she wore most of the time made her look like a Sister of the Church.

"Of course, Mrs. Juno. How can I help you?" Henrik enquired.

"It's my son, Makarov," she replied, a worried frown on her face. "I... I'm afraid that he's gone."

“Gone?” Henrik exclaimed, more loudly than he intended. “What do you mean, ma’am?”

“A couple of nights ago, he came home looking rather grave,” Mrs. Juno explained. “I asked him what the matter was, but he wouldn’t tell me. He just said he had to work on some plans of his, and stayed in his room alone for most of the next day. Yesterday morning – the morning of the funeral – I wanted to take him with me when I paid my respects, but I couldn’t find him anywhere. The only thing I found was this letter...” She held out a single sheet of paper, which had been folded in two.

“Can I have a look at this?” Henrik asked.

“Please do,” Mrs. Juno said, sadly. Henrik slowly unfolded the paper, and read the following short epistle:

“Dear Mother. By the time you read this, I should have reached the border of Northern Galvenia. I regret making my departure in this precipitate manner, but the time has come for me to prove my mettle, as my father did before me. There is a scourge that menaces our fair country, and I must play my part in seeing it extinguished. Farewell.”

Below these lines was Makarov Juno’s ornate signature. “What do you think it means, Henrik?” she asked him, softly.

“Perhaps he’s gone to Lorean to sign up for the Military Academy – he *is* eligible, now that he’s finished high school and is past the age of eighteen,” Henrik suggested. “But in that case, why would he mention reaching the border of North Galvenia? That’s far beyond Lorean. Of course, there’s an advanced training facility there, but they would hardly let him in before he’d gone through his basics.”

“Unfortunately, there’s no one I can ask for help,” Constance Juno replied, her voice shaking. “John Reckland must be at sea, and when I called on Sister Miriam, they told me she’d been called to Checkpoint Bravo on urgent work. Could you... possibly try to find where he’s gone, Henrik? Please?”

Father will certainly be thrilled if I go hunting for Juno, Henrik thought sarcastically. *Not only does he hate the army and everything to do with it, including Juno’s dad, he’ll get on my case and ask me to keep studying for that entrance test.* “I’ll try, Mrs. Juno,” he said gallantly. “Let me first see if I can enlist anyone to help me out with the search.”

“You’re the only boy his age that Makarov is willing to talk to in Davenport,” Mrs. Juno went on. “I know I’ve tried to give him his freedom, as his father would have wished, but I wonder...is this about a girl, or something?”

“A girl?” Henrik was taken aback at the very suggestion. Juno was a combat nut, who lived for the day when he could become a Galvenian soldier or even a Rough Rider himself. The idea of Juno and girls was as strange to him as moving to the Varald Directorate, or giving up his religion. “Why would you think that, Mrs. Juno?”

"I don't know, really," she replied, shaking her head. "It's just that I've noticed a change in him since that Senior Prom; he refused to attend, and he's been more silent, more bitter ever since then."

"Well, I wouldn't know about that, ma'am," Henrik said, "but I will keep my eyes open for him."

"Thank you so much, Henrik," Mrs. Juno said, dabbing at her eyes with her veil. "You've always been good to us – you and your mother. Peace be with you." She made a small bow in his direction.

"And also with you," Henrik replied, bowing in return. *This sounds serious*, he thought, as he watched Mrs. Juno's retreating, gray-clad figure. *Of course I know what he's after; he's gone in search of Lugner, or of whoever it was who was helping Kodenai escape. But why Northern Galvenia? Maybe he's gone to look for more clues in the mines.*

He had almost reached the beach now. *I can't let Makarov do anything foolish, especially after...what happened between him and Ryan*, he thought, confused. *But how will I ever convince Father to let me go off searching for him? He'd never agree, and unfortunately, I don't want to cross him now.* Stepping on to the sanded path, he walked close to the shore, looking out at the afternoon sun. *I've got to think of something, hang it! Mrs. Juno needs my help.*

"Hi, Henrik!" a little girl of about seven said cheerfully, as she trotted up to him. "Look what I found!"

"Hi, Michelle," Henrik replied, patting her on the head. "Looking for buried treasure?"

Michelle Bradley giggled. "It was Viola who gave us the idea, after Jimmy and I got bored of playing hide-and-seek," she whispered. "Jimmy's searching on that side, and I picked this corner. And look!" She held out a small object, no larger than a soup cube, but gleaming white, with a pearly finish on its upper surface.

"That's nice, very nice," Henrik said, taking it from her. "So what's it meant to be?"

"I don't know," Michelle admitted. "I was thinking of taking it to Clarissa's shop and selling it to her! Of late, she's been buying shells from us kids, at ten cents a shell."

Shells? I wonder what crazy Clarissa scheme is brewing under that bonnet of hers, Henrik thought, with a laugh. *She'll probably paint them green and orange, and sell them as "Tribal Souvenirs from the Amazon Women of Zion", or something like that.*

"But when I went to look at her shop, it was closed," Michelle went on. "Would you like to buy it, Henrik?"

"Me? What would I do with it? I don't own a souvenir shop, kid," he said.

"You could give it to your *girlfriend*," Michelle tittered.

"Very funny, Michelle, very funny. But you know what, I do think it looks pretty. Maybe I'll just take it anyhow. How much should I pay you?"

“One dollar, please,” Michelle pleaded. “I need it to buy myself a new ribbon for next week’s trip to Serin’s Peak, otherwise Amanda and Erica will keep making fun of my old bow!”

“Ah, yes. You’re all fashionable young ladies now,” Henrik joked. “Well, I can certainly spare a dollar, so here you go.” He handed her a shiny new one-dollar coin, which she accepted with a triumphant little jump. “Thank you, Henrik! You’re the best!” she squealed. “I’m going to look for more treasure now!” And with these words, she moved a little further down, and began to dig about enthusiastically with a little plastic spade.

Looks like a puzzle piece from some sort of game, Henrik thought, looking at the white cube again. Maybe I should ask Ryan’s dad about it, when I get the time. Traders know about all sorts of things....

“Mr. Spenson! Am I glad to see you!” a cheerful voice called out from ahead of him. Looking up, Henrik saw Bernadette Aquary waving both her hands at him excitedly, and almost running towards him. “Wait for me!” she called out.

Henrik quickened his steps a little, wondering what she was so pleased about. “Miss Aquary, what...”

“I just thought I’d look at the beach, here,” Bernadette said, breathlessly. “And I happened to see you there! I just wanted to thank you, honestly. I stopped by at the Regales’ place, and Mrs. Regale offered me the most delicious strawberry tarts I’d ever eaten! She was feeling rather alone, she said, because her husband and daughter had gone on a boat somewhere.”

A boat? Why would Lavie and her father go on a boat alone? The Regales go on cruises quite often, but why would they leave Mrs. Regale at home? Henrik wondered. “So were you able to, er, fulfill your quota, Miss Aquary?”

“Please, call me Bernadette, Mr. Spenson,” she said, looking at him appealingly. “And yes, I did! The next place I went to,” she said, speaking more slowly, “was with a lady called Melody Tamas, who had a nice little boy with her. She was interested in hearing me talk about the GRSPCC’s work with abandoned children, and took a pamphlet, too. I then met a widowed lady, a member of our church, who accepted one as well. Then I went round to the Queen’s Head, and believe it or not, the bartender’s daughter took one! Finally, I met a young lady who was playing with her kitten, and she agreed to take one because her kitten, um, sort of scratched me by accident,” she ended ruefully, her hand going to an angry red streak on her left cheek.

“I’m sorry, Bernadette,” Henrik said, looking at the wound with concern. “Does it hurt much?”

“Oh, it’s just a scratch!” she replied, dismissively. “And anyway, wounds don’t bother me too much. Just watch!” She bowed her head, folded her hands, and then touched her cheek with her right forefinger. There was what looked like a flash of light to Henrik, and when he looked again, the skin of her cheek was smooth and unbroken. “As good as new.”

“How on Terra did you do that, Miss Aquary?” Henrik gasped in amazement. “I mean, I’ve heard of such things in books of legends, but...”

Bernadette laughed. "Oh, the Aquarys have been healers for generations, or so my father always taught me," she replied. "It's a gift, you know, and only some people are born with it. It's like being a mage. Our family tradition has always been to use our healing abilities for good, and when I was just a child, my father taught me how to put them to the service of the Infinity. I'm still not very good, though; I can manage superficial wounds and bruises, but I have a lot more to learn."

"That's.....pretty impressive, to say the least," Henrik said, admiringly. "I can see we're going to have some very interesting times, when we get to King's College."

"Do you really think so, Mr. Spenson?" Bernadette said gratefully. "Apart from my parents, you're one of the first people I've heard say that. Abilities of this sort were sort of frowned upon at St. Nealus', and in fact, some of my more....straight-laced classmates thought I was some sort of fraud or trickster." She looked upset for a moment, then brightened up. "But I'm sure King's College will be quite different."

"It will, Miss Aquary, it will," Henrik replied. "Just be careful you don't end up being the subject of research; I've heard that Galvenian scientists are working hard on probing the 'science' behind magical abilities, from what I learned when I visited the Museum of Science and Lore."

"I love that place!" Bernadette said, with a slight flush on her cheeks. "Some of the people there are very friendly, and they've even let me watch some of their *mahou shoujo* exhibitions."

"Ma Who what?" Henrik said, scratching his head.

"It's an ancient Zionese term for young women with, er, magical abilities," Bernadette explained. "From time to time, the Museum has visits from Zionese women mages and healers, who put on a bit of a show. Haven't you ever seen it?"

"I'm afraid I haven't," Henrik said regretfully. "But I must say, again, that I'm very impressed, Miss Aquary. I'm very grateful for the chance to have met you."

"That's sweet of you," Bernadette replied, lowering her eyes a little. "And, please, *do* call me Bernadette. 'Miss Aquary' makes me sound like your school teacher!"

"Very well, um, Bernadette," Henrik said, a spot awkwardly. "Please call me Henrik, then. After all, we'll have to use informal addresses if we....take the same courses together, and all that."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you in that Religious Literature class, er, Henrik," Bernadette replied. "I'm sure we'll...." There was an awkward silence between them for a moment.

"Speaking of things and persons magical, a little friend of mine found this while playing on the beach," Henrik said, with a view to easing the situation. "Do you have any idea what it is?" He held out the tiny cube to Bernadette, who looked at it for just a fraction of a second, then stepped back, stunned.

"By the Infinity! Henrik, how did you...." she exclaimed, her voice trailing off, and raising one hand to her mouth.

“Bernadette, I’m sorry! Did I....do something wrong?” Henrik said, with remorse in his voice.

“N...not at all, it’s just that.....Do you know what that is?” Bernadette continued, in a voice filled with awe.

“Isn’t it a sort of a puzzle piece, or something? Like I said, this was just flotsam that a little girl found here. She wanted me to buy it for a dollar, and I just did it on a whim! Is it...something dangerous?” he asked.

“Henrik!” she said, excitedly, looking up at the sky. “There’s a tiny chance I could be wrong, but if what my father taught me is right, this is... a Memory Crystal of some sort. It’s a very, very rare and advanced piece of Zionese technology; I’ve heard of these things in legends, but this is the first time I’ve actually...” She looked forward out to the sea, her eyes bright with excitement.

“A Memory Crystal? I’ve heard of those! They’re like... records of voices and images, stored in the structure of the crystal, aren’t they? I’ve seen a much bigger and uglier one, once, but even I haven’t...” Henrik said, surprise getting the better of him as well.

“Henrik, we’ve got to take this to the Museum of Science and Lore!” Bernadette said. “That’s where such things have to be handed in, according to Galvenian law. The scientists there will study it, and tell us where it came from. This is... simply amazing!”

“Can we...watch it?” Henrik asked.

“Small ones like this, Father told me, need to be exposed to a strong light source, such as a fire or an electric light. But we can try holding it up to the sun, though we won’t get the full contents of the recording. Would you like to try?” Bernadette said, taking a step closer to the shoreline.

“Why don’t you hold it up?” Henrik offered. He placed the cube in her hands, and she held it up to the sun, adjusting her position so that the sun’s rays struck it squarely.

“*How many....*” a rough male voice began to say. A faint image, almost a shadow, stood in front of the crystal, resembling the outlines of two persons wearing hoods. “*How.....bastards.....*” One of the figures raised its hand, as if to strike the other. “*Couldn’t.....H.....honour.....*”, another, smoother voice seemed to say. Then there was a short burst of noise, and the image ceased.

“Well, that was cryptic,” Henrik observed. “And I must apologize for exposing you to that sort of language.”

“It looks like it could have been a combat scene,” Bernadette observed, closing her eyes, “or perhaps a record of a duel, or some similar sort of confrontation. Only a stronger light will tell us more.” She opened her eyes, and smiled at her new friend. “Henrik, could I take this to the Museum, please? I have to go to Lorean anyhow, to do some more witnessing there.”

“I’m not sure if you should do that,” Henrik said, gravely.

“Why not?” Bernadette replied, looking hurt.

“Because it’s not safe to travel there on your own. Remember, the Princess’ birthday celebrations are going on today, and everyone will be on alert. A young woman, travelling alone with an artifact of dubious origins, might attract suspicion,” Henrik explained.

“So what should we do with it?” she asked. “Should we wait a few more days, and then...”

“I have a better idea. Bernadette, would you...mind if I accompanied you?” Henrik asked, the words coming out in a rush.

Bernadette Aquary blushed. “Accompany me? Of course I wouldn’t mind, Henrik, but wouldn’t...wouldn’t it be a lot of trouble to you?”

“Not at all. First of all, I have my own reasons for wanting to head that way, which I’ll explain to you shortly. And second, I’m the one who found the object in the first place. I can’t let you take risks on your own. Let’s do this together, Bernadette,” Henrik said, holding out his hand to her in a gesture of comradeship.

“That’s very, very good of you,” Bernadette replied, placing the cube in his outstretched hand. “I think your idea is excellent, Henrik. Shall we get going, then? If we walk fast, we can reach Lorean by night, stay at an inn, and make it to the Museum first thing in the morning!”

“That sounds like a plan,” Henrik said, nodding in agreement. “Let me just tell my father, first. Meet me in the city square, I’ll be back in an hour or so.”

Alphonse Spenson’s permission was given quite readily, especially once he had seen the object for himself and exposed it to the bulb in his home, eliciting a couple of words. “An ancient artifact like that belongs with the scientists, boy. As long as they reward you for it, I permit you to travel there. But on your return, I expect you to work harder to compensate. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Father. Thank you,” Henrik said, appreciatively.

“Hmph. I remember, when I was at Zion University, they were crazy about Memory Crystals. Crystals here, crystals there. There were even old wives’ tales about crystals the size of a fingernail, but which could capture the entire length of a theatre play. Absurdities, boy. But we need every penny we can spare if you’re going to King’s College. Go ahead, but don’t dawdle.”

“I won’t, Father.” *And while I’m there, I’ll try to look out for Juno, and bring him back. But I must tell Bernadette about him, too.* Quickly packing a few essentials, and strapping on the giant sword he’d found quite accidentally in Mount Lorea Mine, he rushed towards the city square, where Bernadette was waiting for him, seated on a bench.

"I take it from your expression that your father gave his consent," she said cheerfully, rising to greet him. "Well, I've bought myself a few potions for the road, just in case. Shall we leave?"

"Of course," Henrik replied. "But first, there's something I must tell you." Choosing his words carefully, he told her about Ryan and Juno, and the encounter on Davenport Peak, though he passed over the death of Kodenai with as little detail as possible. "And from what I know of Makarov, he's probably gone off to hunt real or imaginary traitors. He's not a particularly great friend, but his mother and my mother were close, and she's counting on me to find him. I'm not sure I can convince him to come back, even if we do find him, but we can at least reassure his mother that he's... more or less safe."

"Oh, that poor lady," Bernadette said, frowning. "Of course we must try to help her!"

"We? Bernadette, you don't have to get involved in this! Makarov can be, er, quite a difficult character to deal with at times, and we don't know what exactly he's involved in. It might be dangerous."

"But Henrik," Bernadette argued, "I'm a member of the Church, just like you, and just like Constance Juno. Wasn't it St. Geraud who taught us that, to truly love the Infinity, we must also look after each other and take care of our mutual needs?"

"You do have a point," said Henrik, "but still... you're a stranger to our town, and unlike both Juno and I, you've never been trained in combat. It's not that I don't want you to come, it's just that I don't want you to get hurt..."

"Henrik, please," Bernadette pleaded. "This concerns me too. I'm a citizen of Galvenia, just as you are. And I'm sure you'll be able to protect me, if the need should arise."

Henrik flushed. "I'll try my best, Bernadette. But promise me one thing. If the situation starts getting out of hand, don't hang around; instead, run and inform the nearest authorities. Can you do that for me?"

"I will," said Bernadette. "But first, we have a museum to visit. Let's go!" She slung her handbag over her shoulder, and began to walk down the path through the woods.

"The woods? That way's longer," Henrik called out. "Why don't we just leave through the city gate?"

"Henrik, you said yourself that Juno was involved in a confrontation in the woods. For all you know, he may have gone back there. It's not that much longer," Bernadette replied, with enthusiasm. "Come on! We haven't got all day!"

"As you wish," said Henrik. *One last adventure before King's College, and I even have company*, he thought, smiling to himself. *One last adventure, Father.*

They had not gone far into the woods when they were alerted by the sound of feet marching in order.

"Who could that be?" Bernadette wondered aloud, looking around her. "City repairmen, perhaps?"

“Well, they certainly have work to do here,” Henrik noted, looking at the crumbling, overgrown footpath that they were following. “But with our Mayor being the way he is, I doubt very much that he would have even thought of dispatching them here.”

“Mayor Saunders? He’s quite a legendary figure, Henrik,” Bernadette said, laughing, as she looked admiringly at a tall tree in front of her. “What magnificent oaks you have here. But...” her gaze suddenly fixed on a large section of the tree’s trunk, which seemed to have been scored or mutilated, “it looks like not everyone loves them the way you do.”

“Er, that particular bit of vandalism.... It’s a long story, really,” Henrik said, apologetically. “Remember Ryan, the friend of mine I told you about? A little while ago, he found out that his girlfriend was cheating on him, so he sort of had a brainstorm and walked down here, and gouged out his declaration of love from that tree.”

“How terrible!” Bernadette exclaimed, drawing in her breath sharply. “I do hope he’s all right now.”

“I guess so,” Henrik said, slowly. “Us teenage boys are like that, we take our knocks and then we get up after some time. He should be fine.” *Ryan, Henrik thought. Was his recent, reckless behavior – including his conduct on Davenport Peak – all because he hadn’t yet gotten over Marianne?*

“We all do, I presume,” Bernadette said brightly. “Now let’s take a little detour, and see if we can find any traces of your friend....”

“Halt!” A voice came out from a little deeper in the woods. Henrik and Bernadette stopped abruptly, and looked to see a small band of five armed men, marching in a single file as they drew closer to them. “Lieutenant Perkin, Galvenian Territorial Army,” the band’s leader introduced himself, raising the visor of his helmet. “I’m sorry, kids, but Davenport Woods is out of bounds at the moment.”

“What seems to be the matter?” Henrik asked.

Lieutenant Perkin ignored him, and walked closer to Bernadette. “Miss,” he said, with a stern expression on his face, “what is your name?”

“Bernadette Aquary,” Bernadette replied, speaking in a steady voice, though she was clearly nervous. Instinctively, Henrik stood closer to her.

“We haven’t seen you around these parts before,” the man said. “Where are you from?”

“She’s from Alton,” Henrik explained. “Her college has sent her here for some, er, summer coursework. She’s quite all right, Lieutenant.”

“If you don’t mind, Miss, could you show me a letter, or any document, from your college, to support what your friend is saying?” the Lieutenant said, not unkindly.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Bernadette said, handing him a folded letter, which he took and read cursorily. “Hmm, this all seems to be in perfect order. Now, could you take the glove off your left hand?”

“My glove?” Bernadette seemed amused by the request. “Could you hold this for me, please, Henrik?” She deftly peeled off a blue leather glove, and handed it to him.

The Lieutenant looked at her hand, and then let out a sigh of relief. “One last thing, Miss. Could you remove that hat of yours?”

Bernadette looked shocked. “Henrik...” she said, pleadingly. “I...I can’t...”

She must be a ‘traditional’, Henrik realized. *Strange, I thought ‘traditionals’ usually taught that women shouldn’t go to college....* “Excuse me, Lieutenant,” he said loudly, “but Bernadette is a traditional Infinitus, a follower of some of the old teachings of the Church of Infinity. They don’t allow her to remove her hat in front of men, unless they’re family or Church priests. Could you please excuse her?”

The Lieutenant looked at Bernadette, who was holding her breath, obviously distressed by the request. He seemed on the verge of making a sharp remark, but stopped himself. “Well, if the Infinity himself says so, I won’t stand on formality, Miss,” he said. “Just stay out of the woods, there are infantry exercises going on here today.” He clicked his heels, made an about-face, and left.

Bernadette let out her breath, and her face softened. “Thank you, Henrik,” she said, warmly, “though you did unintentionally tell a falsehood. I’m sure the Infinity will forgive you, though.”

“A falsehood? Do you...do you mean you’re not actually a traditionalist?” Henrik asked.

“No, though it was very intelligent of you to think of that explanation,” she said, slowly. “The fact of the matter is that, though I know it’s very vain of me, I’m not really happy to let other people see *this*.” Saying this, she quickly raised her hat where it covered the front of her head – and Henrik saw, to his horror, that her forehead had been badly burned, including the front of her hairline. Though the wounds had healed, there was still a large, scarred area where her brow ought to have been. “Actually, I’m not too different from that poor tree, there,” she said, with a faint smile.

“Bernadette, you didn’t have to...” Henrik said, stricken, his hand reaching out to pull her hat back down. She did not oppose the gesture. “Who did this to you?” he asked, looking intently at her.

“A couple of months ago, just after we took our tests to see who would get sent to King’s College, a fire broke out in our dormitory,” Bernadette said, her face pale. “We still don’t know who was responsible. Four of my friends and I were all burned, though, thank the Infinity, no lives were lost, and no one was crippled. The Alton police investigated our rooms quite carefully, but all they could say was that the fire wasn’t started using natural means; there was no sign of an electrical defect, or traces of anything that could be used as kindling. They suggested it was done by someone who could use a Fire Elemental spell, but a low-power one.”

“A Fire Elemental? You mean they suspect a mage, or mages, to have been responsible?” Henrik asked, bewildered. “I thought almost none of them survived the massacre at Inderness, almost a century and a half ago...”

“That’s what I thought, too, but I’m not so sure now,” Bernadette said, leaning against a tree. “Sorry, Henrik, the shock has made me a little light-headed. We can continue now.”

“Would you like to rest a little?” he replied, with a look of concern. “We could always get you a room at the Davenport Inn, and leave tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be all right, Henrik. Thanks for the support,” she said, more steadily. “Let’s head back to Davenport, and leave town the usual way.”

“That would be the most sensible thing to do,” Henrik agreed. In a few minutes, they had retraced their steps, and now found themselves about to leave Davenport through its main gates. “Ready, Henrik?” said Bernadette with a smile.

“I’m ready when you are,” he said, as they left Davenport for the second time.

“Fascinating! I wouldn’t have believed a couple of kids could just find a thing like this on the beach, if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes,” Professor Sandra Hernandez said, placing her hands in the pockets of her lab coat. “A high-density Memory Crystal, if my eyes do not lie.”

“High density?” Henrik asked. Their journey to the Museum had been mercifully swift and uneventful, broken by a quiet and delightful snack at the inn in Alton. “What exactly does that mean?”

“You see, Mr. Spenson,” Professor Hernandez said, leaning back in her armchair, “most of the Memory Crystals we have are large, unwieldy things, which can record only a few minutes’ worth of audio and video. Have you ever seen one?”

“Yes, but it only held audio data, and had been corrupted,” Henrik said.

“I’ve seen a Crystal of the Evangelium at St. Nealus’,” Bernadette added. “It was a gift from the Zion Imperial archives, from the days when the Church was stronger in Zion, but it was mostly speech; all the chapters of the Holy Book had been recorded in archaic Common. It was quite huge, even larger than a fully annotated printed version of the Book.”

“Those are both excellent examples,” the Professor replied, “of what we would call ‘low-density’ memory crystals, which store information in a very inefficient form. However, at some point during the reign of Emperors Johan and Linois, Zion scientists figured out a way to transfer information efficiently into small crystal lattices, which increased their storage capacity by over a million-fold. The Holy Book you mentioned could easily fit into this little cube, and there’d still be place for colour pictures.”

“Impressive,” Henrik said, letting out a whistle. “So why aren’t they more widely used?”

“Simply, young man, because the techniques involved in making them were kept secret, and perished with the guild of Zionese physicists who designed them. Unfortunately, they left no known traces of

their work, and though we're making progress in understanding how they work, we're far from being able to duplicate the technique. We'll get there someday, I'm certain."

"So can we see what's on it now?" Bernadette asked, eagerly.

"I'm afraid that's against the law, young lady," Sandra Hernandez said, apologetically, brushing a stray lock of grey hair away from her forehead. "Because of their historical context, there's every likelihood that those crystals contain information that could be embarrassing, or even prejudicial, to Zion-Galvenia relations. Of course, some of them are harmless family chronicles, and we even found one dating to many centuries after Linois, involving a Journeyman addressing his disciples on the value of meditation. But as for the rest... let's just say that we keep quiet about them for a reason. Under the Commonwealth Privileged Information Act, the crystals can only be opened in front of a team consisting of one Zion delegate, one Galvenian delegate, and a neutral Commonwealth observer, usually an Itarian or a Varaldian. I, personally, have only sat on one such panel in my life. It wasn't pretty."

"I understand, Professor," Bernadette, with a friendly smile. "Thank you for taking the time to explain it all to us."

"And thank you, Mr. Spenson and Miss Aquary, for taking the trouble to bring this along. Heaven knows what would have happened if this had fallen into the hands of those rogues in the Explorer's Guild.."

Henrik looked uncomfortable and shifted his feet around at this statement, but remained silent.

"...we're truly fortunate that it fell into the hands of two civic-minded young Galvenians like you. On behalf of the Commonwealth, I'm authorized to give finders a cash reward, which in this case – given the value of what you've found – amounts to ten thousand Commonwealth dollars, to be shared between the two of you. Once again, you have my eternal gratitude."

"Wow," Bernadette said softly. "That's a lot of money."

"You've certainly earned it, Miss. Have a good day, and we hope to see you at the Museum again some time." The Professor bade them both farewell, after handing each of them an envelope filled with money, and they left.

"Well, I can honestly say that this was a very, very fruitful day, in more ways than I could ever imagine," Bernadette said, placing the envelope securely in her bag, and adjusting her hat. "I'm sure even your father would be happy with the way things have turned out. Thank you, Henrik."

"Yes," Henrik said. "And I couldn't have done it, if you hadn't identified that cube as a Memory Crystal in the first place! Thank you, Bernadette." They shook hands, and then looked up at the sky. The sun had already set, and they were just in front of the gates of Lorean.

"It's getting late," Henrik said. "I don't think we'll make much progress looking for Juno right now, so let's just check into the inn here, and we'll resume our search tomorrow. That is, if you still want to come along."

“Henrik!” Bernadette protested. “I thought we already made it clear that I *would* accompany you.”

“Sorry, just teasing,” Henrik said, laughing quietly. “Now, let’s get to that inn.”

The gatekeepers opened the way to them in studied silence, and both of them were stuck by the solemn appearance of most of Lorean’s inhabitants, as well as the total absence of any decorations, fireworks, or any other signs that a future monarch was coming of age on that very day.

“I don’t get it,” Henrik said. “Isn’t today the Princess’ birthday? I thought they’d all be celebrating, or something.”

“Something must have gone wrong,” Bernadette agreed. “Maybe the Princess was taken ill, or something of that sort.”

“Well, the Inn is straight ahead, so let’s....” Henrik began, only to find that his path was barred by two armed guards.

“Excuse me, Sir, may I know your destination?” one of the guards asked, rather loudly.

“We’re just heading for the inn, actually,” Henrik replied. “We came from Davenport to complete some work at the Museum, and we’ll be leaving tomorrow morning.”

“Then please proceed, Sir, Miss,” the guard replied. “But the Royal Palace and its surrounding area, including the Hall of Heroes and the Arustus Memorial, are out of bounds. No one may enter without the proper authorization. Good night to you.” With this, the guards let them pass.

“You’re right, Bernadette,” Henrik said gravely. “Something *has* happened. Perhaps a security threat, or a bomb scare.”

Bernadette was silent for a while, then turned to look directly at Henrik.

“I think it’s something more than that,” she replied. “Do you remember those soldiers in the woods? They didn’t ask you for much, but they scrutinized me much more carefully. I think they’re looking for a woman.”

“A woman.... You know, that makes sense; a woman who can be identified, perhaps, by a particular mark, such as a scar or a birthmark on her left hand. Or something to do with their hair or head, which was why they wanted you to remove your hat. But who could that be?”

“I really couldn’t say,” Bernadette said, and then stifled a yawn. “Sorry, Henrik. I guess I’m just feeling a little tired. It’s been a long day.”

“No problem,” said Henrik. “I’m feeling pretty sleepy too. Let’s check in at the inn, and see if we can find out anything there.”

A short walk to the northeastern part of Lorean brought them in front of an inn, its windows brightly lit. Henrik pushed open the door, and the two of them stepped inside. The waiting area in front of the reception was empty, except for a man in a black suit who looked at them curiously.

“Could we have a couple of rooms for tonight?” Henrik asked the innkeeper, an elderly lady wearing a thick pair of glasses. “We’ll be gone in the morning.”

“I’m afraid not, son,” she replied. “The inn is jam-packed with Royalists, who’ve all come down for the Princess’ festivities, and aren’t in a very good mood right now. I could fit you both into one room, if you don’t mind a bit of a draught.”

“Why aren’t they happy?” Bernadette asked her.

“Haven’t you heard? You must be from quite a distance away!” the innkeeper exclaimed, raising her eyebrows and squinting at them. “Are you Zions, or something?”

“Not at all,” Henrik explained. “We’ve just come here from Davenport today. I live there, and Miss Aquary is from Alton. We haven’t heard any news from the capital, because we’ve been traveling by road all day.”

“Oh, I see,” she said, looking at them with less suspicion. “Well, let me introduce myself. My name’s Ruth Stone. My husband owned this inn, and I’ve been running it myself for the past four years. What are your handles?”

“I’m Henrik Spenson,” Henrik said, coming forward, “and this is Bernadette Aquary. What is happening in town, Mrs. Stone? We thought the whole of Lorean would be alight to celebrate Her Highness’ nineteenth birthday, but everyone seemed rather quiet to me.”

“Hmmm. What we’ve been told so far, by the Palace and the town announcers, is that the Princess is ill, and that the festivities have been postponed on that account. But there are rumours floating around.”

“What sort of rumours?” Bernadette asked her. “When we were on the way, we were stopped by a troop of soldiers. They insisted on looking at my left hand, and....”

Mrs. Stone’s eyes grew as wide as her glasses, and she seemed to be staring, not at Bernadette, but at the wall behind her. “Hush, now, you children must be tired,” she said loudly. “I think I’ll show you your room now.”

“Wh- Oh, yes, that would be lovely, thank you, Ma’am,” Bernadette replied, as she caught Henrik signing to her with his hand to play along.

The three of them climbed down a flight of stairs, and came into a room that was large and spacious, but had obviously not been occupied for some time. There were two comfortable-looking beds covered with striped quilts, a table, a chair and a sofa, and a single wardrobe. “This used to be a guest room,” she explained, “but I’d be glad to let you have the use of it for tonight. You might want to dust out those

sheets a little, but otherwise, you should be quite comfortable. The washroom and bath are off this way.”

“Tell me, Mrs. Stone,” Henrik asked. “Who was that man behind us?”

“I’m quite sure he’s one of those nosey reporter types,” the innkeeper said, pronouncing the word “reporter” as if it referred to a species of Baron Snakes. “That’s why I didn’t want you to say too much there, Miss. You see, working in an inn, you get to hear all kinds of things, and one of the things I heard, from a bunch of soldiers who were drinking it up in the afternoon, was that the Princess may have gone missing.”

“Oh no!” Bernadette said with alarm. “Do you mean she’s been abducted by someone?”

“Abducted, maybe; or maybe she left on her own,” Ruth Stone said, “All I know is that those soldiers said they were looking out for young women in their late teens or early twenties, especially those wearing gloves. And beyond that, I can’t say anything, Miss,” she ended, darkly. “Good night, young ones, and be careful with that black-suited man. He’s trouble.”

“Thank you indeed, Ma’am,” Henrik said, as she disappeared up the steps to take up her usual post. “Well, this is certainly alarming.”

“I hope nothing has happened to the Princess,” Bernadette said, compassionately, “and I hope those rumours are just rumours. After all, they could just be searching for someone else.”

“Let us hope and pray for the best,” Henrik reassured her. He took a look at the clock on the wall. “It’s almost eight o’clock now. Would you like to have something to eat?”

“I wouldn’t mind at all,” Bernadette replied, “but I wouldn’t be comfortable going up to the dining area, if that journalist is still there.”

“I’ll ask Mrs. Stone if she can fix us something here,” Henrik suggested, and this proved to be remarkably simple. In a quarter of an hour, the two of them were sitting down to a simple meal. Bernadette said the traditional meal-time prayer, and they continued discussing the day’s events as they ate.

“What do you think of our Royal Family, Henrik?” Bernadette suddenly asked him.

“The Royals? Well, they’re the figurative heads of state, but I think they’re only as good as the Prime Ministers they get. Socius is a good leader. I don’t really follow politics too much, to be honest, though I do vote Liberal Unionist as a matter of principle.”

“So do I, actually; our family have been Unionists for quite some time,” Bernadette replied. “But I would like to see a woman becoming Queen of Galvenia in our day and age. It might be interesting.”

“It certainly would,” Henrik agreed. “I don’t know much about Princess Carranya, though. Like most Royals, she is kept discreetly under wraps until she either comes of age, marries, or ascends to the throne.”

“To be frank, neither do I. I suppose we girls are just fascinated by Princesses, in general,” said Bernadette, laughing. She walked up to the sofa, where her handbag was resting, and pulled a small book out of it.

“The *Itarian Missal*?” Henrik said, looking with interest at the book’s cover. “Do you all have to compulsorily recite the Four Hours of Prayer at college?”

“It’s not compulsory, but it’s ‘highly recommended’, according to our chaplain. And ever since they allowed us to say the prayers in Common rather than in Itarian, it’s actually not all that hard,” said Bernadette.

“Mind if I join in? I used to be quite regular at the Hours in my school days, but I’m afraid I’ve slacked off a bit during vacation, and I’ve always found the Nocturnal Hour particularly enriching,” said Henrik.

“I’d always be glad to have company,” Bernadette replied, handing him the book. “We generally say it together at college, so reciting the prayers and chants alone always makes me feel rather odd.”

“Well, most of my friends aren’t particularly religious, and I’m kind of used to reading it alone,” Henrik admitted. “So I’m also grateful for the company. Shall we begin? *In the name of the Infinity, from whom all life and all blessings come,*” Henrik intoned, clasping his hands together.

“*So let it be,*” Bernadette replied, bowing her head.

“*Today the Church recalls its faithful servant, Saint Frederick the Great of Zion. Wise ruler and pious saint, his example reminds us to be virtuous in the exercise of whatever power is granted us from Above,*” Henrik read on.

“*And so we pray: St. Frederick the Great, guide all the rulers of the nations. May your intercession deliver them from all peril, and make them obedient to the Infinity, and worthy rulers over their brothers.*” Bernadette read, slowly and clearly.

“*So let it be,*” Henrik replied...

Henrik woke up with a start in the middle of the night, and looked around. Both he and Bernadette, exhausted by their hours of travel, had fallen asleep shortly after their prayers, and she was lying curled up on one side in her own bed, with a half-smile on her face. Her cap had fallen from her head, but her long blue hair had come uncoiled in the process, and mercifully covered the scars above her eyes.

Henrik allowed his gaze to linger on her for a moment. *I’m glad at least one of us is able to sleep peacefully. Pleasant dreams carry you to the morning, Bernadette,* he thought, then looked around, trying to find out what had woken him in the first place. He listened carefully, and heard the sound of voices, which seemed to come from the floor above. One of the voices was high-pitched, almost insinuating, while the other was cold, formal, almost like the stereotyped speech of a noble in a stage play.

Let me see what's going on, Henrik said. Getting up slowly, and closing the door without a sound to avoid waking his companion, he crept slowly up the stairs, until he could see directly into the small waiting area where he had checked in earlier. The man in the black suit, who had aroused Mrs. Stone's ire, was still there, huddled close together with a tall man wearing a long cloak.

Sweet Infinity! Henrik thought. *Could it be...?* He took a further step forward, and craned his head forward, trying to catch as much of the conversation as possible.

"I'm telling you," the high-pitched voice, which clearly belonged to the reporter in the suit, was saying. "It's all but official. Koketsu has been..."

"Silence," said the lower voice. "I am uninterested in the machinations of the Zion Empire, except insofar as they relate to my objective. So tell me, what have you heard about the man named Lugner?"

Juno! Henrik thought. *And he's looking for clues to Lugner's whereabouts! Should I...*

"Precious little, Sir, though I know one thing for a fact. He's not a Commonwealth official, but he's not a Varald, either. He's not working for any Government particularly," the journalist said.

"But it is self-evident that he was collaborating with Kodenai, to the ruin and detriment of Galvenia," the second voice replied. "What are his aims with respect to this country?"

I'd better make myself known, Henrik thought. Summoning up his courage – he was unarmed at the moment – he walked casually up to the two men. "Makarov... is that you?" he said, trying to sound as light-hearted as possible.

The man in the cloak looked up with an annoyed expression on his face. "Well, well. Spenson, I never thought we would meet under such circumstances."

"Is he another of your friends, Mr..." the reporter began.

"Silence! Let me speak," Juno shot back, glaring at him. "What business do you have with me, Spenson?"

"Makarov, your mother has been worried sick about you. In fact, she asked me to look for you as a personal favour. Just what the hell are you doing?" Henrik said, in an even tone.

Juno looked closely at Henrik. "Spenson. Before I answer this, tell me one thing. Is Eramond with you?"

"Ryan? Ryan's gone to Caledonia, Makarov. His father has sent him on an errand there. He's nowhere around at the moment."

"Then I can speak frankly. Spenson, I have acquired important information about the man known as Lugner, and his designs on Galvenia. I cannot disclose them to anyone, not even you, at the moment. I shall remain in Lorean for a day or two more, to confirm certain suspicions of mine, and then I shall return to Davenport to plan my next course of action. Tell my dear mother not to worry on my account. I am quite capable of defending myself," Juno said coldly.

“Makarov, I’m not sure if this is such a good idea...” Henrik began.

“Leave me to make my own decisions, Spenson, and I will respect you. But I will give you one final piece of advice, as a token of my goodwill. Remain here no longer, but return to Davenport immediately. You may be needed there.”

“What do you mean?” Henrik asked.

“I can say no more, Spenson. I wish you good luck. As for me, I shall follow the Way.” Juno looked away, and motioned to Henrik to leave.

The way? Henrik thought, as he climbed quietly up the stairs. *What does he mean by that?*

As he climbed back into bed, he reflected that, all things considered, he had done quite a good day’s work. *And to the Infinity be the glory. So let it be...* he reflected, as he drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR: EMPTY CHAIRS

*“There are ways that some think straight,
but they lead in the end to death.”
(Proverbs, ch. 14, v. 12.)*

“Henrik! Good morning, Henrik!” Bernadette said brightly, as he yawned and stretched his arms out. She was already awake, and her bed had been made with scrupulous neatness. “My goodness, I slept like a log there. What about you?”

Henrik got out of bed, and paced up and down the room slowly, still feeling the effects of the night’s unexpected encounter. Bernadette was sitting in front of the small mirror on the dresser, her neck bent at an uncomfortable angle as she ran a small comb through her hair. “Good morning, Bernadette. Well, I *did* fall asleep pretty quickly, but I was woken up in the middle of the night by two people who were talking in the reception area upstairs. One of them was the boy I was telling you about, Makarov Juno.”

“Oh, Henrik, do you mean you were able to find him?” she exclaimed, putting her comb down and turning to face him. He smiled at her, but she looked around, embarrassed, and placed a hand over her forehead. “Henrik, have you seen my...”

“Your hat? I think it fell off your bed when you were sleeping,” Henrik replied, “but don’t mind me. It’s quite all right with me if you want to keep it off indoors.”

“Really?” Bernadette coloured, but looked pleased, and was silent for a moment before resuming her questions. “Well, did you tell him his mother was looking for him? What was he doing in Lorean?”

Henrik filled her in on the details of their conversation. “And I was lucky to get that much out of him,” he said, closing his eyes and looking serious. “Apart from the Infinity and perhaps his late father, I don’t think anyone can truly figure out what makes Makarov tick.”

“He said he was looking for that man, Lugner, though” Bernadette said, “Henrik, you’ve told me you’ve seen this Lugner.... what kind of man is he? Have you ever fought him?”

“I’ve never fought him; he and my friend Ryan once got into a fight on the road to Trinden, though, and he did set a couple of bodyguards on Ryan, to try and teach him a lesson.” Henrik chuckled.

“Fortunately, first, Armin and I were there to back him up, and second, those bodyguards were rather pathetic. It wasn’t very hard to dispose of them, but by the time we’d finished, Lugner had run away. All I remember is that he wore fancy-looking clothes, like those pictures of Factorian nobles we see in ancient history books, and had dark hair. He looked like the kind who could be cruel and ruthless, though I wouldn’t have thought he was a traitor unless we’d found him in those mines.” Henrik winced. “That was an experience I’m not keen on reliving any time soon.”

“Poor Henrik,” Bernadette said kindly. “Has Juno ever fought him? Lugner, I mean.”

"I think so," Henrik said, remembering the way he'd found Juno, wounded and angry, in the marshes at Alton. "You see, a little while ago, my friends and I went to Alton to hunt a creature called the 'Gorn Jabola'..."

"Henrik, was that *you*?" Bernadette said with admiration. "We girls at St. Nealus' were absolutely *terrified* of that monster, though our chaplain kept telling us it was probably just a Garun wolf, and scolded us for being superstitious. We offered up an entire day of thanksgiving the day we heard that it had been defeated, but Mayor Erasmus never really told us how it had been defeated; he just said that 'three brave young men from out of town' had slain it at last. What a blessing that the friend I've just met should turn out to be one of them!"

Both pleased and embarrassed by her gaze, Henrik went on quickly. "It wasn't just me, Bernadette, it was my friends Ryan and Armin as well. Especially Ryan; Armin was knocked out by the monster, and the two of us finally took it down. You know....though Ryan probably thinks I've stabbed him in the back, I wish he was back from his cruise, so that we could make our peace. He has been my best friend since school, after all."

"Don't worry, Henrik," Bernadette consoled him. "After all, you did what was right. From what you told me, he and Juno would probably have killed each other if they'd begun fighting, especially in a dangerous place like Davenport Peak. All you did was stun him with one blow, and then convince Juno to leave, after all. He'll probably realize it himself, quite soon."

"I don't know about that," Henrik said, shaking his head as he sat down on his bed again. "Ryan's pretty touchy about any sort of perceived betrayal these days, after what happened between him and Marianne."

"Just have faith in the Infinity, and in him," Bernadette said encouragingly. "You're both brave young men, who did our city and our country a lot of good, and there's no reason why you shouldn't see eye to eye again. Trust me."

"T.....Thank you, Bernadette," Henrik said, gratefully. "I don't know why I'm bothering you with my life story, but just having you listen to me helps a lot."

"It's no more than you would do for me," she replied, holding out her hand in a gesture of friendship. Henrik took it briefly in both his own, then released it.

"So then," he said more cheerfully, "what shall we do now? There's breakfast and the Dawn Hour, of course, but where would you like to head next?"

"Breakfast sounds like an excellent idea," she said, "and after prayer, I think I'll just try and do a little witnessing in the city. It's not exactly compulsory, but it is..."

"'Highly recommended', right?" Henrik joked. "I'm sure you'll find more believers in Lorean than in our heathen town of Davenport, so it ought to be easy."

Bernadette laughed. "Henrik! You really shouldn't be so uncharitable towards the folks in your town," she said, pointing a finger at him with mock seriousness. "After that, however, I have a little idea... if you don't mind, that is."

Henrik leaned forward. "This sounds interesting," he remarked. "So what do you have in mind?"

"I was thinking maybe the two of us could go and have a look at King's College," Bernadette replied, with excitement in her voice. "I've been there for a field trip when I was a young girl, and I've seen pictures of it, but I'd like to have a proper look at it. After all, it's going to be my home in two months or so. Would you like to come, too?"

"Most certainly," Henrik replied. "I took a brief look at it when my friends and I came to Lorean, but I'd love to take a more leisurely look at it, maybe meet some of the ground staff and get on a good footing with them. Tell you what, once we're done here, I'll accompany you to East Lorean, which is a residential area, and you can try your luck with the inhabitants there. In the meantime, I'll just take a walk around, maybe take a look at the Military Museum, and then come back to the inn. Meet me there when you're done, and we can visit King's College, and even the Palace Gardens, if you want."

"The Gardens? You certainly know how to talk to young women, Mr. Spenson," Bernadette teased. "I'm quite curious about them too! I shouldn't take more than a couple of hours, and I'll meet you back here. But first, I believe you mentioned breakfast."

"Indeed, I did, Miss Aquary," Henrik said lightly. "Let us see what our charming hostess has in store for us."

"She sounds like a nice lady, Gran," Emily said, as Maria, looking both flustered and proud, came into the dining-hall bearing a large silver dish. "Did you know her?"

"Know her? Why, Emily, I should think so!" Lavie replied. "In fact, when your mother was born, Bernadette was staying in our home at the time, and helped out a lot. In fact, she and your mother are very close. She always used to refer to Bernadette as her 'back-up Mummy'."

Emily laughed. "That's cute, Gran! But how come I've never seen her?" she asked.

"She did come to visit your parents when you were born, sweetie. I'm afraid that she finds it difficult to get around, though. We still write letters to each other regularly, and she and Professor Spenson own a little house near the College. They live in Itaria now, but they still come down often during the winters, when Lorean is warmer than the City of Itaria."

"Difficult? Is she crippled, Gran?" Emily asked.

"Not quite, dear," Lavie replied, "just old. I'm just grateful I'm still able to get around pretty well, myself! But I'll tell you a lot more about her, sweetie, once we've tasted what Maria has in store for us."

A little later, after a lunch that both Emily and her grandmother pronounced very good indeed (causing Maria to turn as red as a beet), she climbed back onto her favourite perch, and they continued...

Fortified by Mrs. Stone's excellent breakfast, and by a little reading from Bernadette's missal (the morning's readings were on Saint Caroline, the virtuous wife of a rather bloodthirsty Zion emperor of centuries past, and her husband's rather convenient death-bed repentance), the pair set off on their respective errands, about which not much requires to be said, except that they met at the inn at the stroke of noon, and after packing a small luncheon with their host's help, they headed for King's College.

"Fortunately, there are no armed guards here," Bernadette said, relieved, as they reached the long, carefully maintained footpath that led to the College premises. "Henrik, don't run, let's go a little slowly. This place is just beautiful!" She looked around with admiration at the little garden in front of her. The pair walked down the path side by side, pausing every moment or so to look around.

"This place.... It's like a dream come true, isn't it?" Henrik said, as they reached a small flight of steps that led towards the College itself.

"It certainly is, Henrik." Bernadette smiled, as they climbed the steps, and adjusted her hat carefully as a gust of wind almost sent it flying. "Oh, dear, I see I shall have to invest in some hatpins if I intend to live here, it's quite windy!"

"Lorean's generally like that, except at the height of summer," Henrik explained.

"Look at this view!" Bernadette looked down from the little flight of steps, at the garden that they had just left. "I wish I could just paint a portrait of it all, right now, except that I'm not really a good painter."

"Do you paint?" Henrik asked. "I can't even draw anything except stick figures, myself. And unless artistic values *really* change during my lifetime, I don't think stick figures will ever be considered an art form."

"Well, you could use them for comic effect," she suggested. "And yes, I do paint, though it's strictly for pleasure. I'll never paint an 'Imdahl's Sunrise' myself, but I do enjoy doing landscapes. I really should bring some canvas down here when I move in; maybe I'll get a little time to paint when I'm not busy with course-work!"

"That would be nice," Henrik said kindly. "You'll have to show me some of your paintings someday, when we come down here in earnest."

"Oh, I will, Henrik," Bernadette said, "but don't expect any masterpieces!"

Henrik laughed, feeling lighter than he ever had since that night at Davenport Peak. For a moment, even Colonel Whitworth's passing seemed just a distant memory. *King's College certainly has a good influence on me*, he thought. *Or maybe it's just Bernadette. Or both of them together.*

As they climbed up the stairs, an elderly man, wearing a working shirt and green trousers and carrying garden tools, greeted them. "Arr.... You'll be new students, I guess?" he said, his wrinkled face breaking into a smile. "I'm just a... garden tool lifter."

Bernadette laughed. "I'm Bernadette Aquary, from Hartridge. Sir, are you a Guildsman?" she asked.

"A Guildsman?" Henrik asked, puzzled.

"A member of the Lifter's Guild," Bernadette explained, patiently. "You probably have some of them at the docks in Davenport. They're a fraternal society of labourers, who work on the principles of fellowship, loyalty, and the dignity of manual work. They usually introduce themselves with a set phrase, such as 'I be a lifter', which helps fellow members identify them."

"But isn't the Lifter's Guild a sort of, um, secret society?" Henrik said in a low tone, anxious not to annoy the gardener, who was looking at both of them with amusement.

"It's more complicated than that. When they began in pre-Imperial times, the Guild were just a fraternal organization. It was during the pre-Commonwealth era that some of them began to organize into 'cells', swear hidden oaths, and become a considerable force in politics in some countries, particularly Itaria. Because some of their religious beliefs, like the worship of pre-Imperial gods and goddesses, went against the Church's teachings, they were officially banned around 150 C.E., and many of them escaped to the Republic or the Varald Directorate. But many of their lodges reject the 'cells' and their government, and are just a union for the mutual help of labourers and their families..."

"Arr, go on, lass," the elderly gardener said, nodding his head and looking at her benevolently. "You've got it all pat, haven't you? Well, young sir, what your friend says is the gospel truth. Sure, there are crazies who think the Guild is a political party, and who go in for all sorts of cloak-and-dagger rubbish. But most of us are just regular working folk, who like to meet up and stay in touch with our own kind. Even the old guild phrases, like 'I be a lifter', have become jokes for most of us. Is your father in the Guild, too?"

"No, but he's taught me a lot about them," Bernadette replied, shaking hands with him. "He's a member of the Healer's Guild himself, and I hope to be one myself some day."

"A Healer? You don't say!" the gardener said, beaming. "We and the Healer's Guild have been friends for thousands of years, though the Healers accept women and the Lifters are all men. Now, the Journeymen, on the other hand – we just didn't get along, even when we both got into the same sort of trouble. And you, sir?" He looked at Henrik's tall stature and upright bearing with approval. "Military?"

"Hardly!" Henrik stifled a laugh. "Father's a member of the Writer's Guild, and he....doesn't really like the army," he said apologetically. "I'll be joining King's College this semester, as will Bernadette, and we just thought we'd come down and have a look at our new home."

“Please take a look around, as much as you like,” the old man replied. “Does my old heart good to see you young folks running around the place, honestly. If you’ve got the patience for it, there’s actually a bit of a show on here, starting about an hour or so.”

“A theatrical performance?” Bernadette asked.

“No, Miss, no Dances of Malava on the campus, except during the once-a-year student festival,” the gardener replied. “This is more like a lecture. Apparently some professor from Itaria is coming down to talk about something or the other. You can get more details at the big hall, there.” He raised one work-hardened finger and pointed to a new-looking red brick building, about half a mile to the east.

“Itaria? That might actually be pretty interesting, you know,” Henrik said, with a smile. “I thought King’s College generally didn’t endorse any religious beliefs, though.”

“That’s right, sir,” the gardener replied, “but I’m afraid I don’t know much about Itarian professors myself. You should really have a look yourselves.”

“We will!” Bernadette assured him. “Thank you, Mr...”

“Arr, my name is Merrick, Miss. That’s what I’ve been called for decades, and it’s what I answer to.”

“Well, thank you then, Mr. Merrick. Henrik, shall we go down and have a look?” she asked.

“I really wouldn’t mind,” Henrik said, nodding in agreement. “Well, it was a pleasure, Mr. Merrick. I hope we’ll meet again once we move in here.”

“Arr, you will, young man, don’t worry. And enjoy the talk, if that’s possible,” Merrick said, waving them farewell as they walked towards the building. As they drew closer to it, they saw a large inscription carved over its entrance: “*H.R.H King George’s Memorial Auditorium, King’s College.*” A small group of young men and women, perhaps about twenty, were already gathered there. Many of them seemed to be carrying the copies of the same book – a heavy tome with a white leather cover – and they were engaged in animated discussion.

“That seems like a fairly recent construction, doesn’t it?” Bernadette said in a low tone. “And these must be our upperclassmen, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Our *future* upperclassmen,” Henrik corrected. “I’m still a school kid to them, at least till September.”

“And I’m just a country mouse from St. Nealus’,” Bernadette replied, laughing. They walked up to a display board, on which they read the following notice:

A Lecture On

“The Commonwealth and the New Theology”

By the Rev. Ronald J. Gray, Doctor of Divinity,

Professor of Modern Theology, St. Pious VII College, Itaria

On 23/4/300 C.E. at 14.30 hours

At King George's Auditorium, King's College

Followed by a Public Dialogue

Open to students, faculty, and all members of the public.

At the upper right-hand corner of the poster was a black-and-white photograph of a scholarly-looking man in clerical clothing, holding a thick book in his right hand.

"What do you think, Bernadette?" Henrik asked, reading it carefully once more. "It might be a little heavy for the likes of us..."

"I think it sounds very promising," she replied, "and we still have plenty of time to have our lunch before it starts! Come on, let's head back to the garden for a while, or look at the rest of the College. We can easily be back by two-thirty."

"Now that's certainly not too heavy," Henrik said with approval. They headed back down to the campus, and after admiring the locked buildings, found a comfortable little spot behind the main lecture halls, near a little fountain. Henrik sat down on a conveniently-placed bench, while Bernadette ran quickly around the fountain.

"How pretty! If I'd been younger, I'd have probably clapped my hands or something," said Bernadette, placing her hand in the running water. "Come now, Henrik, your mother would want you to wash your hands before eating!"

"Very funny, Bernadette," Henrik said, grinning. "And your mother would want you to come and eat at table, rather than playing in the water."

"Henrik, Henrik," she replied, "why do I feed you lines like that?" The two of them burst out laughing, and then sat down to their lunch.

From a distance, the gardener looked at them, and his friendly face suddenly grew hard.

"Arr, poor children," he muttered, under his breath. "It's almost a shame that they should be mixed up in something like this, but I suppose the Infinity knows best. Protecting them won't be easy..."

At two-thirty, the small group outside the auditorium made their way into one of the halls, and Henrik and Bernadette followed them. They sat down, quietly and unobtrusively, at one of the last rows of seats. "We don't know how many more will come by later," Bernadette reasoned, "and we really shouldn't be pushing ourselves forward."

"I'm with you there," Henrik replied, as they sat down comfortably. The chairs were padded, with convenient rests for their occupants' necks and arms. "Well, this is a welcome change from the Academy, and our cramped little desks."

"And from St. Nealus'," Bernadette replied, leaning back with a contented expression on her face. "We only had wooden stools there, because our Rector thought that it would help us develop a healthy spirit of renunciation."

"I bet he had a throne-like armchair in his own study, though," Henrik whispered, as more young men and women entered the room, and Bernadette laughed. "You know, I think he did, though that was just part of the office," she replied.

A young woman, dressed in fashionable clothes – including a short skirt that reminded Henrik of the outfits Marianne used to wear when she was dating Ryan – but wearing a blue hood over her head, came up to them. "Are you from the College or not?" she asked, handing them a paper, as well as a paperback book.

"Not yet," Henrik replied. "We'll both be joining this year, though. And we're both members of the Church, so we just thought we'd attend."

"I see!" the woman said coolly, looking at Bernadette's clothes with an attitude that was almost contemptuous. "Father Gray is really a great man, so you're very fortunate to get this chance! Believe me, nothing will be quite the same for you once you've heard him speak. And by the way, you don't have to keep your hats on, like an old woman. This isn't a church, kids!" She flicked her finger in the general direction of Bernadette's big hat, laughing out loud. Bernadette looked both offended and upset, but said nothing.

"Well, thank you, Miss..." Henrik broke in.

"That's 'Sister' to you, little brother," the woman replied, archly. "Sister Beverly, of the Servants of Saint Johan, and don't you forget it. Cheers to you, and enjoy yourselves!" She walked away, presumably to distribute handouts to the rest of the audience.

"Who, or what, was that?" Henrik said, taken aback. "The Sisters I know don't behave like that, and they certainly don't *dress* like that."

"What a ridiculous woman!" Bernadette replied, still looking hurt. "How can she..."

Henrik, sensing his companion's irritation, hastened to calm her. "Don't worry, she's gone," he said, patting her hand lightly. "I don't think she's a full sister, probably just a novice in need of further spiritual guidance. And by 'spiritual guidance', I do mean 'being made to walk on her knees and beg for her supper from all her companions', as they used to do in the old convents."

"Thanks, Henrik," Bernadette said, trying to smile. "I guess I shouldn't be so sensitive about such things."

"If I'd been in your place, I'd have given her a piece of my mind," Henrik replied, smiling back. "I certainly hope the Reverend Gray is a lot better than his *disciples*."

"The Servants of Johan.." Bernadette repeated the name, then grew silent. "That must be a fairly recent order, I don't remember ever having come across it."

"Hmm, I remember reading about St. Johan back in my catechism classes," Henrik said, helpfully. "I think he was a Zionese knight, who was famous for his brave deeds in protecting pilgrims from Varald raiders. The name of Johan became popular among Zionese royalty after he was canonized by Pontiff Benevolent XI, though it fell out of favour after the War for Galvenian Independence."

"That's interesting. Our Sister Beverly could certainly learn a lesson or two from him," Bernadette replied, amused, and then picked up the paper that the Sister had given them. It was a page full of quotes from other clerics and monastics, praising the Rev. Gray and his work. "It looks like they're about to begin, though."

In fact, the lights in the hall were now switched on, and a hush fell across the room. A tall man in priestly robes, accompanied by four young women, including Sister Beverly, approached the stage, and following behind them were a group of students in plain clothes. As they reached the stage, one of the young women walked up to the podium.

"As we begin this lecture, I now invite the Infinitus Choir of King's College to welcome our speaker, the Most Reverend Ronald Gray, with a song of praise. Please rise, as we shall listen to them sing 'The Sword of the Infinity', and remain at attention."

"*The Sword of the Infinity*?" *I've learned hundreds of hymns on my guitar, but this is a new one*, Henrik thought, as he and Bernadette stood up. He glanced at her, but the song was obviously as unfamiliar to her as it was to him, judging by the puzzled look on her face.

The choir began to sing, their voices rising in near-perfect harmony.

*"Sword of the Almighty, lying asleep,
Arise, that we may thy noble promises keep,
Through fire and anguish, blood and tears,
Calm our hearts, and still our fears,*

*Sword of the Infinity, let me not rest,
Until I have passed thy final test,
A reign of justice, power and might,
May it be ours, through the Sword of Thy Light."*

Strange words, Henrik thought. "*Justice, power and might*"? *That didn't sound like what I learned from Sister Miriam; the Church has always distinguished between the suffering, peaceful Church on Terra, and the redeemed, victorious Church in Heaven. And wasn't the sword sort of dropped as a symbol in hymns, after the conflict between Emperor Maximilian of Zion and the Church?* The choir finished, and there was

a smattering of polite applause from the audience. "And now, young men and women, allow me to introduce our speaker for the day," another of the young woman said, in a harsh, commanding voice. "The Very Reverend Ronald Grey is the Spiritual Counsellor and Pastor of the Servants of Saint Johan, and a Doctor of Divinity from Itaria University. He has written award-winning papers in various journals of politics and theology, including the *New Imperial Bulletin* and the *Journal of Speculative Theology*..."

Henrik heard Bernadette gasp next to him. *And I'm not surprised! The New Imperial Bulletin? That's one of those 'fringe' journals, which argues that King Richard Lionheart was a traitor, and that Galvenia would be much better off if it had remained part of the Empire! What on earth is an Itarian scholar doing writing there?*

"...to name just two." the woman went on. "Until he recently took up his pastoral duties with the Order of St. Johan, he was a full-time Professor of Modern Theology at Itaria's second-largest institute of higher learning, St. Pious VII College. Without any further ado, my friends, I now present to you the Reverend Ronald Gray, himself!"

There was another round of applause, and the Reverend took the podium, carrying a copy of the same leather-bound book that Henrik had seen the students carrying. He noted with some interest that the four women remained standing rigidly beside him, two at his right and two at his left. *Are they going to stand like that throughout this lecture?* he wondered.

The Reverend bowed his head, then raised it and began to speak. His voice, unlike those of his companions, was soft and persuasive, as though he was trying to reach out to every person in the hall, and convince them of the truth of his statements.

"Good afternoon, my dear young brothers," he said. "First off, I shall ask you a question. How many of you have read this book? He held up a copy of the book, and Henrik was able to read its title: ***The Reign of Righteousness: Reclaiming Terra***. "If you haven't, don't worry!" He laughed, and a good number of the audience laughed with him. "I know you college students are always occupied with one thing or the other, but I do urge you to read it through when you have the time. It may look big, but the print is pretty large!" He beamed at them.

Reclaiming Terra from what? Henrik wondered. Bernadette seemed to be looking at him intently, hanging on his every word, something that he found disconcerting. *Something's not right about this guy,* he said, *but I'm hanged if I know what it is.*

"Today, my friends, I am here to warn you all about something that you've all heard off," he began, his finger tracing an arc across the entire audience. "Now, all of you have heard of how Terra used to be torn by wars in the bad old days, and how it took the formation of the Commonwealth to stop this. Right?" There were nods and sounds of agreement from the audience, and he went on.

"And I'm sure all of you have heard of Lord Geraud Valtemond, and how his ideas became the cornerstone of the Commonwealth Charter; in fact, we of the Church venerate him as *Saint Geraud*, for

his noble deeds. Do I need to go into details?" The audience shook their heads, and there were a few shouts of "No, Father!"

"Excellent." Father Grey rubbed his hands together. "So tell me, now, how many of you have read the Commonwealth Charter? Raise your hands, if you please."

A number of hands, at least fifteen, went up. *Must be political science students*, Henrik thought, and then noted with surprise that Bernadette's was one of the raised hands. He looked at her, and she smiled back.

"Wonderful. Now, tell me, how many of you have read the writings of Saint Geraud?" His eyes searched the entire audience, lingering on every one of them, including Henrik. *I've read excerpts from his works when studying the catechism, of course*, he thought, *but aren't his full works existent only as copies in museums and archives?* This time, far fewer hands were raised, but Bernadette's was still up.

"You see? My friends, many of us are familiar with the Commonwealth Charter, but how many of us really know what *Saint Geraud* said about the world, and about government?" His voice grew severe. "Unfortunately, because of the passage of time, Geraud's writings are difficult to obtain in the original form, and many of them are 'annotated' by commentators of dubious value, such as Paul Mazarus. As a result, many of us, even if we are devout members of the church, attend the liturgy, and pray the Four Hours, are shockingly *ignorant* of what our greatest saint in modern times has actually written!"

Archbishop Mazarus? Henrik wondered. *He's a great writer! I must have read his books, "On the Existence of the Infinity" and "History, Civilization and the Holy Book", from cover to cover at least three times! He's hardly "dubious", he even represents Itaria on the Commonwealth Executive Council!* Bernadette, he noted, had lowered her hand, and was looking rather disapprovingly at the eminent speaker.

"In the hundred and fifty years that the Commonwealth has existed, it has brought peace to this world. It has brought an end to most wars, and to most insurrections. It has brought prosperity to many parts of Terra, and it has improved relations between countries. But, my brothers, is this what the Infinity and Lord Geraud truly wanted?"

Many of the audience seemed shocked by this question. *What is he trying to say?* Henrik wondered.

"I see by the looks on your faces," Ronald Grey continued, "that many of you are considering this question for the first time in your lives. And the purpose of my coming here today, friends, is exactly this: to make you consider it, and consider it seriously! Let us look, for example, at the 'peace' – if you can call it that..." – his expression was contemptuous – "that the Commonwealth has brought us. Consider the Varald Directorate. It has stopped waging war on the Zion Empire, and I do not say this is bad in itself. But at what cost? The Zions are content to let the Varalds continue with their evil policies, particularly the proscription of the Church, and the Varalds are content to trade with the Zions and grow wealthy. Is this what the Infinity wanted?"

Is he nuts? Henrik thought, an annoyed expression on his face. *The Infinity doesn't micro-manage each and every incident in history. Even first-year seminarians and novices are taught that!*

“Or take Galvenia. The Commonwealth has smoothed over relations between Zion and Galvenia, to the point where they spend vast sums of money on sheer vanities, such as luxury cruise ships, which are nothing but dens of gambling and crass materialism!” The Reverend’s voice was still gentle, but he was stressing each word, as if anxious that not one should be missed by his listeners. “Worse, unlike Zion, where the Church is officially recognized, Galvenia has adopted a pernicious policy of ‘tolerance’, which basically means that people are free to ignore Church doctrine and follow their own wicked wills! For the last few decades, Galvenia has been under the *de facto* rule of Martell Socius, an avowed agnostic who has repeatedly refused the Church funds to construct centres for missionary activity, in towns such as Davenport! I need not remind you of the temptations that exist in a seaside town.”

This is going from sublime to ridiculous, Henrik said, and stifled a laugh. He turned to face Bernadette, who was covering her lips with one gloved hand, presumably for a similar reason. *Davenport? I could understand if he talked about the port towns near the border of the Republic, where human slavery and forced marriages are still reported, but Davenport? And speaking of ‘temptations’, what about his Sisters and their dress code?*

“Despite this, Socius and his follower, Saunders, have steadily refused to allow the construction of a church there! And when questioned about this, even by his own newspapers, he cites the Commonwealth Charter, saying that people must be free to follow the dictates of their own conscience. This dangerous and indifferent ideology endangers the souls of the men of Davenport. As the Holy Book reminds us, the great town of Janwen was destroyed because its inhabitants grew proud and wicked, and ignored the Infinity to worship the demons and their master, the Lord Below! How many more Janwens is the Commonwealth creating for us?” He brought his fist down on the podium, and was about to begin again, when he noticed that several students were walking out, with angry expressions on their faces.

He's done it now, Henrik thought, with a satisfied smile on his face. *Socius is the darling of most University students, and you criticize him at your own peril, even if you're the Pontiff himself. Let's see how he reacts now. And comparing Davenport to Janwen is beyond ridiculous!*

“But...” He looked angrily at the departing students, and his voice grew shrill, but he continued. “But I am heartened to see that *some* of you have decided to heed my message. Friends, the source of all these evils is difficult to see, because there is nothing more evil than evil that disguises itself as good! We believe that the Commonwealth Charter has brought good to us, but in reality, it is leading us on a path to destruction! Our ancestors were destroyed because they displeased the Infinity, and...”

More students were walking out, this time with audible expressions of displeasure. A woman’s voice, from somewhere near the rear, sweetly said, “Reverend, tell your acolytes to cover up first, and then we’ll fix Davenport for you”, before leaving, and Bernadette, who was watching the proceedings with increasing amusement, clapped silently and raised her thumb in approval as the speaker of these wise

words also departed. Drops of perspiration began to appear on the Reverend's face, which had now turned a deep red.

"The Commonwealth Charter is gravely and fatally flawed!" he said, his voice rising almost to a squeak, as he tried to begin again. "Those who framed it were compromisers and traitors, who betrayed the noble words of Lord Geraud! You, my friends, are the youth of Galvenia, and you need to take back your country, and place it in the hands of the Inf...."

The youth of Galvenia had all but totally left, except for two young men in the front row, and Henrik and Bernadette at the rear. The Reverend blanched, then moved away from the podium, an expression of the deepest frustration on his face.

One of the women bravely tried to step into the breach. "Does anyone in the audience have any questions?" she said, trying to sound cheerful.

One of the young men in the front row, a dark-skinned man with golden-rimmed glasses, raised his hand.

"Excellent!" the Reverend said, recovering a little. "What is your question, young man?"

"Reverend," he said, gravely, "I'd like to call attention to page 103 of your book, where you quote the following passage from the Holy Book: 'And the Infinity spoke unto his servant, Fina, and said unto her...' That's a clear error. In the original passage – he took out his copy of the *Evangelium Infinitate* – "the Infinity is speaking to Lady Flare, and not to her daughter, Lady Fina. Besides, the best textual versions suggest that Lady Flare's daughter was actually named Freya, and that 'Fina' is a scribal error."

The Reverend spluttered, but did not answer, and the woman looked at him sternly. "The Reverend is not responsible for typographical errors," she chided him. "Does anyone have a *legitimate* question?" The two men nodded at each other, and left quietly.

Henrik raised his hand. *Forgive me, O Infinity, but I couldn't resist this one*, he thought, suppressing his smile.

"Yes," she said, cautiously, "what is your question?"

"I was just looking at page 1 of your book," Henrik said, in his most "innocent" voice, "where you quote Archbishop Mazarus as having said this: 'The idea of the Infinity is born of the yearnings of the human mind. The Infinity is not a person or a thing, but a wish, and a wish whose days belong to the past.'"

"Yes, yes!" The Reverend nodded eagerly. "Frankly, my friend, I am as distressed by those words as you are. Mazarus has turned heretical ever since he was appointed to the Commonwealth Council." He looked at Henrik with approval.

"Well, those words are from Mazarus' book, 'On The Existence of the Infinity'. The trouble is, they weren't written by him," Henrik said, with as much assurance as if he was taking his history orals at

Davenport Academy. “The Archbishop is quoting an agnostic philosopher from Ghetz, Waldemar Jarzon, and proceeds to dismantle Jarzon’s statement in the rest of his chapter. So...”

The Reverend looked as if he was about to have a stroke, and another of the women came to his rescue. “Young man, this session is meant for those who wish to learn the new theology, not for schoolboys who idolize Mazarus! I think you should...”

“Yeah, I know,” Henrik said, giving her his sweetest smile. “I was just leaving now. Thank the Reverend for me, this was very interesting. Coming, Bernadette?”

“I’m ready when you are,” she said, and – her body still shaking with laughter – she followed Henrik out of the hall. The Reverend was left alone with an audience of chairs that no longer held any students, and his four Sisters.

“These Galvenians!” he spluttered angrily, as the silhouettes of Henrik and Bernadette receded. “Utter heathen, rabble! Damnation will overtake them!”

“Why was that man saying all those silly things, Gran?” Emily asked her grandmother. “All the Reverends I’ve met have been very nice!”

“They generally are, Emily,” Lavie said, approvingly, “but this man was different. You’ll understand when we get back to the story. Now, Henrik and Bernadette were leaving King’s College, and...”

“Henrik,” Bernadette said, still laughing at the memory of the Reverend’s “lecture”, “I don’t believe I’ve ever had a more ridiculous experience in my young life. Where *did* King’s College get that lunatic from?”

“Technically, he’d be a *heretic* and not a lunatic,” Henrik quipped, reducing her to helplessness once more. “But seriously, he must have been kicked out of Pious VII College, and is trying to make a buck. Hopefully the Philosophy Club will be more judicious in choosing speakers in future!”

“Do you read a lot of theology, Henrik?” Bernadette asked. “I mean, I’ve read Lord Geraud because it was compulsory at St. Nealus’, and my school at Alton was very strong on civics, so Mrs. Grannan made us memorize almost the entire Commonwealth Charter! But I’ve never tried reading books by Archbishop Mazarus or Archbishop Cantor, though students who choose Social Theology in their second year have to go through them. Is that what you’ll be majoring in at King’s College?”

“Actually, I haven’t yet made up my mind,” Henrik admitted. “History and archaeology have always fascinated me, especially history as it pertains to the ancient times mentioned in the Holy Book, but Father would never let me major in history, given the economy. Fortunately, I was also quite good at Common and natural sciences in school, so I’ll probably take one of them. Or maybe I’ll take up economics, and go into the Galvenian Civil Service.”

“Well, that makes two of us, Henrik,” said Bernadette. “My Italian scholarship will cover three years at King’s College, like the one that the King gave you, and the only condition is that I must pass the

Religious Literature and Philosophy courses in my first year. After that, I'm free to choose. Maybe I'll take the sciences too, and see what they can teach me about being a Healer." She looked a little hesitant. "It's an embarrassment of choices, really."

"Well, we have almost the entire first semester to decide," Henrik reassured her, "and the next two months as well. There's no hurry. So do we have time to visit the Gardens?"

Bernadette rolled down the glove on her left hand, and looked at her wrist-watch. "I'm sorry, Henrik, I think not," she said wistfully. "I would love to, but that lecture took a bite out of our time, and St. Nealus' has a strict curfew for girls; we have to be back for the Evening Hour by six-thirty. I should be leaving." She took a step away, and lifted her handbag, which had slipped down, onto her shoulder.

"Wait, Bernadette," Henrik said, taking a step towards her. "Let me accompany you, at least as far as the entrance to Alton. I'd feel better if you didn't go alone."

"Would you really, Henrik?" Bernadette said, once again blushing very prettily. "But I'm sure your father must be waiting for you.."

"Father doesn't really mind, as long as he's allowed to write undisturbed. He may lecture me a little about my study ethic, but that's it, really. And remember, we've had two encounters with the armed forces, so far. I brought you here because I was looking for Makarov, and I'm responsible for your safety. Let me take you back."

"I'm...very grateful, and also very happy, Henrik," Bernadette said. "All of a sudden, I feel much, much better about going to a big place like King's College, because I know you'll look out for me."

"I will," said Henrik solemnly, as they walked away from Lorean. Their walk to Alton took them almost two and a half hours, but they hardly noticed it, so busy were they admiring the scenery, or simply talking to each other. Finally, they arrived at the gates of Alton.

"I guess this is where our journey together ends," Henrik said. "It's truly been a pleasure knowing you, Bernadette, and I look forward to being a fellow freshman of yours." He bowed, echoing the gesture she'd made at their first encounter, and she bowed back.

"It's... it's been a pleasure too, Henrik," Bernadette replied, and it seemed to Henrik that her eyes were shining. *Must be just the setting sun*, he thought. "In two months, I'll be.... I mean, we'll be together again, won't we?"

"We certainly will," he said. "Goodbye, Bernadette, and peace be with you. I hope you enjoyed this little adventure as much as I did."

"Oh yes, Henrik," she replied, holding out her hand. "Peace be with you and your household, too." They shook hands – letting their hands remain together a little longer than they normally would – and then Henrik turned to leave, waving back to Bernadette, who stood at the gates waving until he was visible no more. Then she smiled, and turned back, walking resolutely towards St. Nealus'.

I must say, Henrik thought, smiling at his recollections as he took the road back to Davenport, that this was certainly the best 'adventure' I've been in so far, even if we didn't do much 'adventuring' in the end. And to think that I met her entirely by accident. The Infinity works in mysterious ways, - he smiled at the familiar reflection – but the next two months are going to seem rather long...

"I trust you....completely," Princess Carranya said, clinging tightly to Ryan Eramond and opening her eyes at last, her entire body shaking. "Ryan.... I wouldn't be alive right now if it weren't for you..." She tried to speak further, but was unable to. Tears of shock and relief flowed down her cheeks, and Ryan, embarrassed by her proximity, patted her on the back lightly, hoping there was some way he could calm her.

Always do the right thing, he thought. That's what Grandpa always said. And right now, I've got to find a way off this boat! Forget getting to Caledonia, I have to bring the Princess safely back home. He slowly unclasped the Princess' arms from around him, looking at her. *I hope she's got enough left to make it back. She's terribly brave, but that last battle must have taken a lot out of her.* He looked at her face, wiping her eyes with his sleeve. Her left cheek, which was bruised by a blow from one of the Cutthroats, had turned purple, and there were red marks just above the neckline of her dress, where Blackheart – *Damn his soul, damn him to hell!* – had begun to choke her, just before Ryan had managed to shoot him. Stepping away, he noted with horror that – besides the slight spray of blood on her bodice, which came from Blackheart – one of her sleeves was almost drenched a bright red.

"Princess, you're wounded," he said, gently. "Let's go down below decks, and take a look at your wound. We can't get off this ship if you're bleeding."

"R – Ryan..." The Princess shivered and closed her eyes. "I can't believe it...."

"Listen to me, Princess," Ryan said. "Blackheart is dead. I threw him overboard, and I hope the sharks choke on every piece of his evil heart." His face grew grim. "I don't think there are any more pirates on the ship, at least not now. But we have to go back down."

"B...back down?" Carranya stammered. "But.... everyone's already d-dead....blood everywhere..." She grew more incoherent, and could not continue.

"Princess, we have to," Ryan said patiently. "There are life-boats up here, but I can't possibly steer one of them alone, and you can't help me if you've got a broken wing," he said, touching her shoulder gently. She winced with pain, but tried hard to smile back. "Now, though everything was a muddle, I do remember that there were Zionese soldiers fighting off the pirates on the upper deck. Some of them *must* have survived. We need to talk to them, and get their help."

"But what about.... What about the pirates?" Carranya said, weeping. "If their ships are still in the water..."

"We'll have to see about that," Ryan replied. "In the meantime, let's get down." Limping, the Princess followed Ryan down the steps. As they reached the last step, they almost collided full-on with a blue-haired guard, who was carrying a sword.

"Who are you?" she demanded sternly, making a menacing gesture with her sword. Even in his dazed condition, Ryan could not help admiring its red blade, which created tiny sparks in the air as she swung it. *It must be magical*, he thought, *and this woman must be in the Zionese army*. "My name is Ryan Eramond," he said, "and this is Her Highness, Princess Carranya of the Kingdom of Galvenia. Captain Blackheart tried to kill her, but I managed to shoot him, and he fell overboard. She's hurt, and she needs help. Please help us."

The guard looked at them both, her eyes widening. "Your Highness!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know you were on this ship! If I'd known, I would have defended you with my life!"

"Th-thank you," Carranya replied, tremulously. "Who are you?"

"My name is Rebecca Burnfist," she said, with a short laugh. "Silly name, I know. The others always call me Caris, though that's not my name, and they daren't call me that to my face! You can call me Becky, though. I'm a sergeant in the Zion Special Forces." She sheathed her sword, and slammed her fist into her palm.

"Caris Burnfist, as in the legendary figure from Factorian history?" Ryan asked, curious despite the urgency of their situation.

"Yes," Becky barked. "I'm afraid us Zionese soldiers have a rather stupid sense of humour. Anyway, I think we've cleared the ship of pirates, at least on this deck. I only hope they protected the Crown Prince with their lives."

"He's....d...dead," Carranya blurted out.

"**What??**" Becky shouted.

"We saw a man kill him, and then escape by breaking a window," Ryan explained. "Probably a suicide killer. He must be dead in the water by now."

"Dishonour! Treason!" Becky cried out, her hand going to her sword. "Are you sure about this?"

"I'm afraid we saw it, Sergeant," Ryan replied. *And I'm going to have a hard time forgetting it. Not as hard as the Princess, though*. She was still shaking, and he placed his arm around her.

"Are you the Princess' bodyguard, Mr. Eramond?" Becky asked, suspiciously.

"No, I'm... just a passenger," Ryan said, deciding to cut a long story short. "I saw the Princess was in danger, and tried to help her reach the lifeboats, but Captain Blackheart was already there. He and his men killed some Zionese nobles, including an Admiral, and then tried to attack the Princess. There was a struggle, but we managed to fight them off."

“We?” Becky said with surprise, looking at the Princess, who was visibly wilting.

“The Princess can use light-based magic,” Ryan explained, “and between her blasts and my revolver, we disposed of Blackheart’s men. Then Blackheart grabbed her and tried to use her as a shield, and I had to kill him.” *I’m a killer*, Ryan thought. *I did the right thing, Grandpa, and I now have blood on my hands. But I can’t think about it now. I have to save the Princess, or there’s no point to it all.* “Unfortunately, she was wounded during the fight, probably by one of the pirates’ knives, and she’s bleeding.”

“Bleeding? Let me see,” said Becky, leading the half-conscious Carranya into a small cubicle. “My quarters are rather small, but they’ll do.” Drawing a small knife from her belt, she sliced open the Princess’ sleeve, and peeled it back to examine her wound. “I think he’s actually cut an artery,” she said, “but this looks....clean. Either a very long, thin knife did this, or we’re dealing with magical pirates here. But that’s nonsense. Pirates are scum, they wouldn’t know how to use magic if it walked up to them and offered to marry them.”

“Is it serious?” Ryan asked.

“What a stupid.....Oh, I forgot, you’re a civilian, Mr. Eramond,” Becky said, cutting herself short. “Of course it’s serious. A cut vein, nothing too big, usually. You just need pressure. Arteries are trickier. Haven’t you ever studied biology? Fortunately, we have just the thing. Your Highness, forgive me, but this will hurt a little.”

Before either Ryan or Carranya could react, she had drawn her sword, and a small spark flew from its blade and directly onto the Princess’ arm. Ryan gasped as the smell of something burning filled the air, making him feel sick.

“She’s fainted from the pain and the loss of blood,” Becky said dryly, “which is actually good. Now we need to just pack the wound. Mr. Eramond, could you get me a pack of bandages from that first-aid kit, up there?” Mechanically, Ryan fetched the pack, and Becky ripped it open impatiently. She first took out a tube of some sort of ointment, which she applied liberally to the Princess’ wound, and then bandaged her arm.

“That should keep her going for some time, now that the bleeding has stopped,” Becky Burnfist said quietly. She looked at the Princess’ face, then took her pulse. “Fortunately, she hasn’t lost so much blood as to cause her heart to collapse,” Becky explained, “if you get what I mean. Doctors have nicer terms for all that, but you won’t find too many of *them* on a battlefield. Let her sleep it off, she needs it. Besides the combat shock, light-based magic uses a lot of energy, or so the mages taught us.”

“Thank you very much, Sergeant,” Ryan said, heaving a sigh of relief. *If Carranya’s safe, we now have some time to plan our next move, and we also have an ally. Things are actually looking up*, he thought, allowing himself to hope just a little. Then an idea occurred to him.

“Shouldn’t we head down, and see if any pirates are still around?” Ryan asked, looking at Carranya’s sleeping face, peaceful at last.

"I doubt they are, or they'd have got here by now," Becky said slowly. "No, I think His Majesty was their target all along. The rest of their attack, bloody as it is, was a diversion. It was meant to make us rush to defend the rest of the ship, while one man – probably someone trained in stealth assassinations – killed him."

"You mean Prince Wilhelm? But why do you call him 'His Majesty'?" Ryan asked. "Isn't Charlemagne still the Emperor?"

"Of course! But don't you know he's...." Becky began, then stopped abruptly. "I keep forgetting you're Galvenian, and not Zionese. Charlemagne is....well, old. Many of his duties are already being carried out by Wilhelm. This is a serious loss to the Empire." She shook her head, irritably. "And I probably have to be the one to carry that news back to Caledonia, when I do get around to going there."

Carranya began to stir. "Ryan..." she called out. "Where am I? Are we still on the ship?"

"Take it easy, Princess," Ryan said. "Sergeant Burnfist, here, has taken care of your wound. You're all right now. Just rest."

"But I have to get back to Lorean," she protested feebly. "Not only will Father and Mother be worried, but I have to tell them.....about Wilhelm...."

The military talks, Ryan realized. Just the day before those cursed pirates boarded the ship, Carranya told me that Wilhelm had come to discuss a military alliance with her parents, against the Varaldians. And now...

"Your Highness, please do not move too much in your current condition," the Sergeant admonished her. "Mr. Eramond, could you have a look at the lower decks? I trust you have a sword in addition to that pistol of yours."

"As a matter of fact, I do, Sergeant," Ryan replied.

"Then hurry, and see if there are any of our men left there," she ordered him, with no more compunction that if he had been one of her privates. "It shouldn't be too dangerous, but be careful all the same. I'll stay here and keep watch over Her Highness."

"Right," said Ryan grimly. "I doubt there'll be much left, but let me see."

There were no signs of life on the upper deck – the Cutthroats had done their job of devastation with remarkable efficiency, and even Rachel's Boutique had been stripped of its designer luxuries. The bodies of Zion soldiers, many of them still holding weapons, lay fallen across the corridors. Casting a last, regretful glance at the conference room where Prince Wilhelm's body lay, Ryan made his way cautiously to the lower decks.

The carnage here was even more complete. As he climbed slowly down the stairs, he came upon the body of a young girl in red, pierced through the heart with a knife. A look of surprise on her face suggested that her end had been mercifully swift. *Poor Rinoa*, he thought. *I wish I could have saved you and the others, not just the Princess*. As he passed by the Starlight Theatre, he entered the room, looking at the rows of chairs that would now never have an audience to occupy them any more.

It's like that line in the play, Ryan thought, feeling as if he would choke. *Something has died here. Not just the passengers, but... something bigger. Something precious, that has been lost forever. Maybe it's innocence. Maybe it's the Commonwealth. I can't name it, but something is gone*. As he took one last look at the theatre, he heard a sound from the direction of the small green room behind the stage.

"Who's that? Show yourself!" Ryan shouted, drawing his pistol and stepping forward cautiously. "The pirates are gone. It's me, Ryan. If there's anyone in there, please come out!"

"No need to yell, my boy, no need to yell!" The door opened slowly, and the dignified figure of Tremfein, the stage director, came out, accompanied by an older woman, and Wolfman, his eccentric actor. "Tremfein! Naomi! And Wolfman!" Ryan exclaimed, happily. "You're safe! Thank the heavens, at least someone made it besides the three of us."

"Heh, three of you?" Tremfein said. "Who else is alive on board? Naomi and I disappeared into a trapdoor under the stage when those blasted pirates landed up, and fortunately for us, they didn't stumble upon it! Sheer luck, my boy, sheer luck. I'm a very lucky man."

"You can say *that* again," Naomi said, shaking the dust from her clothes. "Anyway, Wolfman was the one who saved us. When the pirates tried to attack, he took them down, and then he led us out of the trapdoor and into the green room. We were just about to take a look outside when you came."

"Wolfman?" Ryan asked, puzzled. "How did he fight them off?" In reply, Wolfman took off his grotesque wolf's mask, revealing a determined, tanned face, with a square jaw. "Mr. Eramond, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Agent Wolfgang William Striker, of the Zion Intelligence and Tactics Division. Who else have you been able to save?"

"Only Carranya," Ryan said, hanging his head. "I checked the top two floors, but there were no survivors. Your soldiers fought to the last man, but I found no survivors, except a Sergeant of the Zion Special Forces."

"Caris...I mean, Rebecca is alive? That's good news. As for the others, don't worry about that, Mr. Eramond, some of them *did* make it," Agent Striker replied. "They came by here a while ago, and I sent them to make a sweep of the lower decks, as well as to check if there were any other pirate ships in the neighbourhood. They should be back any moment now."

"So what was your mission, Agent Striker?" Ryan asked. "Were you on detail to protect Prince Wilhelm? If so, I'm afraid he's dead. Carranya and I saw a strange-looking man in black stab him to death, then try to escape through the window of his room, but there's no way he could have survived that drop."

“Wilhelm dead? That’s....unfortunate,” Striker replied, with a surprising lack of emotion. “Tell me, Mr. Eramond, who exactly is that young woman? I have my suspicions, but I’d rather you told me.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t hide it from you any longer, especially since she can use every bit of help she gets now.” Ryan said. “She gave her name as Carrie Lindsey, but she’s actually Princess Carranya, the heiress to the throne of Galvenia. She was afraid of a potential war between us and the Varaldians, and she stowed away on this ship to try and meet Emperor Charlemagne, to persuade him not to use the military option. Unfortunately, she bumped into me accidentally on our second day on board, and was forced to tell me her identity.”

Striker let out a low whistle. “I guessed as much,” he said, “when I saw her in that play. Only a Royal could play a Royal in that way. Everything else can be faked, even appearance, but Royal manners and airs are hard to fake, unless you’ve been born to it. Well, I must say she’s remarkably naïve, Mr. Eramond. Even if she’d reached Caledonia, how could she have obtained an audience with the Emperor? More to the point, what proof did she have that she was really the Princess? And how would she get off the ship without a ticket?”

“Well, I did give her a spare ticket I happened to have,” Ryan explained, “but you certainly have a point, sir. She’s idealistic, but hasn’t seen much of the real world.”

“I have now,” a voice – brave, but weary – said suddenly, and Ryan turned to face Princess Carranya herself. “And whoever you are, it was clever of you to guess who I was. I suppose you object to what I was trying to do...”

“Not at all, Your Highness,” Striker replied, with admiration in his voice. “To be honest, the popular stereotype of Zionese as war hawks, as in Tremfein’s play, is not accurate, especially in our day...”

“Hey, that was poetic license!” Tremfein protested. “I told you, if you’re sore about it, I’ll do a sequel where the Zions hit back! Or maybe I can do a play about the annexation of Darington, or...”

“Shut up, Tremfein,” Naomi said, affectionately, and Tremfein obeyed.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say, Princess, is that we are actually on the same side. We don’t particularly want war with the Varaldians now, because we may be facing danger on an entirely different front.”

“What do you mean?” Carranya asked, softly. “I know you may think I’m weak and inexperienced, but I am the future ruler of Galvenia. We are allies of the Zion Empire. What is this danger that you speak of?”

“Princess, with all due respect, I think you’re going to fall down if you keep trying to stand like that,” the voice of Rebecca Burnfist broke in, followed by the appearance of its owner. “I’m sorry, Mr. Eramond. One of my men came in to report to me, and while I was giving him his orders, the Princess had gone.”

“Sit down, Rebecca,” Striker replied, as she led the Princess to a chair of her own. “Now, Tremfein, you’re technically not part of this problem at all, but unfortunately, you and Naomi have already heard

too much for your own good. I can't threaten you, but I do ask you to keep quiet about the whole thing."

"Heh, indeed I will, Agent Were Willy Strike," Tremfein joked. "I put that line in the script just to have a little fun at your expense, you know."

"Very amusing, Tremfein," Striker replied. "Now, for our soldiers..."

As if on cue, three Zion soldiers entered the theatre and saluted both Sergeant Burnfist and Striker. "What news, men?" the latter asked.

"Sir, there are no more pirates in the water," one of them reported. "All the decks are secure. However, the ship's engines have been sabotaged by the boarding party, and we shall have to escape using the lifeboats."

"Excellent," Agent Striker replied. "I'm sure we can do that, but we need to discuss a few things first. Soldiers, there is one last task I have for you. Go to the top deck, and retrieve the body of Prince Wilhelm. Place it in a suitable locker, and guard it with your lives. We need to bring it back to Caledonia at all costs. He was a good man." The Intelligence agent bowed his head in a gesture of respect. "Permission to leave."

"Sir, yes, sir!" the three men said in unison, as they left to retrieve the unfortunate prince.

"Now, let's get to the point. I told you that the Empire doesn't want a war now. Unfortunately, it looks like we are being maneuvered into one. Whoever assassinated Junzio Koketsu – I presume you've heard about that, my Galvenian friends..."

"We received the news immediately," Carranya replied, and Ryan saw what Striker had meant about a royal bearing. Her face was pale, her arm was bandaged, her dress torn and stained with blood – and, despite that, she was able to command the respect of everyone else in the room. "The initial reports said he had been assassinated in his cabin. And after what I've seen today" – she shivered, thinking of Wilhelm's death, and then held herself upright – "I'm entirely convinced that his death, and the assassination of the Prince, are all the work of the same group."

"Very well reasoned, Princess," Striker replied, nodding in agreement. "In fact, we received a coded message suggesting that a similar attempt would be made on the Crown Prince, which is why we took precautionary measures. Well, those measures have failed – but we still have cards to play. But first, I must explain one thing. Charlemagne, the Emperor of Zion, is a sick man."

"Striker!" Rebecca Burnfist looked shocked. "That isn't supposed to be common knowledge..."

"Do you see any commoners here, Rebecca?" Striker replied, coolly. "This is the Crown Princess of Galvenia we're talking to here. And I'm sure, by the way this young man has defended her," – he pointed to Ryan – "that we can trust him. As for Tremfein and Naomi, I suggest they travel back to Lorean with the Princess, because that's the safest place for them."

“What do you mean, ‘sick’?” Carranya asked. “Do you mean he’s mentally ill? Demented?”

“Not at all, Your Highness,” said Striker, “though that’s a good guess. Charlemagne, my friends, is terminally ill. He needs to be fed by tube, and cannot live for more than a few months, a year at best. In such circumstances, an Emperor does not think straight. Give him a *casus belli*, and...”

“A what?” Ryan asked.

“A cause for war, Ryan,” Carranya replied, smiling wanly at him. “Your knowledge of Itarian needs to improve quite a bit.”

Ryan looked at the Princess with renewed admiration. Just an hour ago, she had seemed a physical and mental wreck, and now, she was almost herself again – the same girl who’d acted with him in Tremfein’s play, and who’d stood with him, looking out at the sunset over the Sea of Arlia.

“Anyway, once Koketsu was dead, Charlemagne was out for blood. All of us, including Wilhelm, tried to talk him out of it, but when that proved futile, Wilhelm set out on his expedition. What was your father’s response, Princess?” Striker went on.

“He didn’t tell me, I’m sorry,” said Carranya. “But I know my father, and I could tell that he was in two minds about it. He wanted to help, but was reluctant to plunge Galvenia into a war that could last years. At least, that’s how I saw it.”

“Your father would have done better to confide in you, Your Highness. You may be in bad shape now, but you’ve certainly got the mind and the heart of a ruler,” Striker said.

“That’s very kind of you, Agent Striker,” Carranya said, graciously, bending slightly to conceal her blush.

“Our very own Lady Penelope!” Tremfein interjected, beaming at her.

“Tremfein, do be quiet, they’re trying to be serious there,” Naomi said, patting him on the shoulder.

“Anyway, the facts are simple. We cannot go to war with the Varald Directorate now. Our best intelligence suggests that such a war would last up to a decade, and would also end up wrecking the Commonwealth beyond repair. Itaria and the Republic would suffer collateral damage, and whatever the result, the losses in terms of lives and material would be immense. Whoever assassinated Koketsu and the Prince probably knew this, and was counting on it.”

“But that makes no sense,” Carranya said, firmly. “Why would someone want to trigger a war that would achieve nothing?”

“That’s something we’re working on,” Striker replied, “but we suspect that it’s a group, either from Zion itself or from the Varald, operating without the knowledge of the Government. Their aim would not be so much winning the war, as taking advantage of the war to start a coup, or an insurrection, and overthrow their country’s government. We’ve all but ruled out such an effort in Zion, which leaves Varald.”

“That’s still far-fetched,” Ryan said. “Even if they overthrow the Directorate, and set up an alternate government, wouldn’t they still be at war?”

“Not necessarily, Mr. Eramond,” Striker replied. “They would sue for peace, blaming the previous government for all their transgressions, and sign treaties of cooperation with their former enemies. Neither Zion nor Galvenia would impose an impossible treaty, especially if the matter came up at the Commonwealth, where Itaria would vote against sanctions and the Republic would support the Varald on trade issues. It would be a case of breaking a few eggs to make an omelette.” He laughed.

“That makes sense, indeed,” Carranya said. “But considering the way both men were murdered, wouldn’t another idea come to mind?”

Striker raised his eyebrows. “Your Highness.... I must say I’m impressed. But I must ask you not to discuss this right now. There are some things we should not speculate upon, until we know the facts better. For the moment, though, we need to plan our exit from this ship.”

“I understand,” Carranya replied.

“Sir, we are currently about halfway between Davenport and Checkpoint Bravo,” Sergeant Burnfist broke in. “If we used the motored lifeboats, we could easily reach either place in less than two days. We need to choose a destination.”

“That’s a good point. Let’s put this to the vote, shall we? Princess, as the highest-ranking among us, you have the right to a veto. Where should we go?” Striker said.

“Checkpoint Bravo would be best, sir,” Sergeant Burnfist said. “It’s more secure, and we could enlist the help of the Commonwealth soldiers in transporting the Princess to safety.”

“I think we should go to Davenport,” Ryan said, slowly shaking his head. “First of all, it’ll be a safer place for her to recover, and she would attract less attention there. We could inform the Palace by telegram immediately – unfortunately, the ship’s wireless is damaged – once we land there, and fewer people would know. Besides, the sea route back to Davenport is safer for small boats.”

“We’re ready to go wherever you take us,” Naomi said, nudging Tremfein in the ribs.

“It looks like yours is the deciding vote, Your Highness,” Striker observed.

“You haven’t voted yourself, yet,” Princess Carranya pointed out.

“Well, it’s a difficult decision. I know Bravo is our best bet in terms of military backup, but I have other reasons for preferring Davenport, which aren’t in the public domain. So I’m afraid it’s up to you, Princess.”

“I would agree with Ryan,” Carranya said, “if only because, if this is any sort of conspiracy, the fewer Governments come to know, the better. Checkpoint Bravo is under Commonwealth jurisdiction, but also has a strong Itarian presence – many of the soldiers there are Itarian, and they even have a church

there. Davenport would allow us to inform all the concerned authorities quietly, and to make further plans.”

“Davenport it is, then,” Striker replied, clearly pleased. “Let’s divide up the teams now, shall we? Each boat – they’re actually small launches, rather than life rafts – can hold up to five people, and is fuelled for two days’ journey. Rebecca, take the men with you, as well as Wilhelm; at Bravo, just tell them he’s a soldier who died in action, and who has to be buried in a Zion military cemetery. I’ll take Ryan and the Princess with me, and Naomi and Tremfein can come along if they don’t object.”

“That seems reasonable, Sir,” Sergeant Burnfist replied, looking satisfied with the decision as well. “I shall prepare the men for their departure.” She saluted, bowed low to the Princess, and then left.

“Then that’s settled,” the Intelligence agent said, kneeling down and kissing Carranya’s hand ceremonially. “Make your preparations for the journey, all of you. We’ll leave in a few hours.”

And with these words, he left the room, leaving Ryan more than a little puzzled, and the Princess deep in thought.

“Sir!” the three soldiers said, bursting into Rebecca Burnfist’s room, where she and Striker were packing essential supplies for their trip. “Sir, we have repaired the wireless, Sir. And we have a situation.”

Striker, who was tossing a first-aid kit into his haversack, looked at them curiously. “What sort of situation?”

“Sir, we received a public broadcast from the Galvenian Broadcasting Corporation, on another frequency,” one of the soldiers replied. “They have announced to the public that the Princess is missing.”

“That complicates things, Striker,” Sergeant Burnfist said. “Especially if we’re heading for Davenport.”

“Sir, we also intercepted a message from a Galvenian ship. They have begun naval deployment in the waters around Davenport,” the soldier went on. “Ships have been mobilized from Serin’s Peak and are now patrolling the waters there. They have been instructed to let no ship pass.”

“Flaming lands!” Sergeant Burnfist exclaimed. “That makes life very difficult for us. How will you get to Davenport now?”

“As much as I must deplore your language, Rebecca,” Striker said calmly, “I can sympathize. But it may not be as difficult as it seems. Why don’t you....”

“Sir, what is our next course of action?” the soldier interrupted.

“Prepare both the ships, soldier,” Sergeant Burnfist said. “We’re going to take a little trip to Checkpoint Bravo.”

The soldier looked relieved, but before he could respond, Agent Striker raised a hand. "Wait, Rebecca. That may not be necessary."

"And why not?" the Sergeant objected. "Look, Striker, I know what you're thinking, and it's a bad idea."

"So what am I thinking?" Striker replied, with a smug smile.

"You're thinking that if we take the Princess back and meet up with the Galvenian fleet at Davenport, they would receive us favourably. Perhaps you're even thinking of contacting them with the wireless, and telling them we have the Princess. But what makes you think they'd believe you?"

"Surely, Rebecca," Striker said, folding his hands together, "the minute they saw us bringing her back safely, they would..."

"They would toss you into prison, that's what they'd do," the Sergeant argued, her voice growing more vehement. "They have no way of knowing if you're genuine, or if you're a pirate or an enemy. Rather than welcoming you, they'd blow you out of the water!"

"Don't be hysterical, Rebecca," Striker answered, with maddening calm. "Wouldn't the Princess speak on our behalf, after all?"

"**Striker!**" Rebecca pronounced the two syllables explosively, causing everyone in the room, except him, to flinch. "Are you out of your mind? Even if they captured you rather than opening fire, you have no way of ensuring your own safety."

"They dare not open fire," Striker said, "because of the chance, however minute, that we might be telling the truth."

"No, Striker," Rebecca said, and her voice was firm. "I don't know what your devious little mind is working on, but I can't take the risk. Look what happened to Wilhelm! Our Prince is dead! And now you want to risk your own life, and perhaps the Princess' life, as well?"

"How little you understand, Rebecca," the Agent said, closing his eyes and folding his arms across his chest.

"Little? **Little?**" Rebecca's expression was one of pure fury. "You were responsible for the safety of the Crown Prince, and he's dead! How do you think the Emperor will react to that? No, Striker, we cannot afford one more of your schemes. I will not have it."

"Remember, Rebecca, that as an Intelligence official, I outrank you. You will obey orders, and you will take the men to Bravo. In the meantime, I will contact the Galvenians on the same frequency that we captured their signal on, and I will tell them that we are on our way to them, with the Princess safe and sound. In the meantime, you will take the men and Wilhelm with you, and make your way to Checkpoint Bravo, from where you can proceed to Caledonia. Is that clear?"

“Not at all,” Rebecca said defiantly, her hand going to her sword. “Damn it, Striker, what is wrong with you?”

“Don’t provoke me, Rebecca,” Striker said, his hand reaching inside his blazer. “There is too much at stake here for you to throw it all away with your hot-headed infantryman’s instincts....”

The three soldiers looked at each other, helplessly.

It is impossible to say what would have happened next if they had been left alone. But all of a sudden, there were footsteps in the hall, and Carranya emerged, looking flushed and out of breath. Striker noted that she was wearing an ornate, high-necked pink dress, and that she was standing much more confidently than she had before. At her right hand stood Ryan, and Tremfein and Naomi followed behind, looking around curiously.

“I see my presence is required,” the Princess said, “and I have come at the right time.”

“Your - Your Highness! What are you doing here?” Striker said, letting his arm drop. Sergeant Burnfist loosened her grip on her sword, and stood upright, looking intently at the Princess. “And how did you find a get-up like that?”

Carranya winced with pain as she took a step forward, but still held herself upright. “If I am to be a ruler,” she said, “I must look the part. And fortunately, Mr. Tremfein still had a stage costume that suited me.”

“Heh, that’s me!” Tremfein said. “Old Tremfein has a trick or two up his sleeve, doesn’t he, Brian?”

“Do be quiet, Tremfein,” Naomi said, making a face.

“Ryan, not Brian,” Ryan said with a sigh, as he, Tremfein and Naomi joined the princess. “We heard an argument while the Princess was getting dressed,” Ryan said, “and decided to find out what was happening.”

“What seems to be happening here, Agent Striker?” Carranya asked.

Still looking irritably at the Sergeant, Striker told the Princess about the wireless broadcast they’d picked up. “And all we need to do is either travel forward and meet them, or even send them a message and then move forward,” he said. “Unfortunately, Sergeant Burnfist did not agree.”

“It’s suicide!” the Sergeant said, looking at the Princess with compassion. “He’s already cost us the life of Prince Wilhelm through his overconfidence, and I can’t let him take a risk with your life as well!”

“Both of you seem to have valid suggestions,” the Princess said, then turned to the first of the three soldiers, who looked acutely uneasy. “Soldier, is it actually possible to transmit messages to the Galvenian ship using your wireless device?”

“Yes, Y-Your Majesty,” the man stammered. “W-we can do that, b-but...”

“Then, Sergeant, I can actually assist you. There are some things that only I can do at this point.” At that moment, looking at her royal dress, her flowing red hair, and the fervor in her eyes, Ryan could well believe that this was the descendant of Lady Penelope, the descendant of Arlbert the First and of George the Great. “Please, come with me to the control room.”

“Princess,” Ryan began, “don’t do anything dangerous....”

“A monarch cannot hide away in the face of danger,” she said, and at that instant, she literally held the entire room spellbound. *It’s a line from the play, Ryan realized, but it’s all real now. She’ll make a great Queen someday.* “Soldier, show us the way.”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!” the second soldier squeaked.

The control room was just a flight of steps and a short walk away. Leaning on Ryan’s arm for support, the Princess walked to the wireless console, and stood in front of the transmitter. “Now, Agent Striker. We shall adopt your suggestion, but with one modification. Establish contact with the Galvenian signal that you just received.”

“Princess...” Sergeant Burnfist’s hand trembled as she raised it.

“Do...” she clenched her lips tightly, as if to stifle a cry or a moan, “do not interrupt me, and do not be afraid, Sergeant. Is the contact established, Agent Striker?”

Striker, looking confused, quickly adjusted a pair of dials on the console, and sent the signal that would engage transmission. “It’s done, Princess. You need to speak here, and they’ll receive you.”

“Good evening,” she said, in a loud, clear voice. “We are calling from Her Majesty’s Ship, the *Paradiso*, bound from Davenport to Zion. Please reply.”

“This is Her Majesty’s Ship, the *Raymond Chester*,” a male voice replied. “Please state your position.”

“Listen carefully, then,” Carranya said, and then, closing her eyes, recited these words, in front of a perplexed audience:

*“When your cause is just,
No sacrifice is too great.
When your cause is righteous,
No loss is truly a loss.
The grieving maiden
will become the happy mother of a son.
Someday, you will understand.”*

There was a short silence at the other end, and then the voice replied excitedly. “Your Highness! Is that you? Your Highness? This is Captain Baker, Your Highness! Please reply!”

"I am Carranya Gerius Elizabeth Alexandra Lionheart," the Princess replied, "Crown Princess of Galvenia, and heiress to all its territories and possessions."

"Your... Oh, thank the Infinity! Thank Him!" the voice replied, growing louder. "Your Highness, please confirm your position!"

"We are on board Her Majesty's Ship, the *Paradiso*," Carranya replied, steadily, placing one hand over her side. Ryan stepped forward to support her, but she motioned to him to be still. "We have been attacked by pirates, but they have been defeated, thanks to the bravery of a Galvenian citizen and the Zionese army. We are secure. The ship has come to a halt in the waters of the Sea of Arlia, between Davenport and Checkpoint Bravo."

"Davenport and Checkpoint Bravo," the Captain's voice said, with excitement. "Your Highness, the ships in our vanguard are less than a day away! Please hold your current position! We shall be with you shortly, and we shall restore you to the Kingdom of Galvenia!"

"You have my eternal gratitude, Captain. I shall await you, then."

"Yes, Your Highness!" There was a sharp sound, and then the connection broke. The whole room stared in respectful silence at Carranya, who was leaning to one side by now, clearly uncomfortable or even in pain, but with a look of triumph on her face.

"Ryan..." she began, and instantly both Ryan and Sergeant Burnfist stepped up to her, to support her. "Are you hurt, your Highness?" the Sergeant asked, with urgency in her voice.

"It's...nothing, just a trifle..." the Princess replied, but both of them could tell that she was having trouble breathing. "Just...need...to..."

"Confound it, Mr. Eramond, what is wrong with her?" Sergeant Burnfist asked, helplessly.

"I don't know!" Ryan replied, with alarm. "Perhaps she needs a glass of water. The soldiers did give her one downstairs, when she was changing her clothes, but maybe..."

"Mr. Eramond, she's been...." Striker began, showing signs of fear for the first time since Ryan had met him.

And then it happened, so quickly that none of them could react. One of the soldiers, detaching himself from his companions, stepped forward, and drew a small knife from his belt. "What a pity you're so resistant to poison," he said coldly. "I thought Royalty were weaker than that, especially you pitiful Galvenians. I shall have to use stronger means."

But his gloating had given Ryan just enough time to respond. With a flash, he drew his sword and brought it down violently on the soldier's wrist, slicing through it. Stunned, the soldier dropped his knife, and as he bent down to retrieve it, Sergeant Burnfist drew her weapon, and launched a forward thrust – the edge of her sword catching fire as it surged through the air – that caught the soldier squarely in the chest, destroying his armor and piercing his heart. At almost the same moment, Agent Striker drew a

small firearm from his pocket, and with an almost inhuman calm, fired it straight at the face of the soldier, which literally collapsed as the bullet struck the bridge of his nose. The smell of scorched leather and flesh filled the air, and the soldier slumped to the floor, dead.

“Quickly!” Ryan opened his backpack, and drew a vial of deep green liquid from it. Wrenching the stopper away, he rushed over to the Princess, who was now on her knees and making valiant efforts to stand up, and forced the vial against her lips. “Drink it! Soon!” He tipped it backwards, and making an effort, she managed to swallow at least half its contents. It seemed a horribly long time until her breathing suddenly became more regular, and she sank to the floor, a thin trail of green still staining one corner of her mouth.

Tremfein and Naomi had covered their faces with their hands, and the latter let out an audible sob. “That poor, poor girl...”

“Let me help you, Mr. Eramond,” Agent Striker replied. “Rebecca, please carry the Princess to a room, and put her to bed. The danger is past, now.” He leaned over the unconscious Princess, and measured her pulse. “A plant poison,” he said, moving close to her face and sniffing at her lips, “probably something brewed at home. Childish, really. I presume that’s an Emerald Tea, Mr. Eramond.” Rebecca, looking at Striker with renewed respect, lifted up the Princess, and carried her gently to the Captain’s quarters, which were now deserted.

“Yes,” Ryan replied, automatically. “Damn it! We were that close to losing her, and....” He looked at the dead soldier, with an expression of rage on his face. “You filthy traitor....”

“Calm yourself, Mr. Eramond,” Striker replied. “The Princess has obviously saved us all, by sending a coded message – though I can’t quite understand how it worked – to the Galvenian Navy. Now, it is our duty to care for her until they arrive. As for this swine” – he looked coldly at the dead man – “I cannot understand how he was able to remain in disguise for so long.”

“Isn’t he one of *yours*?” Ryan replied angrily.

“Mr. Eramond, your indignation does you credit, but I assure you that Her Royal Highness is worth everything to the Zion Empire alive, and that her death would harm us as much as it harms you. This man is not a Zionesse soldier, but a clever impostor.”

“Prove it,” Ryan said warily.

“If you insist,” Striker said coldly. Kneeling beside the corpse, he unbuckled its uniform, exposing a muscled torso wearing a tunic with short sleeves. Lifting up one of its arms with no more emotion than if it had been a specimen in a museum, he looked closer, then stepped away, with a gasp.

Ryan, by this time, had stepped closer, fighting his instinctive nausea. Looking down at the traitor’s arm, he saw what it was that had caused a shock to the Agent. On the man’s forearm was a tattoo, done in crude black ink, and representing three circles, within which faces were depicted. It seemed to Ryan that there was something evil, even demonic, about the faces, especially the third.

“That sign... What is it?” Ryan said, quietly.

“I can’t say for sure,” Striker said, recovering his former poise. “But what is certain is that it is certainly the mark of a group of assassins or mercenaries, possibly stealth warriors of some sort. This man must have boarded the ship along with the pirates, stolen the uniform of one of our soldiers, and been given instructions to kill anyone of importance.”

“But why?” Ryan said, almost shouting. “The pirates didn’t even know that the Princess was on board! Why would they want to hurt her?”

“Mr. Eramond, I wish I knew the answer to that. Quite possibly, he was given a mission to assassinate any nobles or royals on board, and when he happened to notice the Princess, he made a target of her.”

“Carranya...” Ryan said, sadly. Striker placed a hand on his shoulder, and lifted him up.

“Do not feel regretful, young man, you did no worse than we did. Your prompt actions have saved the life of your monarch, unlike mine. Do not act rashly, but look after her, and watch her with your life until she is back in a place of security.”

Ryan was about to reply, but something in the Intelligence agent’s expression made him keep his peace.

“Come, Mr. Eramond,” Naomi said, softly. “The Princess needs us.” Slowly, he followed her and began to walk over to the next room, where Sergeant Burnfist was tending the Princess.

Sitting at the Princess’ bedside – Naomi and the Sergeant had gone to look for any remaining rations on board ship, to keep them going until the Galvenian Navy arrived – Ryan hung his head, and tried to think clearly.

Always do the right thing, he thought. But what if that isn’t enough?

No, he thought, shaking his head. I can’t afford to think that way, not now. But I’m in well over my head. Prince Wilhelm is dead, Carranya... He didn’t want to think about how nearly they’d lost her. And one of the Zion soldiers turns out to be some sort of ninja cult follower. Really, if I tried telling this to anyone, they’d just laugh at me and ask me which graphic novel I got it from.

He looked at Carranya, who was asleep, a rough Naval blanket covering her up to the neck. Her hair flew in all directions around her face, but she was no longer pale, and her breathing was regular. *Thank goodness we weren’t alone, he said. The Sergeant and Agent Striker helped us make it... but that Agent knows more than he’s willing to let on. I’d give good money to know what exactly he’s all about, and why he seems so unconcerned about his Crown Prince’s death. Charlemagne is bound to be out for blood, as Carranya said, especially if he’s dying and his successor has been murdered. There’s only one outcome.*

And slowly, he realized that he’d have to face the ugly word itself.

War. War... Three hundred years after the Commonwealth, and the world was now being brought to the verge of war. Could anything possibly prevent it from happening? If anyone knows, Striker would.

Suddenly, he heard the echo of footsteps drawing closer to the Captain's room. Ryan's body tensed, preparing for action, and he placed his hand on the butt of his revolver. "Sergeant? Naomi? Is that you?" he called out loudly. "Sergeant?"

There was no reply, but the door was pushed open, and Ryan stood upright, drawing his weapon. "Stop! Stop it right there!" he shouted. Carranya stirred, and let out a soft sound, but did not wake.

"What?" a booming male voice replied. "Speak softly, boy, I... Well, if it isn't the kid who helped me fight those pirates!" A large man, wearing a coarse sailor's jacket and carrying a heavy cudgel, walked into the room, and looked around in surprise. "So you made it out alive, I see."

"Chief Broyude!" Ryan lowered his gun and looked at the master sailor, who had helped them fight off a band of pirates when they were racing to find Prince Wilhelm, with surprise.

"Aye, that's me, kid. Where's your friend, the girl in the.... Oh, I see," he said, looking at the sleeping figure with compassion. "Is she wounded?"

"Yes, but we managed to get help, from Zion soldiers who also managed to survive. Did... did any of your men make it?" Ryan asked.

"Precious few, kid," Chief Broyude said, clenching his fists and baring his teeth. "Those murderers hardly spared any of them. I managed to fight a good number of them off, as did my men, but not many of us made it. Who else is alive?"

"Carranya and I," Ryan replied, "and there are four members of the Zionese military: two privates, a sergeant, and an intelligence officer. Two members of the theatre troupe also survived."

"That makes a total of twelve," Chief Broyude said. "The eight of you, three of my men, and myself. Unfortunately, I've had a look at the engines, and that pirate scum has damaged them beyond repair. I saw some people escape with the lifeboats, but I think we're the last men standing here."

"The Galvenian Navy is on its way, Chief Broyude," Ryan said. "We were able to contact them – the Zion soldiers repaired the wireless, and they said they were less than a day away."

"By the Five Angels, I wouldn't have thought it," the Chief replied, with an expression of surprise. "But how did you convince the Navy to come here? Wouldn't they smell a rat?"

Ryan was silent.

"Look, kid, we're a small band of survivors. I think it's best if you told me the truth, sailor to sailor. Heh. The Navy's policy is to respond to all possible pirate threats with an offensive, especially if they have Commonwealth backing. For all you know, they could be coming here with the aim of taking us down."

“They won’t,” Ryan replied, after a long silence, and looking at the Princess. “She was able to convince them.”

“She? What could a kid like her do, anyway? Who is she? Daughter of some big-wig at Lorean?” Chief Broyude snorted.

“Actually, Chief,” Ryan replied, smiling despite himself, “you have that right. She’s the Crown Princess of the Kingdom of Galvenia.”

“The...” Broyude’s jaw dropped. “What the *hell* is she doing on board this ship?”

“It’s a long story,” Ryan said, sighing. “Basically, she was on a mission to try and meet Emperor Charlemagne in Zion.”

“That’s a crazy story, kid, but I believe you, because you couldn’t have made a thing like that up. So that’s the Princess, is it? Well, my men and I can breathe easy, then. The Navy will definitely come if they’re convinced it’s her. And in the meantime, we will protect her. Is that Zion prince still alive?”

“No,” Ryan answered. “We saw him being killed by an assassin in black, who looked quite different from the rest of the pirates. He then jumped out of the window. He must be dead by now.”

“I sure hope so,” Chief Broyude said. “Well, kid, I think all we can do now is wait and watch. If it’s the Princess they’re after, the Navy will be here before you know it. Go and rest a while, you look like you could use it.”

“I don’t really....” Ryan protested, but he knew the Chief was right. His nerves had been on the edge for almost a day now, and perhaps a little rest would help him.

“If you’re worried about your Princess, I’ll keep an eye on her till the Zions come back,” Broyude suggested. “There’s a room just next to this one which is used by the Captain’s family, when they travel with him. You can use that.”

“Thank you, Chief Broyude,” Ryan said, and left. He found the room in remarkably good condition. *Obviously, the pirates never really looked here*, he thought. He lay in bed, and surprised himself by falling asleep almost immediately; this was how Broyude and Sergeant Burnfist found him when they looked in on him an hour later.

“That’s a brave lad,” the Sergeant said, “but neither he nor the Princess can carry all our troubles on their shoulders.”

“Indeed, you’re right there, Sergeant,” Broyude said. “But all things said and done, we owe a lot to them, by the Five Angels.”

CHAPTER FIVE: THE GENTLEMAN CALLER

"You say down with romance. I say I'd take my chance in fighting the genuine romances – all the more because they are precious few, outside the first fiery days of youth."

- G. K. Chesterton, "The Scandal of Father Brown".

"Emily, darling," Lavie said, seeing that her granddaughter had fallen silent, and hugging her close. "Are you feeling frightened?"

"No, Gran, I've heard pirate stories before....I'm just feeling sorry for the Princess!" Emily said, with a sad expression on her face. "Why did people do so many mean things to her? She didn't deserve them! She was a good girl!"

"Well, that's because the people who did those things were wicked men, sweetie," Lavie said. "We live in more peaceful times now, but that's because of the sacrifices that people like the Princess made. And your Grandpa, of course." As always, her expression softened when she mentioned him.

"And you, Gran!" Emily said, hugging her grandmother back. "I'm sure you were as brave as they were."

"That's a sweet thing to say, dear," Lavie replied. "Now, while Grandpa was waiting on the ship, I was still waiting on land, and then someone came by. Someone I hadn't met before...."

A day had passed, bringing no further news, but it seemed like a year to Lavie and her father. Neither of them had been able to sleep very much on the night the Commander had spoken to Sigmund, and despite the assistance of a stiff drink – *and I'd never needed one more than I did that night*, he thought – he had stayed awake most of the night, sitting in a chair by Lavie's side until she grew quiet and still, having effectively cried herself to sleep. *Let her 'have her cry', as they say*, Sigmund thought. *And let's hope that we get some news – any news – soon.* It was close to dawn by the time he drifted off to sleep, and it was Lavie who was the first to arise. Without paying heed to her appearance, she headed straight to the ground floor, looking for Private Burns, whom she eventually found in the Mess Hall with the help of Ellen, the sympathetic tour guide. "Cheer up, Miss Regale," Ellen had said. "Sister Miriam told me about your trouble, and while I don't want to pry, there's still hope. There's always hope."

"That's kind of you," Lavie said, trying to smile. "It's just that... the ship seems so far away, and anything can happen."

"Trust the Five Angels, Miss Regale, and just wait and see," Ellen said simply, before being summoned to other duties.

"Huh!" Lavie thought, indignantly. "I'm sure she's trying to be nice, but she'd be singing a different song if it was *her*....But then, I shouldn't blame her." She shook her head sadly.

"Miss Lavie!" Private Burns said, coming out of the Mess Hall and pulling on her gloves. She was taken aback by Lavie's haggard appearance, but her training kept her from showing anything more than faint surprise. "I'm afraid there's no news of the *Paradiso* so far, but the Galvenia Broadcasting Corporation has officially announced that the Princess is missing."

"Did they say anything about....where she was?" Lavie asked.

"I'm afraid not, Miss. Rest assured, though, that the minute we at Checkpoint Bravo hear anything, you will be the first to know. Unfortunately, I must be leaving now. Apparently a high-ranking official is visiting Bravo today, and we must receive him with ceremonial honours. I wish you the best, Miss." She saluted and left.

"A high-ranking official? Would he know anything about.... Ryan, oh Ryan... I must look like a complete wreck," she thought, feeling guilty. "That girl is right, and Daddy's right. I mustn't give up. And to start, let me make myself a little more presentable." A quick glance at the mirror in her room confirmed this intention. "God! I look terrible," she said to herself. "Fortunately, I did pack some extra things..."

The thought cheered her a little, and after a leisurely bath, she changed into a new, smart hunting outfit in green and beige, which her father had bought her as a graduation present. "And now to get my ribbon just right!" she thought, tying it neatly around her long hair, and combing it out so that it fell in straight lines around her shoulders and down the length of her jacket. "Much better," she said softly, surveying the results of her repair work.

"Lavie?" Sigmund stirred from bed, and got up, fully clothed. "Lavie, are you..."

"I'm better, Daddy," she said, smiling at him. "I've decided to follow your suggestion, and Sister Miriam's as well. After all, it's still possible that Ryan could be safe. Isn't it?"

"It certainly is, dearest," Sigmund said. "Goodness, but I do look clownish in this crumpled shirt."

"Private Burns said that the news of the Princess' disappearance was on the GBC this morning," Lavie informed him, "but they didn't say much else. Oh, and apparently, some high-ranking Army official from Galvenia is coming down here, and the soldiers all have to make a fuss over him."

"A high-ranking official? Must be some bored noble who got the post because his father is in the House of Lords," Sigmund said sarcastically. "Why don't you go get some breakfast, dear, while I make myself more presentable for this official, should he deign to look at me."

"I will, Daddy," Lavie said, and upon reaching the restaurant, she noted with some pleasure that even her sorrow had not completely obliterated her appetite. She ate her bacon and eggs with real pleasure, and felt a little better immediately. "Not as good as Mom's or Gran's," she thought, "but not bad, I'd say!"

As she was leaving the restaurant, Lavie saw Ellen, the young novice, following behind a tall man who seemed to be making disagreeable comments about her, the Commonwealth, and Checkpoint Bravo in general.

“How did they put someone as inexperienced and inefficient as you in a place like this, girl?” the man was saying.

“Sir, if there’s anything you need, please let me know...” Ellen was saying, in her most pleasant voice.

“Well, you can clean this, for starters,” the man said, casually tossing a used napkin on the ground. “Tell Commander Arnoldus that I’d like to meet him as soon as possible. And while you’re about it, why don’t you change into something more appropriate? You’re not in a convent or something, though you’re plain enough to belong in one.” Ellen blushed, but said nothing as she stooped to pick up the napkin, and the man chuckled to himself.

“Jerk!” Lavie thought. “Daddy was right, this must be some old noble who likes to play with his toy sword, and come out for all the Territorial Army parades. I sure hope I don’t bump into him anywhere!”

Making her way back to her room, she found that Sigmund had “freshened up”, and was now engaged in tying his bow-tie, which was being rather rebellious. Lavie laughed. “Let me help you with that, Daddy. See, it goes here....and there.” With a few swift movements, Lavie had secured the errant bow symmetrically.

“Why, thank you, Lavie. I generally don’t stand on ceremony, but Private Burns came by and said that the Commander wanted to have lunch with us, so I thought I’d try to look a bit more formal,” Sigmund said, smiling at her reflection in the mirror. “I was going to tell you to dress up a bit as well, but I see you’ve already done that!”

“Indeed I have!” she said, smiling and placing her hands on his shoulders. “I think I met your army officer downstairs, though – or, rather, I saw him making himself unpleasant. He was throwing things on the floor, and making fun of that little Sister who was waiting on us yesterday.”

Sigmund frowned. “Not one of *those*,” he groaned. “I hope we won’t have the pleasure of his company for lunch, though I’d say he’d probably invite himself.”

“Maybe I should’ve brought my bow and arrows,” Lavie said, “in case he tried to get fresh with me!”

“Good heavens, Lavie, I’m not sure that’s such a bad idea,” Sigmund said, laughing. “Now, what would you say to a little stroll outside?” He looked out of the window. “It’s a glorious day, and we’ve been cooped up in here since yesterday, waiting and worrying. A little fresh air would do us both some good.”

“That sounds cool,” Lavie said approvingly, as she and her father went down the stairs together, and out into the courtyard.

Two men stood on the battlements of Checkpoint Bravo, looking down at the view below – and, it must be said, looking down on the people they saw, as well. “What a sad little place this is,” one of the men said. He was young and tall, with a stately bearing and carriage, and wearing ceremonial armour. His features were sharp and clear, and he would have certainly been considered handsome by most women, if his face had not been disfigured by the sneer that he always wore on it.

“So why are we here, Commander?” the second voice replied, soothingly. “What mission brings you to Checkpoint Bravo?” The man who spoke was older and shorter; his hair was already beginning to grey, and he was in the uniform of a Lieutenant of the Galvenian Rough Riders, though he carried no weapons. His name was Felix Gessler, and his current position – despite his lack of combat honours – was because he had realized, quite early on in his career, that often a “career soldier” just needed to hitch his chariot to the best-bred horse, and come along for the ride. And right now, he reflected, with satisfaction, he’d backed the right horse; as Sir Prescott’s aide-de-camp, his future was assured.

“The Palace has sent me here and asked me to remain for two days,” Sir Prescott T. Chuselwock replied, with a smug expression on his face, “because they’re following a preposterous suggestion from Palace security, that someone or the other might try to smuggle the Princess through to Zion. Bah.” In a bored tone, he went on, “But I’m not complaining. I wouldn’t want to be in the Palace when dear old Arlbert decides to let heads roll. Rather Trask than me. And in the meantime, let us make the most of the time we have here. Unfortunately, all the ‘tour guides’ seem to be half-wits or Itarians. I hope the Commander will prove a more interesting companion.”

“I’ve heard his taste in wines is impeccable,” Gessler said.

“That *would* be the kind of thing you would hear, Gessler, you old drunkard,” Sir Prescott said affectionately. Gessler took no offence; he was used to his superior’s frequent disparagement, which he considered merely part of the game.

“I was hoping for.... Good heavens, Gessler, look down for a moment, will you?” Sir Prescott said, a look of pleasant surprise on his face.

“At those two people in the courtyard, Sir?” Unaware that they were being watched, Lavie and her father were walking through the lawns, with Sigmund’s admiration of the peaceful surroundings broken by an animated remark from his daughter every now and then.

“That girl, Gessler,” Sir Prescott said coldly, as his eyes followed every movement of Lavie’s, a strange smile on his lips. “Who is she?”

“I’ll find out for you, Sir,” Gessler said, and returned ten minutes later, with a pleased expression on his face.

“I take it you have found out something interesting,” Sir Prescott remarked. “Now tell me what it is, and please, no gushing.”

“Her name is Regale, Sir. Lavender Regale. She’s the only child of that gentleman with her, who is a wealthy collector of antiques in Davenport.”

“Regale? The name is not unfamiliar to me. Wait, isn’t he the one who sold His Majesty a rare copy of the *Chronicles of Arustus*, for the Royal Library at Lorean?” Sir Prescott asked. “Certainly a family of wealth and position.”

“There’s more, Sir,” Gessler went on. “I got a chance to look at their documents, and it seems the girl’s mother is of noble blood. Her name is Emily, and she’s a descendant of the House of Lancaster.”

“I don’t know what to admire more about you, Gessler,” Sir Prescott said casually, “your efficiency, or your brazen lack of ethics. But never mind that. That girl, Gessler, is interesting. A wealthy father, noble blood....and she certainly is pleasant to look at.”

“You can say that again, Sir,” Gessler said, enthusiastically.

“My fool of a father has already impoverished the House of Chuselwock enough, what with his failed horse-breeding, and his attempts to keep up with the rest of the Lords. I must not complain about him too much, for it is thanks to his title that I have ascended to my current command. But the time has come to bring something new into the House of Chuselwock, Gessler. These are not my father’s times. Youth, beauty, wealth... and noble blood. Gessler, arrange an introduction.”

“I’m sure no woman would ever resist you, Sir Prescott,” his sidekick said, looking up at him with the sort of adoring expression that is usually associated with young children and pets. “Perhaps we could invite them to a little luncheon today, with that Commander bloke, and take it from there. Is that a good plan, sir?”

“Permission to proceed, Gessler,” Sir Prescott said with a strange smile, looking appraisingly at Lavie, as her hair streamed around her in the morning breeze. “Permission to proceed. This trip may prove to be a very fortunate one after all. Lavender....it’s a fair name, Gessler, and it may soon be joined with mine.”

“An informal luncheon?” Commander Arnoldus looked uneasy, and Felix Gessler’s glare was not helping matters. “Is that really necessary, Lieutenant? I had already made arrangements for Sir Prescott to have a full ceremonial meal with all the Commonwealth personnel at Bravo, in the Banquet Hall. And I was just planning to dine in my own quarters, with a couple of my guests. Couldn’t we just...”

“Commander,” Felix Gessler said, with a threat in his voice. “Think carefully about *whom* you are speaking to, before you make hasty decisions. All I ask is that you, the Regales and Sir Prescott sit down to have a meal, with mutual introductions. What is the difficulty in this?”

“The Regales?” Arnoldus frowned. “What do they have to do with you and me, Lieutenant?”

“Simply this,” Gessler said, with an insinuating tone that filled the Commonwealth Commander with an irresistible urge to hand out kitchen fatigues and a three-mile march to the man in front of him. *Is this*

the caliber of the Rough Riders these days? The man doesn't even know how to speak to a superior officer! Controlling his irritation, he forced himself to listen.

"Sir Prescott, Commander," Gessler went on, "desires to be introduced to the Regales, who are currently your guests. His family, like theirs, is a family of wealth and position. It is perfectly natural that he should wish to be acquainted, especially with that charming young lady. And he felt that the most natural way to go about this was with a friendly meal, with you acting as our host. I assure you that he would far prefer this to any ceremonial meal you might have organized."

"Good God, man, I don't organize Palace parties here!" Arnoldus said, irritably. Gessler was truly getting on his nerves, and his paternal instincts – he thought benevolently of his wife and eight children, including his four daughters, back in Fulton – gave him an immediate sympathy for Lavie. "Besides, the girl is upset. She was looking forward to meeting someone close to her on that ship, and now she's had to hear that it was attacked by pirates. She might not feel up to your 'informal luncheon' in the first place." He glared back at Gessler, and was amused to see him shrink a little.

"Someone close to her, Commander?" Gessler said, in an even tone, "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. All I know is what her father told me. She was looking forward to going on that ship, and meeting a friend of hers, and now those hopes have been dashed. Haven't you *ever* been worried about the safety of a loved one, Lieutenant?" He was going to add "not that anyone except your mother could stand you", but stopped himself.

"Then," Felix said with a smug smile, "wouldn't she quite appreciate another sort of 'treat', as you so sweetly put it? Remember, Commander, Sir Prescott is the son of Sir Turbot F. Chuselwock himself, Peer of the Realm, and a Senator of the Commonwealth. He wishes to be on a friendly footing with this family, *and* with you, Commander. Is that so impossible?"

The words 'senator of the Commonwealth' fell unpleasantly on Arnoldus' ears, and he blanched. "Very well," he said slowly, "I shall tell my men to cancel the ceremonial luncheon, and I welcome you to my quarters at noon. The Regales will also be invited. And," – his voice grew stronger, and he shot his last bolt – "having gotten what you wanted, would you have the kindness to remove yourself from my presence, Lieutenant?"

Felix made an elaborate, ironic bow, saluted, and left. The Commander passed a hand over his brow, and it came away damp.

No good can come of this, he thought darkly. I know both Galvenian and Zionesse nobles pull antics like this all the time, to try and widen their "spheres of influence". Sometimes it's just an "informal meal" with a girl they take a fancy to. Sometimes, it's even worse. And the trouble is that, being in the Commonwealth, men like me have to compromise with them to keep the peace.

He thought of Lavie being in close quarters with Sir Prescott – about whom he had heard more than enough unsavoury tales – and his oily aide, and his face flushed. *Some peace*, he thought. Then, taking

Private Burns – who had listened to the entire exchange, outside the door, with an impassive face – with him, he headed towards the Regales' room.

“Ohmygosh!” Lavie exclaimed, to the Commander's surprise. “A *Galvenian Rough Rider*? I've heard so much about them!”

“Sir Prescott is young, but has risen rapidly thanks to his talent,” Commander Arnoldus said diplomatically, “and is the youngest ever Commander of the Rough Riders. When he heard you were here, he was keen to meet you and your father, Miss Regale.”

“That's just...*cool!*” Lavie said, her face flushed with excitement. “Ryan used to tell me stories about the Rough Riders when we were kids! He even used to pretend to be one, when we played War.....I wish he was here, he'd be so excited!”

Commander Arnoldus was about to ask a question, but refrained. “Sir Prescott is one of your nation's finest soldiers, and his father is one of the Commonwealth Senate. But I must warn you, he has an aide-de-camp, who trots around behind him,” he said with a smile, “and is not the best-mannered of men. Some of the Galvenian army are rough diamonds, I'm afraid.” He felt no compunction about throwing Felix to the dogs, after their last exchange. *If I was his commanding officer, he wouldn't have cleared basic training in the first place*, he thought, fuming silently.

“Oh, *him*? I saw him being rude to one of the tour guides downstairs,” Lavie said with a shrug of her shoulders, realizing who the tall man must have been. “We don't have to talk to him, I'm sure. But Sir Prescott! That's awesome!” The Commander winced at Lavie's starry-eyed reaction. “Daddy, do you think he'll have news about Ryan?” She turned to Sigmund, and looked at him expectantly.

“I...don't know, dearest, but it's possible,” Sigmund said. “I don't believe I've ever met Sir Prescott before, though Saunders did mention visiting his mansion in Lorean once. Quite a delightful place, I was told. Well, Commander, this *is* quite the honour. When should we join you?”

“Please join me in my private chambers at noon, if you please,” the Commander said, extending a hand to Sigmund, who shook it again. “I'll see you both at that time, Miss Regale. I hope you'll all have an enjoyable time together.”

“We will!” Lavie said cheerfully, as he left.

Sigmund frowned. “If I may ask, my daughter, why this sudden burst of enthusiasm for the Rough Riders?” he enquired.

“Don't you see, Daddy?” Lavie replied, impatiently. “If he's coming this way, that means he's going to do something about the *Paradiso*! Why else would the government send someone of his rank along? I'm sure they must have heard something, and are planning a rescue...”

“Lavie,” Sigmund warned, “don’t get your hopes up. He may just be here for another reason. And remember, Sir Prescott is nobility, so remember to be on your best behavior!”

“Well, I’m *half* nobility,” Lavie replied, “so I hope he’s on his best behavior too!” She giggled. “For the first time, I’m starting to feel that things may be going right!”

“Miss Regale?” Private Burns’ head peeped into their room. She was holding a piece of paper, about the size of a telegram, in her hand, and looked positively happy. “We’ve just been able to get a range on the *Paradiso* again, and I think it’s good news this time. The ship is dead in the water, about halfway between here and Davenport.”

“Dead?” Lavie said, shocked.

“It just means the engines have stopped or stalled, Lavie,” Sigmund reassured her.

“But what about the pirate ships?” Lavie asked.

“That’s the funny part,” Private Burns replied. “We can still pick them up, but they’re not moving either. It looks like they tried to board the ship, and perhaps succeeded in damaging the engines, but were probably repulsed by the guards or the Zionese soldiers on board; they’re no reason for them to stall, otherwise. Look here.”

She stretched out the paper in front of Sigmund and Lavie, who could make out a larger grey area, surrounded by smaller grey specks, against a reddish background. “And over here,” she said, pointing to the upper corner of the picture, “are ships that appear to have been deployed from Davenport, which look large enough to be Galvenian Navy vessels. Judging by their course, they’re heading for the *Paradiso*.”

Commander Arnoldus came back in, looking pleased. “Our Naval strategists have examined the facts, and they say looks like they’ve managed to hold off danger. Some of them may have tried to leave on lifeboats, but it’s entirely possible that they could have sent a signal to Galvenia, and are waiting for help to take them home,” he said.

“You see, Daddy?” Lavie said, with mounting excitement. “I *was* right! The people on the *Paradiso* must be alive, and the Galvenian Navy is going to rescue them! I’m *sure* Sir Prescott has had something to do with it, I *know*!”

“This is good news, soldier,” Sigmund said, looking extremely relieved. “Where do you think they’ll head?”

“I can’t say, Sir,” Private Burns replied. “Unfortunately, we haven’t received any message from the *Paradiso* yet. But if those are Galvenian ships, they could either take the passengers back to Davenport, or head up here. I suspect the latter, because there are Zionese on board, so they might prefer a neutral port of call, like this one.”

“You mean they’ll come *here?*” Lavie said, breathlessly. “Daddy, I just can’t...” She flew at Sigmund and hugged him, and he – looking both pleased and embarrassed – gently smoothed down her hair, which was flying in various improbable directions.

“Now, Lavie, calm down. We still don’t know the facts, this is all just conjecture,” he said. “Though, like you, I am inclined to hope.” He released her gently, and she sat down in an armchair.

“The Five Angels must have been listening to me, I know they were!” Lavie said. “Daddy, I can hardly wait....just imagine, Ryan will soon be here!”

“Sir!” One of the young guards who had received the Regales at Fort Bravo burst in, carrying another piece of paper, and saluted Arnoldus. “We’ve just received a public announcement from the Galvenian Broadcasting Corporation!”

“Give me that paper, soldier,” Arnoldus said indulgently. As he read it, his eyebrows were raised so high that it seemed to Sigmund that they would merge with his hairline.

“This is quite remarkable, Mr. Regale,” the Commander said. “Listen to this. ‘The Royal Palace is pleased to announce the rescue of Princess Carranya Lionheart, Heiress to the Throne of Galvenia. She was travelling on His Majesty’s Ship *Paradiso*, which was attacked by pirates. However, the pirates were defeated, in the princess’ own words, “thanks to the bravery of a Galvenian citizen and the Zionese army.” Currently, the Princess and her fellow passengers will be received on board the battleship *Raymond Chester*, from where they will be taken to Davenport, and the Princess will be restored to the Palace shortly.’ I’d say that all hangs together very nicely. Thank you, soldier.” The guard, looking pleased, saluted and left.

“The bravery of a Galvenian citizen?” Sigmund asked. “I thought the soldiers on board the *Paradiso* were Zionese.”

“The Princess did say ‘citizen’ and not ‘soldier’, Mr. Regale. Perhaps she was referring to the ship’s captain, or the security force.”

“Or...” Lavie could hardly express the idea that had suddenly arisen in her mind, and grew silent.

“Daddy, we’ve got to get back to Davenport as soon as we can!”

“Well, Theodore’s boat should be here tonight, I suppose,” Sigmund replied. “But remember, we’ve still got to have lunch with Sir Prescott. Now calm yourself a little, dearest, and you might want to give that hair of yours a little more attention, especially if we’re going to meet a Peer of the Realm.”

“I will, Daddy, I will!” And Lavie sat down in front of the mirror, combing her hair with enthusiastic strokes, and singing to herself. “*Everywhere, I look around... every sight, and every sound...*”

Sigmund looked at her indulgently.

“*Even though you’re not there... and I don’t know if I’m being foolish, I don’t know if I’m being wise...*”

The Commander smiled, and left the room along with Private Burns, leaving the Regales to enjoy the moment by themselves.

“Anastasia,” the Commander asked, using a much softer tone than he normally did with his soldiers, “speaking not as one soldier to another, but in confidence, do you think Sir Prescott really had anything to do with it?”

“I’m quite sure he *didn’t*, Uncle Hieronymus,” Private Burns replied, laughing. “He’s young, he’s spoiled, and he doesn’t really have the respect of his men. When I was at the Military Academy in Lorean escorting Minister Sheffield, I even heard an interesting tale of how he challenged three young visitors, mere boys about the age of Miss Regale, to a duel, just to show off. Unfortunately, they more than held their own against him. Of course, no one dares to say that out loud, but it’s entirely possible. I think his coming here is just a coincidence, or...”

“Or what?” the Commander enquired.

“Or an attempt to escape the storm at the Palace, after the Princess went missing. After all, even if she’s brought back safely, someone will have to take the fall for her disappearance. It’ll either be Trask or him, and if he’s conveniently absent on a mission of his own making, then it’ll be Trask.”

“Where would I be,” the Commander answered indulgently, “without my favourite niece to fill me in on the latest Galvenian gossip? It’s almost enough to reconcile me to the fact that Athena married a Galvenian in the first place.”

“Leave Father alone, Uncle Hieronymus,” Private Burns replied, but it was clear from their voices that they were both jesting. “Anyway, I’ll stand guard during this luncheon of yours, just in case. It should be interesting.”

“It certainly will,” Commander Arnoldus remarked wryly. “I’d better go and spruce up a little, we’ve only got fifteen minutes to go. Take care, Anastasia.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Regale; good afternoon, Mr. Regale,” Commander Arnoldus said, with a cheerfulness that sounded forced to Lavie, as Private Burns escorted them into his private dining-hall, then stepped away and saluted. “I’m glad you could make it here. Now, if you’ll please take a seat...” Two men in livery helped Sigmund to a seat opposite the Commander’s. The table was small but exquisitely carved, and could seat four people. Lavie sat down between her father and the Commander, and looked around appreciatively at the pictures on the wall.

“Who are those people, Commander?” she asked, her eyes focusing on a family portrait – a man in Naval uniform, a small dark-haired woman with a friendly smile, and eight children of various ages, including a baby held snugly in her mother’s arms.

“Oh, that’s my girl back home, as we Naval men say,” the Commander replied, his expression softening, and his voice becoming more natural. “And my eight children, all of them. That’s Aristotle, my eldest, right next to me. He’s training to be an engineer for the Commonwealth Peacekeeping Forces. And that” – he pointed to a tall girl, who towered over her mother – “is my first daughter, Irene. She’ll be about your age. I’m sure the two of you would get along quite nicely.”

“How nice!” Lavie said, admiring the portrait. “Where do they live?”

“Since my assignment here is for just a year, they’re now staying at our family home, in Marcopolis. That’s in the Fulton Republic, as you probably know. I’m due to visit them in three months or so, during my next furlough. In the meantime, my Penelope and I get the chance to hone our letter-writing skills; I’m expecting her next dispatch in a couple of days.” He laughed. “It’s hard for her of course, poor girl, managing the seven of them, but the Commonwealth should transfer me back to a base in the Republic soon enough.”

“Is the name Penelope popular in the Republic as well, Commander?” Sigmund broke in.

“Oh – Ah, I remember, the legendary Lady Penelope of Galvenia. Well, the name actually originated in our part of the Republic; in fact, the House of Gerius probably had its origins not too far from where I came from. My own Lady Penelope was born and bred in Marcopolis, though....”

A clear woman’s voice echoed through the dining-hall like a bell.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Commander of the Galvenia Rough Riders, and Peer of the Realm, Sir Prescott T. Chuselwock!” Having said her piece, Private Burns fell back, and a tall man in armour, his sword at his side, entered the room slowly and impressively. At his side was a smaller man, grey-haired, wearing a military coat and cap. Lavie, looking at them, gave a little gasp of surprise.

“*That’s* Sir Prescott?” she thought. “But that’s the arrogant man I saw outside the restaurant... no, it can’t be. That must have been someone else. But it couldn’t be that other man with him, he’s too short...”

Sigmund and the Commander stood up, and Lavie, taking their cue, rose as well. Sir Prescott reached the table, and coming close to Lavie, took her right hand and gave it a ceremonial embrace. “Delighted to meet you, I’m sure, Miss Regale,” he said, looking at her straight in the eyes. “Please accept a small floral homage from a humble soldier.”

Lavie, who was about to cry out in surprise when Sir Prescott took her hand, just managed to control herself on catching her father’s eye. “He looks like he’s acting in a play!” she thought. “Is he for real?”

In the meantime, the smaller man had handed Sir Prescott a bouquet of flowers. “Thank you, Gessler. You may retire.” The man named Gessler bowed to the rest of the room, looked at Lavie with an expression halfway between a smile and a leer, and retreated unobtrusively.

“F-For me?” Lavie stammered, blushing as Sir Prescott, bowing slightly at the waist, presented the flowers to her. “T-Thank you, Your Grace...” She received them awkwardly, and placed them upon the table.

“Something’s not right,” she thought, feeling uneasy. “I’ve never met this man before, he’s a noble and a soldier, and he’s giving me flowers right away?”

“Think nothing of it, Miss Regale,” Sir Prescott said, expansively. “And please, call me Sir Prescott. There is no need to stand upon formal titles, especially when we are among friends. May I call you Lavender?”

“Uh, all right,” said Lavie, smiling nervously at him.

“Ugh!” she thought. “No one calls me that, except Mom when I was little, and that’s only when she was mad at me. And maybe Mr. Ironside, but he’s a sweet old man! What does this guy want?”

“Let us be seated, then,” the Commander said, wishing with all his heart that he were back in Marcopolis, listening to Irene and Sophia complaining about each other and gently arbitrating between them. His three guests complied, and at a sign from the Commander, a neatly uniformed trio of servants began setting the table, and took the flowers away to be placed in a vase that was poised on the mantelpiece.

“It’s an honour, Sir Prescott,” Sigmund began, noticing Lavie’s discomfort. “We happened to come here quite by chance, and we were delighted to hear that you wished to meet us, Sir Prescott. To what do we owe the pleasure of your presence?”

“Alas, the calls of duty,” Sir Prescott said, theatrically. “His Majesty was concerned about the, ahem, recent events involving the Crown Princess, and asked me to take up my post here until she was known to be safe. Now that this is known for a fact, I will have to return to Lorean.”

“We heard the broadcast too, Sir Prescott,” the Commander replied. “And while I thank the Infinity that she’s safe, how did she land up on the *Paradiso* in the first place?”

“Commander,” Sir Prescott said sternly, “now is not the time to discuss unpleasant topics, especially in front of Miss Lavender.” He looked at Lavie with a glance that could be described as “adoring” if it had not been wooden to start with, and she tried to avert her gaze. “It is sufficient to know that she has been found, and that she will be returned to Lorean in triumph.”

“S-Sir Prescott,” Lavie began.

“Yes, Miss Lavender?” Sir Prescott replied, meaningfully.

“Were the other passengers on board safe? I was originally supposed to travel on that ship, but I missed it at Davenport...”

“You were?” Sir Prescott raised his eyes to the sky. “Thank Heaven that you did not, Miss Lavender. I shudder to think what would have happened to one as fair as you, face to face with the pirates. It was truly Providence that you were spared that ordeal.”

“One as fair as me’?” Lavie thought, and amusement began to overtake her embarrassment. “Who does he think he is? He may be a great soldier, but he’s going a little overboard with his gallantries!”

“But to answer your query, it is entirely possible that many passengers have survived. All that the Princess said in her broadcast was ‘we are secure’.” Sir Prescott leaned forward and looked at Lavie intently. “Was there someone dear to you on that ship?” he asked, in a low tone that Lavie presumed was supposed to be gentle, but actually sounded rather creepy.

“A – A friend,” she said. “His name is Ryan Eramond, and...”

Lavie was blushing furiously, and did not look at Sir Prescott’s face, but it seemed to Arnoldus that his Galvenian colleague’s face flushed red for a moment, with some strong emotion – anger, perhaps? It only lasted for a moment, and then he spoke, as calmly and nobly as before.

“I’m afraid we haven’t received any list of the survivors yet, Miss Lavender,” he said, “but rest assured that if there is any news of your friend, I, Sir Prescott, will bring it to you.”

Lavie smiled. “That’s nice of you, Sir Prescott!”

“Oh, it was but a trifle,” he replied.

In the meantime, the Commander’s domestic staff had begun serving the meal, and Sigmund began eating with gusto. Lavie, nervous under Sir Prescott’s intent gaze, ate slowly, her knife slipping from her hands on two occasions. “Why does he keep looking at me like that?” she wondered. “Do they still suspect me of being the Princess, or what?”

“Quite delicious, Commander,” Sir Prescott said. “Is the meal agreeable to you, Miss Lavender? You haven’t eaten very much, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, I’m...a slow eater,” Lavie replied. “Except when I’m at home, Sir Prescott. And you haven’t eaten much either!” she pointed out, looking at his plate.

“Ah, but how could I pay attention to mere food, when Miss Lavender is seated directly opposite me?” Sir Prescott said, raising his fork to his mouth. “Indeed, it would be shockingly bad manners to neglect her, just for the sake of one’s luncheon.”

“Oh, no, Sir Prescott,” Lavie replied, rolling her eyes, an action that caused Sigmund to wince, and the Commander to stifle a laugh. “You may certainly be good at paying compliments, but don’t let me keep you from your – rations? Is that the right military word?”

Sir Prescott laughed lightly. "You make me the mark of your ready wit, Miss Lavender," he replied agreeably. "If you so command, I shall obey. 'Tis a pity that not all the women in this base are as charming as you are."

"Well, this *is* a military base," Lavie said, with a straight face. "I suppose I must be the *only* woman around here, I guess."

"Ah, yes, the masculine world of the military," Sir Prescott replied. "A world that favours the audacious, the brave, and the talented. And you are right. Apart from careless and clumsy servant girls, who are beneath our notice, you are the only one worthy of the title of a Galvenian woman, Miss Lavender."

"*Our* notice?" Lavie thought, irritation now overtaking her amusement at Sir Prescott's supercilious antics. "That must have been him, with his airs, back at the restaurant! Why, who does he think he is, the jerk?"

Sigmund, noticing the beginnings of the tell-tale red glow in Lavie's eyes, once again tried to head things off. "Sir Prescott, I believe I've met your father once, when we were attending the Commonwealth Literary Awards last year. He's quite a remarkable man."

"Indeed," Sir Prescott said dismissively. "He is a man of the past ages, of literature, art and music. I, on the other hand, live in the present. And at present, I would say that no work of art or literature would compare to the simple pleasures of life, such as being in the company of Miss Lavender."

"Ah... You're probably right, Sir Prescott," Sigmund said, more quickly and nervously. "But there's something I wanted to ask you. What are your views on Prime Minister Socius' recent cuts in military spending? I..."

Sir Prescott laughed quietly. "Miss Lavender," he said, turning to Lavie, who was by now red with anger and embarrassment, "your father is a jealous man. So jealous of the time we are spending together, that he tries to draw my attention to petty issues, such as the doings of Martell Socius. Well, Mr. Regale, I suggest you and the Commander discuss this, and leave us, the younger generation, to dream our dreams."

"This is *not* happening!" Lavie thought, squirming in her seat. "Daddy, Commander... do something! I can't take much more of this..."

"Well, Sir Prescott, you must make allowances for Mr. Regale," Arnoldus broke in, looking at Lavie with pity. "Here he is, with a chance to speak to Galvenia's finest soldier, and you prefer his daughter's company to his!" He laughed. "Really, your Grace..."

"Mr. Regale is all yours, Commander," Sir Prescott replied. "Miss Lavender, I judge from your clothing – which is as remarkable as you are – that you are fond of hunting. Could I perhaps suggest that you and your father visit Chuselwock Manor some time, during the hunting season? I assure you that the experience would be delightful."

"I...really don't know, Sir Prescott," Lavie said, trying her best not to lose her temper, or laugh hysterically. "Archery's just a hobby for me, and..."

"Archery?" Sir Prescott said, smiling broadly at her. "Of course, I ought to have guessed. A sport of feminine grace, the pastime of the chaste maiden. Of course you would be an archer and not a bloodthirsty hunter, Miss Lavender. Please accept my apologies!"

"There's... no real need to apologize, Sir Prescott," Lavie said, feeling a drop of perspiration trickle down her face.

"How noble of you! But, hunting or archery, the gates of Chuselwock Manor are always open to you, Miss Lavender. And I..."

We will never know how Lavie could have survived any more of this, because at this very moment, Felix Gessler burst in to the room, looking excited. Private Burns, who had been listening to the conversation with mounting anger, made no effort to restrain him.

"Sir Prescott! Sir Prescott!" Gessler said, breathlessly.

Sir Prescott turned a wrathful glance on his sidekick. "Later, Gessler, I am engaged..."

"Sir Prescott, I know, but this is terribly important..."

"Gessler, I am *engaged*," Sir Prescott said, sternly.

"Sir... It's a Code Blue, sir."

At these words, Sir Prescott's expression underwent a sudden change. He did not look angry, or surprised, but rather satisfied, as if something even more important than his pursuit of Lavie had come along. "My deepest excuses, my friends. A matter of the utmost urgency and delicacy has come up, and I must attend to it. Commander, my respects. Mr. Regale, it's been an honour. And Miss Lavender" – he took her hand and kissed it again, before she could even react – "I do believe we shall meet again, in happier circumstances. Farewell, Miss Lavender."

"Goodbye, Sir Prescott!" Lavie said, in as cheerful a tone as she could manage.

"My pleasure, Sir Prescott," Sigmund said, shaking hands with him. "Your Grace, it's been very kind of you to spend this time with us, especially when duty is calling. Good afternoon."

"Farewell, Commander, and may the Infinity keep you," Arnoldus said, as Sir Prescott and Gessler walked swiftly out of the room. He waited till they were swiftly out of earshot, and added, "Far, far away from us! Preferably in the Varald Directorate, and for the next hundred years!"

Lavie burst out laughing in sheer relief. "Oh Daddy," she said, rising from her seat, "that was terrible! Is *that* the famous Sir Prescott? Why, he's...he's such a *jerk!*"

Sigmund chuckled quietly. "Good one, Commander," he said. "And Lavie, I'm truly sorry. If I'd known what it was going to be like, I would have spared you." He walked up to his daughter, and just as he had when the Marines had questioned her, placed his arm around her shoulders in a gesture of protection. "Forgive me. If I'd known, I would have kept you well away from him. That pompous buffoon! I could slap the man right now."

"My sincere apologies, too, Miss Regale," the Commander said, looking at her with the expression he used when one or the other of his children came to share their troubles with him. "I'm only glad that we were saved by the bell, so as to speak. And while I don't know what a 'Code Blue' is, if it involves throwing him in the deep blue sea and watching him sink, I'd be all for it!"

"It's strange," Lavie thought, leaning against him, and laughing at the Commander's joke, "how nice and how...kind Daddy has been to me, throughout this trip. I know he's always been proud of me, and given me what I want – well, most of it! – but he's been different this time. Less – ohmygosh, how do I put it? Less stuffy. Less like one of his old books!"

"It's not your fault, Daddy," she replied, then looked at the flowers in the vase, wrathfully, her eyes glowing. "Floral tribute, hmph! As far as I'm concerned, if I never see him again in my life, it'll still be one time too many! Strutting around with his lines from a bad stage play, and his floral tributes, and his corny compliments, and his Chuselwock Manor! The...the *jerk!*" She paused, out of breath, the red slowly ebbing away from her stare. Standing straight, she walked back to the table.

"Mr. Regale," the Commander replied, "while we're about it, why don't we finish this meal of ours? It was rather good, except for the generous lashings of Rough Rider Sauce."

"That is a most attractive proposition, Commander," Sigmund replied, sitting comfortably in his chair. "Lavie, what do you say?"

"Ohmygosh, I never realized how hungry I was!" Lavie said, sitting beside her largely untouched plate. "You're so sensible, the two of you. Now let's chat about something else. I want to forget that this 'luncheon' with Sir Chucklehead ever happened! Commander," she went on, looking gratefully at him, "tell me more about your family.....I want to hear something pleasant!"

"Ah, that's one of my favourite topics, Miss Regale. Now the girl next to Aris, holding the small boy in front of her, that's my second little girl, Sophia. She and Irene are technically twins, but Irene's the older by a few seconds. And my, don't they have their scraps! But when it comes to something really important, they know that they have to look out for each other, and that what counts. The little girl there, winking at me, is Phemie, and she's very much her mother's daughter..."

And, Sir Prescott almost forgotten, except for his half-empty plate, the meal continued quite happily.

"Did he want to marry you, Gran?" Emily asked, laughing. "Did he fall in love with you at first sight, or something? Or did he fall into the deep blue sea?"

"He didn't love me, dear. In fact, he only loved one person in the world – himself. But he did want to marry me – for my father's money, and for my mother's name. I'm afraid Sir Prescott wasn't a very nice man, though he may have been a good soldier."

"I'm glad you didn't marry him, Gran," Emily said, "I couldn't have loved him the way I loved Grandpa."

"Ah, Emily, we share the same taste in men, I see!" Lavie burst out laughing, then continued her tale...

"How did it go, Sir Prescott?" Gessler asked, eagerly.

"A promising start, Gessler," Sir Prescott said, as he dwelt appreciatively on his memories of Lavie's face, her blushes, her "Thank you" as she received the flowers. "Of course, with those two old sticks there, I couldn't proceed as far as I would have liked to. But these things require patience. Now, Gessler. What news?"

"Sir, we've been in contact with the Palace, and it seems that Trask is going to face some pretty unpleasant music," Gessler said with a cruel smile. "Apparently, from what my men have told me, the Princess wasn't kidnapped. Rather, she ran away of her own accord to board the *Paradiso*, and it was sheer coincidence that the pirates attacked."

"Ran way? Foolish girl," Sir Prescott said, dismissing the heiress to the Throne of Galvenia with his trademark sneer. "I wonder why, though. She never struck me as the type. Little Princess Carranya. Always decorous, and dignified, and demure, and...*boring*, Gessler. Not the kind of woman I fancy. Now, Lavender Regale is not boring, I can assure you."

"Surely not, Sir Prescott! But now let me get to the heart of the matter. We've just received a coded message from our agents in Zion. Things are about to break there – they've heard the news about the *Paradiso*, and must have realized that the worst had happened. It's a Code Blue, sir. War. You'll have to return to Lorean as soon as possible, and then leave for Caledonia, with the formal Treaty of Alliance."

"Code Blue," Sir Prescott said appreciatively. "And of course, when the war begins.....well, we shall have to see, won't we?"

Gessler did not reply, but his laugh would have filled any listener with the deepest foreboding.

"There are three kinds of people in a war, Gessler," Sir Prescott said, rubbing his hands together slowly. "The ordinary fools, who fight on the field and die for King and Country – or return home on their invalid pensions, pathetic cripples. The rulers, who do nothing until they're about to win, lose or draw, and then try to work out the least unfavourable treaty. And the third kind, Gessler – *us*. The ones for whom war is not a matter of victory, or defeat, but profit."

And with this, the two men began their preparations for departure.

Ryan awoke with a start, the morning sun falling almost directly on his face. *That Chief Broyude was right*, he said, stretching out. *A little rest can go a long way. I'm now ready to face the day, at least for now.*

"Mr. Eramond!" Sergeant Burnfist's voice, unusually, had a pleasant note for it. "We've been waiting for you to get out of bed. Please come down to the Captain's room at once."

Ryan rubbed his eyes, strapped on his belt, and checked that his sword was in the right place. *Eramond's Legacy*, he thought. *Grandpa's sword. I couldn't have had it with me at a better time, when the Princess needed my help. And I....I did do my part in saving her, even the second time, Grandpa. I will make you proud.* Running a hand through his hair casually, he walked to the door. "What's the matter, Sergeant?"

"You'll see soon enough," she replied, with what looked suspiciously like a twinkle in her eye.

What's brewing now? he thought, and followed the Sergeant to the room where he had last left Carranya. To his surprise, the table in the room had been cleared, and sitting atop it was a large pile of pancakes, a jar of marmalade, and a plate full of sausages.

"We thought you might like some breakfast, Ryan," the Princess' voice called out. She was finally out of bed, and seated comfortably the same chair at which Ryan had kept his vigil over her. "I'm quite all right now, though Agent Striker says I do need to keep using a Sun Herb for the next couple of days."

"Don't pay attention to her, Mr. Eramond," Agent Striker replied. "She's still weak, but she insisted on sitting up and greeting you when we saw you'd woken up."

"Princess, you didn't have to...And where did all this food come from?" Ryan asked.

"Well, sonny, cooking was the only thing I could do to keep my mind off this tragedy!" Naomi broke in. "I did have a little help from Sergeant Burnfist and the Princess, though Tremfein kept trying to catch the pancakes as I flipped them."

The two Zionesse soldiers came into the room and saluted Sergeant Burnfist. "Sergeant, we have completed the task you assigned us on Deck E."

"Permission to retire, men," the Sergeant answered. "We've been trying to clear away the passengers' bodies," she explained to Ryan and the Princess, "and Chief Broyude and his men have also been helping out. We thought it was the least we could do before we left."

"Are you leaving now?" Ryan asked.

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Eramond. We've already spent a night on ship, and we need to bring the Crown Prince back to Zion. Even after we reach Bravo, it's almost twelve days and nights to Caledonia. We've managed to contact Zionesse Navy ships which were within our range, a little beyond Bravo, and they'll intercept us there and escort us back home. Our journey together ends here." She held out her hand to Ryan, who shook hands, noting that she had a disconcertingly firm grip.

“Sergeant Burnfist, you have my eternal gratitude,” Carranya said, rising from her chair. “On behalf of the rulers and the people of Galvenia, I thank you for the services you have rendered to my country.”

“What about Willy?” Tremfein asked. “Is he coming back to Davenport with us, or leaving with you, now that we don’t need to pilot the boat ourselves?”

“We’ve discussed it,” Striker said, with a smile suggesting that the discussion had been more amicable this time, “and eventually Rebecca said that she had to go with her men, while I could represent Zion when we returned the Princess to her people. Once that’s been done, I’ll use my diplomatic privilege to travel to Issachar, which is my next destination. So I’ll be accompanying you, Your Highness, if that’s not a problem.”

“Not in the least,” the Princess assured him. “Now, Ryan, I hate to sound like your mother, but try to eat something and regain your strength. There’s something I need to tell you about, but it will keep for a while.”

“Your wish is my command, Your Highness,” Ryan said with a grin, as he began to pile pancakes onto his plate.

Rebecca Burnfist and her two soldiers, taking Wilhelm’s corpse with them, had just left on one of the motored lifeboats, heading north-west to Checkpoint Bravo. Ryan, Striker and the Princess stood on the top deck, waving goodbye as they disappeared into the distance.

“Princess, are you all right?” Striker asked her, noticing that her footsteps were faltering.

“I suppose it must be time for my medicine,” she said, smiling, as the wind whipped at her hair, and at the folds of her pink dress. “Ryan, would you accompany me back to my room? I think Naomi should have cleaned things up by now.”

“That’s an excellent suggestion, Your Highness. Please keep watch over her, Mr. Eramond,” Agent Striker said. “I need a little time to... think things over, by myself.”

“Carranya,” Ryan said, as he helped her climb down the stairs, “there’s something *I’d* like to ask you first.”

“What is it, Lord Ryan?” she said, teasingly, and once again Ryan felt a pang. *She’s just a little older than me, she’s seen her fellow Royal killed in front of her eyes, she’s been stabbed and then poisoned, and yet she’s keeping up a braver front than I am. I’m sure her ancestors are looking down at her right now, filled to the brim with pride.*

“What was the meaning of that poem you recited over the wireless, Princess?” he asked. “I know parts of it sounded like the story of Derren and Penelope, but how did it have such an effect on a hard-bitten ship captain?”

The Princess seemed lost in thought for a moment. “I can certainly explain that to you, Ryan,” she said, “but first, let me lie down a little. I’m feeling quite exhausted; it’s the after-effects of that poison, I’m afraid.” They had reached the Captain’s room, and Naomi helped her lie down.

“No blankets, please. It’s a beautiful day today,” she said, looking out of the window. “Thank you, Naomi, you’ve been very good to me.”

“I am a loyal subject of His Majesty, Princess,” she said, smiling at her with an expression that was almost maternal. “But I see that you’re dying to tell Ryan something, so I’ll just leave you two alone for the moment. Call if you need me, I’ll be next door.” With these words, her stout figure slowly moved out of the room.

“Ryan,” Princess Carranya said, “come and sit by me. There are some things you need to know, before we proceed any further.”

“Huh? What’s going on, Princess?” Ryan asked, sitting in his chair of last night.

“First of all – I know you’re wondering why I don’t seem to be...taking this as hard as I did at first.” Ryan began to protest, but the Princess silenced him with a smile. “You see, Ryan, when I was lying up there, and Sergeant Burnfist was trying to stop the bleeding from my arm, I saw.... I saw her.”

“Her? Of course you’d have seen the Sergeant, but..”

“I don’t mean the Sergeant, Ryan. I mean *her*. Lady Penelope. You thought I had fainted, but actually, I was....having a vision, I suppose you could say.”

“A vision? Of Lady Penelope?” *God, I hope the shock hasn’t unhinged her mind,* Ryan thought. *I don’t believe in this sort of stuff, but who knows?*

“I can still see it clearly,” the Princess said, closing her eyes. “I was in a cold, dark place, unable to move, and then Lady Penelope appeared to me. She looked just the way I had seen her in portraits, except that she was...alive. She didn’t say anything – she just smiled and touched my head, as if giving me a blessing – but as she appeared, I was able to move. I could stand. I was speaking in front of a large multitude. I saw a ray of light, and somehow, from then on, I felt stronger. I knew I had to live for the sake of the Kingdom, the Commonwealth, and Wilhelm’s memory. To have weakened then would have been to betray her.”

“Sometimes, people see such things when they’re close to death, Princess,” Ryan said. “So you’re saying that Lady Penelope helped you recover?”

“I cannot think of any other explanation,” Carranya replied. “And as I awoke, I heard the words you heard me speak over the wireless – words I’d heard long ago, but had almost forgotten, and then I knew that the time had come for me to speak them.”

“I thought it was a coded message,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “How could it be anything else?”

“It was something I’d learned as a child, when my mage instructors were teaching me to follow the Deity Path, the path of light. It was a gift, they taught me, which could only be used when both my life and the kingdom were in danger. It could only work on someone who was a loyal subject of mine. In effect, when I spoke those words, the person at the other end – Captain Baker, in this case – would have seen a vision of me, a shape made of light that resembled me.”

“A vision of *you*?” said Ryan incredulously. “Princess, are you sure you’re not....”

“Ryan,” Carranya said gently, “didn’t you hear the way the Captain reacted when I said those words? No ‘code phrase’ could possibly account for it. What my teachers had taught me, what Lady Penelope had reminded me of, was real.”

“So you communicated with them by magic. I see,” Ryan said, trying not to sound skeptical. *Maybe it’s true, after all, he thought. After all, I saw her use magic attacks when we were fighting off Blackheart’s men. And maybe she can ‘project’ an image of light over quite a distance. No wonder that message took so much out of her.*

“Princess, let me be honest with you here,” he said, after an uncomfortable silence during which he was aware of Carranya’s gentle gaze fixed on him. “I’m an agnostic, okay? I don’t really believe in things that I can’t know about for sure. But there’s one thing I know: I trust you. I trust you completely. And so, I’m going to take what you said as seriously as possible, despite my misgivings.”

“Thank you, Ryan,” the Princess replied. “It’s good you said that, because the next thing I’m going to say may come as a shock to you.”

“A shock? Heh, Princess, after the last two days, I’m not sure *anything* can shock me any longer,” Ryan replied, laughing. “If there’s an Infinity, I thank him that you’re safe, but....”

“Listen to me, Ryan,” Carranya said, propping herself up against the head of the bed. “The second time I was – in danger, when you saved me with the Emerald Tea... I saw her again.”

“Lady Penelope, you mean?” Ryan shook his head. “Princess, you were poisoned at the time...”

“I know I was, Ryan,” she said, and reaching out, she touched his arm lightly. “And I know that I owe my life to you, not once, but several times. Perhaps that’s why she said what she did at that moment.”

“She? What did she say?” Ryan asked, blushing slightly.

“I was in the same place I was before,” she replied. “A cold, dark place. This time, though, snow was falling around me. I could move, but I couldn’t speak. Then she stood in front of me, and this is what she said.” Carranya closed her eyes, leaning back against the bed for support, and when she spoke, it was in the same tone that Ryan had heard her use over the wireless.

*“The man with you is the servant of the Deity and the Kingdom of Galvenia.
He has saved you, and he shall save you again, that you may reign and prosper.
But he cannot accomplish his task alone, and until he learns this, he will fail.”*

Only by accepting the hand that is held out to him, a hand that is not yours, will he succeed and bring hope back to the hearts of the people. Someday, he will understand."

Saying these words, she opened her eyes, and looked at Ryan with a serene expression on her face. "And it was precisely at that moment that I felt you hold that vial against my lips," she went on. "I was suddenly given the strength to drink. I could feel the poison leaving my body, and I fell into sleep."

Despite his earlier words, Ryan's disbelief had now given way to the utmost surprise. "And that... that was supposed to be *me*?" he said, shaking his head. "It can't be, Princess. I'm not even a servant of any 'Deity' that I know, and as for bringing back hope to the people, I'm not Lord Geraud!"

"Didn't you tell me, Ryan," Carranya replied, a thoughtful expression on her face, "that Lord Geraud was a hero of yours?"

"Carranya, there's a lot of difference between having someone as a hero, and actually doing the things he did!" Ryan protested. "And who am I, after all? I'm just a teenager out of high school. I'd willingly save your life again if I had the chance, but the idea of being some sort of world savior is just – it's just crazy!"

"She didn't say 'savior', Ryan. She said 'servant'. And she did say that you needed another person to help you."

"Henrik or Armin, perhaps?" Ryan mused aloud. "You know, I really should make up my quarrel with Henrik. After all, he's afraid of heights, and he was probably just nervous and trying to stop us fighting up there.... He did hit hard, though. And *Juno*...."

"Ryan? What are you talking about?" the Princess asked.

"Just...something that happened before I boarded this ship. Remember, Princess, I told you about how I'd helped to arrest Mayor Talmadge, right?"

"Yes, I remember," Carranya said, smiling.

"Well, the next day, I received a telegram summoning me to the Royal Palace. It was from a man named Trask, who took us to meet the Prime Minister..."

"Trask, the head of Palace Security? And Prime Minister Socius?" Carranya frowned. "What did they want with you?"

"To cut a long story short, he wanted me to trace Kodenai, Talmadge's aide, who had escaped from the prison at Lorean." Carranya nodded, but did not say anything further. "Well, I went along with Henrik Spenson, who was my best friend since childhood and a good fighter. We found evidence that Kodenai may have gone to the Mount Lorea mine, and we didn't meet him there, but we ran into another man named Lugner."

“Lugner? I’m afraid I’ve never heard the name, though it sounds Varaldian to me,” Carranya said. “Go on, Ryan. What happened?”

“It’s a long, long story, Princess, but... Anyway, in the mines, we also met a boy called Juno, who, for some reason, has been feuding with me for over a year. He was also looking for Kodenai, though I don’t know why. Against my better judgment, I saved him from a Queen Worm, and the three of us decided to team up and continue the hunt. Our search ended on the top of Davenport Peak.”

Ryan closed his eyes, an expression of pain on his face.

“We met Kodenai there, and the three of us were able to overpower him, and take him into custody. However...” He shuddered. “Before we could tie him up and take him with us, that – that maniac, Juno, killed Kodenai right in front of my eyes! It was the first time I’d ever seen a man killed...”

Carranya looked at him kindly. “I understand,” she said. “I remember the first time I saw you shoot one of those pirates... it was the shock of my life.”

“...Anyway, I asked Juno what the hell he thought he was doing, and we were about to have it out, when my friend Henrik broke the fight up by punching me in the face, and telling Juno to beat it. Juno ran away like the murdering coward that he is, and Henrik and I went back to the palace, not speaking a word to each other on the way. We told Trask about Kodenai’s death – describing it as an accident during the battle – and returned home. I thought I’d see him later, after the trip, when we’d both had time to simmer down,” Ryan concluded, and shook his head. “Maybe I really should talk things over with him. We can’t afford to be feuding if Galvenia is going to need us both.”

“Ryan,” Carranya said, and it seemed to him that she was speaking not as herself, but with the wisdom of the entire Lionheart dynasty. “When you get home, tell Henrik you’re sorry. Give him a hug, if that’s not too ‘unmanly’ for you. Tell him you understand that you were both in a difficult situation, and made mistakes, and that if he did, you’re ready to forgive him. He’s your best friend, after all. You’re lucky to have one.” She smiled at him.

“P-Princess, that’s...that’s actually pretty cool of you,” Ryan began, both amused and pleased to have his own sermon preached back at him in this manner. “You know, that may be a good idea. But...” his face grew dark again.

“What is it, Ryan?” Carranya asked.

“I mean, I can see how Henrik and I might play a role in a particular task, like we did with Kodenai,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “And if that’s what your Lady Penelope meant by a servant, I don’t mind. It’s just – this whole ‘save the world’ thing. It just seems so unreal...”

Carranya looked back at him, and again there was the impression of something greater than her, something of which she was just the instrument. “Ryan, do you remember what you said to me, just before the pirates attacked?”

“About Grandpa?”

“No, about being – ‘destined’ to do something. Remember what you said. We can’t change some things; you can’t change being Ryan Eramond, and I can’t change being the Crown Princess. Sometimes, we just have to follow the river where it leads us – as you and I just did, when we escaped those pirates. And sometimes, we just have to do the best with the hand that life deals us. Our wills are free, Ryan, but they’re also constrained by the world around us. You showed me that, and I’m grateful for the lesson I learned from you.”

“Carranya,” Ryan said, softly, “I’m not a philosopher, or anything...”

“Every now and then, we will have to make decisions,” she went on. “And I think what Lady Penelope meant was that, when the time came, you would make the right decision, as you seem to have done so far. You and your companion – perhaps Henrik, perhaps someone else...”

“Someone else,” Ryan said speculatively, as another idea occurred to him. “Do you think she could have been referring to – Marianne?”

The Princess laughed. “I don’t know if Lady Penelope makes matches from beyond the grave, Ryan,” she replied, “but I think it’s someone who’s accompanied you on your adventures. Someone who’s helped you succeed so far, who’s played their own part. So I don’t think it’s her, but it could, of course, be your friend Henrik.”

“You’re probably right, Princess,” Ryan replied. “It’s just that, this is so confusing... the world is threatened by war, we’ve both been through hell, and I...I’m not sure what to think anymore. Back home at Davenport, life seemed so simple, and now...”

“Ryan, I feel exactly the same way,” the Princess said. “But the time to hide away in the security of our homes is over. We both have to spread our wings now, and see in which direction we have to fly, but I do know this – that the journey will be easier if we do not travel alone. You and your friend, together, will accomplish more than you could individually.” The look she gave him was almost a benediction. “‘Someday, you will understand’, Ryan. That’s what she said, and I believe her.”

“Perhaps I will, Princess,” Ryan said, smiling back, and feeling a little lighter. *If she’s as wise in dealing with her people as she is in dealing with me, the Kingdom will have a wonderful leader*, he thought. “But what about you, Carranya? You’ll be going back to the Palace, and you’ll be kept under an even stricter watch than before. Won’t you be....alone?”

“Ryan,” Carranya said, soothingly. “I won’t be alone. After all, I will tell Mother and Father what I told you, and I’m sure they will also understand – someday, if not immediately. But I also have a little plan of my own, before I go home, when we get to Davenport..” She laughed.

“I have a bad feeling about this...” Ryan said, and laughed in turn.

“Nothing like in the play, Lord Ryan,” Carranya said, lying back on her pillow, “nothing quite like that. But I really need to rest a little now.” She stifled a yawn. “Could you please ask Naomi to bring me those herbs, if they’re ready?”

“As you wish, your Highness,” Ryan said, and making an elaborate bow – which caused Carranya to stifle a laugh, this time – he left. Carranya looked after him for a moment, an admiring expression on her face. *There’s more to it, Lord Ryan, but you’ll learn it all. In time. Someday.*

Her head fell to one side, and she slept the sleep of the innocent.

CHAPTER SIX: THE FLOWER OF LOREAN

*“Who is this arising like the dawn,
fair as the moon,
resplendent as the sun,
formidable as an army?”
(Song of Songs, ch. 6, v. 10.)*

“Who’s Marianne, Gran?” Emily asked, curiously. “Is she also a Princess?”

“A Princess? Oh, no, dear,” Lavie said, clapping her hands and laughing. “The very idea. No, Marianne was a girl who lived in Davenport with your Grandpa and I, when we were younger. Your Grandpa and she were rather fond of each other, long ago, but they had a – well, let’s call it a misunderstanding.”

“That’s a pity, Gran,” Emily said, “but I’m happy, because then Grandpa could get to be with you!”

“Very true, dear,” Lavie said, smiling. “Ah, at eighteen, sweetie, people think that if their hearts are broken, their lives are over. Little do they know that, at eighteen, our lives are just beginning! Well, it took Grandpa a little time to forget about Marianne, but he did. Eventually.” Her eyes twinkled. “And now, sweetie, I must tell you what happened when we all got back home. Little did the people of Davenport know what was in store for them...”

The journey home, for Lavie and her father, was quiet and uneventful, except for one pleasant surprise. No weather troubled them, and the ship’s skipper – a tall merchantman, named Sidney Temple, who wore a rather piratical hat – was as friendly to them as Skipper Williams had been. “Forgive me my little joke, Miss,” he told Lavie, as he tipped his hat to her. “We sailors must have our fun, and I can’t resist a little dig at the Commonwealth Naval Authority, with this here hat of mine.”

“Naval Authority?” Sigmund snorted. “What an absurd name. They don’t defend our ships against pirates, they allow even a luxury cruiser like the *Paradiso* to be gutted, and they expect taxes from us?”

“Aye, Sir, that’s not really their fault,” Temple replied. “Under Miller’s presidency, funds for the Commonwealth fleet were slashed quite badly, and ships needing repairs were neither replaced nor decommissioned. His administration believed that each nation could watch its own waters, and that the Authority only had to arbitrate in cases of disputes. Unfortunately, that didn’t work out the way he expected.”

“You can say that again,” Sigmund said, in his usual dry tone. “Pardon me, but do I get the impression we’re going a little faster than we did when we left Davenport?”

“Right you are, Sir,” the skipper answered. “The engines on the *Lady Penelope* are a little more powerful than those on the *Chespa Bay*, but they can’t handle long journeys. Hare and the tortoise, you could

say.” He chuckled. “If the weather and the winds stay calm, we should reach a good half day earlier than you would have with the *Chespa Bay*.”

A loud, horn-like sound came from below the deck. “That’s the wireless, Sir, if you’ll excuse me,” Sidney Temple said, climbing down the stairs.

“A half day ahead! Isn’t that great, Daddy?” Lavie exclaimed, adjusting her red ribbon carefully as the breeze tugged at her hair. “That means we’ll get there ahead of Ryan, and we can ask Mom to cook up something for him!”

“That is an idea, Lavie,” Sigmund replied. “But remember, he’s been on a ship attacked by pirates. For all you know, he may have seen action himself. He’ll be quite exhausted by the time he returns. Give him a little time to recover.”

“Do you really think so, Daddy? How brave!” Lavie said, her eyes flashing. “I hope he didn’t get hurt.”

“I hope not, dearest,” Sigmund replied, when the Skipper came running up the steps, waving a piece of paper in his hand. “Mr. Regale,” he said, “here’s something that may interest you.”

“What?” Lavie asked.

“The Galvenia Broadcasting Corporation has just released a second public message about the *Paradiso*. You may want to hear it, if there are any friends of yours on board. Shall I read it out for you?” the Skipper said innocently, not knowing the effect his words would produce.

Lavie grew pale, and her fingers gripped the railing on the deck. *Suppose I was wrong*, she thought. *Suppose I was just being stupid....Ryan....*

“Go ahead, Skipper,” Sigmund said, with a quaver in his voice.

“As you wish, Sir. ‘The Palace is pleased to announce that it has received a further message from the *Paradiso*, giving the names of the survivors. First and foremost is Her Highness, Princess Carranya, Heiress to the Throne of Galvenia. Next, three Zionese soldiers, who aided the Princess and have departed for Checkpoint Bravo in a lifeboat: Sergeant Rebecca Burnfist, Private Lothar Metzger, and Private Michael Wagner. Next, Conrad Tremfein, playwright.”

“Tremfein?” Sigmund interrupted. “I’ve read some of his historical plays. Rather melodramatic and passé, I’m afraid. I didn’t even know he was still alive.”

“Naomi Festa, dressmaker and personal assistant to Mr. Tremfein. Charlotte Tremfein, daughter to Mr. Tremfein. William Striker, official of the Zion Tactics and Intelligence Division. Lucas Broyude, master sailor....”

Lavie listened to the names, feeling her heart beat slowly within her chest. *I’m glad they’re all safe...but what about Ryan?*

“.....Stan Clark, ship’s mechanic....”

"I'm afraid I know none of those people, Mr. Temple, but it looks like there weren't many survivors," Sigmund interrupted.

"Indeed, I'm afraid not, Sir. There are just three more names. Ian Taylor, seaman first class."

Please, Lavie thought, gripping the rail even harder. Perspiration stood out on her brow, but she paid no heed to it. *Five Angels...please....* she thought, desperately.

"John Forsyth, midshipman."

Ryan...oh, no... Lavie's head dropped forward. *No...*

"And, with a special commendation from Her Highness himself, Ryan Eramond, package delivery man, who aided the Zion army in defending the Princess and securing the ship. All these men are safe and sound, and the *Raymond Chester* should be reaching them by..."

"*Ryan!*" The cry echoed across the sea, and Lavie stepped away from the rail, staggering. Sigmund rushed forward to catch her, and helped her to a chair on the deck, onto which he placed her, half conscious. "Ohmygosh....Ryan....he.....he's alive...."

"I knew that boy would do his grandfather proud someday," Sigmund said, contentedly, feeling as if all the troubles of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. "It seems the Five Angels *did* hear your prayer, dearest."

"The Five Angels....Bless them, bless them! Ryan....he saved the Princess...." Lavie said, brokenly, the colour returning to her cheeks.

"Aye, the boss's son!" Temple said, looking as pleased as Sigmund did. "Remarkable, remarkable! Bravery's something we need more of in this world, Mr. Regale. You know the lad well, I presume?" he asked, looking curiously at Lavie, who was smiling and weeping at the same time.

"Theodore and I are old friends, as you probably know," Sigmund replied, folding his hands together and smiling, "and he and my daughter Lavie have been playmates since childhood. In fact, Lavie was going to accompany him on that cruise, but missed the ship at Davenport."

"Is that so!" The skipper looked at Lavie with renewed interest. "Well, you've been very lucky, Miss. Those pirates don't take no prisoners, that's for sure. I'm amazed that so many of them survived, by the Five Angels! And I'm glad for the boss too, that's for sure. He must have been terribly anxious."

"True, Theodore and Sheila must have been worried sick," Sigmund thought, feeling a little guilty. *Here I was worrying about Lavie and Lavie alone*, he thought, *and all the while the Eramonds must have been going through hell, waiting for their boy to come back. If there's an Infinity out there, this must be his doing. And those Five Angels. Lavie was right, bless them all.*

"Daddy!" Lavie got up from her chair, looking happier than Sigmund had seen her in a year. "Daddy, I just....I just don't know what to say! This is the happiest day of my life! I knew I'd have given anything,

anything, if Ryan was just safe, and now...." She leaned contentedly against her father, who patted her back soothingly.

"Calm down, dearest. It does seem as if the worst is over. Though I presume there'll be some sort of official formalities – I mean, if Ryan has received a commendation from the Princess herself..." His voice trailed off.

"At this moment," Lavie went on, and her smile tugged even at the sober Skipper's heartstrings, "I could just hug that Princess, too! Ryan's a hero, and...." She closed her eyes and smiled peacefully, repeating his name in her mind. *Ryan. Ryan.....*

"Well, I must say it's noble of her, Lavie," Sigmund agreed. "Considering the way the Palace has treated many heroes in the past, including some of our brave soldiers, the fact that Ryan's been commended almost instantly tells me that Princess Carranya may not be as bad as her predecessors."

"Thank you, Daddy! Thank you, Mr. Temple!" Lavie replied, giving them both a hug before they could respond. "And thank you, Five Angels!" She ran happily down the length of the deck, as Sigmund and the skipper watched her, with tender expressions on their faces.

"That was actually the second happiest day of my life, Emily," Lavie explained, a tear running down her cheek. Emily, picking up her tiny handkerchief, wiped it away neatly. "Don't mind me, sweetie. We old folks sometimes cry when we're happy, you know."

"And what was the first, Gran?" Emily asked. "When he came back to Davenport?"

"No, you silly goose," Lavie replied, laughing. "It was something much better than that."

"They day you were married, right?" Emily asked, affectionately.

"Why, how did you....Right you are, Emily, right you are!" said Lavie, surprised to find herself still capable of blushing at the age of eighty. "But that was quite far away at that point, and Ryan...I mean Grandpa...hadn't reached Davenport yet...."

"Tremfein," Ryan said, seeing the old director sitting quietly in his chair in the theatre, reading a book, "there's something I'd like to ask you. When Carranya and I acted in your play, you mentioned that you had a daughter, who was also an actress. What....happened to her? Where is she?"

"Oh, she's safe, Richard," Tremfein replied, chuckling. "I wanted to let her rest, because she's still rather sick, and there was all that ruckus with the Zion soldiers going on. I dare say we can bring her out now and introduce her to the Princess." He unlocked a door Ryan hadn't noticed before, behind and to the left of the stage, which Ryan realized must have been Tremfein's "free accommodation", and opened it. "Lotte, dear," he said, "you can come out now. I think all the noise upstairs is done."

A thin, fair-haired girl, aged about fifteen and looking tired, peeped at them curiously. "Father!" she said. "Are we all safe now?" She shivered. "When I heard those explosions, I..."

"Hush, Lotte, it's all over now," Tremfein said, holding her hand. "Are you feeling a little better now?"

"Yes, I am, Father," Lotte said. "Are the pirates....gone? Really?"

"Yes, dear, yes. Now smarten up a bit, little girl, I have to introduce you to the Princess!"

"The Princess?" Lotte's eyes grew wide. "You mean, the girl who acted in the play as Princess Amanda, instead of me?"

"No, dear, the girl who played Penelope. I'm sorry you were too sick to see the play, it was a grand success!" Tremfein said, rubbing his hands together. "Turns out, she was a real Princess after all. Princess Carranya of Galvenia, in fact! And Robert, here..."

"Ryan!" Ryan said, annoyed.

"...Ryan, here, helped to save her life."

"It sounds like something out of one of your plays, Father," Lotte said, dreamily. "I still can't believe that there were pirates on board....I felt so ill, and I just kept on sleeping and sleeping..."

"Don't worry now, dear, you're all right. Now look smart, dear, and I'll take you up."

"You mean you kept her locked in here all the time?" Ryan asked, bewildered. "Wasn't that....unsafe?"

"Unsafe, dear boy? What do you mean?" Tremfein asked, puzzled. "We were here in the theatre all the time, and Willy and I would have guarded her with our very lives! She's quite ill, poor girl. There are days and weeks when she's quite all right, and times when she's in bed for weeks, with a raging fever, hardly able to eat."

"Then, she needs medical attention," Ryan said, quietly. "Once we reach Davenport, we ought to consult someone."

"Ah, yes, boy....though I can't say I have much faith in them. We've been to many specialists in Davenport, and they say that the only ones who can treat her condition are in the Varald Directorate. And since she couldn't possibly make the journey there, we just have to make do..."

"Ryan?" The voice of the Princess echoed through the theatre hall. "Are you there?"

Ryan, Tremfein and Lotte came out of the room. "Princess, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Who's the pretty lady, Father?" Lotte asked.

"Why thank you, young woman," Carranya said, taking the girl's hand in her own. "This must be the child you were telling me about, Tremfein. She doesn't look much like you." She laughed.

“Ah, that’s what I told you, Lady Penelope! Her mother’s looks and my brains, that’s my Charlotte! Fortunately it didn’t go the other way around.” He chuckled. “She’s a little better now. I was just introducing her to Roderick, here...”

“*Ryan!*” Ryan interjected. “Look here, Tremfein, do you keep doing that on purpose, or what?”

“Just my little joke, Prince Derren,” Tremfein replied, and his daughter laughed.

“Dear, dear, Lord Ryan,” Princess Carranya said, laughing out loud. “The reason I’m here is that I can’t stay in bed all day, and needed to stretch my sea-legs, as the sailors say. But tell me, Tremfein, what exactly is the matter with your child?”

Tremfein launched into a long and animated description, which Carranya listened to thoughtfully. “You know, I might just be able to help,” she said, letting go of the child’s hand. “Ryan, do you happen to have any Keole Roots with you?”

“Keole Roots? I think so,” Ryan said, hunting around in his knapsack. *We used a few in battle, but there must be some left.* After some rummaging through its contents, he found a small jar.

“Heh, Princess, what are you doing?” Tremfein asked, curiously.

“Now, Charlotte, just take these two roots, and keep chewing them. They don’t taste particularly nice, I’m afraid, but they will do you good,” the Princess said.

“I will, Princess,” Lotte said, smiling back at her. “Now, just come and sit by me, child. This may take a few moments.” She bowed her head, and it seemed to Ryan as though her lips moved for some time, though she made no sound. When she lifted her head up, she wore a smile that seemed more than human, and it seemed – *no, it must be a trick of the light!* Ryan thought – that her face was actually shining.

“Now just rest your head on my lap for a while, Charlotte,” the Princess commanded, and Charlotte did so obediently, though she grimaced from the taste of the herbs. *I don’t blame her, Ryan thought. That stuff tastes terrible. Armin’s expression when he had to try them was priceless..*

The Princess laid both her hands on the girl’s head, and this time, she seemed to be singing wordlessly, though both Ryan and Tremfein could make out a faint, haunting tune. Then she raised her hands, looking pleased.

“That should do it,” Carranya said, and when Charlotte raised her head, the tired expression on her face was gone.

“I feel much better now!” she said. “Princess, did you cure me?”

Carranya smiled gently at her. “My old teachers would be so proud of me,” she said, blushing a little. “They tried their best to teach me at least some of the Angel Path, and fortunately, it was enough this time. Tremfein, to the best of my knowledge, your little girl should be all right, now.”

Tremfein looked at the Princess, amazed. “Goodness! Princess, I am.....” He knelt down before her. “Your Highness, this humble subject thanks you for your favour, and...”

Princess Carranya smiled at him benevolently. “Stand up, Tremfein. There is no need to kneel down before me – I am neither your deity nor your ruler at this moment, but merely someone who is glad to be of service.”

Tremfein ran over to his daughter, and the two embraced. “This is...this is wonderful!” he said, unable to come up with a wisecrack for once. “Charlotte, you’re well at last! If only your mother could see you now...”

Ryan let out a low whistle. “Princess, that’s pretty darn impressive! Oops, pardon my language,” he said, flushing.

“I’ll overlook it this time, Ryan,” the Princess replied, laughing.

Agent Striker entered the room, and bowed before the Princess. “Ah, I see you’ve found little Charlotte, too. I wanted Tremfein to bring her out earlier, but she was rather ill.”

“I’m better now, Mr. Striker,” Charlotte assured him. “The Princess made me eat some herbs, and then she healed me!”

“Did she?” Striker replied. “Well, Your Highness, I see you have many arrows in your quiver, as you Galvenians say. But I’m here to inform you that we’ve just received a message on the wireless from the *Raymond Chester*. They’re just a few hours away, and want to know how many of us are on board, so that they can make arrangements to receive us.”

“I take it you have a passenger list of some sort, Agent Striker,” Princess Carranya said. “Well, this time, it will be quite an ordinary message, Ryan.” She smiled, and followed Striker down to the transmitter room, with Ryan following them. “This is Princess Carranya Lionheart speaking,” she said, speaking a little louder than usual. “Can you hear me?”

“Captain Baker of His Majesty’s Ship *Raymond Chester*. We receive you loud and clear,” the voice replied. “Your Highness, our sensors indicate that we are less than four hours away from you. Could you, or one of the men with you, please tell us who is with you, so that we can make arrangements to accommodate you on board?”

“Most certainly, Captain,” said the Princess. “These are the names. I presume you have a passenger list of your own.”

“Affirmative, Your Highness,” the Captain replied.

“Then listen carefully, Captain Baker.” She took Striker’s list, on which he had helpfully marked the names of the survivors, and began to read them out. Ryan, keeping count silently, noted that there were thirteen of them in all – something that would have driven a superstitious soul, such as his classmate

Roger from Davenport, into a panic. *Only ten of us need to board the Raymond Chester, though, he thought, since Sergeant Burnfist and her men have already left.*

“....and finally, Ryan Eramond from Davenport in Galvenia, who at the cost of his own life, defended my own, and aided the Zionese soldiers in making the ship secure. Please record this carefully, Captain...”

“Princess, that’s not....” Ryan began.

“...so that he may receive an official commendation from the House of Lionheart when we reach land. Thank you, Captain.”

“Thirteen names in all, ten to come on board, and a commendation for...Ryan Eramond,” Captain Baker repeated obediently. “May the Five Angels keep you, your Highness. We will be with you very soon.”

“I look forward to that pleasure, Captain,” the Princess replied, and broke contact, then turned to face Ryan, beaming.

“Princess, what did you do that for?” Ryan protested. “I don’t want an official commendation...”

“Ryan, it’s the least I can do,” Carranya replied, calmly. “There’s no way I can possibly repay you for saving the life of the Crown Princess on two occasions, but please accept this as a mark of respect, admiration....and trust.” Her smile, as most people discovered, was extremely hard to resist, and Ryan capitulated.

“Aw, very well, Your Highness,” he replied, turning a bright red.

“Our very own Prince Derren!” Tremfein said, and his daughter applauded.

“It’s no more than we would have given you if you’d saved Wilhelm, Mr. Eramond,” Striker added, with a nod. “Be prepared to become a minor celebrity, at least for a while.”

I wonder what Dad and Mum would say! Ryan wondered, feeling both pleased and embarrassed, despite his protests. And Colonel Whitworth, and....Grandpa. Grandpa, wherever you are, I hope you’re listening now.

“Dear me, Lord Ryan, how happy you look,” Carranya said with a smile.

“And now, Princess, I think you’d better conserve your energies for the journey,” Striker went on. “We still have over a day and a half of travel on the *Raymond Chester* to go before we reach Davenport, and then you’ll still have to make the journey to Lorean.”

“Thank you, Agent Striker,” Carranya said, graciously. “I appreciate your concern, and while you cannot receive a commendation as Ryan did, I will make sure that you and Sergeant Burnfist are recognized for your actions as well. As Crown Princess of Galvenia, I also offer you my sincerest condolences for the loss of Prince Wilhelm” – and for the first time in almost a day, her voice faltered – “and I hope, and pray, that his life will not be lost in vain.”

“We were merely doing our duty, Your Highness,” Striker replied, “and we were glad to be of service in some way. We share your hopes and prayers, and look forward to receiving you one day in Caledonia.”

“I will get there eventually, Agent Striker. Thank you, once again,” Carranya replied, as she made her way back to her room.

And after four mercifully event-free hours, the *Raymond Chester*, accompanied by two smaller ships, arrived for its encounter with the *Paradiso*. As the passage between the two ships was set up by a busy team of Galvenian sailors, Captain Baker stood on the bridge, looking at the Princess with something very much like religious awe.

“Come along, Ryan!” Carranya said brightly. Tremfein, Charlotte and Naomi had already boarded the *Raymond Chester*, as had Chief Broyude and his three men. “And Agent Striker, too. Since Sergeant Burnfist has already left, you two are my only protectors left, until the Galvenian Navy arrives!”

“That’s actually sort of true, Princess,” Ryan observed, as they climbed on board their new transport – Carranya in the centre, with Ryan at her right and Striker at her left. As she boarded the ship, the Captain knelt before her, and drew his sword. The rest of the Marines with him followed suit, all of them looking at their Crown Princess with a reverence that, to Ryan, would not have been out of place in an Itarian church. Many of the men, including the Captain, had tears in their eyes.

“Captain Baker,” Carranya said, simply, “I and my fellow passengers thank you from the bottom of our hearts. And I shall personally ensure that you are all suitably rewarded for your deeds.”

“Y-Your Highness,” the Captain replied, “it is our pride, our duty, and our honour to protect the Flower of the Kingdom. I have been a sailor for twenty years, and I shall never see anything as....as awesome as I did yesterday, when your noble presence stood before us all.”

Carranya blushed. “I thank you for your gracious words, Captain. Could you kindly show us to our quarters? I am quite well, but there is a child who has just recovered from a long illness, and others who may need some time to rest.”

“It would be my pleasure and my duty to do so,” the Captain said, and holding his sword straight, he and ten of his men marched forward. Carranya fell in behind them, standing upright and taking ceremonious steps forward, and Ryan and Striker, unfamiliar with Galvenian naval protocol, simply walked some distance behind, under the watchful eye of the rest of the soldiers. Captain Baker showed them each to a room, and stationed a guard near each of them.

“I must apologize for the nature of this accommodation, Your Royal Highness,” the Captain said apologetically. “Unfortunately, the *Raymond Chester* is not truly designed for civilian travel, and...”

“There is no need to apologize, Captain Baker,” Carranya said, brightly. “I am sure we will all be quite satisfied with these arrangements. Once again, I thank you deeply.”

“Th-thank you, Your Highness,” the Captain replied. “If you should require anything, please inform my men, who will obey you faithfully. Infinity preserve you, Your Highness. I am afraid we now need to take some time to lower the bridge to the *Paradiso*, but we will depart shortly.”

With these words, Captain Baker sheathed his sword, bowed before the Princess, and marched away, his men in tow. One of them, near the head of the procession, looked back at her for a moment, and then looked at the Captain. “Captain Baker, sir, permission to speak.”

“Permission granted, Sergeant Redding,” Baker replied, not breaking stride.

“Sir, weren’t we instructed to keep the Princess under strict custody when we received our briefing from Officer Trask, over the radio?” the Sergeant asked, nervously, as he continued marching. He revered his Captain, but had heard tales of Trask’s vindictiveness when crossed.

“Officer Trask may be in charge of Palace Security, Sergeant Redding,” the Captain replied, placidly, “but I am in charge of this ship, and on board, my orders are final, unless they are overruled by a superior officer of the Royal Marines. Is that clear?”

“I understand, Sir, but...” Redding began.

“Sergeant, I know what Trask wants. He wants us to bring the Princess back to him as a prize package, and claim glory for himself. And that is precisely what should never happen. Tell me, Sergeant Redding, were you not there when the Princess herself appeared to us and spoke to us, though she was leagues away?”

“I was,” Redding replied, reluctantly. He remembered how awe-struck he had been, and how later he’d wondered if it had all been a dream.

“Sergeant, I am a simple seafaring man. I do not claim to understand magic, or religion, or any of those things that learned men at the Court may spend their time debating. But when I saw Her Highness appear to me, looking like one of the Five Angels themselves, I understood one thing; that I must be obedient to her, and allow myself to be commanded and instructed by her. I am her servant first, and not Trask’s. And if he should ask you any unpleasant questions, Sergeant Redding, tell Trask that he can address them to me. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir,” Sergeant Redding replied, with a sigh of relief. “I was hoping you’d say something like that. I...it’s hard to put it into words, Captain, but I’d be ready to swear loyalty to that Princess right then and there, even if Trask asked for my head the moment after. It’s just that..”

“Do not worry, Redding. We are in perfect agreement on this issue. Leave her free,” the Captain replied, as they marched towards the bridge.

“Princess,” Ryan said, as the three of them stood in her room, “indulge my curiosity for a moment. What was it that Captain Baker called you? The flower of the kingdom? Is that an official term, or an old sailor’s compliment?”

Carranya laughed. “The Captain is very kind,” she said. “It’s actually an old, traditional title for a Royal Princess. Royal Princes, especially the eldest ones, are called ‘The Light of the Kingdom’, in honour of Prince Derren.”

“I’ve heard of that,” Ryan said, nodding.

“Similarly, Princesses, especially the eldest, are ‘The Flower of the Kingdom’, or sometimes ‘The Flower of Lorean’, in honour of Princess Alexandra, King Arlbert the First’s daughter, who loved flowers. In fact, our Palace Gardens were constructed for her. Since that time, it’s been a custom for nobles to bring ceremonial gifts when a Prince or Princess is born: a lamp for a boy, and flowers – usually a bouquet of King’s Tears – for a girl,” Carranya explained. “Of course, ever since Galvenia moved further towards a parliamentary democracy, Crown Princes and Princesses have been less public figures, until they come of age. The titles have fallen into disuse in the last hundred years, but many traditional Galvenians – especially naval families – still use them.”

“It’s a nice custom,” Ryan said. “The Flower of Lorean. I think the title suits you, Princess.”

“Do you, Lord Ryan?” Carranya smiled. “Well, I’m glad the Captain brought it up, because it ties in quite neatly with my little idea once we reach Davenport. I’m sure he’ll support us, but I need your help, just in case.”

“What is your plan, Your Highness?” Striker asked, a small smile coming to his face.

“We’ll probably have to spend at least one day in Davenport, before I leave for Lorean,” Carranya said, with mounting excitement in her voice. “I’d like to have a public audience there, like in old times, when Princes or Princesses could meet the populace. It seems like the right and honourable thing to do, considering that I was saved by one of Davenport’s citizens.”

Ryan looked acutely embarrassed. “Princess, you don’t have to...”

“I do, Ryan,” she said, simply. “For almost a century, now, Kings and Queens of Galvenia have felt insecure, have felt that their position has been usurped by the Prime Minister and the House of Lords. I see it now; it has nothing to do with me, or Mother, or Father, and everything to do with history. In response, we’ve cut ourselves off from the populace, allowing ourselves to be put on display at appropriate times, while men like Socius make all the decisions. I don’t want that to continue, Ryan. And if I can take that first step...”

“Carranya, shouldn’t you, just to be on the safe side, clear this with your parents first? What would they think, especially since they’ve just almost lost you?” Ryan said, torn between his admiration of the Princess’ vision, and his fear that it would end in disappointment for her. *She wants to be Lady Penelope or Prince Derren*, he thought, *and I’m sure she could, if only they’d let her.*

“Ryan, this is something that I have to do,” Carranya said, passionately. “Tell me, when was the last time you heard that King Arlbert was selling out to the Zions? Or that Queen Katarina’s tax hikes were ruining the economy? We don’t count anymore, Ryan – we’ve abdicated our responsibilities to Socius and the Lords. Even Lord Lucan, who represents us at the Commonwealth, is more loyal to the government than to my parents. We’ve become like expensive decorations, which people take out on St. Mikhail’s Day, and then put back in their dusty cupboards the day after.”

“But is it safe?” Ryan asked. “Princess, your life has just been in danger, you’re still weak, and...”

“Ryan,” Carranya said, firmly. “Wasn’t it a friend of yours who said that all the Royals were good for were sitting on their seats and being exempt from taxes? The Royal Family should be the symbol of the unity and goodwill of Galvenia, and that’s what I want.”

Sitting on their... Oh, that’s what Lavie said! Silly Lavie, I wish she could see the Princess now. She’d certainly sing a different tune, Ryan thought. “Well, if it’s what you want, Princess, I will support you,” he said resolutely. “Agent Striker, what do you think?”

“Gran!” Emily protested. “Did Grandpa really say you were silly?”

“He did sometimes, dear,” Lavie replied, laughing at the recollection, “though, in all fairness, I probably called him worse things than that. You see, Emily, loving someone doesn’t mean you never disagree with them; it means that you can make up after your disagreements, and get along well anyway.”

“Like the time you wouldn’t let me have a third helping of berry-surprise pie?” Emily asked, with a mischievous smile.

“Touché, sweetheart,” Lavie replied, smiling. “Anyway, Ryan was right that time, about Carranya. She wasn’t like the other kings and queens we’d had till then...she was a good Princess, Emily, and a good Queen. Galvenia and Zion still honour her memory. But at the moment, her friends were trying to dampen her enthusiasm...”

“It’s idealistic,” Agent Striker said, “but it might just work. But what if the King and Queen are already in Davenport? They could easily be there by road well ahead of us, and then you’d have to do as they said.

“Agent Striker,” Carranya said with a bright laugh, “you don’t know much about Royal protocol, do you? The King and Queen *never* visit a town without an official delay of three days and three nights, during which the town in question is supposed to deck itself in all its finery. Even if the three days began from the time we were saved, we would still have a day in which I would be received at the Mayor’s house – there is no other place in Davenport where it would be correct for me to stay, by the way. Of course, Father may choose to dispense with protocol, but I doubt he would.”

“It’s still cutting it a bit fine, Princess,” Ryan argued. “Even if we travel as fast as we can, we’d still be there only by tomorrow evening, and your parents could be there the next day. Not to mention that you’d be exhausted by then. Like I said, I’m on your side, but can you take the strain?”

“Ryan,” the Princess said, with determination, “I can do this. Please, let me at least try. I wasn’t able to reach Emperor Charlemagne, and I may not be able to stop the war that will come. But let me at least show my people what I stand for, and what the Royal Family truly means. Even if you think it will fail, let me try.”

Ryan and Striker looked at each other, confused. Finally, it was Striker who spoke. “Princess, with all due respect, I don’t think your plan is wise at all. But I speak as an intelligence agent, not as a fellow Royal. Sometimes, the right thing to do is not always the wisest. And therefore, I’m going to make sure that you get every chance to succeed.”

“If you think it’s the right thing to do, Princess, I would never stop you,” Ryan added.

He stepped outside and called out to the guard. “Soldier,” he said, using the tone of command that could affect even his fiery colleague, Sergeant Burnfist, “please ask the Captain to meet us as soon as he can. His Royal Highness wishes to speak with him.”

“Yes, Sir!” The Marine saluted and left, and in less than ten minutes, the Captain was in their room.

“Your Highness, how may I help you?” the Captain said, in a humble, respectful voice.

“Captain Baker, I regret making demands on you, considering how much you have already done for me,” Carranya said. “But it is important that I reach Davenport as soon as possible, as I wish to address the citizens of that fair town.”

“Address the citizens?” The Captain was taken aback, though pleasantly. “Your Highness, that’s a very ancient custom, and I haven’t heard of it being done since my grandfather’s times!”

“Sometimes the old ways are best, Captain,” Carranya replied, resolutely. “I believe that extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary responses. And that is why I ask you, as Crown Princess, to make every effort to reach Davenport as soon as you can.”

“If we push forward as fast as we can, and if the weather holds, we can reach there by tomorrow, around 1200 hours – I mean, at noon, Your Highness,” the Captain said, making a quick mental calculation. “And even if we lose a little time at night, we should easily be there by two o’clock, at the latest.”

“That would be perfect, Captain. Godspeed, and be assured of my sincere thanks,” Carranya said, speaking kindly rather than formally. The Captain bowed and saluted, and was about to leave.

“One more thing, Captain,” the Princess said. “Would it be possible for me to address your men at some time today, preferably before they retire for the evening? After all” – she gave him her most charming smile – “I must have a little practice before we land.”

“Your Highness, it would be an honour for both me and my men,” the Captain replied. “We will await you in the Officers’ Hall at six in the evening, if you wish it.”

"I do, Captain," Carranya said. "And thank you, again."

"I look forward to this, Your Highness," the Captain said, as he left.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Ryan said, laughing.

"I'll say this for you, Princess, life is certainly never dull when you're around," Striker added. "But now, you must rest, and try to compose yourself..."

It was a sad and weary group of men and women who had huddled around the wireless set in the Regales' home earlier that day. Theodore Eramond, looking stern, stood near the door, looking every now and then to see if anyone was coming. His wife, still wearing an old apron, her blonde hair hanging limply at the sides of her face, was seated in front of the set, and Emily Regale was standing beside her, one consoling arm wrapped around her shoulders.

Suddenly, a large man came into the room, looking grave. Theodore looked up at him. "Hocha," he said, "what news?"

Hocha, still wearing black for the death of his master, Colonel Whitworth, walked up to Sheila. "Mrs. Eramond, we have some news, though whether good or bad, I cannot tell. No further news has been received by the army since the news that Princess Carranya had been found aboard the *Paradiso*, which had been attacked by pirates. The ships from Serin's Peak and Davenport have already been deployed, and are well on their way to the point mentioned. But from what I've heard, the GBC is supposed to make another broadcast today, in about five minutes. Rumour has it that they will broadcast the names of the survivors."

"Ryan..." Sheila Eramond's voice trembled. "Part of me hopes that he's alive, but part of me....fears the worst," she said, helplessly. "My son..."

"Sheila," Theodore said quietly, "don't give up hoping for the best. Ryan's a fighter. There's every chance that he survived."

"I know," she said wearily, "but it's just....the waiting. My darling boy....He was just out of school, and had the world ahead of him..."

"Sheila, I'm truly sorry," Emily said, holding her friend closer to her, her own husband and daughter forgotten for a moment in her desire to help. "But I think Theodore's right. Lavie's told me how Ryan defended her when they were attacked by a creature in the forest. He could easily have made it, Sheila."

"Yes, Mrs. Eramond," Carmen added. "As long as I've known Master Ryan, he's always landed on his feet, even if he was in a bad scrape or took a bad tumble." She patted Sheila's arm, comfortingly. "I'm sure he will be back with us soon, just as Miss Lavie will."

"I...hope so," Sheila said hesitantly, and then gave a start as the Galvenia Broadcasting Corporation's familiar music began to play over the radio. "We interrupt our regular programme for an urgent announcement," the newsreader said, his voice sounding faint and indistinct to the anxious listeners at Casa Regale. "The Palace is delighted to inform the citizens of Galvenia that Her Royal Highness, Princess Carranya, is safe and sound, and will be reaching Davenport within the next thirty-six hours, from whence she will be conveyed in safety to Lorean. Three Zionesse soldiers, who helped defend the Princess, have already left on a lifeboat for Checkpoint Bravo. However, we regret to announce that there were only nine survivors besides the Princess and these soldiers. We will now read out the names of these people..."

Time stood still as one name, then another, and then another was read out. As the seventh name was read out, Sheila's shoulders slumped, and Theodore covered his face with his hands. "...John Forsyth, midshipman. And finally, a young man from the town of Davenport, Ryan Eramond, who, in the Princess' own words, fought bravely and helped the Zionesse soldiers to protect her and the ship. Mr. Eramond, who is employed as a package delivery man, will receive a special commendation from the Palace for his actions. These ten will be brought to Davenport along with the Princess, aboard the HMS *Raymond Chester*. Now, let us observe a moment of silence...."

Though all of them were silent as the last sentence was read out, there was to be no moment of silence in the room once it was complete.

"I knew it!" Theodore said, excitedly, waving his arms in the air, every hint of reserve thrown aside. "I knew the boy had it in him! Ryan, my boy....I knew you had it in you, and you've proved it!"

"Oh goodness, Ryan...." Sheila rose to her feet, and burst into tears of joy. "Ryan, my son...my darling boy, my brave boy...he's safe, safe at last! And he fought for the Princess, for his country...."

Emily bravely swallowed the lump in her throat. "I'm very happy for you, Sheila.....and very proud too." She dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief, then continued more firmly. "And now we know that the name of Davenport will always be remembered because of the Eramond men."

"Ryan..." Theodore said, almost shouting. "If only Father could see you now, Ryan!"

"If only the Colonel could have lived to see this," Hocha said quietly, and smiled.

Carmen's hands were clasped in prayer, and her eyes were shining as well. "Master Ryan....Oh, thank the Infinity, St. Geraud, St. Mikhail and the Five Angels! Master Ryan!"

Sheila stood up and walked up to Theodore, who was almost dancing around the room, and called out to him: "Honey, he's safe... our boy is safe! Ryan, Ryan...." Hearing her voice and feeling several years fall away from him, Theodore took Sheila in his arms and began an impromptu dance around the room with her, remembering the way he and Sheila Robinson had danced, twenty-two years ago, in this very room.

"Goodness, Carmen," Emily said, looking at the dancing couple and smiling, "it's just like old times, isn't it?"

“Indeed it is, Mrs. Regale. Indeed it is,” Carmen said, her eyes still raised to the heavens with an expression of gratitude on her face.

Shortly after this, members of the Territorial Army had begun announcing through all Davenport that the King and Queen would be arriving there in three days, and instructing the inhabitants to make worthy preparations to receive their monarch. A little while later – or, at least, it seemed like a little while to Emily, on that day of surprises, though it was almost eleven in the night – Lavie returned home, happy and excited, and speaking to everyone in a breathless rush.

“Carmen!” she said, “Mom! I’m home! And isn’t everything wonderful here? We were on our way back, and the Captain was reading out the list of those who made it, and I was so scared, and then he read out Ryan’s name, and Daddy said Ryan was just like his Granddaddy, and I began laughing and crying at the same time, and now we have to cook Ryan a huge feast when he comes back, and....”

“Lavie, dear,” Emily interrupted her, with maternal concern, “sit down for a moment. I’m sure you’re bubbling over to tell me about it all, but are you feeling all right?”

“Oh yes! Mom, that first evening when we heard that the pirates had attacked the *Paradiso*, I couldn’t sleep, and I kept crying, and Daddy and Sister Miriam were looking after me, and then on the way there a Marine soldier pulled my hair, and....”

“Sigmund,” Emily said, sharply, “what *has* our daughter been up to?”

“...and Daddy was so nice to me, and he taught me a prayer in Italian, and I lit a candle for Ryan, and the wind blew it out, and then I met the Commander! And he has eight children, and his eldest daughter was my age, and....”

“Lavie,” Sigmund said, sternly – though his expression was affectionate – “your mother is probably going to question your sanity if you continue in this vein. Do calm down, dearest.”

“But Daddy, I just want to...I wish I could just keep talking, and singing, and....Ohmygosh! Ryan’s parents! Are they all right?” she said, with a sudden look of concern.

“Yes, they are, dear,” Emily said, hugging Lavie close to her. “I’m so glad you’re back home. Why, Sheila and Theodore were here just this afternoon, and they came here to hear the news! In fact, they were so happy, that they actually began dancing in the drawing-room! It was quite amusing, but also quite moving...”

“Ohmygosh! Auntie Sheila was *dancing*?” Lavie asked, incredulously. “I wish I’d seen that! Anyway, we had lunch with Sir Prescott from the Galvenia Rough Riders, too,” she said, frowning, “and he was such a jerk!”

“Miss Lavie! Such language!” said Carmen, hiding her laughter behind a fold of her apron.

“And then he got a telegram, and he had to leave, and then the Commander made fun of him, and....”

“Sir Prescott?” Emily asked, curiously. “Sir Prescott T. Chuselwock? Good God, Sigmund, don’t tell me *all* this actually took place in the span of two days!”

“...and then Daddy said he wanted to whack him, and that was so cool, and....” Lavie went on. “Gosh, I’m tired! But I feel all excited at the same time, I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep so soon!” She yawned and stretched her arms out. “Or maybe I will!”

“My poor dear, you must be worn out,” Emily said, stroking Lavie’s head. “Now I’ll tell you what, dear. I’ve asked Carmen to draw you a nice, warm bath, and then, if you’re feeling hungry, I’ve whipped up a little something for both of you. What do you say to that?”

“That sounds heavenly, Mom,” Lavie said, with a sleepy smile. “I’ll be back!” And saying this, she climbed up to her room, with Carmen hurrying behind her to make sure everything was in order.

“Well, Sigmund,” Emily said, looking at him kindly, “I can tell that it was very fortunate that you went along with Lavender.”

“Thank you, Emily,” Sigmund said wearily. “Poor darling, she was so upset that first night, when we thought Ryan had been lost. I’m sure you’d have done a much better job.”

“Nonsense, Sigmund,” his wife replied, and her tone was one of encouragement. “I’ve never heard Lavender describe you as ‘cool’, ‘kind’ or ‘caring’ before. Frankly, I was hoping that by spending some time together, she’d grow a little closer to you, but this has exceeded my expectations!”

“Closer? Emily, the girl was upset. She obviously has it bad for young Ryan, though I don’t think they’re, ahem, “dating” yet, and I just tried my best to do my part, as a father. I know I haven’t always done that, but....”

“Sigmund,” Emily said, smiling, “I think you did just fine. Look, I know I was angry enough when you and Mother couldn’t stop arguing. And I was unhappy when she decided to leave, but if it was just me, I’d have forgiven you long since. It was Lavender whom I felt for. She was so close to Mother, and...”

“Emily, I’m sorry,” Sigmund said contritely. “And believe me, as much as I may still disagree with your mother on some things, I do realize now that she was right, and I was wrong. You know, Lavie apparently went to see her grandmother when she took that trip to Mann Island, and she’s invited us all over for a cook-out at her cottage, or something.”

“That’s a good sight more than you deserve, Sigmund,” Emily said in a sarcastic tone, but seeing that Sigmund looked downcast, she stopped short. “But I think you’ve almost redeemed yourself, at least in Lavie’s eyes, by whatever it was you did on your trip, and I’m glad of that.”

“Thank you again, Emily,” Sigmund said, his hand reaching out to touch hers for a moment. She slipped her fingers around his hand, and squeezed it gently before releasing it. “And if your mother is willing to let bygones be bygones, so am I.”

"I'm glad about that, Sigmund," Emily replied, with an indulgent and hopeful smile, the same one she had often used on a younger Lavie after one of her mishaps. "But tell me, what is this outlandish story about meeting Sir Prescott T. Chuselwock? My father knew Lord Turbot, and he was quite the gentleman, though I'm afraid that came to an end soon after I was born. Old Turbot thought Father had married beneath him by marrying the descendant of a knight, rather than a born noble."

"Well, I think the times are changing," Sigmund said drily, "because I think his son has got, shall we say, more enlightened views on marriage across the classes. *Too* enlightened for my comfort, or for Lavie's, if you understand what I mean."

"Sigmund!" Emily was a true daughter of the Lancasters, but even she could not conceal her shock at this. "Do you mean Sir Prescott.....and *Lavender*?"

"I'm afraid so, Emily," Sigmund said, removing his eyeglasses and wiping them with his handkerchief, an annoyed expression on his face. "We were quite surprised to be invited to lunch with him, and he insisted on giving Lavie a bouquet of flowers..."

Emily listened with a somber expression on her face, but said nothing.

"....and it just went downhill from here, I'm afraid. He was quite blatant and heavy-handed with his compliments, right down to calling Lavie a 'chaste maiden' because of her archery, and suggesting that the Commander and I – he's a fine man, Emily, and he was quite kind to Lavie – should leave the room and let them 'dream their dreams'." Sigmund scowled, thinking darkly of what he would have liked to do to Sir Prescott then, if there had been a firearm handy. "He went on and on in this vein, though we both tried to cut him short. Poor Lavie was so embarrassed, and didn't know what to say, or how to react."

"*Sigmund!*" Emily cried, almost involuntarily. "My God, Sigmund, just think of it. Lavender...." Though she was ordinarily the gentlest of creatures, Emily Regale's only daughter was very dear to her, and she was feeling quite ready to give Sir Turbot a piece of her mind about his son's conduct. "That dreadful man!"

"Fortunately, his aide – a smug toad named Gessler – saved us all by coming in and telling Sir Prescott that he was being recalled urgently to Lorean. Later, I had a chat with the Commander in confidence, and he told me that Sir Prescott had a reputation for this sort of thing – or worse, he hinted. I was horrified, and terribly glad that he wouldn't be near Lavie any time soon."

"I should hope not, Sigmund!" Emily said, angrily. "And I hope he doesn't try to force an acquaintance. But..." She looked away into the distance, her expression growing calmer. "Did Lavender say anything about him after that?"

"I believe the term she used was 'jerk', at least twice," Sigmund said, laughing quietly. "And she also called him 'Sir Chucklehead' – not within earshot, of course – which was quite a nice touch, really." This lightened the tension for a moment, and both of them burst out laughing.

“Sir Chucklehead? Lavender, you darling!” Emily said, finally. “Maybe she should say it to his face, if she ever sees him again!”

“Emily!” Sigmund said, surprised by his wife’s vehemence.

“I’m serious, Sigmund. Oh, not about calling him names, but about....about our daughter’s future. She’s growing up, and it seems like just the day before that she was waving her teddy bear around, or playing hide and seek with Ryan and Cathy...” Her expression grew tender. “I know I can’t always be around to protect her, Sigmund, and neither can you. But I do hope she finds someone who....who can make her happy, and something that she’s happy doing. That’s all a woman needs, really...”

“Emily...” Sigmund said, a note of regret in his voice.

“I know what you’re going to ask next, Sigmund,” Emily said, walking closer to him, still smiling, “and believe me when I say that I haven’t done all that badly myself. It could be better, but it’s not as bad as I thought, and I believe it will get better.”

“Emily, I know I’ve....” Sigmund began, but she interrupted him.

“Remember what Gustav Eramond said, Sigmund?” she said. “*Always do the right thing.* I think you’ve been trying to do that for the last few days, and if you keep up the good work, I think everything will be all right.”

“I will, Emily,” Sigmund replied, with a determined expression on his face. “I know I haven’t exactly done so, in the last couple of years, but I will now.”

“Thank you, Sigmund,” Emily said, nodding her head. “But enough about us for now, it’s Lavender who matters at the moment. Tell me, Sigmund, as the only man in the house, what do you think young Ryan feels about her?”

“I....I couldn’t really say,” Sigmund said, hesitantly. “I know I did drop him a hint right before that fatal cruise, but...”

Emily laughed. “That’s sweet of you, Sigmund, but I think you were gilding the lily there, because I did, too. And I’m sure Carmen did, too.”

“Did you call me, Mrs. Regale?” Carmen said, climbing down the steps. “I’ve just finished seeing to Miss Lavie’s room, and she’s just changing for dinner now.”

“Thank you, Carmen,” Emily said. “We were just talking about Lavie – and Ryan.”

“Oh!” Carmen laughed. “That boy is blind, ma’am, blind as a bat. He doesn’t know a good thing when he sees it. Right now, unfortunately, he can only see Miss Lavie’s less endearing qualities, but someday – I don’t know when – he’ll wake up and realize how silly he’s being.”

“I hope so, Carmen, I hope so,” Sigmund replied.

It was almost midnight when the family sat down to a late, but good-humoured, supper. Lavie, though tired, managed to tell her parents a little more of her adventures – with Sigmund helpfully explaining things to an amused Emily and Carmen when the narrator became a little muddled. Then, her eyes beginning to close, she kissed them all goodnight, and went up to her room to sleep.

A little later, Sigmund and Emily, who were retiring for the night, stopped by to peek into her room. The door was open, the light was still on, and Lavie had fallen asleep, curled up snugly on one side, a broad smile on her face. Wrapped in her arms was “Mr. Bear”, the ursine companion Ryan had given her when she was eleven after an eventful day at the Carnival.

“She’s still a child in many ways, Sigmund,” Emily whispered, looking at her protectively, as she switched off the bedside lamp.

“Indeed she is,” Sigmund replied in a low tone, “but I think she grew up a lot in the last couple of days, the teddy bear notwithstanding.”

The next morning, after breakfasting in the Marines’ Mess, Ryan was at a loose end. *Might as well stretch my legs. I can’t believe we’ll be in Davenport by the afternoon*, he thought, as he paced up and down the main corridor on the lower deck. *And I can’t believe how well the Princess’ talk with those soldiers went yesterday. Of course, she didn’t make a speech or anything; she just thanked them, and then spent some time listening to their stories. There was even that one bloke who showed her a picture of his children, and the other guy whose father had died at Chespa Bay; she was just – just nice to all of them! I know Socius is a great orator, but somehow, Carranya could reach the hearts of those men in a way Socius never could.*

As he walked past the Princess’ room, he could hear excited female voices from behind the door, which remained closed. Curious, he knocked on the door. “Princess, it’s me, Ryan,” he called out. “Is anything the matter?”

“Oh, it’s you, sonny!” Naomi’s voice replied from behind the door. “Well, I must say you’ve come by at a good time. Come on in, there’s something we’d like to ask you about.”

What’s going on now? Ryan wondered. Naomi opened the door to him, and to his surprise, he saw the Princess dressed in a long, golden dress with a train, which Charlotte Tremfein was holding up with a flush of pride. Her face was covered by a soft pink veil, and her red hair, which flowed down her shoulders without any restraints, was held in place near her forehead by a silver tiara, studded with emeralds.

Ryan drew in a breath. *That’s pretty amazing*, he thought. *She’s certainly going to make a splash if she arrives in Davenport dressed like that!*

“Lord Ryan!” Carranya exclaimed, clapping her hands in pleasure. “Just the man needed by the ladies of the court! Tell me, what do you think?”

“Princess, what *is* this all about?” Ryan asked. “Are you acting in another play, now?”

Carranya beamed at him. “Not at all, Ryan, not at all! We’ll be landing very soon, and I have to look my best when I meet the people. I’m sure there’ll be several of them waiting at the docks, when we reach land.”

“The docks?” Ryan asked, puzzled. “But shouldn’t the *Raymond Chester* go to the military shipyard, or at least to Serin’s Peak?”

“I’ve discussed it with Captain Baker,” Princess Carranya replied, “and we decided that we’d make an arrival at the city docks instead. They’re sure to spot us from a mile away, anyhow. If we do things that way, I can reach the city sooner. There’s so much that I need to do there.”

“So much?” Ryan asked, with a note of suspicion in his voice.

“Well, I must visit the Mayor and his family, of course, and accept their hospitality,” Carranya explained, patiently. “Then I must meet any Army and Navy veterans in town, and pay my respects to any of them who are in the town graveyard. I have to visit the military docks, and the school, too. And finally, I have to meet your parents, and thank them, too...”

“Princess, that’s not necessary.....” Ryan protested.

“Ryan, as the Crown Princess, I *order* your parents to receive me for a little while,” Carranya said, laughing. “And I’m sure I can think of other things to do, once I arrive.”

Davenport is in for the shock of its life, Ryan thought, smiling.

Captain Baker entered the room, and saluted – and then looked at the Princess with the same expression of awe that Ryan had noticed earlier, when they’d boarded the ship. “Your Highness,” he said solemnly, “the winds and other circumstances are quite favourable. We should be reaching the docks at Davenport in three hours, at the most.”

“Thank you very much, Captain,” Carranya replied. “Are your men quite clear about the procession through the docks?”

“Procession?” Ryan said, bewildered. “Captain, what is...”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Captain Baker said, smiling at Ryan. “As soon as we reach Davenport, my men will walk forward in a single file, carrying the flag of the Galvenian Royal Marines, and I shall bring up the rear, with my sword drawn. Next, the civilians will enter in the following order: first you, Mr. Eramond, carrying the Galvenian flag...”

“Galvenian flag? Princess, *what* is going on here?” Ryan said.

“...followed by Mr. Tremfein and Mrs. Festa, Chief Broyude and his men, carrying a Merchant Navy emblem, and Agent Striker. Finally there’s yourself, Your Highness, with the little girl carrying your train for you. I should say it’ll be quite unusual, but it’s the first time I’ve ever done a thing like this, and I’m

rather looking forward to it." The Captain laughed. "Young man," he went on, placing a hand on Ryan's shoulder, "the Princess wants to revive an old Naval tradition, and I have always been fond of pageantry myself."

Great, Ryan thought, darkly. Not that I have anything against the Galvenian flag, but I'm going to look like an utter dope, carrying it around like that. He glanced at Carranya, who was laughing into her veil. Determined to have your fun, aren't you, Princess? A dance, a play, and now a pageant? I'd give a million Galvenian dollars to find out how the King and Queen are going to react to this.

Suddenly, the comic side of the affair struck him, and he laughed in turn.

"Does this amuse you, Ryan?" Carranya said, still laughing gently.

"Princess," Ryan said, "I've got to hand it to you. Only you could make something elegant and refined out of a teenage girl's act of rebellion."

The Captain looked shocked. "Young man, you are addressing the Crown Princess of Galvenia!" he said, in a low tone. "Please remember..."

Carranya laughed so hard that her tiara began to come loose, and Naomi rushed forward to replace it before it could fall off completely. "Dear me, dear me, Ryan," she said, slowly subsiding, "you do have a way with words."

"Heh, Princess, I'm just a humble commoner, and I don't know if I'll accidentally hit someone with the flag," Ryan joked, "but like I said, if you need me, I'll do the job!"

"Where would we be without our loyal subjects, would we not, Charlotte?" Carranya said to her proud little train-bearer, who was finding the entire affair extremely amusing herself.

"I shall review the men one last time, Your Highness," Captain Baker said, smiling as he saluted and left.

Almost on cue, Agent Striker walked in. "Mr. Eramond!" he said, with a pleased expression on his face. "I see you've heard of the Princess' latest plan. I must confess, I am rather jealous that you've got a better position in the parade than I do..."

"Very amusing, Agent Striker," Ryan said, smiling back. "Did Tremfein write that one for you?"

Striker laughed. "Not this time, but I've got to warn you. The Princess is now quite well, and I think Davenport does deserve to witness her triumph, at least for a while. However, keep your weapons ready, just in case."

"Agent Striker," Ryan said casually, "may I ask you a question?"

"It would be my pleasure to answer, as long as Zionese national security is not involved," Striker replied, calmly.

"You're a Zion. Now, I know that Galvenia and the Empire are allies, and that we have treaties of mutual trade and assistance; my friend Armin gives me enough lectures about how Socius is kow-towing too much, but that's not my point. My question is, why have you shown such devotion to helping the Crown Princess, even at the risk of your own life? You're an intelligence agent, not a soldier. What's in it for you?" He looked challengingly at Striker, who returned his gaze.

"Ryan," Princess Carranya began, "I think that question can wait a little, and..."

"That's an excellent question, Mr. Eramond," Striker said coolly. "I could answer you simply by pointing out that we are your allies, at least politically, and that we have many common goals. However, I will give you one hint: our common interests, in this case, have to do with something a little more – shall we say personal, or familial? And now I must remain silent on the issue." He smiled benevolently at Ryan.

"Thank you, Agent Striker," Ryan replied. *If it's personal, I don't really want to pry, he thought, and though he's trained to deceive, he sounded sincere. Perhaps he's from Darington, and is still loyal to Galvenia.*

"Now Ryan, since you've got your answer," the Princess said brightly, "let me brief you a little about what you're supposed to do. Now, according to tradition, when a Crown Prince or Princess visits a town, there's usually..."

And Ryan listened, patiently, as the Princess described the elaborate formalities involved, and the way in which they had been mercifully simplified over the years. *Just march in a straight line and hold my flag right. That should be all right, though I'm sure Armin will be hooting at the whole thing – and maybe Henrik as well!*

"Miss Lavie, where are you?" Carmen's voice rang through the library, as she made her way from there to the little room where Lavie's piano and music books were kept. Lavie was at the piano, her fingers flying deftly across the keys, and Sigmund was listening appreciatively. "Oh, good morning, Miss! And Mr. Regale, too. Now isn't that nice?"

"I was feeling a little sleepy reading *Gravity's Thundercloud*," Sigmund admitted, a little sheepishly, holding up Alphonse Spenson's thick opus, "and Lavie's music sounded a lot more cheerful, so I thought I'd listen in a little."

"Come and join us, Carmen," Lavie said brightly. "They've announced on the radio that the *Raymond Chester* will be reaching Davenport by noon! Daddy says they'll have to enter through the military docks, and then they'll probably bring the Princess back in state."

"The rest of them will probably come separately and quietly, accompanied by Territorial Army men," Sigmund added. "Ryan will probably be among them. Then the Princess will be taken to Saunders' residence, and they might have a short public ceremony, and a fireworks show. I'm not sure what our Mayor has cooked up, though given his perennial laziness, it can't be anything too exciting."

“That’s why I came by, Miss Lavie,” Carmen explained. “The *Raymond Chester* should be here in about an hour, and the Mayor just sent word that he wanted us, as the town’s most ‘notable’ family, to be at his home when the Princess came by.”

“The Mayor’s home?” Lavie said. “Ohmygosh, Daddy, we’ve got to get ready quickly!” She jumped up from the piano, where she had been playing an old ballad about the Five Angels. “Come on, Daddy, we’ve got to be there when R – I mean the Princess – comes by!”

“You have a point there, my impetuous daughter,” Sigmund said, smiling. “Where’s Emily?”

“She’s just getting ready now, Sir,” Carmen said, as Lavie walked up to her. “Come along, Miss Lavie, I’ve just ironed some of your new outfits, so you have plenty of choice!”

“You’re the best, Carmen,” Lavie said happily, as they both went upstairs.

And so it was that, in little more than a half hour, Lavie and her parents were on their way to meet the Mayor, dressed up to the nines. The city had been decorated in an astonishingly short time, and garlands and lanterns festooned most houses; a large Galvenian flag, surrounded by lights, flew atop the Mayor’s residence, and the Davenport Inn was gaily decked out in a variety of floral arrangements.

“Coming, Carmen?” Lavie called out cheerfully, as they left the house. “I’m sure the silly Mayor won’t mind if you join us.”

“It would not be my place to do so, Miss Lavie,” Carmen apologized. “I will wait at the dock, and see if I can spot the ship coming in, though!”

“Oh, that’s pretty cool too!” Lavie said. “Go right ahead, Carmen.”

A short walk brought them to the Mayor’s house, where Saunders – wearing an elegant tuxedo, and a pink rose in his buttonhole – greeted them effusively. “Ha ha, Regale!” he said. “It’s a pleasure to have you and the lady wife over,” he said, bowing politely to Emily. “And this must be Lavie. Well, Miss Lavie, I’ve known you since you were this tall!” he said, placing his hand at the level of his knee.

As corny as ever, Lavie thought, rolling her eyes. *I hope he doesn’t annoy that Princess too much. Royals can be cranky, or so I’ve heard!*

“Please do take a seat,” Mayor Saunders went on, pointing to a number of comfortable armchairs in his waiting-hall. “I’m just waiting for Mr. and Mrs. Eramond to come by. This is a huge honour for Davenport, Regale! Just think of it, the first time the Royal Family will be here in over eight years, and we get to host the Princess too!”

“Well, make sure you do a good job,” Sigmund said, sarcastically. “Royalty can be much more demanding than we are, Saunders.”

“Ha! You *will* have your little joke, won’t you, Regale?” Mayor Saunders said effusively, when a Territorial Army private burst into the room, looking surprised.

“What’s the matter, soldier?” the Mayor asked, twirling his moustache. “Any news?”

“Sir, the *Raymond Chester* has been sighted, and it is heading directly for the docks of Davenport!” the soldier said, nervously. “We thought they’d head for the military docks, but...”

“The docks? What on Terra for?” Saunders said irritably. “Regale, why would they want to come to the docks?”

But as he said this, his guests became aware of the sound of rushing steps and voices going past his house. “Here, I say, what’s going on?” Saunders asked, peeping out at the door of his home.

“Sir,” the soldier replied, “it looks like everyone is heading to the docks!”

“I can see that, you cretin!” Saunders said, turning red with anger. “Why are they all going there?”

“Perhaps we should find out ourselves, Mayor,” Emily said, smiling at him placidly. “Sigmund, Lavie, why don’t we go have a look ourselves? The docks are large, and they can surely hold all of us.”

“That seems sensible,” Sigmund said, rising.

“Maybe the Princess is knighting Ryan over there,” Lavie said, bright-eyed. “Come on, Daddy, let’s go!” And leading both her parents by the hand, Lavie ran out of the house. As she joined the crowd of people, she spotted her friend Cathy Weseluc running behind the rest, waving a small Galvenian flag.

“What’s up, Cath?” she asked.

“The Princess is here, Lavie!” Cathy said, breathlessly. “The ship is just arriving, and the sailors on watch said that they could spot her, standing on the deck! We’re all going along to see her. Rule Galvenia!”

“Ohmygosh, she’s getting down at the *docks*?” Lavie asked.

“This is very exasperating,” Saunders muttered, following the Regales with a sulky expression on his face. “Why can’t those Marines follow proper protocol?”

Within minutes, Lavie and her family were at their docks, where at least a hundred people were already gathered, talking excitedly, as they looked at the ship that drew closer and closer to its destination.

“They’re lowering the bridge...”

“My granddad, Mr. Snell, said it’s an old custom, and the Princess has to be greeted by the people, and march to the Mayor’s house....”

“Goodness, I sure would like to be Theodore or Sheila Eramond right now...”

“Where’s old Saunders? He should be here to receive her...”

“Ho, ho, lad, he’s busy sleeping! ‘Tis what he always does!” (This from Hughburt.)

The Mayor, in the meantime, was pushing his way through the crowd, cursing as he did so. "Make way, all of you!" he said angrily. "I am Mayor Saunders! I must receive the Princess..."

The bridge had now been lowered, and a row of men in Naval uniform marched in an orderly way, with a tall, stout Naval captain bearing his division's flag at the head. They marched until they occupied the entire length of the bridge, then turned and stood at attention, the captain drawing his sword. Then another group of people began to descend.

*Ohmygosh, that's....*Lavie thought, but before she could complete her thought, a shout of joy rose above the sound of the crowd.

"Ryan! Ryan, my boy!" Lavie looked around and saw that the cry had come from Sheila Eramond, who was standing near the front of the crowd, waving a handkerchief. "Ryan, with the Galvenian flag!"

Ryan! Lavie thought. *Ohmygosh, that's.....that's just so cool! So awesome! I'm sure his parents must be really, really proud of him. And so am I! Ryan....*

Carrying the flag, Ryan followed the Marines down the bridge, and he was followed by some other people, whom Lavie could not recognize. And then it happened. All that she was aware of, at first, was a series of exultant shouts!

"By the Infinity!"

"God save the Princess!"

"A woman in gold.....she looks like one of the Five Angels!"

"Heh, heh, that's one magical girl indeed!" *Hmph, trust Armin to make cracks like that,* Lavie thought, annoyed. *But even he can't ruin this moment. She's beautiful!*

And, indeed, it was a sight to inspire poems and songs. The Princess, clad in the golden robes that Naomi had given her, her light veil fluttering around her face, really did look like a saint or an angel from an ancient painting or sculpture. Slowly, as the crowd broke out in applause, she walked down too, with a young girl carrying a golden train behind her.

"Let's hear it for the Princess!" This from a group of sailors who were standing respectfully near the bridge. "Let's have it for 'er, folks! The Flower! The Flower of Lorean!"

And without a pause, they burst into a spontaneous shanty, fiddling away and singing in hoarse, enthusiastic voices. Recalling the words of the song many had heard in their younger days, the older population of Lorean joined in."

*"Flower of the Kingdom,
look on these, thy people,
Hear our pleas, and soften the heart of the King,*

*Flower of Lorean,
from the graveyard to the steeple,
Thy praise and thy honour we sing!*

...

After the sailors had exhausted this theme, a younger voice began to sing a slower song....

*From our gardens, we implore thee,
Accept our flowers, few though they be,
Flower of Lorean, Flower of the Kingdom,
Our hearts and hands we give to thee!"*

"You there! The lad with the guitar! Give it to us again, and with a little more speed!"

You want speed, you've got it, Henrik Spenson thought to himself, as he picked up the tempo and the verses rolled by, the sailors – and several members of the crowd – joining in.

*Flower of the Kingdom, flower most fair,
Daughter of glory, sister of light,
Place our poor roses in thy fair hair,
As we sing for thee, day and night...*

This is just....so amazing! Lavie thought, her eyes shining. *And Ryan's a part of it all!*

The soldiers had begun marching through the crowd, and as the Princess followed them, she reached out to shake their hands, to speak a few kind words to whomever she could reach. Ryan, a little ahead of her, stole a glance back every now and then. *I must admit it was a good idea, Carranya*, he thought, smiling.

"Ryan!" Lavie called out, waving her own handkerchief. Ryan, looking up, caught her eye and smiled back. *It's great to be home....who would've thought I'd be a little glad to see even Lavie? It was nice of her to come down, even though I know she doesn't like Royals*, he thought.

When the Princess was halfway through the crowd, she raised her hand, and the crowd – which was either cheering wildly or singing – was still.

"Citizens of Davenport!" she said, in a loud, clear voice, the afternoon sun shining off her dress, giving the impression that she was actually clothed in light. "I am here among you to pay a debt of gratitude. I am eternally grateful – no, I am overcome by the kindness and warmth of your welcome." She paused for a moment, and it seemed to Lavie that she actually wiped her eyes with her veil before continuing.

Ohmygosh, Princesses have feelings too, Lavie thought, smiling.

"And I must say this, with all my heart: I would not be standing here if it was not for the bravery, the courage, of one of your own citizens. If I am here, it is because I have learned a lesson: that we, the

Royal Family of Galvenia, exist for you, the people – and not the other way around!” She smiled, and there was a burst of applause. “I hope to share as much time with you, my friends, as I can in the days to come, when I will be joined by my grateful parents. But there are some to whom my debt is even greater. Could the family of Ryan Eramond, who placed his own life in peril for my sake, please come forward?”

There was a buzz throughout the crowd as Theodore and Sheila, looking both proud and embarrassed, were pushed to the front of the surging crowd. Carranya, moving her veil away from her face, embraced Mrs. Eramond, who was now weeping with joy. Theodore was about to bow before her, when Carranya stopped him. “You must not kneel before me, Mr. Eramond,” she said to the stunned crowd, “when it is I, in all justice, who should bow before you.” She bowed and shook hands with Theodore, who flushed with pleasure.

“Next, I must congratulate the Mayor of Davenport, for his warm welcome.” Saunders, delighted at being praised despite not having done anything, came forward, bowed ceremonially, and shook the Princess’ hand as well. “Heh, efficiency is my middle name, Your Highness!” he said.

“Is it, Mayor Saunders?” Carranya said, with a little laugh, and many in the crowd laughed and hooted as well. Saunders looked around angrily at his citizens, but could not see who it was who had ruined his golden moment. “Er...” he continued, recovering, “Davenport is honoured by your presence, Your Highness. We, the people of Davenport, welcome Princess Carranya, heiress to the Throne of Galvenia, to our town!”

“Thank you, Mayor,” Carranya said, gravely, then turned away as a pair of identical little girls in white dresses came forward, bearing flowers. “And what delightful flowers! What is your name, little girl?” she asked.

“Amanda Rose,” the girl said shyly, “and this is my sister Erica.”

“We’re twins, Princess!” Erica squeaked.

“The twin flowers of Davenport! You two are more adorable than your bouquets!” the Princess said happily, picking them up one by one and embracing them, as their parents and elder sister stood by, applauding and cheering along with the rest of the crowd.

“And now, Mayor, would you do me the honour of extending your hospitality to me for a little longer, until my parents arrive?” she asked, holding out her hand.

“Your wish is my command, Your Highness,” Saunders said, kneeling and kissing her hand.

“Then, my friends, I bid you farewell, but I shall see you again shortly! The people of Davenport will always be very, very close to my heart. May the Infinity bless you and your children’s children.” With this, the Princess – accompanied by the Captain, the soldiers and the rest of the passengers, including a bemused Ryan who held his flag upright – made their way in procession to the Mayor’s home, as the crowd followed behind, still cheering and singing, the roads echoing with their voices:

*Flower of the Kingdom, flower most fair,
Daughter of glory, sister of light...*

I still can't believe what I've just seen, Lavie thought, as she and her parents followed along with the rest of the people of Davenport. I wonder if Daddy will get an audience with her? Or if Ryan will receive a public honour, or a medal, or something? She's....she's just amazing! I can't wait to see what happens next!

"His Majesty will see you now, sir," the Royal Guard said, smirking at the tall officer as he opened the doors to the Audience Chamber.

This is not good news, by any stretch of the imagination, Officer Randall Trask, Chief of Palace Security, thought to himself, as he removed his helmet. If he wants to see me in the audience room, rather than along with the Queen in the Throne Room, then I am in trouble. But it's also an opportunity to find out how much he knows, or at least suspects.

Steeling himself for the inevitable blow, he walked slowly and deliberately into the Chamber. Seated on the tall golden chair which was a second throne to him, King Arlbert of Galvenia looked at him with an expression of the utmost annoyance.

"Your Majesty desired to see me?" Trask began, kneeling down with exaggerated politeness.

"Sit down, Trask," the King replied, sternly, as he pointed to one of the chairs around the throne that wasn't. "I have just received some interesting news from Davenport." The Royal Guard, looking in to the room, bowed to his sovereign, and shut the doors.

How appropriate, Trask thought. I am, indeed, in a bind here. But I didn't become Chief of Palace Security by running away from difficulties, even if this one is not exactly run of the mill.

"News from Davenport, Sire?" Trask replied, sitting down with a bow. "I trust it is good. Has the Princess arrived safely?"

The King glared at him. "When I want your impertinence, Trask, I'll ask for it," he said, haughtily. "Now, Trask, there are three questions I want you to answer, and perhaps *then* I'll answer any questions you may choose to ask."

"My apologies, Sire," Trask said, in a level tone. "It was not my intention to sound impertinent."

"My first question is this, Trask. Ever since that day, eight years ago, you have managed to convince me that the best way to handle my own daughter was to keep her behind bars. Fearing harm to her – which, I may add, could have originally happened because of *your* incompetence - I agreed with you. But it seems the bars were not as secure as you believed."

“Sire, we are still unclear about how the Princess left the palace,” Trask replied. “Our trail ends at the stables, and then begins again on board the *Paradiso*. She may have boarded the ship either at Davenport or at Serin’s Peak, where provisions were being loaded for the cruise. I suspect the latter, because it would be almost impossible for her to board at Davenport without a ticket, and there was no suspicious name on the passenger list.”

“Nicely played, Trask,” the King said, more softly, “but it just will not do. That is my first question: how did she manage to leave, or be removed from, the Palace, and make it as far as either Serin’s Peak or Davenport? Did she have help, and if so, who was it?”

“We conducted an extensive search and interrogations around the stables, Sire,” Trask replied, “All we can say is that someone may have been waiting there, either with a horse or with a small carriage, to take her to Serin’s Peak, but we do not know who that might have been. I’ve been over the staff with a fine-tooth comb, and they seem innocent.”

“Very well, we will pass that over for now. Now for the second question, Trask: I know there’s been no official word from Zion, but the GBC did *not* mention Prince Wilhelm as one of the survivors. Now, they were relying on what my daughter told the men aboard the *Raymond Chester*, and I’m certain she knew that Wilhelm was on board. In fact, she even asked me about the military talks when I returned to the Palace, the last time I saw her. Is Wilhelm alive, Trask?”

“I do not know, Sire,” Trask replied, quietly.

“Did it not occur to you to at least enquire about this, or ask the sailors on board the ship to do this?” The King’s voice was insistent. *Hang it*, Trask thought, *he’s really getting worked up about this. I shall have to be careful.*

“Sire, we did. But we also considered the possibility that any such communication could have been intercepted either by the Zions, or by hostile ears, especially given the proximity of the Varaldian Vanguard Fleet. Given this, we decided to wait until Her Highness was home safely.”

“If Wilhelm is dead, Trask,” King Arlbert said, coldly, “you know very well what it means.”

“War, Sire?” Trask asked.

“You have a genius for stating the obvious, Trask,” the King said, and snorted. “Doesn’t it strike you as just a *little* strange that my daughter and heiress should just *happen* to be aboard the same ship on which Wilhelm may have been killed?”

“Sire, when we know more about how the Princess reached the *Paradiso*, the matter may not seem so strange. We shall question her...”

“You shall do nothing of the sort, Trask.” The King raised a hand as Trask tried to interrupt him. “Now listen to me. I know that for years I’ve had people telling me that I held sway only over the Court and the Palace, that men like you, Socius and Lucan were the true power behind the throne. I held my peace,

because I believed that you were working in the best interests of Galvenia, and also because I wanted peace at all costs. But now, Trask, things are different.”

“Different in what way, Sire?” Trask asked, his eyes averted from the King’s gaze.

“Different in that, at times of crisis, a people turns away from the trodden path, Trask. I fully realize that we are not in the age of my glorious ancestors any longer. I do not for a second dream that I could ever be another Richard Lionheart, or even another King George. And my father’s ill-fated attempts to play the hero during the dark days of Alamoth Jakov convinced me, perhaps forever, that discretion was the better path to take. But when I look at these pictures, Trask” – he casually threw a series of snapshots onto the table that separated them – “I realize that a visible monarch can sometimes be a good thing. And I shall speak to my daughter myself.”

Trask picked up the photos and studied them carefully. *Patience, Trask*, he told himself. *You have all the time in the world. Buy some time.*

“I presume these were taken yesterday, Sire,” Trask said, laying them down on the table.

“Yes, they were. Look at those pictures, Trask. My own daughter – whom I have hardly known these past eight years, whom I have left at the mercy of governesses, soldiers, and instructors in Royal etiquette – was able to inspire loyalty, even adoration, in the people of Davenport.”

“Adoration is fickle, Sire, and tomorrow....” Trask began.

“Be still, Trask, and listen to me,” the King thundered, and his voice was a command that Trask did not dare disobey. “It is almost certain that there will be war, unless the murder of Junzio Koketsu can be solved soon, and the Varald exonerated. And in this war, we will have to fight beside the Zions. At that time, Trask, caution and bureaucracy will do us little good. What is needed, Trask, is someone who can inspire the people, as Socius and Lucan have failed to do. As *I* have failed to do. And, unless these pictures and the telegrams I have received all lie, my daughter has succeeded where we have failed.”

The cold mask of royalty broke for a moment, and even a hardened bureaucrat like Trask could see paternal tenderness and pride substitute for regal haughtiness. *This will be easier than I imagined*, Trask thought, suppressing a smile.

“And your third question, Sire?”

“Is perhaps the simplest.” The King paused, and leaned forward. “Why does a Zion imperial agent choose to accompany my daughter to Davenport? Both the broadcasts we received stated that a man named William Striker had defended the Princess, and that he was with the rest of the passengers to Davenport. Now, unless you ascribe to the Zions a wild streak of altruism that leads them to protect *our* Princess, and neglect *their* Prince, something is wrong. Who is this Striker, Trask? One of *your* men?”

“I do not know, Sire,” Trask said truthfully. *But I wish I did*, he thought. *He could be extremely useful, if only...* “How do you want us to treat him?”

“He has saved my daughter, Trask. And we are currently allies of the Zions. Treat him with the utmost kindness and courtesy.”

“But what if he has....other motives, Sire?” Trask asked.

“Then I will ask him about them face to face, Trask,” the King said, a look of determination on his face.

“That may not be wise, Sire....” Trask argued.

“At this moment, Trask, you are in no position to tell *me* what is wise or not. Make preparations to accompany me to Davenport, along with the Queen, and leave Officer Jeffries in charge of the Palace, to hold his charge until Sir Prescott returns.”

“Sir Prescott, Sire?” Trask asked, with a note of alarm.

“I have recalled him from Checkpoint Bravo, to strengthen defences in Lorean and Northern Galvenia. He will additionally assume a supervisory role over you, Trask, and you will defer to his judgment unless I order you not to. After your recent failures, I believe you need a capable man watching you. You may go, Trask, and be very careful from now on.”

“As you wish, Sire,” Trask said, bowing low as he left the room. *Sir Prescott?* he thought, and despite his demotion, his heart was hopeful. *This may be better than I thought. And, Your Majesty, you may change your tune soon enough, despite what you just said.*

“Your Highness,” Mayor Saunders had spluttered the evening before, “I’m not sure if that’s really a good idea...”

“Why not?” Carranya asked, sweetly. The procession had reached the Mayor’s residence to the sounds of cheers and loud singing (with the lyrics of “Daughter of Glory” often getting jumbled up with those of “Flower of the Kingdom”) and they were now in the Mayor’s conference hall, with Striker and Ryan standing guard on either side of the Princess, Captain Baker and his Marines lining the walls.

“But a public audience.... I mean, the crowd is rather wild out there,” Saunders said feebly. “Things might get a little, er, messy...”

“Mayor Saunders, surely, as the head of this town, you can exercise some control over the populace,” the Princess replied, firmly. “But if you wish, we can do this at leisure. Today evening, by six o’clock, after we have had some time to prepare, please invite the members of the town council, as well as anyone else you see fit. This would, of course, include Ryan’s parents. Tomorrow, I will grant audiences to any of the populace who so wish it, and later, we could visit Davenport Academy, whose good reputation has reached the ears of even the King. Will that be satisfactory?”

“Y-yes,” the Mayor said, finding himself unable to say “No” to the Princess in her golden robes, especially with the two armed young men positioned beside her. He could handle young Eramond, of

course, but the other man, with his yellow hair and square jaw, looked genuinely unpleasant, and he did not want to incur his wrath in the least. He hurried out of his room, and began to bark instructions to his secretary, a long-suffering lady who was as fed up as the rest of Davenport with his sloth, and was secretly glad that the Princess was making him shape up a little.

“Your Highness,” Captain Baker said, once the Mayor was out of the room, “my crew will now steer the *Raymond Chester* into the military docks, and some of them will remain there with the ship tonight. As for myself, I remain at your disposal, along with as many of my men as you require.”

“Thank you, Captain Baker,” the Princess replied. “We look forward to seeing you today evening, and I thank you most sincerely for all that you have done.”

The Captain drew his sword, saluted and left, and Carranya sank down in the Mayor’s chair, showing signs of exhaustion for the first time that day.

“Your Highness, are you all right?” Agent Striker asked, with a look of concern.

“I – I think I shall be perfectly fine,” she replied, smiling, though her face appeared drawn and even slightly pale. “Perhaps a day more of the Sun Herbs would do me some good.”

“I’ll go and fetch them, Princess,” said Ryan, enthusiastically. “Take good care of her, Agent Striker. I’ll just head to old Mr. Snell’s and I’ll be back soon.”

Heedless of the enthusiastic crowd that followed, Ryan quickly made his way to Mr. Snell’s, sending word to his parents that he was on an errand, and would be back with them soon. As he opened the door to the shop and headed for the counter, he noticed a familiar face, and stopped short.

“Marianne?” he asked, bewildered.

“R-Ryan?” And, indeed, it was Marianne, though a very different Marianne from the days when they had been, as they put it, “going steady”. She was still dressed fashionably, in a blue blouse and red trousers, but her expression was quiet, even serious, and her large earrings and hair ornaments were gone. “I – I didn’t...” Her voice faltered, and she could not go on.

His errand forgotten for a moment, Ryan took a step closer to you. “Are you....all right?” he asked, gently. *Perhaps there was something to what Carranya heard, or thought she heard, from Lady Penelope. Perhaps I need to....let the past be the past. After all, he thought, darkly, after what’s happened in the last few days, I can hardly claim the moral high ground.*

“I – I’m sorry I wasn’t at the docks with the rest of them,” she said, with an expression of remorse. “It’s just that I couldn’t...”

“I beg your pardon?” Ryan asked, confused. Mr. Snell, owner of the only tonic and potion shop in Davenport, was still snoring behind the counter; only the voice of a prospective customer could awaken him.

"I didn't....have the courage to face you, in front of all those people," she said, bowing her head. "Ryan, could you..."

"Huh?" Ryan said, at a loss for words. "I should say the whole of Davenport was out there. Why were you afraid to come out?"

"I was feeling....ashamed," she said, hurriedly, wringing her hands as she spoke. "Ryan, you could have been killed out there, and I never had the chance to....to make things right..." She seemed to choke on the last few words, and was silent.

What should I say? Ryan wondered. I really don't know.....let me buy some time. I'll think about it tomorrow.

"Marianne, I'm sorry," Ryan said, "but I really don't have the time to talk now. I've got to bring some things back to....to the Mayor's house, and my folks will be waiting for me, too. I'll tell you what, why don't we meet up some time tomorrow? We'll have more leisure to talk things over then."

"Do you really mean that?" she replied, her expression brightening momentarily.

"Yes, I do," he said, with a look of encouragement on his face. "Now, I must run. Let me see if I can get the official stuff out of the way today, and I'll send word to you as soon as I'm free. Is that all right?"

"Ryan..." She looked at him for a moment, as if afraid to say anymore, and then hurried out of the shop, without having apparently purchased anything herself.

Damn, Ryan thought. This isn't going to be that simple. And, willing himself to continue with the task at hand, he walked up to the counter, and began the simpler but time-consuming task of waking up Mr. Snell, and getting his Sun Herbs.

On all counts, the reception at Mayor Saunders' home, later that evening, was a grand success. Every person of note in town attended, and received a personal audience with Her Highness himself. Ryan, still standing guard beside her chair, noted appreciatively that, for once, the Mayor was being made to work – under the watchful eyes of Agent Striker and the Princess herself, he was welcoming and introducing guests as if it was all he had ever done. *I only wish the Colonel had been here,* he thought. It was only after he had returned from his errand that his father – rushing home to get ready for the evening – had briefly broken the news to him. *I knew this would happen one day, and I knew he wanted to go quietly, without any fuss. I hope Henrik isn't taking it too hard, and I wonder what will become of Hocha now.* As another group of people was introduced to the Princess, he was awakened from his thoughts.

"And, Your Highness, this is Sigmund Regale, perhaps the most important man in town – besides myself, of course! Ha, ha, ha!" the Mayor joked, as he introduced the Regales to the Princess. *This ought to be fun,* Ryan thought mischievously. *Neither Lavie nor her father are big fans of royalty. I only hope she behaves herself!* He did note, with some surprise, that even Lavie was dressed formally for the occasion,

in attire that would not have been out of place at the Palace itself. *I've got to hand it to you, Princess*, he thought. *Not only did you help defeat the pirates, and lead us all safely home, you've even got her to dress up neatly for once.*

"Mr. Regale," Princess Carranya was saying, rising from her makeshift throne, "I am so glad to meet you. Our family has always treasured the copy of the *Arustus Chronicle* that you kindly gifted to my father."

"Hmm, just doing my duty," Sigmund said with a broad smile. "Have you read it yourself, Your Highness?"

"Several times," she replied, smiling, causing Sigmund's eyebrows to travel upwards. *This is even funnier*, Ryan thought, suppressing a laugh. *He's always on Lavie's case to read more, but she never did develop an interest in his "boring books", as she calls them.* "I've always been fascinated by pre-Imperial history, and this was a fascinating addition to our meager knowledge about that period."

"And this is Mrs. Regale," the Mayor was saying, his chest puffed up with pride as Emily came forward and curtsayed most becomingly. "Not only is she Sigmund's better half, but she is also a descendant of the House of Lancaster itself. In fact, it was thanks to her kindness that we've been able to arrange a sumptuous banquet for tonight; she has very kindly made us the loan of several of her house-staff to assist us. The charming young lady with her is her only child, Lavender."

Carranya laughed. "The house of Lancaster?" she said, holding out her hand to Emily. "Sir Gerald was a particular friend of my grandfather's, and my father has always spoken highly of him. I am honoured, Mrs. Regale. And correct me if I'm wrong," she said, turning to Lavie, "but didn't the Mayor introduce you as Lavender? Are you the young lady who is Ryan Eramond's business partner?"

Lavie beamed. "That's me, Your Highness!" she said, curtsying.

"Mr. Eramond was telling me about your views concerning Royalty during the trip," the Princess went on. "Is it true that you feel that we should take a more active role in ruling the country, and not merely remain seated in our thrones?"

Ryan suppressed a laugh, and Lavie glared at him. *Ryan Eramond, you....you jerk!* she thought, a red glint appearing in her eyes. "Er, Your Highness, I'm sure I didn't mean to...." she stammered.

"Don't apologize," Carranya said, holding out her hand to Lavie in turn. "In fact, it was partly your words which inspired me to enter Davenport through the docks, and have these audiences, in the first place. I'm glad to see that we girls think alike!" Her eyes twinkled, and Lavie shot a triumphant glance at Ryan, who had the good grace to look embarrassed. "Anyway, it is always a pleasure to meet people of my own age, and I hope we will have the chance to speak again later, Miss Regale."

"That would be awesome!" Lavie gushed, and both her parents laughed. *She'll never cease to amaze me*, Ryan thought, looking at the Heir to the Throne. *If she can get into Lavie's good books, she'll even have the Varald eating out of her hand someday!*

And, after a few more pleasantries were exchanged, Lavie and her parents took their seats at the table of honour. She took advantage of her position to steal a glance at Ryan every now and then. *I wish I could talk to him now*, she thought, as Ryan's parents were brought forward and embraced their son whole-heartedly, *but there's plenty of time for that! After all, a deputy can't complain! Just wait and see, Ryan!*

The reception over, and all the guests having eaten – and spoken to the Princess – to their heart's content, the Mayor had retired very quickly to his own chambers, and Ryan could hear him snoring from the floor below.

"Is that the Mayor?" the Princess asked, with a smile. "Goodness, Ryan, what a remarkable sound!"

"Saunders is notorious throughout Davenport for his laziness," Ryan observed, remembering his last attempt at meeting him, just before that fatal night on Davenport Peak. "Which explains why there's so much to be done in our town."

"Oh dear," she replied. "I can see that we'll have to listen to quite a few grievances tomorrow."

"Don't worry about that, Your Highness," Agent Striker interjected. "From what I can tell, the people here are pretty laid back. In fact, Galvenians seem to be pretty laid back, present company excepted!"

"Except for Lavie," Ryan said, and laughed. "She's not laid back in the least! In fact, most of us, when faced with her cooking or her temper, would run away in horror!"

"You're terrible, Ryan," the Princess said, with mock sternness. "She seems to be a very nice young lady, and I'm sure the two of you are actually good friends, despite all your protestations."

"Friends? Well, I guess you could say that," Ryan said, grinning, "at least when she isn't snapping my head off."

The Princess laughed in turn. "Dear me, Ryan, I would very much like to see the two of you together. It ought to be rather interesting!"

"Together? Now you sound just like Dad," Ryan protested. "He keeps telling me how nice Lavie is, and how I should 'get my head out of the clouds'! I only hope he doesn't start up on the topic again once I get home."

"Does he?" Princess Carranya said, still looking amused. "Well, though I *am* your future ruler, I wouldn't presume to interfere in anyone's private life, especially if the person has happened to save my own life!"

"Heh, Princess," Ryan said with a blush, "I was just...doing the right thing, that's all. That's what Grandpa always told me."

"Which reminds me, I must pay my respects at your grandfather's grave tomorrow," she said, more soberly, "and Colonel Whitworth's as well. But for now, I mustn't detain you any longer. I'm sure your

parents must be waiting for you! I shall call on you some time tomorrow, but for now, I think you should go and join them.”

“You know, you’re right there,” Ryan said, with a yawn. “I’m sure Mum and Dad must be dying to talk to me for real, and hear about everything that happened! Good night, Princess, and take care. I hope you don’t have too much trouble when *your* dad comes around.”

“Somehow, I think not,” the Princess said, brightly, holding out her hand to Ryan, who held it for a moment and bowed before leaving. “Good night, Lord Ryan.”

“Till tomorrow, Your Highness,” Ryan said, with a laugh, as he left.

The room was now empty except for the Princess herself, Captain Baker, and Agent Striker. Returning to her chair, the Princess sat with her chin resting in one hand, looking pensive.

“That went off pretty well, I should say,” Striker said, “and I agree with you. I don’t think your father or mother will have too many objections to your course of action thus far, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Agent Striker,” she began, and then paused, turning to the Captain. “Captain Baker, there is one more favour I wish to ask of you.”

“You need only say the word, Your Highness,” the Captain replied with a low bow.

“I – I would appreciate a breath of fresh air, Captain,” she said, passing one hand over her forehead. “As pleasant as our evening has been, it has left me rather exhausted, and I believe a walk along Davenport Beach would do me good.”

Striker raised his eyebrows. “‘Taking a breeze’, as we in Zion put it? I don’t see why not. But – Davenport Beach, Your Highness?”

“Yes, Agent Striker. I have – reasons for wishing to see it once more, in solitude. Of course, I will return soon.” The Princess closed her eyes, as if remembering events long past, days long gone by, with a tired smile on her face.

“Your Highness, far be it from me to oppose you – being not just your humble servant, but a stranger as well – but would that be wise?”

“In all fairness, Agent, I doubt assassins would be lurking around Davenport Beach at this hour. But if you wish, I could ask the Captain and his men to accompany me.”

“It would be my honour to do so, Your Highness,” the Captain replied.

“We shall all accompany you, keeping a respectful distance, of course,” Striker replied, with an expression of relief on his face. “Only, do not linger too long, Princess. You also require rest, and tomorrow is bound to be a long day as well.”

Thus it was that the Princess, accompanied by Agent Striker, the Captain, and four of his men, walked slowly and silently down to the beach. As they reached, the Princess began to walk faster, her expression brightening.

“My friends,” she said, turning back to face her escort, “remain here if you will, but I would be most grateful if you could leave me alone for a while. There are things that I need to decide.”

At these words, the Captain and his men fell back, and Agent Striker took up a position on the other side of the beach, near a now-empty newspaper stand. He drew his weapon, and stood alert. *I don't know what she has in mind*, the Agent thought, *but I can't take any risks. It was sheer luck that she survived those pirates, and if I want to make it safely back to Zion, I need to watch over her.*

Carranya, in the meantime, had walked down to approximately the middle of the beach, and looked out at the moon, shining over the waves. For a moment, she was the Crown Princess no longer, but the girl who'd acted in Tremfein's play.

He said we'd come back later and count the stars, she thought. *It's what he said that first time...*

Walking to the shoreline, she crouched down, as if remembering a familiar spot. *It was here that we built it*, she recalled, and a smile came to her face again. A wave suddenly broke against the shore, and Carranya gasped with pleasure at the sensation of the cold sea water, soaking through her stockings. *Just like the time we took off our shoes and waded in...*

Can you swim? That's what he had asked, she thought. *Come, let's go out into the sea.*

But isn't it dangerous? she had replied, thinking of the extreme caution that was observed even if she wished to visit the Palace's swimming pool.

Don't be afraid, he'd said, looking out at the setting sun resolutely. *I'll protect you.*

Where are you now? she wondered, looking out at the shimmering sea, as if looking for him on a distant ship, somewhere across the waves. *In Caledonia, where I hoped to see you again? Or somewhere close by, waiting for the right time?*

“Carranya, flower of Lorean...”

The Princess gave a start. *Is that him? I must be imagining things*, she said, bringing herself back to the present. *Or is this just a dream? Lady Penelope, did you also stand outside the Palace gates, or at the entrance to Trinden, listening for Derren's voice?*

“Carranya, don't be afraid.”

The Princess turned and looked around, but she could see no one.

“I helped you that day, and I'll help you again. I always keep my promises. Stay safe, Carranya, and I will find you, sooner than you know.”

This is....this can't be! the Princess thought, walking further along the beach.

"And don't be afraid of the war, either," the voice went on. "Come what may, I will work with you, and try to prevent it by every means possible. We will meet again, in a better world..."

Carranya cried out, and her escort responded to the sound at once. Captain Baker and his men came dashing forward, their swords drawn, and Agent Striker stepped out from behind the stand, holding his pistol. "Your Highness!" the Captain said, with an expression of alarm. "What is the matter?"

"Did you hear something, Your Highness?" Striker asked, taking rapid strides forward.

Feeling a little foolish, the Princess turned to face them all. "I thought I heard someone," she said apologetically, "but I must have been mistaken."

"I didn't hear anything," Striker replied.

"I could hear a faint sound," the Captain said, nodding his head, "but that was all. It could have been just the waves."

"I must have been dreaming," she said. "I apologize for causing alarm, Captain. Come, let us return to the Mayor's house."

They turned to leave, but as they did, the Princess cast a last look at the spot where she had stood, wondering...

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE ARCHER'S DREAM

*“There are three things beyond my comprehension,
four, indeed, that I do not understand:
the way of an eagle through the skies,
the way of a snake over the rock,
the way of a ship in mid-ocean,
the way of a man with a girl.”
(Proverbs, ch. 30, v. 18-19.)*

“Ryan,” Theodore suddenly said, interrupting Ryan’s account of the journey back to Davenport, “I’m sorry to interrupt, son, but what became of the package?”

After the festivities of the previous night, things had returned to normal – or almost so – in the Eramond household. Returning home from the Mayor’s home, Ryan had fallen fast asleep almost immediately, and had been woken the next morning by his mother, who had prepared an enormous breakfast that even he – the sternest culinary critic in his home – was forced to pronounce satisfactory. Princess Carranya was holding court in the Mayor’s house, and an official decree had reached Davenport, stating that the King and Queen would arrive the next day.

In the meantime, urged on by his anxious and proud parents – whom Ryan, undemonstrative as he was, was genuinely glad to see again – he told his tale, in bits and pieces, recalling incidents as they came to mind. Sitting in the living-room, his audience listened with rapt attention – Sheila proud and joyful, and Theodore calm and respectful.

“The package? Oh, you mean the one I was supposed to deliver to Caledonia in the first place?” Ryan asked, comprehension slowly dawning on him. “It’s in my knapsack, I’ll just fetch it from my room.”

“Go right ahead, son,” Theodore said. “We’ll be waiting right here.”

Ryan ran up to his room, and returned with a thick, heavy, cube-shaped package, wrapped in string and securely sealed.

“What is it, Dad?” he asked. “The pirates never seemed to be aware of it, so I guess it’s nothing that they could use.”

“As a matter of fact, they can’t,” Theodore said calmly. “Go ahead, Ryan. Though we all know how it ended, I think both your mother and I would rather hear it from you.”

Obediently, Ryan went ahead, telling them everything he could recall. There was only one detail he omitted – the “message” that the Princess had given him, which she claimed was from Lady Penelope. *It’s too wacky a thing to tell them, and it would only make them worried, he reasoned. The Princess was probably just delirious from the poison, and remembering that I had saved her earlier. The mind can play all sorts of tricks on us when we’re in danger.*

When he had finished, Theodore looked at him seriously, but with unmistakable admiration. "Ryan, my boy," he said, slowly, "you've had what will probably be the greatest adventure of your life. Now, as your father, I want you to know that both your mother and I are very, very proud of you. However, we do feel that you need to recuperate a little; living the way you did for that many days is always a shock to the system, my boy. So I suggest that you simply make the best use of your summer vacation, relax, spend time with your friends, and think about what you'd like to do with the rest of your life."

"I will, Dad," Ryan said, gratefully. "Thanks."

"Oh, take your time," Theodore went on. "Just one thing: don't let fame or adulation go to your head. I know you're a level-headed young man, at least in most ways..."

"Very funny, Dad," Ryan said, smiling.

"...and I know that you have done truly great things, but don't get carried away. People, especially young women, may throw themselves at your feet because of what you've done, but don't rush into anything. Be yourself, Ryan. Remember who we are. Keep training at your sword work, and keep in touch with Hocha, too."

"The Colonel..." Ryan said, softly. "I wish he'd been here. He'd have loved to meet the Princess; he always had a high opinion of the Royals, and was unhappy that they had stopped meeting the people of late."

"Oh, I'm sure Walter is looking down on us and smiling at you now, Ryan," Theodore went on. "The Princess said she'd come by and visit us a little later, and she wanted to visit Walter's grave, as well as my father's. She's quite a remarkable person."

"And so gentle!" Sheila Eramond said, flushing with pride at the recollection of the Princess' warm welcome. "Mark my words, Ryan, she's going to make a great Queen someday."

"Well, if she can ensure that tax collectors like Socius are kept in check, I, for one, would become a fervent Royalist," Theodore replied, jokingly. "Now, Ryan, I don't think she's going to come by so soon, so if you'd like to visit some of your friends, this would be a good time. Do be sure to come back in a couple of hours, thought."

Good, I can go and see Henrik...and maybe Marianne, as well, Ryan thought, plans slowly forming in his mind. "I think I'll do just that, Dad. Maybe just check and see how Henrik is taking things, especially now that the Colonel has passed on."

"Oh, and don't forget to say hello to the Regales," Sheila said, with grateful memories of Emily. "They were so kind to us when we were waiting for you....and didn't know what the news would be..." Her voice trembled, and she fell silent.

“Don’t worry, Mum,” Ryan said, gently. “I’m safe, and I doubt I’ll be going adventuring for a long, long while – and certainly not on the seas! My little cruise has cured me of any desire of being a sailor, that’s for sure.” He placed an arm around her shoulders, and she ruffled his hair.

“Have fun, dear!” she said, as he began to leave. Just as he was about to open the door, Theodore called out to him.

“Just one more thing, Ryan...” he said, kindly. “After you left, Lavie came to see me.”

“Lavie?” Ryan asked. “Oh, yes! Well, thank Heaven she missed the boat. She’d have been terrified by those pirates, poor thing. It’s a good thing she stayed back, though it was a tough break missing that cruise – for her, at least.” He chuckled.

“Actually, Ryan, that’s something I must tell you about. At that time, we didn’t know anything about the pirates, so I offered to send her and Sigmund to Checkpoint Bravo, where they could board the ship. Unfortunately, once they reached there, the base’s commander told them the news. Poor child, she was quite upset at the thought of anything happening to you.”

“Really?” Ryan joked. “You never really can tell with Lavie. Sometimes she’s concerned about me, and at other times, you’d think she’d rather see me in the Varald Directorate!”

“Ryan,” Theodore said, softly, “do be serious. I spoke to her and to Sigmund at some length, and it’s obvious that she was quite distraught over the whole thing, and overjoyed to hear that you were alive. Now, son, I’m not trying to tell you whom to be friends with, or what to do. But I want you to understand one thing, Ryan. In this life, there are very few people who will be truly loyal to us, or who will truly care about what becomes of us. Don’t neglect them, or fail to appreciate them, just because they may get on your nerves every now and then.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. *Oh, boy, Dad’s at it again. He’s confusing Lavie’s trademark silliness with loyalty, now. But I shouldn’t be too hard on her; after all, she did miss that cruise.* “Point taken and duly noted, Dad,” he replied. “I’ll be nice to Lavie, if you say so.”

“Excellent, m’boy,” Theodore replied. “I’ll see you around, then.”

“Theo,” Sheila said, as Ryan walked down the path towards the Spenson residence, “don’t you think Ryan ought to realize that himself?”

“Perhaps, dear,” Theodore said, “but being reminded of it won’t do him any harm. I just spoke to Sigmund yesterday, during the banquet, and the way he described Lavie’s reaction to the news of Ryan’s safety – well, she sounded just like you, in fact!” He laughed.

“Very funny, Theo,” Sheila said, laughing in turn. Then she closed her eyes and smiled – a tender, indulgent, maternal smile. *Darling Ryan, she thought. So young, so intelligent, so brave – and yet, so much more to learn.*

Alphonse Spenson was sitting at the dining-table, going through a pile of typed pages with a red pencil. "Henrik's in the backyard, if you want him," he said, looking up absently at Ryan, and then returning to his work with a look of the utmost concentration.

The genius at work, Ryan thought, smiling. He'd heard tales from Henrik of his father's legendary antics when in the throes of creation. Stepping out into the backyard, Ryan heard the soft sound of guitar chords being picked out slowly, note by note, and a soft male voice accompanying them:

*"And I'll treasure every moment
Of the good times that we had,
And until the day we meet again..."*

Well, well! Ryan thought. *Henrik's in a romantic mood today. Don't tell me he's fallen for Lavie, or something!* The thought made him laugh out loud, and Henrik looked up.

"Ryan?" he said, and, putting his guitar down on the bench, he began to walk slowly towards his friend. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

"Henrik..." Ryan hesitated. "It's good to see you again, Compadre."

"Likewise," Henrik said. "You know, Ryan..."

"Henrik, please listen," Ryan said. "I know I was mad at you that night in the park, but I've been through a lot after that. And something very uncanny happened just a few days before I landed here – something that the Princess told me about. Now, you're the only 'religious' person I can trust, so....is it all right if I tell you about it?"

"Ryan, I.....I'm very proud of you," Henrik said, stepping forward, and the two friends shook hands firmly – no, let us tell the truth; they followed Carranya's advice to the letter, and shared a warm, "manly" (if you will) embrace. "And I also had a strange experience when you were gone, and met someone who convinced me....that life was too short to hold a grudge against my best friend. I'm sorry, Ryan."

"Apology accepted, old bean," Ryan said, embarrassed by his sudden display of emotion. "Now, mind you, I'm still not sure what you thought you were doing back there, but you know what? It doesn't matter. Juno is a lunatic, and lunatics make even sane people act crazy. And I'm not going to break up with *my* best friend just because some lunatic got involved in the work we were doing."

"That sounds quite right to me, Compadre," Henrik said, warmly. "Look, why don't you sit down, and tell me about your, um, experience. Then I'll tell you about what happened to me."

"All right," Ryan said, "but first, one question, Compadre. How come you've suddenly developed a taste for slow, romantic ballads? You *are* growing up, Henrik! So who's the lucky girl, eh?"

Henrik flushed, then burst out laughing. "Well, to tell you the truth – it has something to do with what happened to me, actually. I'll tell you all about it, I promise."

“Very well, then. Now don’t laugh at me, because this is a mighty weird thing, but I swear I’m not making it up!” And, without pause, he began to tell Henrik about what had happened after he’d saved the Princess the second time. To his surprise, he found he could recall her words almost verbatim. “And that’s what she said....or at least, that’s what I remember. I know the first thing was probably just a result of her being close to death, but the second time....I just don’t know.” He shook his head. “Does it make any sense to you?” He looked up at Henrik, whose look of surprise was remarkable for one as calm as he normally was.

“You know, this is interesting, Ryan,” Henrik said, slowly, “because in some parts of Northern Galvenia, there’s even a cult of Lady Penelope, with several people claiming to have received visions from her, or having obtained favours by praying to her. Unfortunately, when the Church investigated them, it couldn’t find enough evidence that they were supernatural phenomena, and not just wishful thinking or hallucinations. Not to mention that having been Prince Derren’s mistress sort of disqualifies her as a candidate for sainthood.”

“Mistress? Come on, Henrik,” Ryan said, remembering the play, “they were just two kids in love, or at least that’s what the history books say!”

“I know,” Henrik said, smiling, “but try convincing a hard-boiled Archbishop about that. Anyway, Ryan, I’m not too sure. Of course, I’ve heard of people at the point of death, or under the influence of herbs and poisons, having visions or even hearing voices. But I’ve rarely heard of a message as specific as this one. Unless...” His lips curved into a sly smile.

“What is the meaning of that twisted look?” Ryan asked, amused.

“Maybe the Princess is in love with you, and you’re her handsome hero! Perhaps she recalled a passage from one of those romance novels that Lavie or Jessibelle keep reading,” Henrik said, laughing out loud as he finished. “You might even end up a Lord or a Prince yourself! Your Highness, Prince Ryan Eramond, you do this humble subject proud...”

“Very funny, Henrik,” Ryan said, sarcastically. “I’m trying to be serious here. And anyway, she said ‘a hand that is not yours’, didn’t she? At first, I thought it might just refer to you, and our quarrel over Juno...”

“I’m touched,” Henrik said, and they both laughed. “But though I’m very glad we’re back on speaking terms, Compadre, do you really think that was what the Princess – or Lady Penelope, even – really meant?”

“I’m not sure,” Ryan said. “The more I think about it, the more I think it might refer to a woman, rather than a guy – because it clearly said ‘a hand that is not yours’; in other words, not the Princess, but another woman.”

“Another woman? Marianne?” Henrik said. “You did tell me that she wanted to get back together – but somehow, I have trouble thinking of the Infinity, or any of his saints, as some sort of cosmic matchmakers.” He laughed. “Though I might have to change my mind on that,” he went on, and winked

at Ryan. "Look, I'm not a Bishop or a Cardinal, but in my opinion, the Princess may have just been influenced by a Northern Galvenian custom. Still, if all she's telling you is to forgive your friends and mend fences with them, I see nothing wrong with that."

"So you also think I should...." He let the question hang in the air.

Henrik bent his head in thought for a moment. "Look, Ryan, I know that if I was in your place, I'd feel upset and betrayed, too. And I'm not saying that you should make any decisions in a hurry. But if you think you can just talk things over with her, and give each other some time to make big decisions, that's....."

Years later, Ryan would recall what happened next very precisely, and would think of it as an example of the way things were strangely destined, and how the smallest incidents could have unimaginable consequences...

"What do you mean, Gran?" Emily asked, wide-eyed.

"I mean the way little things make a big difference, my dear," Lavie said, gently. "For example, if that Book Lifter hadn't told you the story he had, you wouldn't be sitting here listening to the story of our lives, and who knows what else would have changed?"

"I see, Gran," Emily said. "But is that good or bad?"

"My, you do ask deep questions for a child your age, sweetheart," Lavie said, drawing her grandchild closer to her. "The answer, my dear, is that no one knows. We just have to believe that something good comes out of even a small thing like that, and work towards it...."

"Henrik!" An excited voice, the voice of a young woman, echoed through the small garden at the back of the house, and two figures emerged against the morning sun. One of them was a white-haired, elderly man, with a broad smile on his tanned face, a pair of glasses perched precariously on his nose, and carrying a walking stick. The other, instantly recognizable from her "mushroom hat", was Bernadette, smiling and waving as she had done that first day on the beach.

"Henrik, we just heard the news that the Princess was in Galvenia," Bernadette explained, breathlessly, as Ryan looked on with a grin. *So that's what you've been up to, Henrik*, he thought. "Father was so keen to come down here and meet her – we'd been praying so hard that her life would be preserved! And to think that it was your friend who helped save her! May the Infinity bless that brave man, unto the fourth generation!"

"Hello there," Ryan said, suddenly. "I believe that would be me you're referring to." He grinned at the visitors, who looked at him with astonishment.

"Henrik, is that him?" Bernadette asked, incredulously. Henrik, wearing a rather silly grin (or so it seemed to Ryan) on his face, got up and nodded. "That's right, Bernadette, that's my friend Ryan Eramond right there. He was just telling me about some of his adventures.....Ryan, this is Bernadette

Aquary, from St. Nealus' College of Divinity at Alton. She'll be joining King's College this semester, and we'll be taking some courses together."

"My dear daughter, you certainly seem to be making the acquaintance of some fine young men," the elderly man added, leaning on his stick. "Allow me to introduce myself to all of you, my brothers. My name is Jonas Aquary of Hartridge, and Bernadette is my daughter. It is, indeed, a pleasure to meet the defender of our nation's future Queen." He bowed to Ryan, who bowed back, and they shook hands.

"May the Infinity keep your path ever straight, Mr. Eramond," Bernadette said, blushing as she bowed to him and extended her hand. Ryan took it in his own, and looked at her kindly.

"Well, that's very generous of you, I'm sure, Sir, and you too, Miss Aquary," he said. *Nice folks*, he thought. *Wonder how they'll get on with Henrik's curmudgeon of a dad, though.* "I just did my duty as a citizen of Galvenia, that's all."

"How is the Princess?" Bernadette asked. "Was she wounded during the pirate attack, poor thing?"

"She did suffer injuries," Ryan replied, "but she's quite all right now. She still needs a Sun Herb or two to keep strong, but all things considered, she's doing very well. In fact, you could probably just walk into the Mayor's house and she would grant you an audience."

"Would she?" Jonas Aquary looked amused. "My child, it looks like Royalty has changed quite a lot in this old man's lifetime."

"You're not old, dear father," Bernadette said, leaning against his other arm. "Mr. Eramond, this is truly an honour. I really wish we could spend more time with you, and perhaps visit your household, but I'm afraid we are on an errand of mercy. There's a sick soldier at Serin's Peak Naval Shipyard, and one of the Sisters sent us a telegram, asking us if we could do anything for him. Father and I have to hurry there, and we just thought we might get to see the Princess on the way back."

"Are you a doctor, Mr. Aquary?" Ryan asked.

"Oh, dear me, no, my brother," Jonas replied. "I'm a humble member – an Elder, even – of the Healer's Guild, and a deacon of the Church of Infinity; my child hopes to follow in my footsteps someday."

"Healers, as in mages?" Ryan asked.

"Not quite, friend," he explained. "A mage, technically, is one with the gift of offensive magic – magic that can be used to attack, or in combat. Healers only have the gift of healing ailments of various kinds. Both mages and healers can use defensive spells, though. Of course, there are some who are fortunate enough to have both varieties of gifts, but otherwise, they are quite different Ways."

"The Princess is an amazing healer herself," Ryan said. "I saw her cure a young girl aboard the ship, using Keole Roots and a sort of chant. And..."

“Keole....Goodness me, Bernadette, did you hear what the young man said?” Jonas exclaimed, his glasses almost falling off his nose. Bernadette caught them with an indulgent smile and replaced them. “That can only mean.....she could only be...”

“A Light Healer?” Bernadette said, in an equally excited voice. “You must be right. Why, I’m sure she must have been trained by some of the Guild, when she was a girl. If only she could come with us!”

“Why is that?” Henrik asked.

“Father and I are ‘Ordinary’ Healers; working together, we can cure most ordinary sicknesses, but I still have much to learn,” Bernadette replied, shaking her head. “However, there are people – usually women – who possess both the gift of healing, and light-based magic. These people are called ‘Light Healers’, and their healing powers far outstrip those of the ordinaries.”

“Heck, why don’t you ask her to come and help you?” Ryan said. “I’m sure she’d be willing to do it...”

“You know, Ryan, that’s actually a pretty good idea,” Henrik said. “After all, she’s already visited the school; I could hear the junior choir singing their hearts out for her, from here! Why don’t we go along and ask her if she could help out?”

“Oh, Henrik, do you think she really would?” Bernadette asked, her hands clasped together.

Always do the right thing – and this will make Henrik and his friend happy, Ryan thought. “Listen, why don’t you come along with me? I can ask her, if you’re feeling awkward about it.”

“Mr. Eramond, would you truly do us that favour?” Jonas Aquary asked.

“I certainly would,” Ryan said, with a broad smile. “Come along, let’s see if she’s at home now!”

And so it was that Ryan, Henrik, and the Aquarys set out for the Mayor’s House. William Striker, who was standing guard at the entrance with two of the Royal Marines, beamed at them.

“Mr. Eramond! And the young musician who serenaded Her Highness, too!” he said. “What a pleasant surprise! The Princess returned from the Academy a little while ago, and she’s in the hall with Tremfein and his child. And who is this with you?”

“Were you playing the guitar for her welcome, Henrik?” Bernadette asked. “I must hear you play, someday!”

Henrik flushed. “Yes, that was me, sir,” he replied. “My name is Henrik Spenson. These are friends of mine, the Aquarys, from Hartridge. They are Healers who’ve been called to Serin’s Peak to look after a soldier who is ill, and they have a request to make of the Princess.”

“That sounds like something right up her alley,” Striker remarked, laughing quietly. “Please follow me, Mr. Spenson.”

Within a few minutes, they all found themselves in the presence of the Princess, who was singing an impromptu duet of the “Commonwealth Song” with Charlotte Tremfein.

*“And looking forward to the years
When war will be no more,
We stand together, unafraid....”*

Their voices rose in harmony, and stopped suddenly on noticing their visitors. Charlotte clapped her hands in delight. “Princess, we have an audience now!” she said.

“Dear me, Lord Ryan,” Carranya said, rising from her chair, “do what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Lord’ Ryan?” Henrik asked, with a laugh. “Looks like I was....”

“Stow it, Henrik,” Ryan said, with mock annoyance. “Princess, this is Henrik Spenson, the friend I was telling you about. I decided to follow your advice.”

Carranya looked at the two friends with satisfaction. “That’s very good of both of you, and I’m delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Spenson,” she said, holding out her hand to Henrik, who knelt before her. “And who are these people with you?”

It was Bernadette who spoke. “Your Highness,” she replied, curtsying, “my name is Bernadette Aquary, from St. Nealus’ School of Divinity. My father and I live in Hartridge, where he is an elder of the Healers’ Guild.”

“The Healers?” Carranya asked, immediately interested. “How well I remember those dear men and women, from whom I received instruction in my childhood, as they taught me to study the two Ways. I am honoured,” she said, raising her hands over Bernadette and Jonas in a gesture of benediction. “How may I help you?”

Bernadette took the lead again, while her father looked on, awe-struck. “There’s a man at Serin’s Peak, a Marine being trained in the Commonwealth forces. He’s recently returned from Ghetz, where he was posted at the border between Varald and the Republic. He’s been ill ever since, and the Sisters strongly suspect that the illness is magical in origin, as ordinary medicine has failed so far. They sent us a call, and we just happened to come here at the very time you were here, Your Highness. Besides which, Mr. Eramond mentioned that you were a Light Healer...”

“I see,” the Princess said. “Ghetz, and a magical sickness – this is most distressing. Agent Striker, please arrange to have word sent to the Eramond household that I will be delayed a little. I must accompany my friends to the docks, and see if I can help this unfortunate man.”

“As you wish, Princess. Do you want any of us as an escort?” Striker asked, pointing to the Marines.

“I think I will be quite safe if Ryan and Mr. Spenson accompany me,” the Princess said, with a gentle smile that softened even the Intelligence agent’s stern expression. “Thank you, Agent Striker.”

"If this sickness is magical," the Princess said, as they set off, "combining our abilities may be the best way to help." And in fact, on reaching Serin's Peak, they found a man who was very sick indeed, but the joint efforts of Bernadette and the Princess were successful in healing his disease. Once they were done, Carranya questioned the man and his colleagues about their exact position in Ghetz, and then nodded gravely, as if their answers agreed with some knowledge of hers.

"Is that what you meant, Gran," Emily asked, looking happy, "that because all those people happened to be in the right place, they could do something good, by going and curing that man in Serin's Peak?"

"Not quite, darling," Lavie replied, with a wink, "because this is what happened next..."

Leaving him resting under the supervision of his grateful comrades, some of whom burst into an impromptu rendition of "Daughter of Glory", the little party began to make its way back to the Mayor's house. Ryan, bringing up the rear, was looking with amusement at Henrik and Bernadette, who were talking animatedly, quite wrapped up in each other, when suddenly, he heard the sound of someone sobbing.

That sounds just like.... Ryan thought, and turning around, his eyes fell upon Marianne, who was seated on a crate close to the exit of the docks, her face buried in her hands. She seemed unaware of what was going on around her, and obviously in the grip of some great sorrow.

I can't leave her like this, he decided. Going up to her, he placed a hand on her shoulder. "Marianne? Marianne, it's me, Ryan..."

"Ryan?" She lifted her head up, briefly. "Ryan....how did you find me here?"

"Let's just call it fate," he said, with a smile. "Look, I can see that something has happened, but this isn't the best place to discuss that. Why don't you come along to Davenport Park, and we'll see if we can make something out of this?"

"Oh, Ryan....would you really be willing to do that?" Marianne asked.

I can't leave her when she's in pain, he thought, and made up his mind. "Yes, I would, Marianne," he said. "Come along now, you can use my handkerchief if you want." He handed her a simple square of white cloth, with which she dried her eyes.

In the meantime, his companions, noticing that Ryan was falling behind, stopped and remained at a distance. Henrik, recognizing Marianne, let out a low whistle. "Remarkably good timing," he said, under his breath. "The words 'too good to be true' come to mind, somehow."

"Henrik, is that...." Bernadette began, remembering what Henrik had told her in Davenport Woods.

"Yes, it is," he said. "I think we should leave them alone for now."

"You're probably right, Henrik," she said, softly. "Come along, we'll get back to your home now."

"Ryan?" Carranya said. "What's the matter?"

“He’s just met a....friend of his, who’s going through a tough time,” Henrik explained. The Princess looked surprised for a moment, then her expression relaxed.

“Dear me, I understand,” she said with a smile, “I think we’d best be going. Come along, Miss Aquary. Before you leave Davenport, I wish to spend a little time with you and your father; it’s been so long since I met an Elder of the Guild. Mr. Spenson, you can come along too, if you wish.”

“As you say, Your Highness,” Jonas said, leaning on his stick. “Let our young friends comfort each other, while we talk of other things.”

“Oh,” Emily said, looking a little sad. “I see what you mean, Gran. If they hadn’t gone that way, Grandpa wouldn’t have met her, and...”

“That’s right, darling,” Lavie said, closing her eyes and smiling. “My, you do catch on fast, Emily. But there was more to come...”

Earlier that morning, Lavie had woken up with a start, shivering slightly. *I didn’t even eat that many pastries last night, so why am I having a nightmare?* she wondered. Sitting up in bed for a moment, she caught sight of Mr. Bear, and held him against her for a while, as she stared at the clock, trying to calm herself. *Usually, when I have a nightmare, it’s something silly. Something like last month, when I dreamt I was talking to Ryan in the park, and I was suddenly surrounded by an army of different Lavies, all giving me different instructions! Or two weeks ago, when I dreamt I was acting in a play, in which Armin had stolen something from Davenport Academy and Marianne was in league with him! Silly Armin. But those didn’t hurt the way this dream did.*

She tried to recall each detail, as if recalling them would help her forget all the more.

I was playing with my ball at the beach – yes, that was how it started – and then Ryan was there too. I had twisted my ankle, and he was so nice – he carried me back home. There was no one at home except the two of us, and he carried me back to my room. We looked into each other’s eyes –

And that was when it happened...

- and then he let go of my hand, and turned away, walked out of my room, away from my house, while I was left lying here, helpless to do anything, unable to even call out to him –

And that was the point at which she had woken up. *It’s just a dream,* she told herself. *I’m probably still thinking of what happened at Glendale. But that was in the past. Today is a new day. And today, I’m going to meet Ryan and spend some time with him – or die trying! He won’t walk away! That was just a dream!* Thinking of her signature phrase managed to cheer her up a little, and she lay down again, keeping Mr. Bear beside her head. *But first, I must sleep a little more! Man, I’m tired!* Stretching herself out comfortably, she curled up on one side and fell asleep, and this time, she had no more troubling dreams.

By the time she arose at eight in the morning, she felt quite herself again, and any remaining fears were dispelled by one of her mother's trademark breakfasts.

"What will you be doing today, dear?" Emily asked, fondly.

"I think I'll play the piano for a while, Mom," Lavie said, popping a piece of toast into her mouth with a contented expression, "and then I'll just go and say hello to Ryan and his parents."

"Will you, dear?" Emily asked, smiling. "Well, have a nice day."

Singing a little song to herself – the same one she'd sung on that day she had missed the *Paradiso* – Lavie went down to the library, where her father was busy cataloguing some of his books. "Lavie, dearest!" he said, putting a bunch of index cards down. "Off for some piano practice?"

"That's right, Daddy," Lavie said brightly. "And after that I'm going to visit the Eramonds, and then maybe say hello to Sister Miriam, and thank her."

"That sounds nice," Sigmund said, with a nod of approval. "Now, I'd be more than willing to serve as audience today, Lavie, but I *must* get these books indexed by today. I'm afraid I'm expecting a visitor from Lorean, a fellow collector, and he wants to look at my collection of Factorian poetry."

"Huh? He's coming directly, and not sending a broker, someone like Mr. Robertson?" Lavie asked.

"That's right, dear," Sigmund said, dryly. "Apparently there have been rumours about some of Robertson's trading practices – which, frankly, I think are more than rumours at this point – and more and more book collectors are meeting face to face now, rather than using him or his friends. I'm not protesting – first, because Robertson is an ass, and second, because it's always a pleasure to meet someone who appreciates fine literature."

"Unlike your daughter, right?" Lavie said, with a mischievous smile.

"Ah, dearest, none of us can be perfect," Sigmund said, laughing as he patted Lavie on the head. "Now have a nice day, but be sure to come and tell me about it later, all right? I should be free by the afternoon."

"Thanks, Daddy. I will!" Lavie said, and headed promptly for her little study, from where the sound of an old waltz soon began to fill the air.

Sigmund smiled, recalling their journey to Checkpoint Bravo, and then – somewhat reluctantly – returned to his index cards. *Ah, "The Faerie Tale Of Princesse Esmeriah, Of The Faire Kingdome of Gaia-Ruse." I'm sure he'd like that one. And "The Little House of Maid Mariel". And what's this? "Morte de Lexus"? That's in the wrong place, it should go with the "First Generations" books!*

A little later, Lavie took a short walk down to the Eramond household.

“Lavie, dear!” Sheila Eramond said, walking to her with arms outstretched. “What brings you here?”

“Hmm, nothing, really,” Lavie said, blushing a little. “Is Ryan around?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Lavie,” Sheila replied. “I think he said he was going to visit Henrik Spenson, and find out how he was doing. He and Henrik were both the Colonel’s students, after all.”

Hmph, Lavie thought, a little annoyed. *Trust Ryan to survive a brush with death, and then go goofing off with the Three Compadres almost immediately. But I shouldn’t be too hard on him. After all, he may not even know that I was waiting for him at that checkpoint...* “Did he say when he’d be back, Auntie Sheila?” she asked.

“I don’t know, dear, but his father asked him to be back in a couple of hours when he left, so he ought to be back quite soon. Would you like to wait for him here?”

“Thanks, Auntie, but I think I’ll meet a couple of other people, and then drop by!” *Or else*, she thought with a hidden smile, *Auntie Sheila would make me try her latest “Kitchen Experiments”, and those can be downright scary!* Waving goodbye, she stepped out onto the porch. *Now where should I go?* Lavie thought. *Maybe I’ll meet Cathy, and catch up on the latest from the Rumour Mill!* With a bounce in her step, she headed east, and soon bumped into Cathy, who was watering the flowers outside her home with a large can.

“Hi, Cath!” Lavie said. “So what’s new in our busy little town?”

“Have I got some news for you, Lavie!” Cathy said, brightly, adjusting her bonnet to shield her face from the morning sun. “You know Henrik Spenson, right?”

“Henrik, Ryan’s best friend?” Lavie said. “Yes, what about him?”

Cathy giggled. “Do you only remember people because they have something to do with Sir Cool?” she asked.

“Very funny, Cathy,” Lavie said, laughing in turn. “Though after his latest exploits, Ryan cannot be ‘Sir Cool’ any longer! After all, he saved the Princess, so he must be at least ‘Lord Cool!’”

“Or ‘Prince Cool’,” Cathy suggested.

“As long as it’s not ‘Baron Prince Cool!’” Lavie added, and they both laughed until they had to hold their sides. “So what’s Henrik been up to, Cath?”

“Well, you didn’t hear it from me,” Cathy said, leaning close and whispering, “but I heard he was seen walking along the beach, and in the woods, with a young lady – a blue-haired young lady.”

“What?” Lavie exclaimed. “You mean....Marianne?” The very idea seemed ridiculous to her, but Marianne was the only blue-haired girl in Davenport, just as June was the only green-haired one.

“No, silly! I don’t think she’s from around here,” Cathy said confidentially. “She seemed to be from out of town, and was wearing a funny hat. My sources say she was rather a plain Jane, but she and Henrik seemed to be getting along just fine!”

“A funny hat? Oh, I’ve seen *those*,” Lavie said, laughing. “I think some colleges make their students wear them, right?”

“So here’s the interesting bit,” Cathy said, lowering her tone even further. “Today morning, the same girl was seen coming to Henrik’s house, along with an old man!”

“An old man? Her dad, perhaps?” Lavie asked.

“Yes!” Cathy said, excitedly. “It looks like there may be wedding bells in the near future for quiet old Henrik! Now isn’t that cool?”

They were about to elaborate further on the theme when they spotted a small group walking past, talking together animatedly: Henrik himself, the old man and the young girl of Cathy’s story, and Princess Carranya.

“Look! That’s them!” Cathy said, almost jumping up with surprise. “And with the Princess! What on Terra could they be up to, Lavie?”

“Why don’t we ask them?” Lavie suggested. “I met the Princess yesterday, and she was so *cool!*”

“Wow, you met the Princess? Lucky you! Must be because of your dad, I guess,” Cathy replied. “My mom and dad are going to see her today evening, when she’s granting public audiences. Just imagine, having the future Queen of Galvenia in our own town! But do you think she’ll mind?”

Before they could reach a decision, the Princess herself had caught sight of Lavie, and began to walk towards her. “Miss Lavender!” she called out. “What a pleasant morning!”

“Hi, Your Highness,” Lavie said cheerfully. “This is Catherine Weseluc, an old friend of mine, but we all call her Cathy,” she said, introducing a very embarrassed-looking Cathy to the Princess, who greeted her kindly. “Yes, it is a nice morning. We were just catching up on some girl talk, you know?”

The Princess looked at them both with a fond expression. “I’m afraid I don’t quite,” she apologized. “You see, it isn’t considered decorous for a Princess to engage in ‘girl talk’, as much as I’d love to. But I hope you have a lovely day! I’m just coming back from Serin’s Peak, where I accompanied these two people, who are Healers. There was a sailor there who was quite ill, and we were fortunate enough to be able to help him.”

“Healers?” Cathy said, with a look of amazement. “You mean, like...magic healers?”

“That’s right,” the blue-haired young lady said. “Though we prefer to just call it a gift from the Infinity.”

“Hi, Lavie,” Henrik said, joining her. “These are friends of mine, who live in Hartridge. Bernadette, this is Lavie Regale. She’s a classmate of mine from the Academy. Lavie, this is Mr. Aquary, and this is his daughter. We’ll be future classmates at King’s College.”

“What an interesting hat you have, Miss Aquary,” Lavie said, kindly. “Is it Zionese?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, Miss Regale,” Bernadette replied. “It’s part of our uniform at St. Nealus’, but it’s optional. I just – like wearing it, myself. The custom apparently goes back to pre-Imperial times, when the country we now call Zion was ruled by the kingdom of Meldia.”

“How nice,” Cathy said politely. “Well, I hope y’all have a good time! – er, I mean, have a lovely day too, Your Highness.”

“Henrik, if Ryan isn’t with you, do you have any idea where he is?” Lavie asked.

“Oh, Mr. Eramond came along with us as far as Serin’s Peak,” Bernadette said, brightly. “What a brave young man. I’m sure you must all be very proud of him.”

“We sure are!” Lavie said, and grinned. “Cathy and I have now decided to call him ‘Lord Cool’, after his recent exploits!”

“‘Lord Cool’?” Carranya broke in. “How charming. I sometimes call him ‘Lord Ryan’, just to make him feel a little embarrassed, myself.” And all the four women began to laugh heartily.

Lord Cool? Henrik thought, laughing silently. *Way to go, Ryan. They’ll soon be writing songs about you. Wonder when you’ll make it to King Cool.*

“But he left us just as we were leaving the shipyard,” Bernadette went on. “He met a friend of his who seemed rather downcast, and I think he wanted to...”

Ouch, Henrik thought. *Lavie is **not** going to like hearing this.* “Yes, you know Ryan,” Henrik interrupted, speaking rather loudly, with a warning glance at Bernadette, who fortunately realized that something was up. “Good old Ryan, always willing to lend a helping hand. Anyway, I’m not sure where he went, though he did say he’d be going home after that. Perhaps you could check over there.”

“Uh, yes, I could do that,” Lavie said, puzzled. *Henrik’s normally the quiet one, why did he interrupt his friend like that? And Ryan has plenty of friends, but which of them would be sitting and moping at the shipyard, of all places? I hope he’s not fighting with Juno again. Juno is creepy*, she thought, shivering as she remembered the duel she had witnessed between them.

The little party was now leaving, and Lavie waved goodbye as they walked past, smiling at her. “Pleasant morning, your Highness!” she called out.

“Thank you, Miss Lavender,” the Princess replied, with a friendly nod of her stately head, as she walked away with the Aquarys and Henrik in tow.

“Isn’t she awesome?” Cathy gushed. “And she calls him ‘Lord Ryan’? That’s so cool! Maybe Ryan could end up being the King of Galvenia, or something?”

“Hmm,” Lavie said absently, thinking of Henrik’s unusual conduct. “Well, Cath, I must be going now! Have fun!”

“Don’t be a stranger, Lavie,” Cathy said, giving her a friendly wave as she began walking away, slowly, deep in thought.

Maybe I should just wait for him at his home, and take my chances with Auntie Sheila’s cooking, she thought. Or maybe he’s gone to the park. Let me take a look there. She began to walk towards the park, but when she reached there, she found that it was deserted.

Huh, where could he be? she thought, sitting down on a convenient log. *I think I’ll just wait over at...*

But her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of voices and footsteps. *Ohmygosh, someone’s coming here,* she thought. Listening more carefully, she could make out a girl’s voice, which came in starts and fits, as if the speaker had been crying.

Lovers’ quarrel? Lavie thought, smiling. *I’d better not interrupt them!* She began to take a few steps towards the park exit, when she heard the second voice, and it was one she could not fail to recognize. Suddenly, she understood why Henrik had been embarrassed, and the reason for his sudden interruption.

Oh no....Ryan! she thought. *Ryan is coming here, with...no, no.....* She felt a sudden chill, despite the warm sun beating down on her head and shoulders. *Should I stay here? Should I just leave?*

“Look, I know it’s hard,” Ryan’s voice was saying, “but there’s nothing either you or I can do about them. We just have to...”

Let me know the worst, Lavie decided, with a resolute look on her face. Moving quickly, she positioned herself behind a large tree, out of sight, and strained her ears, feeling her heart thump within her.

And sure enough, Ryan and Marianne came walking slowly into the park, slowly. She was leaning against him, and he had a comforting arm about her shoulder.

God, how can he be so stupid! Lavie thought, angrily, as a tear rolled down her cheek. *Mom always said that the burned child is afraid of fire, but Ryan....the...the dope!*

By this time, Ryan had led Marianne to the old log, and they were seated side by side.

“Now calm down, Marianne. Tell me what happened, slowly.”

“Ryan...” she said, in a weak voice. “It’s over.”

Over? Lavie thought, and hope surged within her once more. *Dare I hope that...*

“You mean that’s it?” Ryan asked gently. “There’s no more hope? I wished it wouldn’t come to this, Marianne.”

“Just think of it....Father and Mother, and now.....Mother will be alone in Trinden, and....”

Hmph, stupid me, Lavie thought, still crying quietly. There had been rumours of troubles in the Robertsons’ marriage for months, but Lavie hadn’t paid much attention to them, though she could easily understand how any woman would get fed up with a stuffed shirt like Alex Robertson. *So they’re splitting up? Good for her*, she thought vengefully. *Like mother, like daughter. A leopard can never change her spots.*

“Marianne, I understand,” Ryan said, gently. *Why can’t he speak to me like that?* Lavie thought, bitterly. *He only did so once, that day in Blackwater Park...*

“Gran!” Emily reached up and touched her grandmother’s face, looking desolate, but Lavie was still smiling. “Poor Gran, is that what really happened?”

“I’m afraid it did, dear,” Lavie said, with an indulgent smile. “We were all young, and rather silly, back then.”

“But how could Grandpa be nice to Marianne, and not to you?” Emily asked, indignantly. “How could anyone make....such a mistake?”

“Well, Emily, dear, I’m grateful I have such a loyal supporter,” she said, still smiling. “But you see, your Grandpa still had many things to learn. And in the end, remember, he did choose me. We were together for sixty years, and married for fifty-five of them. Dear Ryan....”

“I’m glad Grandpa changed his mind! So...so even if things don’t work out right immediately, they still can later?” Emily asked, hopefully.

“That’s right, dear. Now, let’s go on, where was I? Oh yes, behind that tree trunk....”

“Mother came by today....with the notice from the Family Court at Lorean,” Marianne said, hiding her face in her hands. “She just handed it to Father, who didn’t say a word – he just looked angry, and upset. Then Mother said she was free at last, free to do what she really wanted – and that if Father tried to bother her in any way, she’d complain to the police at Trinden! Oh, Ryan, it was....just horrible, hearing her say those things...”

“Marianne....” Ryan began, then remained silent. *There’s nothing I can do to make this easier*, he thought. *Poor girl, no wonder she’s so mixed up. If I don’t stand by her now, nobody will.*

“I was there in the room with them, but they never looked at me,” Marianne went on, in a low voice. “It was just about them, and their quarrels, and Father’s business, and....it was as if I didn’t exist. I was...so alone, and so scared, Ryan...”

How touching, Lavie thought, sarcastically, dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve. She goes whining to him with her problems, and expects him to manage them all? It's not like I haven't had my own hard times, it just that I don't want to complain! Gran....how I wish you were here with me, right now...

"Now Marianne, you know that's not your fault," Ryan was saying in a comforting tone, as they huddled together on the log. "You know your father and mother have been having troubles for a long time...and when people fight, they get so wrapped up in their quarrel that they forget everything. It's like when countries go to war. It doesn't mean that they hate you, or don't care about you..."

Brilliant analysis, Dr. Eramond, Lavie thought, an angry flush coming to her cheeks. Pity you're so blind to what the others around you are feeling!

Ryan and Marianne were now getting up from the log. "Listen, Marianne, I know you're having a very hard time, and I can make allowances for that," he said, stroking her hair. "But I want you to know this. I'm not going to hold...the past against you. You're my girlfriend, and I'll stand by you, whatever happens."

Marianne seemed a little comforted by this, though she still sniffed. "But the people around....what will they say, what will they think..."

"Marianne, this is the year 300. People aren't automatically turned into outcasts, just because their parents are divorced," Ryan said patiently. "And you know I'll always accept you, no matter what, right?"

"Ryan..." Marianne said, looking up at him.

"And it's not like you're the only one whose family has problems," Ryan went on. "Juno the Luno and his mother live like hermits, and Heaven knows what they're trying to hide. And I've heard that even Lavie's father drinks a little too much...."

*He does **not**!* Lavie thought angrily. *Oh, Daddy, Daddy...what are they saying about you? I know he and Gran have had their problems, but how could Ryan say a thing like that? If he only knew the way Daddy helped me at that base, when I was waiting for him, the jerk!*

"Anyway, you're not the only one with troubles, Marianne. Hold on, I'll be there.."

"Ryan...thank you..." Marianne said, leaning her head against his chest.

I can't watch this any more! Lavie thought, despairingly, leaning her face against the tree's rough bark. *Please, let them just go soon!*

Fortunately for her, they were now leaving the park, with Marianne still leaning on Ryan's arm for support. Unable to even feel angry any more, Lavie leaned against the tree trunk, and burst into tears. *It's...not fair,* she thought, helplessly. She did not notice another person walk into the park, a few minutes later....

How nice this little park is, Princess Carranya thought. And it's nice to see that Ryan is trying to support his friend, after they had that misunderstanding.

Thinking of Henrik and Bernadette, she smiled. *Summer is truly upon us, she thought. How did that old song go? "Everywhere I look around, love is in the air..."*

Suddenly, her face grew grave, but brightened immediately as she spotted the pair of swings, standing still, casting their shadows on the grass.

Good heavens, I haven't been on one of these since I was....eight or nine, I think! Carranya reflected, smiling. Mother said it wasn't proper for a little Princess to play on a swing, once she got older. But maybe I should just try this once. I wonder if it'll even take my weight!

With this idea in mind, the Princess took a few steps forward. Leaning her hand on one of the swings, she noted with satisfaction that it seemed quite sturdy. *I know I shouldn't, but it would be so much fun, she thought. And anyway, there's no one here. Just a little, just for old times' sake.*

She seated herself comfortably on the swing, and gave herself a gentle push. Within no time, she was swinging happily, enjoying the sensation of floating through the air. *This is what we give up when we're Royalty, she thought. How I envy girls like Miss Regale and her friend, who can do this any time they want to...*

She was in mid-arc, the wind blowing through her hair, when her ears caught the sound of someone crying.

Infinity help me, she thought, still thinking of what had happened the night before. Am I....is this just an illusion? This is the third or fourth time I'm 'hearing things', and.....no, this sounds real. Someone needs help.

With a determined look on her face, she stopped the swing, and looking back at it with longing, she walked around the park. *It's coming from here, she said, as the sobs grew louder. Somewhere in that thicket...*

And walking to the upper edge of the park, where it gave way to woodland, she spotted Lavie, still leaning against the tree trunk, oblivious to her presence.

Miss Regale! Carranya thought, with a start. *What on earth could have happened? I have to find out.* Walking up to Lavie, she gently touched her on the arm.

"Miss Lavender, what's the matter?" she asked, softly.

Lavie jumped away from the trunk with a start. "Waah!" she exclaimed. "Who are you, you.....Huh? P-Princess?" she stammered, as she turned to face the intruder.

“Yes, Miss Lavender, it’s me,” Carranya said, gently. “What seems to be the matter? I can’t stand by when one of my subjects is in pain, right next to me.”

“But wh-what are you doing here, Princess?” Lavie asked, shocked out of her tears for a moment. Carranya, without a word, first offered her a handkerchief, which she gratefully accepted.

“Well, Miss...”

“Please call me Lavie. ‘Miss Lavender’ sounds like...like something out of a play. Though I’m sure my life would make an interesting play, if the audience were sadistic enough,” she said, bitterly.

“Well, Lavie, remember that a play isn’t over until the curtain falls,” the Princess said, giving her a look of encouragement. “And why don’t you come and tell me what is troubling you? I must confess, first, that I was being a little foolish. I left Mr. and Miss Aquary at Mr. Spenson’s house, and seeing this park, I just thought I’d.....try the swings a little. I haven’t done that since I was a little girl.” She blushed, and Lavie’s heart warmed to her.

The swings? she thought. *How sweet....that’s just what that nice sailor, Mr. Williams, told me. Deep down inside, even the Princess is like me, like any other girl.*

“Are you amused, Lavie?” Carranya asked.

“Not really, Princess....I was just thinking about something I heard once.”

“You must tell me all about it,” the Princess replied. “Now why don’t you come and sit here by me, and we can talk a little. I hardly have anyone to talk to in the Palace, except Father and Mother, and they’re often – occupied.” She looked down at the grass, closing her eyes.

“P-Princess Carranya, I don’t know if I should really be bothering you with my silly troubles,” Lavie said apologetically. “It’s just that...I was waiting, and hoping for something good to happen today, and I just saw the opposite...”

“Just like me on that ship, Lavie,” Carranya said sympathetically. “Look, there’s a comfortable old log there. Let’s sit down.” Leading Lavie by the hand, the Princess led her forward, and they sat down side by side.

“So tell me, Lavie, what happened?” the Princess asked. *What green eyes she has,* Lavie thought, admiringly. *I never thought I’d be this close to a Crown Princess, and....under such strange circumstances.*

“It’s just....you know Ryan, right?” Lavie said, in a low tone. “Ryan Eramond?”

“How could I forget him?” the Princess said. “I owe my very life to him, Lavie. Don’t tell me *he’s* the one who’s upset you!”

“Well, it’s just that....” Lavie hesitated, and then lost all reserve on seeing the Princess’ look of concern. “Ryan and I....we’ve been friends since childhood, we used to do everything together, *everything*. When

I was a little girl, he told me we'd go sailing the seas, and look for treasure together! I even still have the teddy bear that he gave me, seven years ago..."

The Princess said nothing, but listened, holding Lavie's hand in hers.

"...but, some time ago – I'd say it was about a year ago, something changed. I still....cared for him. I still do. But he started – getting annoyed with me, and though he'd come home and have meals with us, he wasn't his usual friendly self; he was – quite offhand, really, towards me! It was only later that I found out that he was dating Marianne...Marianne! Good heavens, she'd dated practically everyone else in the Academy, I don't know what Ryan was thinking! Ryan was just another...another notch on her sword, for her!"

If Carranya was amused by this, she did not show it, but merely patted Lavie's hand soothingly.

"I tried to warn Ryan, but he got mad at me and said that he wouldn't hear a word against his beloved Marianne," Lavie went on, angrily. "Then when the Senior Prom came around, Ryan, well,...caught her with another boy....Poor Ryan..."

"I know, Lavie," Carranya said, squeezing her companion's hand. "He told me about it, though not in such detail."

"He did?" Lavie said, surprised. "That's strange, Princess, he's usually so reserved, doesn't like to show his feelings....Anyway, I thought now I'd have a chance with him, but he was the same towards me as he'd been all the year... I even volunteered for a job as his deputy, thinking I could get close to him, but he wasn't very happy with that either." Lavie blushed, remembering their stay in the inn at Glendale. "It was almost as if he....was fed up with me, or something...."

"My old governess always told me that young men could be quite – shall we say hasty in their judgements," Carranya said, smiling. "And you were supposed to accompany him on that cruise, weren't you? I'm glad you were spared that, Lavie. Those pirates were....ruthless. Many young women were killed mercilessly, and others...." She shivered and closed her eyes. "They wouldn't have spared you. I myself..." She leaned against the log for support, and frowned.

"Princess, are you hurt?" Lavie said, alarmed.

"I was...wounded while trying to defend myself from them," Carranya explained. "My arm still hurts a bit, but I'm much better. All thanks to Ryan, of course, and some very brave Zionesse soldiers."

"Ohmygosh, do I need to call someone? Are you all right?" Lavie asked.

"It's nothing, Lavie," the Princess reassured her. "And after all, we Royals aren't supposed to complain."

Lavie laughed, and the sound cheered up the Princess at once. "How strange! That's what I always used to tell myself when I took up that job: 'A deputy doesn't complain!'"

“A deputy?” Carranya laughed. “Lavie, you know, we’re both deputies here. You may be a deputy in Ryan’s business, and I may be a deputy Queen, but we’re both trying to deal with things as bravely as we can. Do you realize that?”

“I never thought of it that way, Princess!” Lavie exclaimed. “Wow, that’s....pretty cool!”

“Indeed it is,” the Princess said, with a nod of approval.

“Well, anyway, I thought I’d meet Ryan today, and tell him how much I’d been worried for him when the *Paradiso* went missing,” Lavie continued. “But then, today in the park....” Her voice failed her.

“You saw him and Marianne, didn’t you?” Carranya said, kindly. “Poor Lavie, that must have been painful. Were they....on good terms?”

“Hmph, that’s putting it mildly, Princess!” Lavie said, her temper flaring up again. “They were...oh, I wish I hadn’t seen it!” She covered her face with her hands, flushing with shame.

Carranya’s face looked grave. “Lavie,” she said, “I’m truly sorry. Do you want me to...to speak to Ryan?”

“I don’t know,” Lavie said, weakly. “I don’t know how he’d react; he might just think I was annoying you, or something...”

“You’re probably right,” Carranya replied. “After all, he’s eighteen; I’m sure he wouldn’t like being told what to do, even by me. I wish I could help, somehow.”

“I know it sounds silly, Princess,” Lavie said, “but I really – I mean, I really care about Ryan. I know I often get angry with him, and lose my temper, but that’s because he can be such a....”

“Lavie, it’s not ‘silly’. I may be the Princess, but I’m young enough to understand what you mean, and what it means to you,” Carranya said, looking at Lavie with concern. “I wish I could offer you something better in the way of consolation, but I’ve lived a rather sheltered life, and I don’t know quite how to go about it. I *do* know, however, that you’re a remarkable young woman, and that I’d be honoured to count you as a friend.”

“A friend? Princess Carranya, that’s just....so sweet of you!” Lavie said, brightening up and holding the Princess’ hand in both of hers. “Wow, I never thought that, at this moment, the Princess would be willing to...lend me a hand.”

“I’m sure many more people will, Lavie,” Carranya said, warmly. “You know, maybe you should share this with your parents, or someone else whom you’re close to...”

“I could talk to Mom and Dad, but that’d be a little awkward,” Lavie said slowly. “You see, my parents and Ryan’s parents are quite good friends, and I don’t want to cause too much trouble. Ryan’s dad has been very supportive, too; in fact, when I missed that cruise, he actually helped me to get to Checkpoint Bravo, where I waited for Ryan.”

“You were at Checkpoint Bravo?” The Princess seemed surprised. “Do you know, Lavie, we almost ended up going there, after the pirates attacked us. It was only when the Galvenian Navy contacted us that we decided to come to Davenport in the first place. But coming back to the point, is there anyone else you could confide in?”

“There’s Gran, of course, but she’s on Mann Island,” Lavie said, smiling at the memory of her grandmother. “Maybe I should go and pay her a visit!”

“Your grandmother? You mean Mrs. Lancaster? I would like to meet her, too,” the Princess said, “but I don’t think it’ll be possible. My parents will be here by tomorrow, and then I shall have to return to Lorean. My own grandfather and father always spoke highly of Mr. and Mrs. Lancaster, you know. I wonder if she’s ever seen me!”

“Perhaps she has! She’s told me about visiting the Court several times, though she stopped visiting Lorean after Granddaddy passed away,” Lavie said, and her face grew sad again. “She and Granddaddy were so close, even when they grew old. I wish Ryan and I....could be like that, some day.”

“Well, Lavie, I wish I could give you some advice, but I’m not old enough,” Carranya said, gently. “But I will tell you what did help me, when I was in a....similar predicament. Find something you love doing, Lavie, and work at it. Put your soul into it. And always, always, hope for the best. This may just be my youth and my silliness speaking” – she paused and laughed, and Lavie smiled despite her tears – “but I do believe with all my heart that, if something is meant to happen, it will. Eventually. Don’t give up, Lavie. You deserve better, and you will receive it, the Infinity willing.”

“Princess...” Lavie said, gratefully. “Thank you, Princess. You’ve given me a little hope...and maybe that’s all I really need, right now.” She relaxed, and her sad expression was replaced by one of tiredness. “It’s just that it’s hard to keep hoping, sometimes....I thought that when Ryan got back safely, things would be different, and....”

“Oh, Lavie,” the Princess said, letting Lavie’s head rest on her shoulder, “we aren’t that different, you know? In the old days, we’d probably have been good friends at court, or something – especially since you’d belong to the House of Lancaster by birth. And I know it’s hard, Lavie. It’s just that I have a little more practice.” She smiled at Lavie, who looked at her with surprise.

“Princess? You – wh- what do you mean? Are you also...” she said, blushing as she spoke. “Ohmygosh, Princess Carranya, do you mean *you*...”

“Yes, Lavie, I do. And that’s why I can understand what you feel. My story is a little different from yours, but, like you, I’m waiting – for my day to come, someday.”

“Could you...tell me about it, Princess?” Lavie asked, shyly.

“I suppose I could, Lavie, if it makes you feel better. You see, my story took place at Davenport, too. Or at least that’s where it began.”

“At Davenport?” Lavie said, sitting upright and leaning forward intently. “When was this?”

The Princess closed her eyes, and it was clear from her expression that her memories were pleasant ones. “It was about nine years ago, Lavie. My parents, the King and the Queen, had come down to Davenport, to attend Jerry Saunders’ inauguration as Mayor, and I came along with them.”

“Wow!” Lavie said. “I must’ve been just about eight years old at that time! I’m sure Ryan and I must have been running around and playing something or the other, then!” She smiled at the recollection.

“I was just ten, you know,” Carranya said, “but I looked a little small for my age – I still am rather short, even by Galvenian standards.” She laughed. “Anyway, Father and Mother were at the Mayor’s house, and they all went down to the beach, where a stand had been put up. A band was playing for the Mayor, and the people were celebrating and dancing. I was feeling sad, and a little left out of it all, because I was lonely; I didn’t have anyone to talk to, or to play with. In fact, I felt jealous of all the children in Davenport, who were enjoying the day.”

“I’m sorry, Princess,” Lavie said, warmly. “Who knows what would have happened if we’d met that time, I wonder!”

“I wonder, too. Anyway, by the evening, everyone was making their way back to the Mayor’s house, and I was left behind there. Father and Mother didn’t notice, somehow, because Father was very worried about a Parliamentary election that was going on at that time, and Mother wasn’t well; she’d just come along because it was protocol. I didn’t understand those things at the time, but I do now.”

“Princess, I can see...” Lavie began.

“See what?”

“See...that you haven’t had a particularly easy life, either. We tend to forget that, and think that the Royals have a fine time...”

“Thank you, Lavie,” Carranya said. “I appreciate that. Anyway, I was left alone there somehow; the beach was quite deserted, and I looked out at the sea, thinking how I’d love to just sail away somewhere, to some other place, where I’d have friends. It was then that I saw him.”

“Who?” Lavie asked?

“I didn’t know at the time. All I could see was a boy, dressed in a sailor’s suit, walking along the beach towards me. He came closer, and I could see that he looked friendly. He was tall, and he was whistling a song to himself. I thought I was dreaming, that he was a sailor come ashore from some far country. Then he walked up to me, and I saw that he was just a little older than me, perhaps about twelve or thirteen....”

“Hello!” the boy said, cheerfully. “Looking for treasure? That’s what I’m doing.”

The little girl giggled. "That's nice!" she said, holding out her hand. "My name is Carranya. Did you find a treasure chest here?"

"Not yet," the boy said, "but someday, I'll find a lot of treasure, and I'll hide it on beaches all over the world! You can join me if you like, you know," he said generously.

Carranya blushed. "That's kind of you," she said. "What's your name? Are you a pirate captain's son?"

"Not exactly," the boy admitted, "but I come from another country. My father brought me here on a ship. He said he'd come back and fetch me later. My name is Francis."

"That's a nice name," Carranya said. "Does your father own a ship, then?"

"Your name is nice, too," the boy said, admiringly. "And I like your red hair, too. It's just right for a pirate. Would you like to go sailing with me? My father owns a lot of ships, maybe he'll give us one!"

"My father.." Carranya began, blushing at the unexpected compliment, but hesitated as she was about to say 'is the King of Galvenia' – somehow, that seemed unexciting to her, compared to ships and pirates. "My father lives in a castle. Maybe you could come and visit it someday!"

"That would be great," Francis replied. "Look, Carranya, why don't we build a castle right here? It would be just for the two of us, and we could come back here after our adventures."

"For us?" Carranya said, feeling happier than she'd ever been in her young life. "That's – that's great!"

"Come and sit by me," Francis said, indicating a comfortable spot some way off from the shoreline, "and we'll get started. First, we need to make the walls..."

"Father's castle has towers at the four corners, too," Carranya said, excited. "Do you know how to make those?"

"Show me, Carranya!" Francis said. "I'll try."

Time went by slowly as the two children, happily unaware of anything around them, continued building their castle of sand – and their castles in the air.

"What's the name of your town, Carranya?" Francis asked. "I come from a place called Caledonia. It's a big city! It would be a good place to sail our ship to."

"I'm from Lorean," Carranya said simply. "It's..."

"Oh, I know Lorean," Francis said happily. "I've even been there, a couple of times. Father took me."

"You did?" Carranya said, flushed with excitement. "Francis, the next time you come there, why don't you visit me?"

"I promise I will, Carranya," Francis said, standing up and holding out his hand. Standing at the shoreline, they held hands as they watched the evening sun sinking.

"It's pretty, isn't it? The sun, I mean," Carranya whispered. "I'm happy that...that we can watch it together, Francis."

"It's even better at night!" Francis said, releasing her hand and pointing up at the sky. "We should come out here when the moon is out. There are thousands and thousands of stars in the sky, like tiny lamps, and we could sit and count them! I tried to, once, but only got up to a hundred and seven," he admitted.

Carranya laughed. "Do you think people live on those stars, Francis?"

"Maybe they do," Francis said. "Or maybe they're just lights that the Infinity has put up there, to make us happy. I know an old man who told me a lot about the Infinity."

"The Infinity?" Carranya frowned. For her, the Infinity was associated with endless lectures and classes on doctrine, in the course of which her royal knuckles had often been rapped by the ferule of a sour-faced teacher, when she failed to remember. "Did he...did he make all this? I thought the Infinity was someone who told us what to do, and how to behave."

Francis smiled. "Carranya, the Infinity is much greater than that! That's what my friend, the old man, told me. He said the Infinity made us so that we could make him happy, and he also made the whole world, including the stars."

"Your Infinity sounds quite different from the one I know," Carranya said, slowly. "I'd like to...learn more about him. Can I meet the old man too, Francis?"

"Sure, if you come to Caledonia. I'll introduce you to him, and you could meet my father, too! I'm sure you'd like him," Francis replied. "Come on, let's get closer to the water."

As Carranya took a hesitant step forward, guided by her new friend's encouraging look, a wave suddenly broke upon the shore. Carranya gasped with pleasure as the cold water struck her legs, soaking through her stockings.

"It's cold, but it's rather nice!" she said. "I wonder what's over there, far away, where the sun sets..."

"Why don't we take a look?" Francis suggested.

"Take a look?" Carranya asked, puzzled. "But how?"

"I was just joking, Carranya. You know, you're really nice. You're different from the girls in Caledonia." He looked at her admiringly, then took a bold step forward. "Can you swim?" he asked, with a mischievous smile on his face.

"Yes, I learned how to last year," Carranya said, smiling at him. "You're nice too, Francis."

"Come on, Carranya," Francis said, taking her hand. "Let's go out into the sea."

"The sea?" Carranya said, looking at the waves before her. "But....isn't that dangerous?"

“Don’t be afraid, Carranya,” he replied, standing closer to her. “I’ll protect you.”

And then it happened. There was a series of loud shouts, and a group of men in uniform ran onto the beach, carrying swords. “Your Highness! Your Highness!” they called out. “Please come back at once! We’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

Oh, no, Carranya thought. The Palace guards...

Francis looked at them, and Carranya – frightened as she was – was amazed at his courage. He stood in front of her, placing a protective arm about her shoulders. “You wicked men,” he said, in a loud, clear voice. “Go away, and leave Carranya alone. She didn’t do anything wrong. She’s my friend.”

“You’d better get lost, boy,” one of the guards said, menacingly, taking a step forward. Francis, drawing closer to her, looked at him unflinchingly, his face determined. “Leave the Princess alone, and we can forget this ever happened.”

“Why should I?” Francis said. “You’d better leave me alone, or I’ll tell my father about you, and he’ll punish the lot of you!”

“Sweet kid,” another guard growled. “Look here, son, just step out of the way.” He stepped forward, and to Carranya’s horror, his boots trampled their beautiful castle, which was reduced to a pile of sand. Carranya’s lower lip quivered, and a tear ran down her cheek.

“Make me,” Francis said, stepping forward.

“Francis, no!” Carranya cried, as two more guards came forward.

The guards, looking rather lost, grabbed Carranya by her arms, and began to drag her away. Francis rushed forward, hearing her scream with pain, but four more guards formed a wall between him and them – a wall that, despite his courage, he was too young and small to cross.

“Francis!” Carranya cried out, helplessly, as the guards pulled her away roughly.

“Your Highness, please be quiet!” one of the guards said, haplessly. “Please...”

“Carranya!” Francis called out, and his words were ones that Carranya would never forget. “Don’t cry, Carranya, and don’t be afraid! I will find you someday!”

The Princess, her head reeling from the sudden shock, allowed herself to be dragged away by the guards, and she could hear him no more...

The Princess closed her eyes and trembled. Lavie, moved by the simple story, took her hand and held it firmly. “Princess, I’m sorry....I didn’t know,” she said.

"It's all right, Lavie," Carranya said, though there was still a tremor in her voice. "I didn't know what being unhappy really was, until that day. But then – I met him again. Twice, in fact. But I could never find out who he was..."

"Twice?" Lavie leaned forward and looked at Carranya kindly. "How did that happen?"

"The first time was at a royal ball in Lorean, when I was about fifteen. I wasn't allowed to attend, because I wasn't of age yet, but my governess at the time, who was a kind lady, allowed me to join her and the rest of the ladies-in-waiting in their room for dinner, while Father and Mother presided over the festivities above. I was just following them, but they were in a hurry, and I must have taken a wrong turn, and got lost. Then I saw someone – a young man – walking up to me. He was wearing a mask – it was a masked ball, you see, Lavie – and when I saw him, I was nervous. Masks always did scare me, at least until that day."

"And it was him?" Lavie asked, dreamily.

"Yes, Lavie, it was. He stopped me, and I was about to run away..."

"Carranya," the young man said, and despite his appearance, his voice was friendly and even gentle. "Wait for me."

"How....how do you know my name?" the Princess asked, frightened.

"How could I forget you, Carranya?" he replied. "Don't you remember me? From Davenport Beach? Our castle?"

"Francis?" The Princess' voice sounded shrill, almost hysterical, to her own ears. "Francis, can it really be...Oh, Francis!"

"Yes," the man said, and despite his mask, Carranya was certain he was smiling at the moment. "I've waited for this moment for so long, and I find you've – well, when I saw you, it just took my breath away," he said. "I haven't forgotten, Carranya, and I always keep my promises."

"Francis," Carranya said slowly. "Oh, thank the Infinity...If you only knew about all the times I dreamt of Davenport Beach, wondering if I'd ever see you again..."

"I felt the same way too, Carranya," Francis replied. "And despite the years that have gone by, I still care for you as much as I did, that day. Someday, we'll build that castle again, and make it so strong that no one can ever destroy it..."

And then, it happened again. The sound of footsteps, but this time, the voices were those of nervous women.

No, Carranya thought despairingly. It's Mrs Elliott and the others, and they'll....."Francis, I'm.....I can't stay now, I'm sorry." Sadly, she stepped away, and then began to run...

“Carranya, wait!” Francis called out, as she disappeared down a flight of steps, in the direction of the voices.

“Of course, I didn’t really get into trouble that time,” Carranya went on. “I just told them I had gotten lost, which was the truth – in a way.”

Lavie laughed. “And when did you see him again, Princess?” she asked, her own woes forgotten for the moment.

“Just two weeks ago,” the Princess replied. “It was just before that fatal cruise, when my father was engaged in talks with Prince Wilhelm of Zion. There were rumours of war between the Zions and the Varald, and Wilhelm wanted to know if my father was willing to form a military alliance with them.”

“You mean...Galvenia will be at war? With the Varaldians?” Lavie said, shocked. “Princess, that’s....terrible! Can’t the Commonwealth do anything?”

“I’m afraid not, Lavie. The Commonwealth itself is in trouble; the President-Elect, Junzio Koketsu, was mysteriously assassinated while on his way to Unity Isle, which was what sparked off the Zions. We still don’t know who was responsible for his murder,” Carranya said, sadly. “The world, it seems, is becoming a dangerous place.”

“War..” Lavie shivered. “I know boys are crazy about war, but Grandpa and Grandma lived at the time of the Battle of Chespa Bay, and they always told me that the only ones who loved war were those who never had to experience it! They lost some of their close friends, who were among the troops defending the Commonwealth at the very end...”

“You’re quite right there, you know. Only those who know nothing of war can glorify it. Now, Father wouldn’t tell me what happened during the talks, but I could tell he was worried; he didn’t want war, but the Zions were putting pressure on him. I was determined to prevent the war at all costs, and wanted to meet Emperor Charlemagne himself, to try and convince him.”

“Convince him, Princess? But – would he listen to you?” Lavie wondered.

“Lavie, as the Crown Princess, I had to try. After all, what good is the Royal Family if we cannot negotiate for peace with other royals? Unfortunately, I could see no way to reach Caledonia. Feeling frustrated at my own inability, I thought I’d go riding a little, to try and forget. And it was there, near the stables, that I saw him for the last time.”

“Ohmygosh, had he come to the Palace?” Lavie exclaimed. “How did he manage that?”

“I still don’t know, Lavie,” Carranya replied. “He was wearing a long cloak, and a helmet, so that I couldn’t see his face – but I recognized his voice, and I knew it was him. He told me that he’d heard the rumours too, and that he wanted to know where I stood on the matter. He said he was a loyal citizen of Zion, and didn’t want to see his country, or mine, devastated by war.”

“Really?” Lavie asked. “And what did you tell him?”

“I told him I was ready to try anything if there was a chance of preventing a war – that if I could only get to Caledonia, and meet the Emperor, I would try my best to convince him. He seemed pleased, and said that he’d always believed in me, and knew that I would stand for the right thing when the time came.”

“He sounds like a very intelligent man,” Lavie said, appreciatively. “So what happened next?”

“He said he’d help me get on board the *Paradiso* by stealth, and that if I was ready to try, he’d have a friend of his waiting by the stables, the next night. Then he told me....that he loved me, and he promised that we would meet again, later, once my mission was complete. He held my hand, and we embraced” – Carranya blushed with pleasure at the recollection – “but were interrupted by the sound of the Royal Guards coming by on patrol. As he quickly left, I won’t ever forget what he said. He said, ‘Live for our sakes, Carranya. I shall see you again, in a better world....’” She smiled, looking far into the distance.

“Wow, Princess, that is just so.....*awesome!*” Lavie said. “So you mean you actually stowed away on the *Paradiso?*”

“I’m afraid that’s what I did,” the Princess said, with some embarrassment. “The next night, I waited till all the Ladies of the Bedchamber were fast asleep, and climbed out of my room through the window. He wasn’t there, but there was another man there, a Zionese with a strong jaw, wearing a coachman’s uniform. He helped me get to Serin’s Peak, using quite a remarkable carriage – a carriage that ran on its own, without horses. Then he helped me sneak aboard the ship, and that’s how I got there.”

“A carriage without horses? I think Mr. Anderson mentioned them once in science class,” Lavie said. “They run on fuel or oil, and they’re quite common in the Republic, though they aren’t yet used in Arlia.”

“Unfortunately, fate struck – or rather, the pirates did – and after many dangers, I found myself here, in Davenport,” the Princess said, and sighed. “And now I don’t know if I’ll ever see him again, unless I visit Caledonia....unless he’s been caught up in the war, too. I only wish I could see him, or hear his voice, one more time. But I know I will,” she said, throwing her head back and looking determined, “when the time comes around. Someday, I will.”

“Princess Carranya, I know you will,” Lavie said, smiling. “And I understand what you mean, now. Maybe I’ll just go back to my archery, visit Gran, and wait....until it’s my turn, my time. Princess, you’ve done more for me than you’ll ever know.”

“Archery?” Carranya looked at Lavie with a new appreciation. “Lavie, I know I’ve lectured you enough today, but do you realize that archers have always played an important part in Galvenian history? The twin huntresses of Malava, legendary figures from our continent, are often portrayed as archers. And at the battle of Lorean, just before King Richard returned to defeat Emperor Johan, the only men left standing, besides Prince Derren, were four archers. I think it’s a good sign.”

“A sign of what?” Lavie asked, intrigued.

“A sign that, in the strange world in which we live, you, too, may have an important part to play, Lavie,” Carranya said, in a more serious tone. “Work hard at your archery, and be yourself. Other things will come to you in their time.”

“Princess, thank you,” Lavie said, gratefully. She was about to bow when Carranya held up her hand and stopped her. “There’s no need for that, at least not now, Lavie. We’ve met as equals, spoken as equals, and let us leave on the same terms – as friends. Good fortune to you, Lavie. May you find the Way.” The two women shook hands, and Lavie made her way out of the park, having recovered both her smile and the bounce in her step.

Carranya looked after her, and sighed. *Now I know, she thought. I’ve understood, and I hope Ryan will understand, someday. Good fortune to you, indeed, Lavie – you’ll need all the help that I, or even the Infinity, can give you.*

And with a last, grateful look at the park, she turned and made her way back to the Mayor’s house.

That night, Lavie slept peacefully, and as she slept, she dreamed...

She was on the shore of an island, feeling dazed, as if she’d been the victim of a shipwreck. Looking around, she could tell that it was evening – the sun was low, though it had not yet set.

Is this Mann Island? she wondered. Standing up, she could see a castle of sand lying near the shoreline, the waves slowly washing it away. Looking ahead into the distance, she could see a tall building.

The Archery Academy? It must be, Lavie thought, and began to walk forward, carrying her longbow in her hand. As she stepped closer, the building seemed to grow in size.

Ohmygosh, that’s not the Academy! she realized. And, in fact, it was not an ordinary building, but a castle – a castle that was the replica of the one that the waves had taken away, though larger.

Am I in Lorean? Is this where the Princess lives? But Lorean isn’t by the sea.... Where am I? I know I have to get to that castle, somehow...it’s important.

Quickening her steps, she drew nearer to the castle, but as she came right up to the bridge, a creature swooped down in front of her, barring the way.

What....what is that? It’s really creepy! I should just run....Lavie thought. And, indeed, the creature was an intimidating sight – a large, birdlike animal, looking like a vulture, but with two faces – one the face of a man, and the other of a young woman. Both of them were looking at her smugly, as if daring her to pass.

Ryan? And....Marianne? she thought, but on looking closer, nervously, she found that this was not so. She had seen the faces somewhere before, but could not recall them.

“Go away, little girl,” the man’s face said, in a cold, sneering tone, “and we can forget this ever happened. This place is not for you. This is the place where the truth lives, and you cannot face it.”

“The truth?” Lavie asked, trying to sound brave.

“Yes, the truth!” the woman’s face said, with a shrill laugh that was almost a shriek. “You have not found the Way yet, and you do not deserve to learn the truth. Return to your little world, to your little home. This is not your place or your time, foolish child.”

Suddenly, Lavie felt anger rise within her. I may be foolish, she thought, but these two are just so....so annoying!

The setting sun gleamed against the bangle on Lavie’s wrist, and an idea occurred to her.

“Are you a phoenix?” she asked, deliberately trying to make her voice sound submissive.

The man and the woman both laughed. “We are greater than the phoenix, higher than the Infinity himself,” they said, in unison. “You would never understand our Way, and you would never even find your own. Leave.”

“If you’re greater than the phoenix,” Lavie said, taking an arrow and scraping it against her bangle, as a red glint appeared in her eyes, “then I’m sure you’ll enjoy bursting into flame!” Before the beast could reply, she drew back her bow and fired, hitting it in the neck. The man and woman screamed – long, unearthly screams – before the flames consumed them all, and all that was left on the path was a heap of ashes.

Lavie paused, astonished at what she had done, then smiled. “Don’t mess with Lavie Regale, buster,” she said, kicking the ashes aside triumphantly. Holding her head high, she walked closer to the castle, and as the gates opened for her – how did that happen? – she saw an elderly woman within, sitting on a rocking-chair. She was near the bedside of a young man, who seemed ill, though Lavie could not see his face clearly.

“Lavie, sweetheart!” the woman said, rising from her chair. “It’s so nice of you to pay your old grandmother a visit! I’m so glad you came by...there’s someone here who needs your help.”

“G-Gran?” Lavie said, taken aback. “What are you doing here?”

“And I’m so glad you got rid of that annoying bird, dear,” Anne Lancaster said, embracing her. “It was scaring everyone away, and I don’t know where it came from! As for what I’m doing here, my dear, surely a woman has the right to stay in her own home, doesn’t she?” Her eyes twinkled.

This is weird, Lavie thought. “And who – who is that?” she asked, pointing to the man in bed.

“I don’t know his name, sweetie,” Anne said, soberly, “but I do know that he’s been very, very brave. Unfortunately, Lavie, bravery isn’t often enough in this world. They say fortune favours the brave, but I

know that the brave are often the victims of the crafty, and the unscrupulous. That's what happened to this young man here, I'm afraid. But now that you're here, I think we can help him.

"Help him, Gran?" Lavie asked, confused. "But how?"

"It's simple, dear," Anne Lancaster said, taking Lavie by the hand. "Show him the Way...."

Lavie woke up with a start.

Ohmygosh, she thought. What on Terra was that all about?

Shaking her head, she looked at the clock. It was only three in the morning. Mr. Bear, sitting obediently next to her pillow, seemed to be looking at her protectively.

I don't know, she mused, but somehow, I think....this wasn't an ordinary dream. It meant something, and I need to find out what. I must go and visit Gran. Perhaps she'll know....

And then, a memory came back to her. *Granddaddy's poem! "I must find The Way", that's how it went! I'm sure it means something, even the Princess said something like that to me! I must ask Gran what it meant....I'm sure she can help me.*

With a smile on her face, Lavie promptly fell back into sleep.

Annotations:

* Proverbs 30: 18-19

** Admiral Styles and 15385bic, *Love and War: Scattered Pictures*

CHAPTER EIGHT: SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

*“For the LORD watches over the path of the upright,
but the path of the wicked is doomed.”*

(Psalm 1, v. 6.)

“‘The Way’?” Emily asked, with a wondering look on her little face. “What does that mean, Gran?”

“Oh, it’s not that difficult to understand, Emily,” Lavie said, and lifting her granddaughter off her lap, they both trotted off to her room. “But it’s getting late now, dear. Come along, I’ll put you to bed, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“That would be great, Gran!” Emily said, with a sleepy smile.

“You know, dear, I did learn what it meant from my very own Gran, at the time,” Lavie replied, as they reached Emily’s comfortable little room. Untying the bows that held her elaborate coiffure in place, Emily shook her head happily, feeling her hair fall loose.

“Your Gran? Do you mean your dream was actually true?” she asked.

“More than I had even thought possible, my dear,” Lavie said, laughing. “But first, something else was happening in Davenport. The King and Queen were coming to town, you see...”

“We should be reaching Davenport in about an hour, Sire,” Admiral Wells said, saluting his monarch.

“The waters are clear, and the Royal Coast Guards have declared that there is no danger ahead.”

*“Very good, Wells. You may go now,” the King said, absent-mindedly, looking out of the window of his large and luxurious cabin. The Admiral having left, King Arlbert sighed, and rose from his chair. *I never did enjoy travelling by sea, even when I have to*, he thought. *At least the journey is easier for me than for Katarina. I must see how she is.**

But before he could leave his room, the Queen entered herself, holding on to the walls to support herself. Though she still looked pale, almost green, she was smiling.

“Oh my, Arlbert, are you daydreaming again?” she said, affectionately. “Now don’t fret any longer, you know it’s bad for your digestion. I only thank the Infinity that soon, we’ll be with Carranya again.”

Arlbert looked up at her, concerned. *“My dear, are you sure you should be up and about like this? You know that sea journeys are not exactly your cup of tea.”*

*“Well, my sea-legs must grow out *some* day, my lord,” she said, laughing lightly as she sat down in the chair beside his. “And besides, the sheer relief of knowing where we are going has made the journey easier for me – or, at least, a little easier.”*

King Arlbert looked at the Queen admiringly. As a young man, he had been bold enough – or foolish enough, as his father and tutors had put it – to marry her despite stiff opposition, which was based as much on her weak health and unassuming personality as on her ancestry, which was widely known to be part Varaldian. It was perhaps the one brave deed of his inglorious reign, and he did not regret it. Even the passage of time did not prevent him from feeling a surge of happiness every time he saw her - her slight form, her ever-patient face, and the green eyes and red hair that she had bequeathed to their child.

It's amazing how much she and Carranya look alike, the King thought, though they're so different in other ways. My daughter is passionate, even willful, and has now shown the courage of a Lionheart, while Katarina has always been self-effacing, content to remain in the background. And yet, Carranya's always been closer to her mother than to me. Life is strange.

Aloud, he said, "You know, Katarina, when I began this journey, I felt – confident. I was quite sure that I had done the right thing in overruling Trask – and even Lucan, who wired me from Unity Isle asking me to bring back the Princess at once, and to have 'no more of her folly', as he so kindly put it."

"You did the right thing, Your Majesty," the Queen replied, in a calm tone, "but why do you doubt now? Aren't you proud of what she has done?"

"It's not a question of being proud or not, Katarina," the King said, irritably. "It's a question of – decorum, etiquette, propriety. That fool Trask hasn't even been able to find out how she got on the ship in the first place! Suppose the rumours in the Court are actually true, and she was actually trying to elope with some man..."

"Arlbert, you know that's not possible," Queen Katarina replied, gently but firmly. "I know my child, and even if she was – let us say – involved with a young man, she would never behave in that way. Besides, how could she have run away on her own? None of the horses in the stable were missing, not even her favourite. I think it's best if we just wait and find out from her."

"But the rumours, Katarina," the King said, nervously. "It's bad enough that the people know that Carranya was taken from the Palace, but it would be worse if it was anything different!"

"Worse in what way, dear?" she asked, with a patient expression on her face.

"Confound it, Katarina," Arlbert said, raising his hand in a gesture of annoyance, "that child – our only child – is going to rule the Kingdom some day! Her conduct and character must be above reproach!"

"And I'm sure it is, my King," the Queen replied, touching his arm gently. "Now, instead of listening to what people like Trask and Prescott are saying, grant me this favour – that you will trust Carranya over them. It was her destiny that she should be restored safe to the Kingdom, and to us."

"But what if – what if Trask was right all along?" The King shook his head. "You know I've always tried to rule cautiously, and to avoid the mistakes my illustrious father made," he said sarcastically. "And I know that I've often seemed weak – especially over the matter of Darington – but I had little choice, thanks to

the glories of 'parliamentary monarchy' and the Commonwealth. On the whole, caution has served me well, Katarina, and I wonder – despite my bold words to Trask – am I truly doing the right thing in throwing caution to the wind, and embracing her actions? You know that I've always tried to protect you, and protect our child..."

The Queen placed a gentle, almost maternal hand on Arlbert's shoulder.

"I know that, my King," she said, "and I've always been grateful. I deeply regret the many times when my health has caused you distress, or even interfered with your rule, and your decisions. I know I was partly responsible for what happened at Darington..."

"Katarina..." the King said, softly.

"But our daughter is different, Arlbert. She's not like you, or like me. She's a throwback to a different generation – perhaps to the Lionhearts of long ago – or maybe that red-haired warrior who, according to my old family legends, played such an important role in the First Generations, even preserving the life of a righteous man by sacrificing his own." She laughed suddenly.

"What amuses you, Katarina?" the King asked.

"Dear me, my King," Katarina said, beaming at him, "when I thought about that old story, I suddenly had a picture in my mind – a picture of Carranya in armour, her red hair flying, and wielding a sword. I believe that would make a lovely painting, even if it's not very true to life."

"You always did have a vivid imagination, my dear," the King said, fondly. "I remember when you suggested to the Mayor of Westchester that he should put up those statues of the Five Angels, and then described how they ought to look in such detail...But let us return to the matter at hand. While I disagree with Trask and Lucan that we ought to discipline our daughter in any way, I would still recommend that we are a little more circumspect about her next public appearance. Do you agree with me?"

"What you say is true, my King," the Queen said quietly, "but what of the people of Lorean? I know many of our most loyal supporters were sorely disappointed when the Princess' birthday festivities had to be postponed, and they may still look forward to them. Besides, Carranya is of age. I think you owe her – and the people – at least one formal celebration."

"Hmm, there's something in what you say," King Arlbert said, brightening. "Perhaps one formal ceremony, one ball – and then, we shall have to see. It depends very much on the result of Sir Prescott's mission to Zion, as well as on our Varaldian brothers."

"What do you mean, my King?" she asked.

"I mean that our intelligence services have also been active, and I was informed – just before our departure – that there are certain elements in the Varald Directorate who wish to avoid war, and are

working on a diplomatic solution. If they can overcome that pig-headed donkey, that son of a Varaldian fishwife, Russell Kievan...”

“Such language, my lord!” Katarina said, laughing quietly.

“Well, that’s what he is, Katarina. No point in mincing words. Kievan and Jansen are the two main reasons why we have never made any headway in relations with the Varald. But if his own countrymen can succeed, a catastrophe may be averted. Otherwise, much against my advisors’ wishes, Carranya will serve as a rallying point for the people, for a war that would otherwise prove very unpopular indeed.”

“War...” The Queen rested her chin in one hand, looking worried. “I don’t know how Carranya will take that. You know she always believes in peaceful solutions to problems, and the education she has received – often from priests, mages and healers – would only have strengthened that. I know that sometimes war is inevitable, but must we involve her in something as vulgar as propaganda?”

“We may have no choice,” the King said, in a low tone, “but let us hope that it does not come to that. And now, let us prepare ourselves – we shall enter Davenport as our daughter did, at the docks, and she will receive us there. If you have any arrangements of a cosmetic nature to make, now would be the time.” He smiled, and Katarina rose from her chair.

“I shall do as you say, my lord,” she said, and smiled as she bowed and left.

War, thought the King, as he watched her leave. Believe me, my wife, my daughter, I wish for it as little as you do. But I do not believe we have a choice.

And for a moment, let us now turn our gaze to a distant land – to Itaria City, capital of Itaria, home of the Church of Infinity. Known throughout Terra for the beauty of its fields, its ten hills, as well as its fine architecture, Itaria City is perhaps as renowned as a destination for young couples as for being the centre of Terra’s most widely practiced religion. On this day – at precisely the moment that the HMS *Arlbert I*, carrying the King and Queen to Davenport, was drawing close to this destination – some of the faith’s greatest luminaries were meeting at the Pontiff’s Palace. Besides the Pontiff and his personal secretary, the remaining men were all members of the Pontifical Council of the Evangelium. This imposing-sounding group was, in fact, a group of scholars and theologians whose job was to ensure that the Holy Book was interpreted and preached in accordance with Church doctrine.

Seated around a large, Spartan table, with the Itarian flag on one wall and the portraits of Saint Mikhail and Saint Geraud the only ornaments in the conference room, the men of the Council looked somber, and with good reason. They had to make an unpleasant decision, and they had to make it quickly.

The Pontiff himself, Pious XXI, rose from his chair, and the clerics around him, all dressed solemnly in black or white robes, reflecting their rank, rose together with him. After praying together in low voices for several minutes, the Pontiff raised his hand, indicating that he would address the Council.

“My brother priests,” the Pontiff said, “we are gathered here today because we, the Church of Infinity, face a difficult and even dangerous situation.” He turned towards a stack of books and periodicals that lay on the table before him, looking at their titles. “It has come to my notice, and to the notice of the esteemed Council, that certain members of our faith have apparently become puffed up with their own knowledge, and believe that they can interpret our teachings and traditions better than we can. These people would have us reject our tradition of pacifism, and seek vulgar temporal power, in the manner of the Varald. Father Marlborough, would you kindly proceed?”

A murmur of disapproval went up through the Council, and an elderly man seated immediately to the left of the Pontiff nodded gravely. He was remarkably thin, his monastic robes fitting loosely around his neck, and his expression was calm, as he spoke in measured tones. “My brothers, despite the nature of the situation, I am confident that, under the guidance of the Infinity, we can resolve this little difficulty. Over the last one year, there has been – shall we say – a rather virulent strain of thought that is becoming popular among theologians in our country, and even among some of our followers in other lands. The issues are these, quite simply. First, these thinkers claim that some of the decisions of the Pontiff, especially those that he approved at the Synods of Issachar and Itaria, are in error. Second, they want a reconsideration, if not a complete reversal, of our policy of pacifism, including a military alliance with the Zion, war against the Varald, and withdrawal from the Commonwealth. Third, they disapprove of the way certain provinces, particularly the churches and universities in Galvenia and Zion, are being run. And fourth, they want a clean break in relations with the Republican Church of Infinity, claiming that such a relationship is harmful to our doctrine and our interests.”

There was a nervous clearing of throats, but no one interrupted the elderly priest’s exposition.

“Now, it would be unfair,” he went on, with a quiet smile, “to refer to them as a single dissident group. Rather, they go by various names: the Neo-Traditional Infinitum, the Servants of Johan, the Fraternity of Saint Benevolent XII, and so on. None of these groups is identical, but they are in harmony on the four points mentioned above. And despite the strangeness of their ideas – or perhaps because of them! – they now have a small, but substantial following among both clergy and the common people. We are here, my friends, to decide how to handle them before they, or their views, get out of hand.”

Archbishop Elias, the Pontiff’s secretary, raised his hand, and Father Marlborough paused. He was a fierce defender of the Pontiff, with no small resemblance to a bulldog either in speech or appearance, and his voice was angry as he spoke. “As His Holiness says, this is not the work of a single man who has been led astray. It would not be an exaggeration to speak of a rebellion, or even a schism, here. In the last two years, an alarming number of books and articles have been published by people claiming to represent us, but whose views are sadly far from ours. There are rumours, even, of a single strong group who call themselves the ‘New Infinitum’, who claim to have found errors in the teachings of the Pontiff. Now, in the old days, issuing a condemnation would be the prerogative of His Holiness himself; however, ever since the Synod of Issachar, in 263 C.E., it has become mandatory that any blanket condemnation for heresy or schism be approved by the Council of the Evangelium. Before I proceed further, I wish to hear your views on the issue.”

A large man, clad in the white robes of an Archbishop, raised his hand, and was allowed to speak. "Father Marlborough," he said, "while none of us are blind to this issue, we believe it can be resolved by patience, rather than by hasty action. While I deplore the writings of men such as Ronald Gray and Johan Bastow, we must understand that, though flawed, these works reflect the frustration of some of our brethren with recent events, and must be interpreted in this light."

"What events do you refer to, Your Grace?" Pious XXI said gravely.

"Your Holiness, I refer in particular to the failure of the Commonwealth to maintain freedom of conscience, particularly in the Varald Directorate. Though the Commonwealth Charter, as conceived by Saint Geraud of blessed memory, guaranteed this right in all nations, the Varald have been systematically allowed to disregard it, and to exercise repressive measures against our brethren there. There are many, moved with righteous indignation, who would wish for a stronger condemnation of these acts."

"Archbishop Schliemann, your indignation is admirable," a younger Bishop said, nodding in approval, "but what sort of condemnation do the dissidents require? His Holiness has twice issued encyclicals that have condemned the Varaldian government..."

"...which were so vague," Schliemann grumbled, "that you could apply them to any nation except perhaps our own. No, Bishop Marchmont, it is not just the Commonwealth, but we, who have grown timid, afraid to raise our voices against injustice."

"You dare accuse the Pontiff of cowardice?" Elias said, his voice rising, and the blood rushing to his face. "Do you realize that..."

Pontiff Pious XXI raised his hand, and both Elias and Schliemann were stilled. "My dear Elias, I am quite capable of speaking on my own behalf," he said, softly but firmly. "If I was not as explicit as you wanted, Archbishop, it was precisely to avoid worse measures being taken against our Varaldian brethren. And let us remember that both these documents have been read at the Commonwealth Council, along with a personal protest by Archbishop Mazarus, and a request for condemnation of the Varaldian Directorate's deeds."

"And what was the outcome?" an older Archbishop, with a gruff yet pleasant voice, enquired. "Forgive me, Your Holiness, but managing Itarian-Republican relations takes up most of my time, and I have had little opportunity to keep abreast of the Commonwealth's affairs."

"Unfortunately, Archbishop Legrand, the Commonwealth is a democracy, as you well know. The resolution to condemn the Varald was put to the vote by all the members – excluding the Varald, of course. Galvenia and Itaria voted for the motion, but the Republic and the Zion Empire voted against, and Viceroy Kanoi used his veto when the matter was at an impasse."

"And you still wish to befriend the Republican heretics?" another voice said, slowly and insinuatingly. Everyone turned to look at the speaker, who was leaning back in his chair, his eyes closed. "Legrand, tell

me, what is the use of seeking dialogue with them, when their Government consistently votes against us?”

Legrand flushed, but kept his voice level. “First of all, Archbishop Martino, the actions of Josen and Jedda have nothing to do with those of their citizens who try to live faithfully according to the decrees of the Infinity...”

“And who reject the authority of the Pontiff,” Martino went on, chuckling quietly to himself. “I must say that while I join the learned Father Marlborough in deploring these groups, I must concede that they have a point.”

The Pontiff raised his hand again. “Leave me to worry about my own authority, Martino,” he said, an edge entering his voice. “Now, my brothers, I know that not all of us share the same views on finer points of theology, let alone politics. But no matter where our sympathies lie, these “New Infinity” – or whatever they call themselves – pose a danger. They confuse the faithful, and create divisions among the clergy – divisions that seem to have reached even the Council of the Evangelium.”

“At least you acknowledge that,” Schliemann said, with an irritated look at Legrand. “Your Holiness, I am your faithful servant, but clearly, the solution to these problems is to enter into dialogue with these men and women, and seek to understand their grievances. If we fail to do so, we fail both them and the God we serve.”

“Which God would that be, Schliemann?” Elias said, heatedly. “A God who rejects the Republicans for accidents of birth, who destroys the Galvenians for our own evangelistic failures, and who stands at the head of a victorious Zion army, crushing both Varald and Republic? That is who these Servants of Johan, or whatever they are, believe in. Neither the *Evangelium* nor the laws of the Church state that we must preach violence or division!”

“If it comes to that, Elias,” Martino said, rubbing his hands together, “isn’t that the same God we have believed in for millennia, minus your rhetoric? The God who destroyed Janwen for its sins? The God of the Catastrophe, who allowed only one man to survive? The God who gave Lady Flare and her daughter the power to destroy demons? The God who allowed Meldia to be destroyed, when its people grew proud? Perhaps you and I are reading different translations of the *Evangelium*, or perhaps yours has some of Father Marlborough’s interesting footnotes, such as those which claim that the Book of Origins is ‘legendary’!”

“Hmph!” Legrand interjected. “What about the scandalous attire of the Servants of Johan? For people who call themselves traditional, they certainly dress with less modesty than an Imperial dancing girl! Why, the young women of the Republic would blush if they saw them!”

“Instead of admiring the personal charms of the Sisters of Johan, you would do better to return our Faith to its true direction, Legrand, and stop wasting time on the Republican schismatics!” Schliemann shot back, though his embarrassed expression showed that Legrand’s bolt had gone home.

Father Marlborough, watching this exchange with amusement, seemed serenely unconcerned at this mention of his scholarly work.

“All this is rather beside the point,” the Pontiff said, calmly. “Now, let us do what we were called here by the Infinity to do, brothers. Let us put this to the vote. The proposition is this: Should the groups of dissidents, and the thinkers who speak for them, be subjected to censure, and their books placed on the Index of Censorship? Is a sterner sentence, namely a withdrawal of teaching and priestly faculties, required? Or, as Archbishop Schliemann suggests, should we avoid any form of punishment, and instead engage in dialogue? You have heard the three options I suggest. Now, indicate your choices on the ballot provided, and place it into the box in front of me. If a majority is in favour of a particular option, it will be faithfully followed. Let the holy Council decide. Let us pray, and then decide.”

The voices raised in argument were stilled as the Pontiff led his clergy in the recitation of the Afternoon Hour and the Invocations of the Saints, and then there was no sound except the scratching of old-fashioned quills on parchment ballots, as one and then another member of the Council made his decision. After everyone was done, the Pontiff – bowing low before the images of St. Mikhail and St. Geraud – unlocked the box with his pontifical key, and he and Father Marlborough counted the votes, while the rest of the Council waited eagerly, many of them sitting on the edges of their seats.

“My friends,” Marlborough said in his most placatory voice, “the votes of the thirty Council members have been tallied. There are eight votes in favour of censure, and no more. There are nine votes in favour of the deprivation of office. There are ten votes in favour of dialogue. And there are three who have abstained. The move to punish is defeated, unless His Holiness chooses to override the Council’s decision.” He paused.

“I do not,” the Pontiff said, “If this is the decision you have made, so let it be.”

“But what is to be done, then, Your Holiness?” Legrand said anxiously, as Elias scowled.

“I hereby decree,” Pontiff Pious said, “that a delegation from the Council meet the individual leaders of these groups, and engage in dialogue. This delegation will be headed by you, along with Archbishop Martino.” Legrand paled, and he and Martino glared at each other. “Now, select five members of the Council to assist you in this endeavor, and God speed. May you be able to win them back to the truth. And now, let us depart.”

After leading the Council in prayer once more, the individual members rose from their chairs filed out and left the room, some of them huddling into groups as they discussed the day’s events. Archbishop Elias, looking grave, bowed before the Pontiff and received his benediction, before proceeding on the next of his numerous tasks.

“Marlborough,” Pious XXI said, “I’m afraid that we pleased no one, back there.”

“Your Holiness,” Marlborough said, smiling placidly, “that was to be expected. Schisms cannot exist unless there is a grain of truth – or rather, something that looks and smells like the truth – at the bottom of them.”

“Wisely said, Marlborough,” the Pontiff replied, with a laugh. “And let us hope that these expressions of dissent will soon be peacefully resolved. I must apologize, however, for those of our brethren who were less than cordial about your scholarly endeavours.”

Marlborough laughed. “Sticks and stones, Your Holiness, as they say in Galvenia. Which is, indeed, where I will be leaving for, quite soon.”

“For King’s College?”

“Yes, Your Holiness. They have kindly invited me as Visiting Professor of Religious Literature for an indefinite period, which I suspect will be until the Infinity decides that my time has come,” he said. “We’ve even given a scholarship to a student from little St. Nealus’, and all in all, I think teaching a mixed group of believers and non-believers should be an interesting experience.”

“You always did love teaching, did you not, Marlborough?”

“Yes, indeed, Your Holiness. And though my current charges may be less illustrious than my former, I must admit that I am eager to return to my first love. The Council of the Evangelium will get on very well without me.”

“You’ll be a hard man to replace,” the Pontiff said, “but I understand your reasons for leaving, and I will honour them. May the Infinity bless you, my friend.”

The elderly priest bowed and received his leader’s blessing. “And you as well, Your Holiness. We will meet again quite soon, if what I fear does come to pass.”

The reception that King Arlbert and Queen Katarina received in Davenport exceeded even their wildest expectations, being preceded as it was, not just by Carranya’s arrival, but by the two days she had spent among the people. It was a large and enthusiastic crowd – augmented by visitors from Trinden, Hartridge and Glendale – which cheered for the rules of Galvenia as they stepped off the ship. Then, in a custom that had not been seen for a century, Princess Carranya – dressed in the simple dress and sun-hat of a shore girl – welcomed her parents as they reached level ground, presenting them with a lit lamp, as well as a bouquet of King’s Tears. Katarina, recalling memories of her own freer girlhood as the third daughter of a rather obscure Duke, embraced her daughter happily, while Arlbert – looking stern but pleased – placed his scepter over her shoulder as she knelt before him. The sailors, augmented by the children of the Academy, gave their illustrious guests renditions of several patriotic Galvenian songs, from “Daughter of Glory” to “God Bless The King, The Great, The Good”.

Then, without an interruption, and led by the Admiral’s sailors as well as Captain Baker and his men, the King and Queen, followed by the Princess, marched triumphantly through Davenport, with Ryan again carrying the Galvenian flag – a little less awkwardly, this time – and Agent Striker given a place of honour in the King’s rearguard. It was a happy day, and none was perhaps as happy as little Charlotte Tremfein, whom Carranya introduced to her mother, and who was then allowed to carry the Queen’s train.

“Naomi,” Tremfein muttered, as the two followed the procession at its rear, “this really ought to be made into a play. I can see it already.”

“What do you see, Tremfein?” Naomi asked, amused, but Tremfein did not answer directly – he was smiling happily, imagining scenes from his next great pageant of Galvenian history. “Look at Rodney, there. He’s a real hero! I wonder if Frank Lightfoot would take the role...”

“I think his name is Ryan, Tremfein,” Naomi said patiently. “If you’re going to write a play about him, for goodness’ sake, get his name right!”

“But Rodney sounds more, er, manly,” Tremfein argued.

“Much you know about what is and isn’t manly, Tremfein”, she shot back. “Manly is as manly does, and that boy would be a hero even if his name was Naomi Festa, or Carranya Lionheart.”

“Very amusing, Naomi,” Tremfein said, his eyes twinkling. “I see you’ve absorbed some of my trademark humour.”

As the procession reached the Mayor’s house, the Royal Family were received by a flustered-looking Saunders, who was being made to exert himself far more than he normally would in the course of a year. As they entered, they were welcomed by another choir, assembled from among the older children of Davenport, and accompanied by Lavender Regale on the piano.

*“From the seas of Serin to the mount of Lorean,
Our hearts sing praise to thee, O Galvenia,
May you ever live and prosper...”*

“Who is that young lady playing the piano, Carranya?” Queen Katarina whispered. “She’s quite talented, though I say so myself.”

“That’s Lavie Regale, Mother. She’s a friend of mine. I must introduce you to her, I’m sure you’ll get along well too!” the Princess whispered back, excitedly.

“I trust everything is acceptable, Your Majesty,” Saunders was saying nervously. “I’m sure the Princess will inform you that we have done everything possible to make her stay a pleasant one.”

“I would rather hear that from her own lips, Mayor,” Arlbert said, but there was no rancour in his voice. “And now, since we are expected to meet the populace, could you kindly give us room to prepare and compose ourselves? We have just made a long journey.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Saunders said, bowing low as he showed the King and Queen to their quarters. They waited till Saunders was out of earshot, and then the three of them entered the chambers.

“Father,” Carranya began, “All Davenport is glad of your presence, as I myself am.”

“Thank you, daughter,” Arlbert said, as he seated himself in one of the Mayor’s comfortable chairs. “Do sit down, because there is much that we have to discuss, and little time to do so.”

“As you wish, Father,” Carranya said, sitting down.

“Carranya,” the King began, looking intently at her, “if I had not seen what I saw today with my own eyes, I would have to say that you had been rather imprudent and foolish.”

“I beg pardon, Father....” Carranya began, apologetically.

“No, daughter, let me finish. But when I saw the people of Davenport today, and the welcome they gave us – a welcome, I’m quite sure, for your sake – I realized that, sometimes, an imprudent action can also be a brave and noble one.”

“Father...” Carranya said, blushing.

“My daughter, I have reigned for years keeping prudence as my motto, but though it has brought me peace, it has not really brought me happiness. And while I have always tried to ensure that you learnt this virtue as well, I am pleased with your conduct in Davenport.”

“Thank you, Father,” the Princess said, simply, bowing her head.

“But there is one more thing, Carranya. Do not be afraid that I will punish you, but tell me the truth. How was it that you found yourself on board the *Paradiso*? There have been ridiculous rumours at Court that you were trying to elope with some young man on board the ship – rumours to which I have given absolutely no credence, you understand – but I wish to hear the truth from your own lips.” Katarina, listening to this long speech, smiled quietly.

Carranya blushed. “Father, I can give you my word of honour, as your daughter and as the Crown Princess, that I did no such thing. However, it is true that I boarded the *Paradiso* of my own accord.”

Arlbert was startled. “Of...your own accord? What do you mean, my child? Explain yourself.”

“Father,” Carranya said, slowly, looking at him with determination, “I was aware of the negotiations that took place between you and Prince Wilhelm, though you would not tell me about them. I was old enough to realize that it would mean war; it would mean pain and suffering for us, and for our brothers in Zion. I was resolved to prevent this by any means possible. I left my room, travelled by carriage to Serin’s Peak, and boarded the ship by stealth, determined to reach Caledonia and convince the Emperor not to declare war on the Varald. As the Heir to the Throne, I had to try, and I failed. I know now that my actions were foolish, and that I placed my own life in danger. Forgive me, Father.” Her voice trembled as she recalled the manner in which her mission had come to naught.

The King, who has listened to this narrative with astonishment writ on his face, shook his head. “My daughter, you speak the truth when you say that you acted foolishly. But,” he went on, his voice softening slightly, “I would also say that you acted bravely and nobly, as I would wish a child of mine to

act; no, as I would wish to act, if circumstances had been otherwise. Tell me, then, how it is that you escaped with your life.”

Her face still troubled, as she recalled those desperate hours, the Princess spoke slowly, explaining how first Ryan and then the Zionese had helped her. When she came to the account of her wound, and how Sergeant Burnfist had treated it, her mother stifled a sob. She kept nothing back, not even the account of her vision of Lady Penelope, or the second attempt on her life by the assassin disguised as a Zionese soldier, except for one detail – the message she had heard about Ryan. *That message was meant for him and for him alone*, she thought.

As she finished, the Queen rose from her chair and held her only child close to her, reluctant to let go. “Carranya, my child....the Infinity has truly preserved you and brought you back to me. Are you still suffering? Are your wounds healed?” she asked, brokenly.

“Mother, forgive me for causing you sorrow,” Carranya said, remorsefully, embracing her in turn. “And I give you my word of honour that my wounds are not serious – no, indeed, they are almost fully healed now.”

“My child, you have no need to ask me for forgiveness,” Queen Katarina replied, placing a maternal hand over Carranya’s injured arm. “You have been tried by fire, as the men of the First Generation would say, and the fire could not consume you. May the Infinity continue to preserve you, that you may live and reign, my child. This is my wish for you.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Carranya said, bowing her head as Katarina placed her hand over it in a gesture of benediction. The King, clearing his throat nervously, finally spoke.

“Carranya,” he said, “if any other living soul in the kingdom, though he were my closest friend, had told me a tale such as yours, I would have dismissed him instantly as an audacious liar. But I have spoken to Captain Baker as well, and a hard-headed sailor such as him could never tell a lie of that sort. My daughter, despite your youthful errors, you clearly possess gifts of a most unusual kind – gifts that I, in my excessive caution, had failed to appreciate. Learn to use them for the good of the kingdom, Carranya, for we will soon have need of them.”

“Do you mean that war is inevitable, Father?” Carranya asked, softly.

“I pray that it may not be so,” the King said, and he explained what he had learned from the Intelligence agents, which he had already shared with his wife.

“So there is still hope, Father,” the Princess said. “But if our hope should prove vain, then...”

“If it should come to pass, the people will have need of you. You possess the gift of inspiring loyalty and admiration in your subjects, and we may well have need of it, to give us courage during dark times. I only ask one thing of you, my daughter, which is that you trust me, and obey me. Even if your youthful heart should whisper dangerous plans to you, promise me that you will pay them no heed. I say this not

only as King of Galvenia, but as your father, and as one who desires that you live and prosper above everything else.”

“I will promise, Father, but promise me one thing in return,” Carranya said, smiling.

“Let me hear what it is, first, my daughter,” the King replied.

“Simply this: that, if at some time in the future, a brave action on my part is required – one without which the Kingdom, or the people, would be defeated or left without hope – that you would not restrain me, Father. I cannot predict the future, but I sense that in the days to come, sacrifices will be required of us all, including myself. If such a time ever comes, promise me this, Father.”

The King was silent, swayed by his daughter’s words, but at the same time unwilling to make a promise that he considered imprudent. “My daughter, if…”

“She’s right, Arlbert,” the Queen said, suddenly. “There may be a time when she may have to take a risk for the sake of the Kingdom. And while as a mother, I would say no with all my heart, the Kingdom is greater than any of us.”

“Katarina,” the King said, “I pray that it may never come to this. You have my promise, daughter, but remember to honour yours as well. If you should be called by Fate to make a sacrifice, make it, my child, but only for the sake of the Kingdom. Remember that the people need you – no, Carranya, that *we* need you, and do nothing imprudent. Promise me this, Carranya.”

“I do, Father. Thank you,” Carranya said, and bowed to receive her father’s blessing, which he conferred with trembling hands. Then, aware of the enormity of what each of them had said, they quietly began to make preparations to receive the people.

And so it was that, a little while later, a throng of loyal citizens of Davenport made their way into the Mayor’s house, many of them for the first time in their lives. As they made their way into the large hall, where the King and Queen were seated in state, the Princess at the King’s right hand, they were carefully scrutinized by a small band of armed men, which included Captain Baker, Agent Striker, and two men from the Territorial Army.

“Goodness, what do we have here?” Striker said, raising his eyebrows, as a group of seven young men trotted up to the entrance. They were wearing colourful masks, complete with false fur, representing various forest animals, “And who might you be, gentlemen?”

The voice that answered was confident, even cocky, but not devoid of charm. “Well, Major-General, we’re just a group of entertainers, making names for ourselves all over Davenport, and we’re here to ensure that the Royals have some *fun!*” he said.

“Oh, is that so?” Striker said, amused. “Entertain me, then.”

“Are you kidding, Soldier Boy?” the young man – evidently the group’s leader – said, tossing his head back. “But hey, since I’m a nice guy, I’ll tell you a joke. What’s the difference between your mom and a Varaldian soldier’s grandmother?”

“I could think of several,” Striker said, still grinning, “but which do you have in mind?”

“Aw, there’s only one, Inspector,” the man said. “The Varaldian soldier’s Gran is prettier. *Much* prettier!”

The young man’s companions all laughed loyally, though Captain Baker and the Army men glared at him.

“I say,” the Agent replied, with a short laugh, “you truly need to work on your punchlines, my furry friend.”

“Phooey! I thought that was rather good, myself!” the man protested. “So can we go now?”

“Well, as long as you promise not to indulge in any maternal-themed jokes at Royalty’s expense, I see no objection,” said Striker, holding out his hand.

“Haha! I like this one,” the ‘entertainer’ shot back. “He’s no Varaldian soldier, that’s for sure, guys!” This elicited much good-humoured laughter from the other six men, and even the stern Captain Baker relaxed a little.

“But we must check them, just to be on the safe side,” one of the Territorial soldiers suggested. “Take off the mask, clown boy, and let’s see who you guys are.”

“Fine with me,” the ringleader replied, and lifted his mask, revealing a tanned, blond young man, who was grinning widely. The others, following his cue, raised their masks as well. “Good enough for you?” he said, chuckling.

“They’re all local boys, Captain Baker,” the soldier said, relieved. “Now run along, but no monkey tricks from the likes of you, do you understand?”

“We’re not monkeys, buddy, we’re nice, friendly forest creatures,” the man replied, still in high spirits. “Soldiers, the Brotherhood of the Raccoon thanks you for your service.” And before any of them could reply, the man and his followers slipped into the hall, mingling with the crowd.

If only Mother could have heard that one, Agent Striker thought, chuckling quietly. The Brotherhood of the Raccoon? Our Galvenian friends have a strange sense of humour, indeed!

Within the hall, things were much more decorous. Ryan, accompanied by his parents, was receiving a decoration from the King for his recent actions, while Queen Katarina looked at him with as much fondness as if he had been her own son.

“Mr. Eramond, you have rendered the greatest possible service to our Kingdom,” the King was saying, gravely. “I know that neither words nor honours can express our gratitude towards you, for saving the life of the Crown Princess. May your future be as bright as your brave deeds promise.”

Ryan, kneeling and bending low, received the King's benediction, and the medal was placed around his neck. Filled with pride, his parents also received their blessings from the King and Queen, and then took their places at the table of honour, where the Princess was waiting to receive them. Ryan, sitting down with a pleased look on his face, flushed as he noted that Lavie and her parents were sitting on the other side, immediately next to Carranya. However, they were apparently deep in conversation, and Lavie did not seem to notice him.

"People of Davenport," Queen Katarina said, "I thank you from the bottom of my heart, not only as your Queen, but as a mother. Not only did one of your citizens save my own child's precious life, but the welcome you have given her – and us – is something we shall never forget. May the Infinity preserve you, and your children's children."

"And now," Mayor Saunders said, effusively, "let us rejoice, for our King and Queen are with us! I welcome my fellow citizens to..."

But this was as far as he got, for the seven men in animal masks suddenly stepped forward to the front of the crowd, and burst into song. Their voices were far from melodious, and did not harmonize in any known way, but it was hard to resist a smile on hearing what they sang:

*From the taxes we can't pay,
to the town we gave away,
Our hearts sing praise to thee, O Galvenia...
May you live and prosper...*

"Silence!" Mayor Saunders exploded, as the King looked on in consternation. "Who are you hoodlums, to disrespect our King and country in this way?"

"Oh, look, it's the Mayor!" the group's leader said, and his followers made derisive noises. "Let's have a special song, just for him!"

"You got it, bro!" the group replied in chorus, and began:

*Snoring away in his mansion
While citizens do all the work,
Some of us call him a genius,
The rest of us call him a jerk!*

*God bless our Mayor, the fat old slob,
God bless our Mayor, who can't do his job...*

"**Silence!**" the Mayor said, turning extremely red, as several members of the audience – nay, even the guests at the table, including Lavie and Ryan – burst into laughter. Even the Princess was reduced to hiding her smile behind a fan, and the King and Queen looked pleasantly surprised rather than dismayed. "Guards! Remove these men from the hall at once!"

“Oh, I don’t think so,” the group’s leader said, sarcastically, as he removed a package from his baggy clothing and extracted a small camera, with which he proceeded to take a very unflattering picture of the Mayor, shouting and gesticulating, with the Royal Family in the background. “Enjoy seeing yourself in the papers, Your Honour!”

“Don’t let them get away!” the Mayor shouted, but they were already almost out of the hall, when – turning to leave – they shouted out: “The Brotherhood of the Raccoon thanks you, Your Majesty!”

“Stop them!” Mayor Saunders shouted, almost despairingly, but the “Brotherhood” was gone.

Captain Baker, who had been watching this scene with silent amusement – for, though a loyal citizen, he had little admiration for Saunders and his pomposity – spoke out in a calm, clear voice. “Do you want us to apprehend these men, Mayor? I’m afraid they must have gone quite far by now.”

“Never mind,” Saunders said, fuming as he returned to his seat at the table. And, adding insult to injury, most of the crowd continued laughing.

“I must say,” the King said, in a surprisingly good-natured tone, “that though I could certainly wish for a little more refinement, the rustic entertainments of Davenport do have their own charm.”

“Your Majesty, I apologize most humbly...” Saunders stammered.

“Oh, nonsense, Mayor,” the King replied. “A little rough music never harmed anyone, did it? And now, let us dine together.”

The Academy choir stepped manfully into the breach, and the original versions of “O Galvenia” and “God Bless Our King” were played, as the excited crowd settled down to their banquet.

“Miss Lavie, who on earth was that?” the Princess asked, lowering her fan.

“It must be some of the boys from Davenport Academy, Princess,” Lavie replied, smiling. “And don’t tell him I said this, but our Mayor certainly can use a wake-up call every now and then!”

“I am certainly going to have a hard time remembering the original lyrics after hearing this particular version,” the Princess admitted, and they both laughed.

Ryan, who had recognized the leader’s voice during his impromptu photography, was also chuckling to himself. *Of all the crazy ideas you’ve ever had, Armin, this might be the craziest*, he thought.

Fortunately for all concerned, the self-proclaimed Brotherhood did not make any further appearances that day or that night, and all went well for the most part. Even Alphonse Spenson, looking uncomfortable in an old tuxedo, was introduced to the King and Queen as “the literary light of Davenport”, and presented them with an autographed copy of *Gravity’s Thundercloud*, which Queen Katarina received with polite gratitude. Finally, as the audiences and then the supper banquet went by, the Mayor – having recovered some of his composure – announced the opening of the celebratory

dances. Leading the set were the King and Queen, who – to Ryan’s surprise – were both no novices on the dance floor. He himself was invited to lead Princess Carranya in the first steps of the waltz, and did so rather self-consciously, causing much innocent amusement to Lavie as well as to his parents.

“He’s almost as good as you, Theo,” Sheila said, laughing, though she was secretly proud of the honour that her son had been given.

“Very funny, dear,” Theo replied, chuckling.

As the first dance came to an end, the Royal Family regained their places, and Mrs. Webster, Davenport Academy’s music teacher, came forward to provide some lighter accompaniment as the young people came forward. Lavie, rising from her chair, looked in Ryan’s direction.

Dad said I ought to be nice to her, Ryan thought, catching her eye, so I might as well invite her. After all, she doesn’t care much for dancing, so she’ll probably say no anyway. But it’s the thought that counts, right? Smiling at this reflection, he began to take a few steps in her direction, when he found his path blocked by someone.

“Hey, mister, where do you think you’re going?” a voice said, insinuatingly, and Ryan knew who it was before he even looked. Marianne was wearing exactly the same clothes she had on the night they’d shared their first dance, and after a few seconds of indecision, Ryan turned to face her directly.

“I was wondering where you’d gone off to,” he said, lightly.

“Well, you’re not going anywhere!” she said, and taking him by the hand, they both stepped onto the floor, and began to dance slowly.

Lavie, watching this little scene, returned to her seat in stony silence. Her father, who was also watching events unfold with an expression of concern, leaned forward. “Lavie...”

“It’s nothing, Daddy,” she said, shaking her head and closing her eyes. *Ryan....she thought, feeling once again too tired to even summon up a “you jerk!”* Emily, looking at Lavie’s expression, sighed.

“Good heavens, Theo,” Sheila said, surprised, “what is our boy up to?”

“Looks like he’s either being silly, or has an extremely forgiving nature,” Theodore replied, drily.

Carranya, seated beside her mother at this point, did not miss the import of what had happened either. *Stay strong, Lavie, she thought. I hope you can take it in your stride.*

So absorbed were they in this little scene that they failed to notice an elderly lady, with a sprightly step, wearing an old-fashioned Court dress, who was walking across the hall, directly up to the Royal Family.

“Good evening, Your Majesty,” she said, gently, in a refined accent. “I’m glad I’m not too late to have the honour of meeting you.”

“The pleasure is ours, my lady,” the King replied. “And whom do I have the honour of speaking to?”

The lady laughed. "Good heavens, Your Majesty, I can't blame you for not remembering. The last time I saw you was when you were a young man, at the birth of your little girl. I'm afraid I've led a rather retired life since then."

"By the Infinity!" the King exclaimed. "Mrs. Lancaster, is that truly you? This is a pleasure indeed!"

"You always did have a good memory, Your Majesty," Anne Lancaster replied with a smile. "And Her Majesty – and, if I am not mistaken, would that be the Crown Princess? Your Highness, I am indeed grateful that you were returned safely to us. Thank the Infinity that you were unharmed."

"Thank you indeed, and I am grateful for the opportunity to meet you, my lady," Carranya replied, kindly. "Your granddaughter Lavender was just telling me about you yesterday."

"Lavie? Oh, my merciful heavens, have you made her acquaintance? How delightful. Is she here, I wonder?" Anne asked. "I was hoping I could meet her here, you know."

"There she is, with her parents," Carranya said, looking in their direction, "but I'm afraid she isn't having the most pleasant of evenings at this moment, my lady."

"Why not?" Anne asked, surprised. "Surely a young lady like her would appreciate all this finery and display, even if her father is something of a radical?"

Carranya laughed. *What a pleasant laugh she has*, Anne thought. *I'm glad she and Lavie seem to be on good terms. A little touch of nobility can't do her any harm, especially in a town like Davenport.* "I'm afraid that even finery and display can pall when something else is missing," she said, diplomatically.

Anne Lancaster leaned closer. "What do you mean, your Highness?"

Lowering her voice to a whisper, Carranya embarked upon a brief explanation. Anne nodded sympathetically. "Oh dear, so that's what it is," she said, then brightened as an idea occurred to her. She whispered something back to the Princess.

"Mrs. Lancaster, that's a wonderful idea!" Carranya said. Walking up to the piano, the Princess whispered a few words to Mrs. Webster, who listened to her instructions, then got up from her stool with a smile, the music temporarily stopped.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that my own little repertoire of music is almost exhausted. Her Highness has kindly suggested a substitute, who incidentally happens to be one of my most talented pupils. Miss Lavender Regale, would you replace me, if you please?"

Startled at hearing her own name, Lavie looked up at the piano, and saw both Anne and the Princess standing next to her teacher. *Princess, you shouldn't....and, ohmygosh! Gran! Gran's here!* Waving excitedly in their direction, she walked towards them.

"Goodness, Sigmund....is that *Mother* I see over there?" Emily exclaimed.

"I think so," Sigmund said, smiling. "And she's picked an excellent time to arrive, at least for Lavie."

“Gran,” Lavie whispered, as they embraced, “what are you doing here?”

“You know what they say, dear,” Anne replied. “The fairy godmother always turns up when she’s needed the most! Now run along and play your best, dear. They’re all waiting for you.”

“I will, Gran!” Lavie said, smiling.

And, indeed, the crowd responded with enthusiasm to the change of performer, as Lavie’s music was certainly more lively than Mrs. Webster’s old-fashioned marches and ballads. Gratitude to both the Princess and her grandmother surged within her, and each song she played was greeted with enthusiastic applause and energetic dancing. On more than one occasion, Ryan and Marianne happened to pass near her, leaning close to each other, and Marianne even cast a curious glance at her, but she kept her eyes resolutely on her music scores and keys.

I’ll live through this and keep playing as well as I can, for Gran and for the Princess, Lavie thought, as her fingers travelled the length of the keyboard. Or die trying!

It was a good hour and a half before the city’s clock struck eleven, marking the end of official festivities. The crowd, who had thoroughly enjoyed themselves, slowly dispersed, talking happily among themselves, many of them stopping to smile at Lavie or say a few words of appreciation. Finally, Queen Katarina herself approached Lavie, who blushed with pleasure.

“My dear young lady, that was quite remarkable indeed,” the Queen said. “I do wish you could come and play at the Palace, someday! Some of our musicians can be rather slow and sedate, I’m afraid,” she added, lowering her voice and smiling at Lavie.

“Thank you, Your Majesty!” Lavie said brightly, curtsying. “I’m, um, glad you enjoyed it.” *Ohmygosh, I hope the Princess hasn’t told her mother about....She really is a nice lady, though. I guess you can be a good person, even if you’re not a particularly good ruler!*

“We most certainly did, Miss Regale,” the King said, amiably. “And it was a pleasure for us to make the acquaintance of your grandmother, too. My own father and mother always spoke highly of her.”

Lavie laughed. “Gran does tend to have that effect on people, Your Majesty,” she replied.

“Oh, do I?” Anne Lancaster said, amused, walking up to Lavie. “Well, I’ll leave you to be the judge of that, dearie. But this most certainly has been a memorable evening, Your Majesty.”

“I would agree whole-heartedly,” said Princess Carranya, holding out her hand to Lavie. “And I do join my mother in hoping that you’ll visit us at the Palace when you have the time. That was very well played, and very spirited indeed, Lavie.”

“Thank you, Princess,” Lavie said, taking her hand.

“I’ve always wished my daughter could have more friends,” the Queen said apologetically, “though we do keep her quite safe in the Palace – a little *too* safe, I’m afraid. Please do come, with your parents and with your grandmother, and give us the pleasure of your company when you can.”

Carranya laughed. “That sounds like an excellent idea, Mother,” she replied, winking surreptitiously at Lavie, who stifled a giggle.

A little later, the reception was at an end, and Lavie – accompanied by her parents and her grandmother – walked towards her home, feeling exhausted but strangely pleased.

“Mother,” Emily Regale asked, pleased and surprised, “what brings you here?”

Anne Lancaster beamed. “Oh, Emily, I’m sure you remember that Arlbert’s father, King George the Fourth, was always a friend of your father’s. When I heard that he was hosting this gathering at Davenport, I told myself I had to come along. I’m only glad I arrived on time.”

“And it was most fortunate that you did,” Sigmund said, soberly but kindly. “I’d say your timing was quite perfect, especially where Lavie was concerned.”

“Very funny, Daddy,” Lavie said, laughing as she and Anne walked hand in hand. “But true, too!”

“Ah, sweetie, there are still some things I can do for you at my age,” Anne replied, with a wink. “And I’m glad that the Princess took my suggestion seriously. She is a wonderful young lady, though I say so myself.”

“Ohmygosh, was that *your* idea, Gran?” Lavie asked.

“Let’s just say that the Princess thought you needed a little diversion, and that was all I could think of at the moment, Lavie,” Anne said happily. “And I’m glad you rose to the occasion.”

“You certainly did, Lavie,” Sigmund said appreciatively. “And while I was quite surprised to see you here, I’m glad for her sake that you came by, Anne.”

“Why, thank you, Sigmund,” Anne said, lightly. “Well, I suppose I’ll just stay at the inn tonight, and...”

“Gran, wait,” Lavie said, hurriedly. “Why don’t you come and stay with us tonight, and tomorrow, after the King and Queen have gone, I’ll come back with you to Mann Island! The Princess told me I needed to catch up on my archery, you know!”

Anne looked at her granddaughter curiously. “Now, did she? That Princess is certainly an intelligent young woman, Lavie, though you’ll always be my favourite. And I’d always be glad of some company on the ferry, that’s for sure!”

“You’re always welcome to stay with us, you know,” Sigmund added, hesitantly, with a slow nod of his head. “After all, I’m sure Davenport Inn would be packed with visitors because of the King’s visit, and besides, you’d be much more comfortable at Casa Regale.”

“Yes, Mother,” Emily added, obviously pleased with Sigmund’s suggestion. “Besides, Lavie’s idea is a good one, even to my eyes. I think a little change of air would do her good for a while.”

“Why, Sigmund, I do believe Lavie is having a good influence on you,” Anne said, surprised. “Well, since all of you are inviting me, I’d be delighted to spend a little more time in your company. Goodness, I *am* tired.” She yawned, and Lavie gave her hand a friendly squeeze.

“We all are, Gran,” she said. “Come on, let’s get home and get a good night’s sleep, before tomorrow’s journey!”

And with these and similar friendly exchanges, the Regales reached home, and for a while, Ryan Eramond was quite forgotten.

The next day, the Royal Family left Davenport to the accompaniment of as much fanfare as Carranya’s arrival had received, though this time, there were genuine tears of regret mingled with the rejoicing. After all, a visit from a monarch, whatever one’s political beliefs, is a memorable occasion indeed, and this visit was no ordinary visit. Many of the simple folks of Davenport went away touched by the Princess’ kindness and her parents’ generosity, which extended to the announcement of new public funds to repair the paths along Davenport Woods, to expand Davenport Academy, and to renovate the little Church of Infinity chapel that Sister Miriam and her colleagues occupied. Even the most cynical noted with pleasure that Jerry Saunders was kept firmly in his place by the King, and that pressure to act more quickly was put on him in subtle, but evident, ways.

But at last, the moment had come for their departure, and the Royal Family returned, in procession, to the ship that had brought them here, accompanied by Captain Baker’s devoted Marines as well as the Admiral’s own men. Ryan was once again given the honour of carrying the Galvenian flag, accompanied by his parents, and Lavie shared the duties of carrying Carranya’s train with Charlotte, who found her quite an agreeable companion. And of course, at the very head, were the King and Queen in all their regalia, accompanied by the Princess, wearing the same golden dress that she had worn upon her arrival, though with the addition of a golden cloak this time. Ryan, still feeling strangely guilty over the events of last night, cast a surreptitious glance at Lavie every now and then, but she seemed to be engaged in amiable conversation with the young girl beside her, and did not seem to notice him.

Good to see that she isn’t blowing up over the whole thing, he thought. The last thing I need now is Lavie in one of her violent moods.

“It is not every day that Davenport is visited by an angel, Sister,” Hocha observed, teasingly, looking at the procession.

“Now, Mr. Hocha, you know she’s not *really* an angel,” Sister Miriam protested, “though I must say she does come quite close.”

“Ho, ho! Where’s Saunders, lads? Is he still sleeping?” Hughburt observed, watching Saunders hurriedly make his way through the crowd to catch up with the procession.

As they reached the ship, their guard of honour – including Ryan, Lavie and the Marines of the *Raymond Chester* – fell back, and descended the gangplank. Then, standing in full view of the crowds – many of whom were waving handkerchiefs and launching flowers in his family’s direction – King Arlbert spoke.

“People of Davenport,” he said, “there is little I can say to express either my joy or my gratitude to you. Though the world we live in is uncertain and troubled, the warmth of your welcome reassures me that the values of the Kingdom of Galvenia remain alive, and that they will never perish. Though we leave you now, you will always be dear to us, and we shall strive to keep your interests in mind at all times. Farewell, my loyal subjects.”

It was now Carranya who stepped forward, the morning sun reflecting off the golden hood she was now wearing.

“My friends,” she said, in a steady voice, “I have, perhaps, already spoken to you many times, but I must ask for your patience for a little while longer. I call you friends, because that is what you have been to me, and will always be. May Davenport, and all the friends I have made here, be blessed and prosper, for generations to come.” Her voice trembled slightly, and she lifted her hood away. “I will never forget you,” she ended, simply, and bowed her head.

The applause that followed these brief statements was deafening, accompanied as it was by shouts of joy, protests against their departure, and even snatches of “O Galvenia” and “Flower of Lorean”, all melting together spontaneously. The Royal Family stood on the deck as their ship began to move away slowly, while the crowd shouted out their goodbyes, waving their handkerchiefs.

Ryan, who with his parents had rejoined the crowd in bidding the Princess farewell, was surprised by a touch on his shoulder.

“Who’s that?” he said, turning around.

“Hey, hey, Compadre! Congratulations on becoming a celebrity,” Armin Tamas said, grinning broadly. “So is that your new job, Eramond? Royal Flag Bearer? I’m sure it pays well, so perhaps you could spare a few dollars for some of your commoner friends...”

“Oh, give it up, Armin,” Ryan replied, laughing. “And just what were you doing back there at last night’s ball, might I ask?”

“You ask about the secret affairs of the Brotherhood?” Armin said, in a whisper. “Well, let me show you *what* I was up to!” He took out a folded copy of the *Davenport Herald* from his pocket, and the headline showed an irate Mayor, with a smiling crowd – including the Queen of Galvenia – in the background. “SAUNDERS EMBARRASSES HIMSELF AT ROYAL BALL”, the headline read.

“Oh God, Armin, don’t tell me you’re working for the Press now,” Ryan said, groaning. “And besides, when did the *Herald* become a tabloid? They normally print boring news about Mrs. Regale’s garden, or Davenport Academy’s latest sporting triumphs.”

“I work for no one, Lord Ryan, except the highest bidder,” Armin said, with a wink. “And to answer your question, the *Herald* has a new sub-editor, who wants the local news to be a little more colorful! Heck, he’s almost an honorary Raccoon himself!”

Ryan, taking the paper from Armin, opened it, and was horrified to find himself dancing with the Princess on page two, looking quite awkward. Below the picture was an article with the title “A Summer Romance! Will the local hero and the blushing Princess be our next King and Queen?”

“*Armin!*” Ryan protested. “Just what the hell is this supposed to mean? The Royal Family could seriously get on your case for doing something like this! Besides, that was just a social occasion.....And just how did you take this picture, anyway?”

“Do I detect the beginnings of a blush, Prince Ryan?” Armin joked. “I must say I’m a little bit *jealous!* Just think of it: Ryan the hero, with his sword and gun, dispatching the evil pirates, while Magical Princess Carranya looks on admiringly. I can just see the cover of a romance novel like that, you know. Maybe I should *write* one myself, I’m sure all the maidens of Davenport would just *love* to read it!”

“Shut up, Armin,” Ryan said irritably. “You sound just like Cathy and Lavie, with their snake demons!”

“Hey, lighten up, Ryan,” Armin said, still unashamed. “I thought Henrik was the straight-laced one, not you! And besides, to answer your question, the secret is diversion, Mr. Eramond. While we gave the Mayor a little light music, some of us sneaked in among the crowd, and took our picture while no one was looking. Republican cameras are awesome, let me tell you.”

“Oh, great,” Ryan groaned again. “Not only do you make public spectacles of yourselves, but you take pictures of the Royal Family using a smuggled camera? You’re one of a kind, Armin.”

“And you’re *too* kind,” Armin quipped. “Now I’d love to stay and chat a little, but duty calls me, and I must go. Be sure to say hi to old Henrik as well, and reassure him that we remain....The Three Compadres!”

“Indeed we do,” Ryan said, smiling despite himself. *If this is another of Armin’s get-rich-quick schemes, I pity the editor of the Davenport Herald. He can’t generate news now that the Royals have left, after all!* “Enjoy the work, Armin, and give my regards to Rachel if you see her.”

“Ha, ha, Ryan, I’ll make sure I do that! Now, as they say in San Delas, *adios, amigo!*” And with these words, Armin scampered away, perhaps in search of his next “scoop”.

In the meantime, at the Regales’ home, Lavie and her grandmother were making preparations for departure, ably assisted by Carmen.

“So apart from staying over with me, what would you like to do in Mann Island, dear?” Anne was asking, as she finished packing her small suitcase, setting it down on the bed with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Well, Gran, like I said earlier, the Princess told me I should keep in touch with my archery, so I thought I’d go and meet Mr. Evens, and see what else he could teach me. I could also pay a visit to some of my friends in Westchester, just for fun!”

“That sounds nice, dear. And you know you’re welcome to stay for as many days as you want, as long as your parents don’t mind,” Anne replied.

“Oh, take your time, Lavie,” said Emily, encouragingly. “After all, the last few days would hardly qualify as ‘normal’ for you – there was your trip to that base, and then the return home, and the Royal Family coming over. A little rest would do you good, and I’ve always found the old place very restful myself.”

“A base?” Anne Lancaster exclaimed. “Do you mean a military base, Emily dear? Just what has Lavie been up to?”

“Oh, I’ll explain it all to you, Gran! It’s a long story!” Lavie said with a smile, as she packed some spare ribbons in a corner of her suitcase.

“Indeed, dearest,” Sigmund said with approval. “A little change of scenery is always a good thing. Sometimes, after a major event like this takes place, the best thing to do is just step away and take some time to consider what has just happened. And I’m quite sure your grandmother will help you out with that.”

“Why, thank you again, Sigmund,” Anne said. “And don’t worry, Lavie is quite safe with me! We must get going, though, the next ferry will leave in half an hour, and we do need to get our seats a little ahead of time.”

“I’m all done, Gran!” Lavie said exultantly, as – with a little help from Carmen – she managed to fit in all her clothes, as well as her longbow and some of her books. “Let’s hit the road!”

“As you wish, sweetie,” Anne said, and accompanied by Emily and Sigmund, the pair made their way to the porch.

“Now have a nice time, Lavie, and look at the bright side of things, all right?” Emily said, embracing her.

“I will, Mom,” Lavie reassured her.

“Well said, Emily,” Sigmund added, giving Lavie a brief hug as well. “And I’m sure your trip will be far less strenuous than the one we just took together!” They both started laughing at the recollection, and then – with her parents still standing on the porch, waving goodbye – Lavie set off, in her grandmother’s company. *They all know....about Ryan, she thought, and that’s why they don’t want me feeling bad. Well, a deputy doesn’t complain! And who knows what will happen when I get back?*

The walk to the docks took only a short time, and they were surprised to find that the ferry to Mann Island was comfortably empty.

“Why, I was expecting a much larger crowd!” Anne exclaimed, as the boatman handed them their tickets.

“They’ll come by later, ma’am,” he explained. “A lot of the folks who came down will probably stay the night at the inn, or perhaps have a little celebration of their own at the Queen’s Head. Can’t blame them, seeing the King is a heady experience! Rule Galvenia!”

“Rule Galvenia, indeed,” Anne said, the familiar words bringing back memories of Court festivities, long ago. “Well, it looks like we have a choice of seats, Lavie, so why don’t we pick a comfortable corner, and you can tell me what you’ve been up to.”

“Sure, Gran!” Lavie replied with a broad smile, and the two of them found a comfortable place near the rear. A few more men and women, many of them looking tired but happy after the morning’s events, made their way to the remaining seats, and the ferry slowly left the docks.

“So tell me, dear,” Anne said, lowering her shawl, “what’s all this about a base?”

“Oh, the base? Well, remember the summer job I was telling you about, Gran?” Lavie said, frowning as she made an effort to recall all the events of those eventful days.

“I certainly do, Lavie. You and Ryan were delivering packages, right? So did you have to go to a military base? I’ve hardly been to those places myself; even Gerald, the dear man, confined himself to civil cases after we settled down on Mann Island.”

“Not quite, Gran,” Lavie said, blushing at the mention of Ryan’s name. Her grandmother noted this with some amusement, but refrained from commenting on it. “You see, Ryan and I were supposed to go to Caledonia to deliver a package, and Mr. Eramond was really cool, and got us a couple of tickets on board the *Paradiso*!”

“The *Paradiso*? Why, Lavie, dear, that’s very kind of him!” Anne exclaimed. “But what does that have to do with a military base?”

“Well...” Lavie said, embarrassed, “I wanted to look my best for R – for the trip, so I told Ryan to go ahead and hold our places, while I added the finishing touches. Unfortunately, by the time Ryan made it there, the ship was already leaving, so he jumped on board. He tried to make them stop, but the Captain refused to...and I guess I was rather mad at him, though it wasn’t really his fault.” She flushed at the recollection of her arriving, breathless, at the Docks, watching Ryan and the *Paradiso* disappear into the morning sun.

“Looking your best?” Anne raised her shawl slightly to hide the inevitable smile. “Well, I’m sure you were quite disappointed, dear, so I’m not going to lecture you, and I’m sure your father or mother must have done so already.”

“Daddy certainly did,” Lavie said, uncomfortably, “and I was...quite upset. I thought I’d go apologize to Mr. Eramond, but he was so nice! In fact, he had another boat that was leaving around the same time but by a different route, and he offered to have me taken to a base called Checkpoint Bravo, where I could catch up with Ryan! Daddy thought it wouldn’t be safe to have me travel alone, so he came along.”

“*Sigmund*? Really? I must say I didn’t expect that from him,” Anne said with a smile, “which goes to show that I may have misjudged him, poor man. So what happened on the way?”

And, in her usual, breathless, lively and somewhat jumbled fashion, Lavie narrated the incidents that ensued, from the first chat with her father to the journey home and the news of Ryan’s rescue. So absorbed was she in her tale that she continued uninterrupted even as they got off the ferry, and slowly made their way to the Lancaster residence. Mrs. Lancaster listened with much interest, looking serious when she heard of the long wait for Ryan, and somber at the description of Sir Prescott’s visit. They were on the path that led to her home when Lavie finished her story.

“And that’s what happened, Gran...or at least, most of it!” she concluded, laughing. “My, I have been telling you a pretty long story, haven’t I?”

“Lavie, darling,” Anne said with grandmotherly tenderness, “I can see that you’ve done a lot of further growing up in a very short time. And I’m very, very happy that Sigmund was able to support you when you were there.”

“Me too, Gran,” Lavie replied. “It was almost as if he was a different person, when he was out of that library of his. You know, even after we got back, he’d come and listen to me playing the piano! He hasn’t done that in almost two years...”

“Sigmund’s a good man, Lavie,” Anne said, pleased. “It’s just that, when you spend your life collecting objects and studying them, you become a little rusty at dealing with people. You use your brain, but not your heart. Dear Gerald’s father was rather like that, I’m afraid. So was Sir Prescott’s.”

“Sir Chucklehead?” Lavie said, and they both began to laugh. “Oh, Lavie, stop that,” Anne said, between peals of laughter. “I shouldn’t be encouraging you to mock a Peer of the Kingdom in that way, though I must say you had provocation! But it’s true. Sir Turbot Chuselwock has only one son, whom you met so unfortunately. His wife was a Gerius, and a very nice girl indeed, but she had her only son rather late in life, and died soon after Sir Prescott was born. And Sir Turbot was so wrapped up in his collections of art and music that his son grew up rather pampered, I’m afraid.”

“Like me, right?” Lavie said, laughing.

“Not at all, Lavie. Despite your position in life, you’re a very sensible girl, my dear, and I wouldn’t have you otherwise, all airs and graces and nothing else. I’m afraid Sir Turbot and Gerald had rather a falling-out after we married. He thought Gerald had married outside his class, you see.”

“Outside his....What a jerk!” Lavie said, angrily. “How could he say that! Wasn’t your father a knight too, Gran?”

“To people like Sir Turbot, darling, there’s a lot of difference between knights and hereditary nobles, I’m afraid,” Anne explained, as she unlocked the carved door of her home. “Now come in and sit down, Lavie, I’m sure you must be quite exhausted!”

Lavie yawned. “I guess I am!” she said, amused. “So did Granddaddy and Sir Chucklehead’s dad ever make up their quarrel?”

“Well, Sir Chuckle – I mean, Lord Chuselwock did come and visit us when Emily was born,” Anne said, “and he was rather polite after that, so I suppose you could say they did. For all his outdated ideas, he was quite a fine person. But I’m afraid I can’t say the same of his son. Did you find him attractive, dear?”

Lavie laughed, and Anne was reminded of her own laughter when her own mother had proposed – as an “acceptable” alternative to Gerald – an ageing Naval captain from Trinden. “No way, Gran!” she replied, shaking her head emphatically. “In fact, I didn’t like him one bit! He was mean to a young girl there, who was working as a tourist guide to pay her way into a convent in Itaria, and when he met me, he was so *corny*! I mean, you’d think he was reading some sort of handbook, ‘The Twenty-Four by Seven Guide to Romancing Young Ladies’, or something! It was like watching a bad play!” She shuddered. “I’m only glad that sidekick of his turned up, and told him he had to go back to Lorean...”

“Well, Gerald always did say that a mark of true nobility was being courteous to those less fortunate than us, Lavie,” Anne said, nodding her approval, “so I’ll agree with you on that count. As for the compliments” – she chuckled – “my, my, this does bring back memories. I won’t embarrass you with some of the things I’ve had to listen to in my youth, dearie. And as for manuals of deportment, well, I’m afraid young men still do read them, even in this day and age. Most of them are nonsense, you know.”

“You too, Gran?” Lavie said, laughing as she leaned closer to her.

“Indeed, dear. Remember, Lavie, at your age, I looked a lot like you, and Father and Mother were often at court. A young girl in that position often attracts, shall we say, rather heavy-handed and unwanted attentions, as I’m sure you’ll realize.”

“Poor Gran,” Lavie said sympathetically. “Even though I’ve never been to Court, I know what you mean. Some of the boys at the Academy...especially that jerk, Greg! And there’s Luis at the Archery Academy, who keeps trying to do acrobatic stunts to impress me...”

“History repeats itself, dear,” Anne observed. “I know the Itarians don’t like to hear that said, but it’s true. But tell me...” she leaned closer as well, and gave Lavie a meaningful look, “...those boys at the Academy, do they include Ryan Eramond as well?”

Lavie flushed. “Well, G-Gran...”

Anne patted her on the shoulder gently. "Well, I'm afraid Her Highness has, as you young things say, 'spilt the beans', so that was a rhetorical question, darling. She is a delightful young lady, you know. The kind of person you'd want to know even if she was the police constable's daughter, and not the King's."

"She is, Gran," Lavie said warmly. "In fact, she was very good to me when I -..." Her voice faltered, and Anne could see that she had stumbled upon a sore spot.

"Do you want to talk about it, sweetie?" Anne said, sitting down next to her.

"It's strange, Gran, that's exactly how she reacted...the Princess, I mean. I don't know why, but I ended up telling her all about it, too. You see..." And it all came spilling out, in fits and starts. The return home. Greeting Ryan at the docks. Henrik's evasiveness. Then the scene in Davenport Park, which she still could not recall without anger or shame. And finally, the Princess and her words of comfort. Even in her distress, though, Lavie kept the Princess' secret. *It was something she wanted to share with me to make me feel better*, she thought. *I'm not sure if I should be telling anyone else about it, even Gran...*

As she always did where Lavie's troubles were concerned, Anne Lancaster listened sympathetically, holding her the way she had when she was a little girl, and had taken a tumble, or been in some other mishap. At the end of her story, she was quick to provide the edge of her shawl in place of the much-needed handkerchief, and waited till Lavie could compose herself before she spoke.

"Lavie, I'm sorry," she said, finally. "I know that doesn't sound like much, but you know you can always count on your old grandmother for support at a time like this. But tell me, after you'd told the Princess about it all, what did she advise you to do? I have my own ideas, you know, but I'm just curious."

"You know, that's the funny part, Gran," Lavie said, slowly. "She asked me to talk things over with you, and to start working on my archery again. Somehow, she felt that was important. The archery, I mean."

"Archery?" Anne looked puzzled. "What does that have to do with the price of tea in Itaria, dearie? I can understand her asking you to turn to a hobby for comfort, but why archery in particular?"

"She said....oh, I can't remember the exact words, Gran, but she said that I might have an important part to play in.....in 'the strange world we were living in'. That was it, I *think*. It was almost as if....as if she knew something I didn't. And then, you know, I dreamed about archery that very night..."

"A dream?" Anne frowned. "What sort of dream, Lavie?"

"I remember it just as clearly as if it had really happened, Gran," Lavie said, a distant look on her face, as she relived that brief but strange experience, putting it into words as best as she can. Anne listened to her narrative with bewilderment, her eyes growing wide as Lavie came to her conclusion. Both of them remained silent for a long while, until Lavie spoke.

"Gran? Are you all right?" she asked, anxiously.

“Oh – Oh, Lavie, I’m sorry. I was just....thinking about something, something that happened long ago, sweetie. I’m not quite sure if it’s important or not. Tell me, did Princess Carranya say anything else to you?”

Lavie blushed. “She did tell me something about....a friend of hers, whom she hoped to meet again someday, but...” She stopped, uncertain how much she ought to reveal.

Anne laughed, a look of understanding on her face. “Oh, my. I ought to have guessed. Misery loves company, as the Varald say, and she was certainly being a good companion to you there, my child. But that’s not what I meant. After she told you about the archery, did she say anything else?”

“Oh, yes, Gran,” Lavie said, looking pleased as the memory came back to her. “She said ‘Good fortune to you, Lavie. May you find the way.’ She said that last bit as if there were capitals in it, ‘The Way’. Just like in the dream, really. What does it mean, Gran? Do you know?”

“Lavie, dear,” Anne Lancaster said, a serious look on her face, “there is something I need to tell you, but I just need a little while to – well, to prepare myself to say it.” Seeing Lavie’s look of concern, she went on in a lighter tone. “Now don’t get alarmed, darling, it’s just something that might take some explaining.”

“I see,” Lavie said, curious to know more. “Is it....something about the Princess, Gran?”

“Oh, no, dear, it’s about you, not the Princess,” Anne replied. “Now, while I make up my mind, why don’t you head over to the Archery Academy for a spell? I heard Mr. Evens was quite eager to hear from you, after you won that contest. Be back by nightfall, though, because we have things to discuss! You might want to spend some time freshening up first, though.”

“I guess I’ll do that, Gran!” Lavie said, quickly unpacking her bow and arrows. Rushing upstairs to wash her face and hands, and to securely fix her red ribbon, she was ready to leave in a few minutes.

“Now enjoy yourself, Lavie, as your new friend told you to. I’ll be waiting for you,” Anne said, embracing her. Lavie hugged her back affectionately, then walked out of the door, quite her normal self. *I wonder why Gran is being so mysterious? Perhaps it’s a story about Granddaddy,* she thought. *And what is Mr. Evens up to?*

Alone in her cottage for now, Anne sat down at the table and sighed. After a few moments’ hesitation, she walked up to her room, unlocked a small drawer in the desk that had belonged to her late husband, and drew a small envelope from it, which she opened. It contained a single sheet of paper, written over on both sides in a clear, firm hand. She already knew the contents by heart, but lifted them close to her eyes once more.

Dear Gerald, she thought, sitting down on her bed, reading the familiar lines slowly. *I know you’ve always been here with me, even after you passed on. I know you’ve watched over me, and over Emily and Lavie, and Sigmund as well. I will do what you asked me, just as I promised. But, just this once, I wish*

you were actually here, and could tell Lavie what happened to you in person. You'd be so proud of her, darling. And you could have explained it much better than I will.

"Lavie!" Joshua Evens, standing outside the gates of the Archery Academy, gave a shout of pleasure. He was engaged in repainting the two large longbows that stood on the posts of the shooting range, assisted by Luis Rodriguez.

Ohmygosh, is he the "Paint-Master" now? Lavie thought, smiling. And I hope Luis isn't in his "let's impress Lavie" mode today!

"Lavie, what a pleasant surprise!" Mr. Evens said, laying down a paintbrush and climbing down from his stepladder. "Luis, my boy, could you hop over to the Mess Hall and ask them to get something ready for us all? It's almost time for tea, you know."

"No problemo, Senor Evans," Luis said, giving Lavie a cocky smile as he dashed towards the Mess Hall.

"Hi, Mr. Evens!" Lavie replied, brightly. "What's new? Giving the Academy a new look?"

"I'm afraid keeping the *old* look in place is enough work for me," Evens said, ruefully, and they both laughed. "So what good wind blows you here? Have you finally decided to take up my offer, and teach archery here for a while?"

"Not exactly," Lavie said, amused by his persistence. "But I did want to keep in touch, and to hone my skills further, if that's possible!"

"Anything is possible when Joshua Evens wills it," the archery teacher said, expansively. "But honestly, what more is left for you to learn, Miss Regale? You've made it to Level Ten, and you've even won my Bangle of Flame, which I thought was out of reach to any young man or woman in Galvenia! Frankly, I think you ought to be giving people lessons, not asking me for them!"

"Didn't you promise to stop asking me about that, if I cleared Level Ten?" Lavie asked, archly.

"Ah! You've got me there, Lavie. But, honestly, you've learned everything there is for a young lady like you to know. I'm not sure what more you want to learn!"

"But what about..." Lavie began, then paused. "What about the archers in the Galvenian army? Don't they learn anything more than we do here?"

Evens chuckled. "The Army? My, you certainly are ambitious, Lavie. Are you thinking of trying out for the Army? I didn't think you had it in you."

"I'm not sure if I want to actually *join* the Army," Lavie admitted, "but don't they have special archery skills and techniques that they need to use in battle?"

“Well...” Mr. Evens paused, reflecting on the question at hand. “To tell you the truth, Lavie, some years ago, I used to teach young men the rudiments of military archery. It was meant specially for those who wanted to join the Army, and wanted to try out for the Royal Archers. But with the longbow slowly being replaced by the gun – something I seriously deplore – there haven’t been any takers for that particular course, and I’ve wound it up.”

“I’ve got to agree with you there, Mr. Evens. Guns are silly! Hmph!” Lavie said, annoyed, thinking of a certain dark-haired young man from Davenport who was surprisingly good with his pistol. “But you could teach me what you taught those men, couldn’t you?”

“I most certainly could, Lavie,” Evens said, puzzled, “but, if you’re not trying out for the army, why would you want to learn about that?”

Because the Princess told me to, Lavie thought, smiling to herself, *but I can’t tell him that*. Aloud, she said, “Well, just because it’d be challenging to learn more, Sir! After all, a girl can always learn such techniques for self-defence, can’t she? And a little while ago, I was in a park, and was chased by a giant lizard! I want to make sure that I don’t have to panic the next time I see one!”

“Giant lizards?” Evens looked amused. “And self-defence? I see I shall have to warn all the young men of the Academy about your prowess, once I’ve finished training you.”

“Then you will teach me what you know, won’t you?” Lavie said, gratefully.

“I most certainly will, Lavie. It’s a pleasure to teach someone as motivated as you are, and even if you never make it to the Army, I sympathize with your desire to keep going further! Now why don’t we head over to the Mess Hall for a spot of tea first? After that, prepare to be challenged!” Mr. Evens said, cocking his head towards the range.

“I’m up for it!” Lavie said, happily, as they headed to the Mess Hall.

“Gran, I’m home!” Lavie said happily, walking in through the open front door, and resting her bow and arrows against the wall. “Mr. Evens was there, and he’s started training me in some new archery techniques that he didn’t have the chance to teach for years! Isn’t that cool?”

“That’s very nice indeed, dear,” Anne Lancaster replied. She had exchanged her formal clothes for a simple dress and apron, with one of her favourite shawls, and had quite regained her composure after their earlier conversation. “Now do sit down, Lavie. I’ve made you some of your favourite cookies, as a homecoming treat. There’s a little cocoa too, if you’d like some.”

“Wow, Gran, you are the *best!*” Lavie said, enthusiastically. “All that practice with moving targets has made me hungry! But I hope it wasn’t too much of a bother...”

“Not at all, dear,” Anne said with a smile, as they sat down opposite each other.

“So what was it you wanted to tell me?” Lavie asked, taking an enthusiastic bite out of a nut-filled biscuit. “You sounded quite mysterious back there, Gran.”

“Oh, Lavie,” Anne said, smiling, “it was just that you took me rather by surprise, back there. I’m quite myself now, sweetie, don’t worry. You see, Lavie, a long while ago, when you were just a little girl, something rather unusual happened to Gerald. And, strange as it seems, it’s all connected to what the Princess told you, a couple of days ago.”

“To Granddaddy? What happened to him, Gran?”

“It was when you were about – let me see – about seven years old, Lavie. You’d just come here for a visit with your parents, in the winter, and you and Gerald were playing together happily. I think he actually gave you a toy bow that day, if I’m not mistaken.”

“My first bow? Hey, I remember that, Gran!” Lavie said, laughing. “I kept shooting the arrows into the well by mistake, and Mom had quite a laugh! And Granddaddy kept telling me to aim for the sky, and one of the arrows fell back on my head! Then Daddy and Granddaddy were talking about this book in which three gods were fighting over a magic bow, and....You know, I still have that bow, Gran. It’s in the treasure chest in my room!”

“Do you? That’s nice, dear. Well, the next day, just before you were about to leave, you caught a chill. We thought it was just the weather, but by the next morning, you were quite ill indeed, Lavie. We were all terribly worried.”

“I don’t really remember that, Gran,” Lavie said, “but I do remember a time when I was in bed, and feeling very tired, when I was little. Then an old man came to visit us, and soon after, I got better and went home. Was that the time?”

“I’m surprised you remember that much, sweetie,” Anne said, patting her on the shoulder. “Anyway, you had quite a fever, and couldn’t get out of bed, or even eat very much. Sigmund and Emily were frantic, poor things. Sigmund went all the way back to Davenport and brought a doctor, and I’m afraid his medicine didn’t taste very good, though you did drink it all up like a good girl.”

“Did I?” Lavie said, soberly. “I must have been really sick, then.”

“You were, Lavie. In fact, even after he treated you, you showed no signs of getting better; in fact, you could hardly speak then, except to call for one of us, poor girl. Sigmund was making arrangements to have you taken to the Royal Children’s Infirmary at Lorean, and Gerald was getting a carriage ready to take the three of you there. It was at that moment that he arrived on the scene.”

“Who, Gran?” Lavie asked, anxiously. *Goodness, I don’t even remember all this. Mom and Dad must have been so worried, she thought. It’s strange, I’m normally one of the healthiest people around!*

“An elderly man, who was passing through Mann Island to visit some relatives of his. He saw Gerald and Sigmund talking together outside our cottage, and asked them what the matter was. Actually, he wasn’t

that old, darling, maybe a little older than Sigmund perhaps. He carried a wooden staff with him, and said he was a healer.”

“A healer? You know, Gran, the Princess is a healer too! She was telling us about it at Davenport. Maybe it was someone she knew?”

“Quite possibly, Lavie,” Anne replied, gravely. “Anyway, he asked Sigmund what the matter was, and was quite concerned when he heard that you were ill. Apparently he had a little girl of his own, about your age, and he felt quite sorry for you.”

“A little girl?” Something clicked in Lavie’s mind all of a sudden. “Ohmygosh! That must have been him, then! Gran, do you think it could have been them?”

“What do you mean, dear?” Anne asked, surprised.

“When I met the Princess for the second time, before....before I saw Ryan in the park,” Lavie said, faltering and then going on bravely, “she had companions from out of town – an old man, and a young lady with a funny hat, who must’ve been just a little older than me. They were healers too, and the Princess had taken them to Serin’s Peak to look after a sick sailor! Maybe that was the same man, and his daughter!”

“A funny hat, you say?” Anne smiled. “Well, I have heard of Zionese guilds of healers who wear quite preposterous headgear. But to continue with my story, he offered to cure you free of charge, for his own daughter’s sake. Emily and Gerald were quite opposed to the idea, poor dears. Gerald always was quite the rationalist. He was rather like Ryan, you know, in that way.”

“Like *Ryan*?” Lavie scowled. “Well, I’m sure Granddaddy was much more of a gentleman than Mr. Ryan Eramond!”

“Now, Lavie, calm yourself, dear,” Anne said, gently. “Anyway, they weren’t much in favour, and were about to ask him to leave, but Sigmund was quite desperate, and I think he’d studied a bit about magic and healing when he was at University. Strangely enough, I backed him, because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you, if there was anything that could be done....”

“Thank you, Gran,” Lavie said, softly.

“Oh, don’t thank me, thank your father! He was the determined one. The end of it all was that Sigmund asked the old man to help you, and the man agreed, but said he wanted to speak to your grandfather, first.”

“To Granddaddy? To convince him, perhaps?”

“I suppose so. He asked all of us to leave your room, and only the three of you remained. He and Gerald spoke together for quite some time, and Gerald came out after about an hour, looking very serious indeed, but apparently quite convinced. The old man spent just a few more minutes with you, praying,

and giving you some herbs from his satchel. That evening, you woke up and were able to eat for the first time in almost a week.”

“Wow,” Lavie said, with a look of awe on her face. “I had no idea. I must find him and thank him, now that I know! What was his name, Gran?”

“Do you know, dear, he wouldn’t tell us, at least not at that time. He said he was just an envoy of the Infinity, and that he was glad to have healed you, because he was a father, just as Sigmund and Gerald were. We asked him to stay with us a while, but he said he had work to do, and he left. The next day, your parents took you home, but Gerald was still quite unsettled by the whole thing. He wouldn’t tell me what he was concerned about, and went away to Lorean soon after, saying that he had to visit King’s College. He returned in two days’ time, looking calmer, and apologizing to me for his sudden departure. Then he handed me a letter, sweetie, but said I was to open it only after his death, and after that, life went on quite happily, as it had before.”

“And what did the letter say, Gran?” Lavie asked, in a low voice that was almost a whisper.

In reply, Anne drew the envelope from a pocket of her apron. “I only read it myself the day after Gerald’s funeral,” she said, “and I must say I was quite confused about what it all meant. I’m still not sure, actually, sweetheart. But I think the time has come for you to read it yourself.”

Lavie took the envelope from her grandmother, withdrew the sheet of paper within, and read these words:

“My Rose,

I am writing this to you because you are the only one I can trust with this. While I love my daughter with all my heart, I do not wish to distress her, and while I respect Sigmund, I do not wish him to be carried away by what seems to me sheer moonshine and midsummer madness. But the facts are the facts.

I know that Lavender, my precious grandchild, was healed by the man known as Jonas, after the doctor from Davenport failed to help. I know this because I have seen it with my own eyes, as you did, dearest. And because I cannot bring myself to distrust the man who restored her to life, I must record what he has told me, and trust that you will tell Lavender of it when she is old enough to understand. If the vagaries of life should prevent you from doing so, please entrust this task to Emily for my sake.

I will not pretend to reproduce all that old Jonas had to say, for – like all dealers in fantasy – he had a way of rambling on. But what he told me, in brief, was this. That in less than a generation, our kingdom would be plunged into trouble. That my ancestors, the Lancasters of centuries past, had served the kingdom faithfully, and would serve it now in the person of my granddaughter. And that it was with fear and trepidation that he cured her, because she would have to endure worse trials in future.

I asked him to be more precise, but he refused to say anything more. All he would say was this: “As someone has shown you the way, Sir Gerald, she will show someone the way, when she is fully grown. The rest is confusion, and I cannot presume to look behind the veil.”

I leave this to you, Anne, for it was you who showed me the Way that my own life would take, and who gave me the greatest happiness that a man could hope to know. The experience of a lifetime tells me that what I have recorded above is just the fancy of a fanciful mind, but after seeing Lavender's miraculous recovery, I cannot be sure. I leave it to you to decide, you whose judgment I have always relied upon. If you find nothing of merit in the old man's claims, destroy this, and let no more be said. But if you feel otherwise, tell Lavender the truth, and may the Infinity guide you both.

Yours now and forever, Gerald."

"Did he always call you 'his Rose', Gran?" Lavie asked, dreamily, after she had read the letter through.

Anne wiped away a tear with the corner of her shawl, but she was still smiling. "Yes, he always did, that dear man. Even after the rose grew rather old and faded, to be honest. Gerald was like that."

"Come on, Gran!" Lavie protested. "'Old and faded', indeed! Even now, I'm sure old Mr. Ironside would be more than willing to honour you with his attentions."

Anne laughed. "You silly dear! I was only joking, of course. But goodness, this brings back memories. Gerald always wrote very pretty letters, when he got the chance to. Now you've heard what your grandfather had to say, Lavie. What do you think?"

"I don't know, really, Gran," Lavie said, with a confused look. "I'm not sure even *he* knew, to be honest. But what does he mean by 'The Way'? I keep bumping into that term everywhere! The Princess, my dream, and now Granddaddy!"

"Well, I think we're on more solid ground there, Lavie," Anne replied, "because both Gerald and I knew what that term means, and it's rather an interesting story. But it's getting late, you know. Now why don't you help me get dinner ready? We can discuss it while we're working!"

"A cooking lesson?" Lavie said, amused. "Well, it can't do any harm! Lead on, Gran."

"That's quite good, Lavie," Anne said, looking at the contents of the frying pan with an air of approval. "Now just take hold of the spoon like that, and lift it up."

A little hesitantly, Lavie lifted the rudiments of her omelette from the pan.

"Very good, dear. Now turn it over."

"Turn it over? All right!" said Lavie, and with a flip of her wrist, the omelette – or at least the majority of it – landed on the other side.

"Not quite one hundred percent, sweetie," Anne said, with a chuckle, "but it'll do for now. Now just let it stay like that for a minute or so, and you're done. My, a little more of this, and you'll be just as good as me."

“Stop it, Gran,” Lavie said, giggling. “I know I’m a terrible cook, even if I don’t like to hear people say so.”

“Well, we all have to start somewhere, Lavie,” Anne said, surveying the almost-finished omelette with satisfaction. “Now turn off the stove, and we’re all done.”

“Wow, that was easier than I thought!” Lavie exclaimed. “Except for the part about turning things over. I need more practice, I guess.”

“Oh, there’s time enough for that, Lavie. Do you know, my own mother only taught me how to cook when Gerald and I were about to get married?”

“Really?” Lavie said, surprised. “You must have had a natural talent for it, though!”

“You know what they say, Lavie. Everyone has talent, they just need to apply it the right way. Now, let’s sit down at table, and I’ll tell you another story.”

Within a few minutes, Mrs. Lancaster and her granddaughter were at table, enjoying their simple meal. “So what’s ‘The Way’, Gran?” Lavie asked, in between mouthfuls.

“Let’s start at the very beginning, darling,” Anne said, her brow wrinkled in an effort to collect her thoughts. “I know your father and mother weren’t very particular about religious instruction, and frankly, neither am I. But have you ever read any of the stories about the Itarians and their Holy Book?”

“Daddy used to tell me some of them when I was younger,” Lavie said. “About the First Generations, and how they were wiped away as some sort of punishment.”

“Sigmund certainly has an interesting taste in bedtime stories, I can see,” Anne Lancaster replied, laughing. “Anyway, what I’m telling you now is more or less what my old governess taught me, though Gerald did teach me a little more when we were engaged. According to the legend, when God created us – human beings, I mean – he didn’t want us to settle down, because he was afraid we would get too caught up in our lives, and forget about him. I’m not putting this very elegantly, dear, I’m afraid. Gerald could tell it a little more nicely, because he had to study Itarian as part of his training in law. Anyway, at that time, the first people called God ‘The Purpose’ or ‘The Way of Truth’, or so the story goes.”

“So ‘The Way’ is just another name for God?” Lavie asked, a little disappointed.

“Not quite, dear. Apparently – again, this is just a legend, dear, so don’t take it too literally – God told the first humans that they should wander, living off the land or by hunting, doing good to their fellow men, and never settling down. This early code of conduct was called ‘The Wanderer’s Way’, but it soon became known as just ‘The Way’.”

“You mean a nomadic life, like the desert tribes and chiefs in the Fulton Republic?” Lavie said. “Miss Heaton used to teach us about them in geography.”

“Something of that sort, dear. Anyway, as time passed, men and women began to settle in cities, and the ‘Wanderer’s Way’ no longer held too many charms for them. It was at this time, just before the

Catastrophe, that people began to speak of three Ways, and not one. The first was the Way of Justice, which involved redressing wrongs, fighting wars, ruling over people, enforcing the law, and so on. The second was the Way of Love, which involved caring for each other, raising a family, cultivating the land, protecting nature, curing the sick, and passing on values and meanings from one generation to another. And the third, which was called the Way of Darkness, referred to all forms of evil and wrong-doing. To prosper, men had to follow the first two ways, and stay away from the third.”

“Three Ways? That sounds interesting,” Lavie said.

“Of course, the Itarians claim that God dictated these ideas to our ancestral leaders, who wrote them down in the Holy Book. But Gerald told me that the idea was actually much older than the Itarian religion. In fact, the dear man often claimed that the Itarians had copied their ideas from older, more primitive religions. But I don’t know much about that, Lavie, I’m afraid.”

“Copying? That sounds like something Daddy would say,” Lavie observed, with a smile.

“Is that so, dear? Well, over time, once the great empires – especially the Zion and the Varald – came into being, the idea became a lot more formalized, and even in countries where the Itarian religion wasn’t followed, it became a tradition that people had to choose one of the Ways, and follow it faithfully throughout life. Of course, this was much more important among the nobility than among the common folk, many of whom had only heard vague legends from their ancestors, and had never read about the Ways themselves.”

“Choosing a Way? How did they do that, Gran?” Lavie said, looking intently at Anne.

“Well, it was often rather pre-defined, Lavie. Men, especially soldiers, had to uphold the Way of Justice. Women, especially married women, were enjoined to follow the Way of Love. But of course, it wasn’t always that water-tight. If a woman was a Queen or an Empress, she had to follow the Way of Justice, and if a nobleman lived off the land, he had to follow the Way of Love, caring not only for the peasants under him, but for his animals and crops as well. And of course, the sins listed in the Way of Darkness, such as murder, treason and theft, became criminal offences in most countries, which is why the laws of most countries are still closely related to Itarian law.”

“I know which way *you* chose, Gran,” Lavie said, hugging her grandmother. “But what does this have to do with what the Princess said, or with what happened to Granddaddy? Does it mean that I, too, have to choose my own Way?”

“Well, there’s a little more to the story, dearie,” Anne said, patting her hand. “About four hundred years ago – after Galvenia became independent, but before the Commonwealth came to be – a group of thinkers, from all over Terra, met in Caledonia, the capital of the Zion Empire, to discuss the Ways, and whether they still meant anything in a changing world.”

“And what did they decide, Gran?” Lavie asked.

“Well, Lavie, I can’t tell you *all* that they said, because that would fill a book!” Anne laughed. “But they did say one thing that was to be quite influential. They said that, to truly live one’s life well, it wasn’t enough to choose one Way or the other. Rather, they said, all of us needed to combine justice *and* love, and by doing so, we would lay the foundations for a brighter future. This, they said, was the true Way.”

“That sounds nice, Gran,” Lavie said, appreciatively. “And it sounds just like Granddaddy, too! I mean, he was a lawyer and a judge, but he loved all of us too, right?”

“How pleased Gerald would be to hear that from his own grandchild,” Anne said, with a sigh. “In fact, he always told me that he’d been preoccupied with justice from his youth, but that it was after meeting me that he’d learned the second way. He even referred to it in that love poem I showed you, sweetie. Do you remember?”

“The poem with which he proposed to you? ‘I must find The Way’? That’s....that’s just awesome, Gran!” Lavie said, flushed with excitement. “So what happened after that? To the idea of the Way, I mean?”

“Well, one of the men who participated in the meeting at Caledonia – I believe he was from the Republic, but I’m really not sure – went on to become Lord Geraud’s tutor. In fact, some say that it was the idea of the true Way, rather than the Itarian religion, which inspired Lord Geraud to form the Commonwealth. Gerald always believed that, the dear man, but that’s because he and the Itarians never did see eye to eye. In fact, Gerald always believed that the truly great men and women in history, the ones whom the Itarians called saints, were simply those who had been able to unite the two ways in their own lives, and share what they’d learnt with others.”

Lavie laughed. “But by that standard, wouldn’t he be a saint as well?” she asked.

“Why, Lavie, you’re quite right!” Anne said, brightly. “Anyway, this idea was also taken up, quite enthusiastically, by many mages, including the Journeymen. You’ve heard of them, haven’t you?”

“Yes, Gran,” Lavie said, leaning her chin against her hand and looking pensive. “But if I’ve understood what you’ve told me, and what Granddaddy wrote, then does it mean that...” She stopped, surprised at the ideas that were coming to her mind.

“Go ahead, Lavie, think it out for yourself,” Anne said, encouragingly.

“Well, it means I have to show someone the Way, just as you showed Granddaddy the Way! Is that right, Gran?” Lavie asked, wonderingly.

“It certainly looks like that, sweetie,” Anne replied. “You don’t have to take all that message about ‘saving the kingdom’ too seriously, Lavie, because religious people always tend to exaggerate a little. But I think, ignoring all the hyperbole, what it means is that you will play an important part in the life of a companion of yours. Perhaps it’s Princess Carranya, who already seems to appreciate and trust you.” She winked at Lavie, and laughed. “You may have an important lesson to teach someone like her – about justice, about love, or even about both of them! And even if it seems like a little thing, it will somehow be important in the long run. That’s what I think, dear.”

“Gran, you’re....so wise,” Lavie said, lovingly. “I really don’t know what to think, but....I’ll try my best.”

“We live in troubled times, you know, dear,” Anne went on. “We almost lost our Princess, and the President of the Commonwealth was assassinated...”

Lavie shuddered. “Yes, the Princess told me about that, Gran,” she said, slowly.

“...But don’t let that frighten you, Lavie. Just as the Princess helped you, you may be in a position to help her someday. Or,” she added, mischievously, “it could even be your friend Ryan whom you’ll need to help.”

“Ryan? That’s ridiculous, Gran,” Lavie retorted. “Ryan’s too wrapped up in his precious Marianne to care about finding any sort of ‘Way’, and...”

“Now, Lavie, don’t let your feelings get the better of you. I know you’re upset, and I’ve been a young girl too, so I understand why. But I also know that Ryan’s a very intelligent young man, and some day, he may realize that you have much to offer him. Don’t close the door on him yet, sweetie.”

“Do you really think so, Gran?” Lavie asked, flushing. “Do you really think he would actually...”

Anne smiled and wrapped her arm around Lavie. “Now, darling, I’m not a priest or a prophet from Itaria. I can’t claim to know exactly what road your life will take. But I do know that you shouldn’t burn your bridges too early. Ryan’s a fine young man, who might just need your help in the future. Be there for him if he needs you, Lavie.”

“I will, Gran,” Lavie said, warmly. “Thank you so much....thank you for just being there, and explaining it all to me.”

“Why, Lavie, that’s what grandmothers are for!” Anne said, cheerfully. “But you must be tired now, after such an eventful day. Let’s tidy up, and then you can settle down to a good night’s sleep.”

Lavie yawned. “Why, you’re right, Gran!” she replied. “Maybe things will make more sense in the morning!”

“That’s what the Itarians say, and I think they’re right,” Anne observed. And in a little while, after the remnants of their meal had been cleared away, Lavie was curled up comfortably on a mattress in the drawing room, fast asleep, a peaceful smile on her face.

You’re going to need a lot of courage, darling, Anne thought, drawing the covers over her in a protective gesture. May the Infinity protect you, whichever way it is that you end up going. And may he protect the Princess, and young Ryan as well. You’ll need it, all of you.

CHAPTER NINE: DEATH IS NOT THE END

*“So rather than the living,
who still have lives to live,
I congratulate the dead
who have already met death.”
(Ecclesiastes, ch. 4, v. 2.)*

“Here you be, Sister,” the coachman said, pulling on the reins as his donkey slowly came to a halt. “Saint Nealus’ College of Divinity, if my eyes aren’t lying.” He descended from his seat, and held the door of the small carriage open, helping its only passenger – who was having a little trouble negotiating the single, steep step – to alight, herself. “Watch your footing – ah, there you are.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Merrick,” the woman replied, lifting the hood of her cloak to reveal the blue and white headgear of an Itarian nun. “I know I ought to have made the journey on foot, but the instructions I received were to come here as soon as I could.”

“Arr, orders are orders, Sister,” the coachman said, indulgently. “Vows of obedience, that’s what you and I are under, even if you wear the uniform and I’m just a....donkey lifter.” He chuckled. “Will ye be needing my services for the return journey?”

“No, thank you, Mr. Merrick,” the nun replied, kindly. “I will probably spend a day or two here after I’ve passed my message on, and then return to Davenport, perhaps passing through Hartridge on the way. I’ve got a wedding to attend there, you know.”

“Would that be the Galvenian lad you visited on that base?” Merrick asked, curiously. “Ah, a wedding’s a happy occasion, even though this old widower’s own wedding was donkey’s years ago.”

“Yes, that would be the young man. He and his bride are coming down to Davenport, where his parents live, for a wedding in the chapel there. A happy occasion that we all need, in these troubled times,” she answered, a worried look on her face. “When I think of the Princess and her miraculous deliverance, I can only thank the Infinity for protecting the crowned heads of Galvenia.”

“Arr, the Princess, you say?” Merrick replied. “She seems to be a fine young lady, God bless her. But tell me, Sister, since I’ve known you for a long time – is there anything else that be bothering ye?”

“How well you know me, Mr. Merrick,” the nun said, flushing. “It’s just that I ran into someone at Checkpoint Bravo, someone I wasn’t expecting to meet, and what she said reminded me of an unpleasant task I’d have to perform, some day soon. The religious life isn’t always easy, especially for those of us who are out in the world, rather than in cloisters.”

“You and me both, Sister. As for unpleasant tasks, we’ve both got some coming our way, but I can’t complain. ‘Tis my lot, as ‘tis yours. But I must be back to King’s College now, before the groundsman gives me an earful. Peace be with you, Sister Miriam.”

“Peace be with you too, Mr. Merrick,” she replied, and they bowed to each other respectfully before the coach slowly drove off, leaving a cloud of dust hanging in the still morning air.

It’s strange, Sister Miriam thought, as she walked down the path leading to St. Nealus’ College, how lives can change in the span of a few days. When Father Joaquin summoned me to help him look after that poor young priest, little did I know how my own life – and the lives of so many other good people I knew – would change in the days to come. She smiled ruefully as she knocked on the door. Perhaps what Professor Marlborough told me, during my novitiate, was true; the Infinity sometimes has a strange sense of humour.

The door was opened by a young novice, who instantly lowered her eyes in deference on seeing the older woman. “Good morning, Sister,” she said, with a low bow. “Welcome to St. Nealus’ College of Divinity for Women. Do you have an appointment, or are you staying with us for a while?”

“Actually, I was just asked to come here a day ago, my child,” she replied, gently. “Don’t inconvenience yourself on my behalf. I’m Sister Miriam, from the Order of St. Mikhail, and I work at the chapel at Davenport. I just want to speak to the Rector, if that would be possible.”

At the mention of the Rector, the young novice grew even more uneasy. “Please have a seat, Sister,” she said, hurriedly. “I’ll just check if he’s free, and be back in a minute...” And before Sister Miriam could reply, she had scurried away.

How nervous that young girl seems, Sister Miriam reflected. I wonder why; in fact, I wonder how much they all know, here.

In a little under five minutes, the nervous novice had returned, but she seemed pleased this time. “Father Riordan will see you now, Sister,” she said, with another exaggerated bow. “Please follow me.”

I’ve never met him before, and these are hardly auspicious circumstances, Sister Miriam thought, following the young novice, who was walking a little too fast for her liking. Goodness, I’m getting out of breath. I really must get myself back into shape. Life is like that; if we aren’t careful, we grow slow and complacent, and when a crisis comes, we find it hard to adapt. Saint Caroline was right when she said that a true Infinitus must be “ever ready to face her Creator.”

A winding corridor had taken them outside the glass doors of a large and spacious office, and the novice politely held the door open for her. “Reverend Father, Sir, here’s Sister Miriam to see you.”

“Very good, Lucy. Wait outside for a while, in case we need you,” the balding priest said, absently, looking up from a stack of papers on his desk. “Please have a seat, Sister, while I finish navigating my student’s tortuous train of thought.” He made some large, red marks on the paper before him, wrote some presumably critical comments in the margin in a neat hand, and then set his fountain-pen down with a look of relief. “I’m afraid correcting essays in Religious History is one of the least enjoyable parts of my job, Sister,” he apologized.

“Oh, there’s no need to apologize, Father,” Sister Miriam said kindly. “I’m afraid my own teaching is confined to younger children, with an entirely different set of joys and pains.”

Father Riordan laughed. “What I wouldn’t give to be in your place, sometimes,” he said. “Sometimes I wonder what is becoming of scholarship, and I’ve heard that it’s worse in Itaria, where it’s become so that you can’t assign a topic without receiving either a wild set of speculations, or a political tract. My girls here aren’t that way, fortunately, but most of them are deplorably lacking in analytical skills.”

“Well, I’m hardly an intellectual myself,” Sister Miriam replied, laughing as well. “And I must apologize for interrupting you when you’re busy. It’s just that Father Joaquim wanted me to do him a favour here, and I need to ask your permission first.”

“Old Joaquim?” Father Riordan folded his hands together. “I’m always ready to do him a good turn, if he needs one. Is he still teaching in that seminary at Issachar?”

“Not any more, I’m afraid. His eyesight has been troubling him a little, and while he’s fortunately not going blind, he has difficulties in reading. He’s currently the pastor at St. Hilda’s Chapel, in Davenport,” Sister Miriam replies. “He sends his love, and says he’ll visit you some day.”

“Poor chap,” Father Riordan said, sympathetically. “So tell me, Sister, how can I help you and Joaquim?”

“It’s a long story, Father,” Sister Miriam said, drawing a letter from a modest cloth bag, “and Father Joaquim thought it might be better if you read what he had written.”

“That’s considerate of him,” the Rector replied, taking the letter and unfolding it. Father Joaquim’s elegant but somewhat shaky hand covered two pages of foolscap, and the Rector read them slowly, the furrows on his brow deepening as he wrote.

I can’t blame him, Sister Miriam thought, sadly. *This is not going to be easy for any of us.*

As he came to the last paragraph, the Rector turned pale, and the letter fell from his hands onto his antique desk. “Sister Miriam, are you....is this actually true?” he said, hesitantly.

“I’m afraid so, Father,” she replied. “Both Father Joaquim and I were at his bedside when he told us about it, and I’m quite sure that everything was written down faithfully.”

“This is....disturbing,” Father Riordan said lamely. “And ugly, to say the least. And you think someone here might know something?”

“I have every reason to believe so, Father,” Sister Miriam said, softly. “Father Joaquim promised him that we would look into the matter, and the wish of someone who dies penitent is sacred to both of us. All I need is permission to speak to two of your girls, and ask them what they know. They may know nothing. They may refuse to tell the truth, even if they do. But we must pay our debt to him, somehow. If what he says is true....”

"...Sweet Infinity, I hope – and pray – that it was just a dying man's hallucination," Father Riordan said, folding the letter with an unsteady hand. "Do you wish me to be present when you, er, interview my students?"

"I would appreciate it if I could speak to them alone, Father," Sister Miriam said, simply, "but only with your permission."

"Joaquim's no fool, and I'd trust my girls with anyone he sends along, Sister," Father Riordan said, recovering a little. "Now, given the – ahem – delicate nature of your task, there's a room next to mine that would be quite convenient. We have a professor from Darington who comes by once a week, to teach the students about counseling, and it's been soundproofed for the purpose. Feel free to make use of it, but promise me one thing – that, if you uncover anything, you will keep it to yourself, and see that the College is not implicated in any way. That would be quite disastrous, especially since this town is full of Socius' sympathizers."

"Rest assured, Father," Sister Miriam said, in the consoling tone she sometimes used with her younger charges, "that if I find out anything, it will remain between the four of us – you and I, Father Joaquim, and the girl in question. If anything further should be – required, Father Joaquim has told me that the matter would be pursued quietly, without involving the Galvenian authorities."

"Hopefully, it need never come to that," Father Riordan said. Rising from his seat, he walked up to a small cabinet, tucked away discreetly behind a large photograph of Pontiff Pious XXI, and extracted a small bottle and two glasses from it. "Would you care to join me in a little glass of something Itarian, Sister?" he said, grinning. "After all, we both need to steady our nerves."

"That would be most kind," Sister Miriam replied, as he poured them both small glasses of a sparkling red beverage. They remained in silence, slowly sipping their drinks, until Father Riordan laid his glass down with a determined look.

"Lucy!" the Rector called out, loudly, and the young novice appeared as if by clockwork. "I would like to have a word with two of the girls. Please call Amelia Rushden and" – he consulted the letter – "Bernadette Aquary, and ask them to come to my office at once."

"Yes, Father," Lucy said obediently, and departed on her errand as fast as she could.

"Tell him he cannot enter," the Chamberlain said irritably to the Imperial guard in front of him. "His Highness is busy discussing the funerary arrangements, and he will have to wait until we are done. If he wishes, he may wait in the Lions' Hall, and you can arrange for suitable refreshments."

"Wait, Klaus," the Emperor said, slowly. "Whom did you say it was, soldier?"

"Sir Prescott Chuselwock of the Galvenia Rough Riders, Sire," the guard said, kneeling before his sovereign. "He has come from Lorean as an envoy of the King of Galvenia, accompanied by his aide."

“A Rough Rider?” The Emperor slowly re-arranged himself on his throne, groaning a little as he did so. “Treat him courteously, then, and tell him we will meet him shortly.” He raised his hand in a gesture of dismissal, and the guard left the throne room. The black-clad figure of the Emperor of Zion slowly arose from its seat, and took a few steps forward.

It was now three days since Princess Carranya had returned to Lorean with her parents. At the same time, news of Prince Wilhelm’s demise had reached Caledonia, in the form of a coded dispatch from Sergeant Burnfist at Checkpoint Bravo. Even now, the body of the unfortunate prince was being brought post-haste to the capital for the necessary ceremonies. The people of Zion, who had seen little of their Emperor in the past two years, mourned their Prince, who for that period had been the visible face of the monarchy to them.

“As I was saying, Sire, we must make the sad news known to the rest of the world,” Klaus Engel, the Emperor’s chamberlain, was saying in a soothing tone. “Though all Zion mourns the death of our beloved Prince Wilhelm, the world must know of the villainy of these pirates, and the Commonwealth must act.”

“Hmm, you speak truly,” Emperor Charlemagne replied. Though old and weary, he seemed to be surprisingly in control of his emotions, despite the death of his only son and heir. “But what can the Commonwealth do, Engel? One would almost think that there was a curse upon us. Koketsu is dead. My son is dead. And, like vultures swooping down for a kill, this Galvenian upstart arrives with, I presume, an offer of a military alliance. It’s almost like a stage play, don’t you think?”

“Sire, do you think the Varald...” Klaus Engel began.

“What you or I *think* is of no use,” Charlemagne said, firmly. “The fact of the matter is that the Commonwealth Council is still deadlocked on their next course of action. The Commonwealth right now is a headless chicken, Engel, and I’m not sure if that comparison isn’t a little insulting to headless chickens. While they bicker over the constitutionality of Koketsu’s status, and whether Hipper should be allowed to succeed him or not, they will hardly be in a position to agree on anything, especially not military action. The question then becomes, not what the Commonwealth must do, but what we ought to.”

“There is another factor to be considered, Sire,” Engel said, softly. “In the news broadcasts we received from Galvenia, mention was made of a Zion agent who helped save the Princess’ life – a man named William Striker. Why did this man not make an effort to save the Prince? Is he truly loyal to us? We must have him questioned, Sire.”

“Chamberlain,” Charlemagne said sternly, “I do not remember appointing you to the Intelligence and Tactics Division at any time. As long as I live – and those foolish doctors assure me that it will be for at least a while longer – all agents are answerable only to the Director of the Division, and the Director is answerable to me alone. I have already spoken to the Director, and he assures me that the officer in question is quite trustworthy, and was working on an entirely different mission. It was sheer ill luck, or fate, that he happened to be on the same ship as my son.”

"I beg your pardon, Sire," Engel said, humbly. "I spoke unwisely."

"Think nothing of it, Engel, we're all distraught. My son...." Emperor Charlemagne's voice grew unsteady, and he fell silent for a while. "He will be buried with full honours, of course. He died bravely, serving the Empire, and there is no better way for a man to die."

"But what of the Varald, Sire? Koketsu's death was enough of a blow, and Commissioner Jansen's suggestion that Hipper immediately assume office was an insult to the dignity of Zion! And now, they have the audacity to murder the Prince..."

"Engel, do not put the cart before the horse," Charlemagne said, raising his hand impatiently. "It is certain that the Varald wish to provoke us with their audacious suggestions regarding that fool Hipper, but it is not proved that they had anything to do with the deaths of either Junzio Koketsu or my son. Let us hear what this Sir Prescott has to say, and when the Varald Ambassador meets me tomorrow, then I shall make up my mind. Before that, the utmost discretion is required. Is that clear, Engel?"

"Yes, Sire," the Chamberlain said quietly.

"Prescott Chusel-Wock," Charlemagne replied, pronouncing the unfamiliar name slowly. "Do you know anything about the man, Engel?"

"Only that he is a member of Galvenian nobility, Sire. His father is seated in the Commonwealth. He is young, and he is ambitious. A strange choice for an embassy of this sort, though. I would have thought that someone older..."

"You are right there, Engel. Our Galvenian friends," Charlemagne said, "are generally the most cautious of people, and believe in the power and wisdom of grey hairs. Which is why I find these recent events doubly suspicious. Why was the Princess on that ship? She has never been seen in public before, to my recollection. And why was someone as young as Sir Chuselwock chosen to make a treaty of alliance with us, when a wise old man like Sheffield is available?"

"If we knew the answers to those questions, Sire, we would be well placed during our negotiations with him," Engel began, when the doors were thrown open again.

"An urgent message, Sire!" the guard said. "Telegram from one of our agents in Issachar, for His Highness' attention!" He marched briskly up to the throne, and handed the Emperor a telegraphic message on a tray. He picked it up, read it carefully, and then placed it within his cloak, his lips curving into a snarl.

"I think I understand our Galvenian friends and their methods now, Engel," the Emperor said coldly. "Guard, bring Sir Chuselwock in. This promises to be interesting."

The young man knocked on the door impatiently, a look of growing annoyance on his face, as a summer breeze blew his cloak around him. The door opened slowly, and an elderly man peered at him curiously, out of eyes that seemed almost blind.

“You certainly seem to have a hearing impediment, old uncle,” the young man said, sarcastically. “I thank you for deigning to open your door. Are you the one known as Fossen?”

“I am. What do you want?” the old man said, simply. “This place is not for the impatient, or the impetuous. If such be your description, I suggest you try the Military Academy at Lorean.”

The young man swore under his breath. “I am not here to bandy words,” he said. “I have been told that you can help me, and I have come to seek your help. I am following the Way.”

“The Way? Is that what they’re still calling it? Well, come in, son. We can’t have a polite discussion if you’re going to stand out there and philosophize.”

“Very well,” the young man said, calmly. The two men entered the small cottage, which was simple, but neat, bearing the marks of an ascetic and disciplined lifestyle. There were no ornaments on the walls, except a sword that hung loosely from a peg above the door.

“Have a seat,” the old man said, rubbing his eyes, as he lit a lamp. “Goodness, it’s getting dark quite quickly, even though it’s summer.”

The young man took his seat on a simple stool, silently. “It is but five o’clock,” he replied, “but the weather tonight promises to be stormy.”

“Rain? Then you’d better tell me what you want quickly, or be prepared to stay the night. My abode is simple, but I don’t refuse hospitality to anyone, as long as they’re honest wanderers.”

“I am both honest and a wanderer, my friend,” the young man said, a little more kindly. “I have come because justice must be done, and I believe that I am capable of serving her cause.”

“You’re confident, boy,” the old man replied, “so let me put you through a few questions first. Now, your accent gives you away, so I won’t bother with my first question. Davenport boys always hanker after adventure, even if most of them settle down to a nice, luxurious life of trading.”

“As I know well,” the young man said contemptuously. “There are too many such young men in Galvenia in these times. I do not wish to be one of them.”

“Too pat, son, too pat. Next question, then. Do your father and mother know that you’re out here?”

The young man flushed. “My father is dead, and I have avenged his memory,” he said, his hand going to his belt. “As for my mother, I have left word with her, through a trustworthy friend; one who will tell the truth, though he be a settler.”

“A disciple of Itaria, I suppose?” The old man laughed. “My, but you do talk prettily, son. You’d think this was something out of a novel, the way you go on. But what do you mean by ‘avenging his memory’? I

must warn you, I don't deal in foolish vendettas and blood feuds. Those belong to the Republic, and in the Republic they shall remain, as the Purpose wills it."

"I do not speak of a vendetta," the young man said, coldly. "My father died a hero, but his reputation was besmirched by the machinations of a lying official, and my mother and I were driven to living in obscurity, deprived of the position that was rightfully ours. When I came upon the same official much later, now happily engaged in betraying the Government he had previously served, I had no compunction about dispatching him in fair combat. It was an act of mercy – to a country and a city that deserve it but little."

"You're bitter, boy," the old man said, sympathetically, "but bitterness has no place along the Way of Justice. I'm not here to train bounty hunters and mercenaries, you know. If your cause is just, I can help you. If you simply seek vengeance or glory, look elsewhere."

"It is not glory I seek, old man," the young man answered. "It is honour and justice. I may have executed judgment on one man, but his masters remain at large. And I honestly concede that I, a single man and an inexperienced one, need help if I am to complete the task I have set myself."

"You know, boy, I've met a lot of young men like you. Most of them come out wandering with dreams of being a hero, or a hunter, and leaving a glorious, bloody trail behind them. Most of them leave here disappointed, when I tell them I cannot help. But you" – he stepped closer to the young man – "you are different. You are foolish, and you are young, but you have courage, and someday, perhaps, you will understand what it means to follow the Way."

"I suppose I should be flattered," the young man said, with a thin smile.

"Don't be, boy. You still have a long way to go, and I can't promise that you'll make it to the end. Now, if you're serious about learning anything from me, pick up that sword which is hanging over my door. Just pick it up, and hold it in your right hand, like you would an ordinary sword. Go ahead."

The young man picked up the sword. It felt surprisingly light in his hand, as if it were merely an extension of his own right arm. As he gripped its hilt tightly, he felt a vaguely warm and not unpleasant sensation flow through his hand, and the blade gleamed blue in the lamp's dull light. It seemed to him as if he heard a voice – a surprisingly gentle one – speak in his ear.

I will obey you, as long as you follow the right Way, but if you leave the path, I shall forsake you.

"Did you speak, old man?" the young man said, surprised.

Fossen looked at the young man with admiration. "You pass, boy," he said. "A Sword of Justice will not recognize the arm of anyone whose cause is not right. Hang it up, and I'll get you something to eat, because some things are best discussed when feeling warm. By the way, what is your name? I don't believe you've introduced yourself yet."

"They call me Juno," the young man replied, replacing the sword on its peg with a satisfied smile.
"Makarov Juno, son of Franz Juno."

"That's an interesting name, son," Fossen said. "Now sit down, boy, while I check on the soup. It should be just done now, and there's always a little bit for a true seeker of the Way."

I'm not very good at this, Sister Miriam thought, disconsolately. The interview with Amelia Rushden, a dark-haired young girl with a quiet, impassive face, had yielded nothing of interest. Father Joaquim told me to put them at ease, and then ask them about things all of a sudden. That's what I tried to do. But it really seemed as if that child knew nothing, or was working very hard at concealing it. Dear me, I'm not really cut out for police work. None of us are. We're just groping in the dark here, hoping that the Infinity will show us the truth.

"Come in, child," she said with a sigh, as Bernadette came into the room, with a smile and a bow. Sister Miriam, pleasantly surprised, smiled back. *At least this young woman seems a little more communicative. And it's nice of her to wear her hat even outside classes, most young students simply don't bother these days. I pray that I learn something from her, I don't want to go back to Father empty-handed,* she thought.

"Good morning, Sister," Bernadette said, brightly. "Father Riordan said you wished to speak with me, and here I am!"

"Why, good morning, young lady," Sister Miriam replied. "I just need to ask you a few questions. I'm doing this as a favour for Father Joaquim, in the chapel at Davenport."

"Father Joaquim?" Bernadette said, with pleasure. "Why, my father knows him rather well! I wonder what he'd want with *me*, though. I'm not studying theology..."

"Oh, this is nothing academic," Sister Miriam replied, finding the girl's good humour infectious. "What are you majoring in here, child?"

"I'm studying Religious History and Literature, Sister," Bernadette replied, proudly, "and I've just got a scholarship to go to King's College this autumn. I'm very happy about it, of course, but just a little nervous, because I've lived in small towns all my life."

"King's College? How interesting, I know someone who's going there, too," said Sister Miriam. "But let me come to the point. Now, your full name is Bernadette Ellis Aquary, isn't it?"

"That's right, Sister!" Bernadette said.

"And your parents' names are Jonas and Laurette Aquary, am I right?"

"Yes, Sister," Bernadette said, nodding in agreement.

"Tell me, Bernadette," Sister Miriam said, "how long have you been at St. Nealus's College?"

“Oh, just this year, Sister,” she replied. “It was my mother’s wish that I should go on to study the Holy Book in more depth, and I was lucky enough to pass the entrance test, after I finished high school. I did spend a year in between, though, working as a volunteer at Saint Integra’s Hospital for Women and Children, in Darington. It’s where I was born, actually.”

I don’t need to be secretive with this girl, Sister Miriam thought to herself. *Let me just be natural.* “That’s very good indeed,” she said, with a nod of appreciation. “Now, Bernadette, I don’t want to alarm you, but I want to ask you about some things that happened about two years ago. Is that all right?”

“Two years?” Bernadette asked, a look of puzzlement on her face. “I was just finishing school at that time, in Alton.”

“At that time, did you belong to a prayer group called the ‘Infinite Revival’, my child?” Sister Miriam asked, gently.

“Why, yes, I did!” she said, with a look of surprise. “They came around to Alton about a year before that, in – let me see – the year 297. They had members from all over Galvenia. I used to sing in the choir, though not very well,” she said, blushing, “and I also used to help with the discussion group on the Holy Book. However, I got out of touch with them when I went to Darington, and when I came back home, I found that the group had folded. What a pity!”

“That’s quite right,” Sister Miriam said. “Do you remember Father Gruber, who led the group?”

“Oh, yes,” Bernadette said, a far-away look on her face as she recalled her school days. “He was young, but very energetic. In fact, he was quite supportive of my...” Bernadette paused, and then began again. “I mean, he was very nice, and open-minded about a lot of things. He did tend to discuss politics a lot with the boys, but I wasn’t too interested in that.”

What was she about to say? Sister Miriam wondered. *Should I ask, or stick to the point? Father Joaquim told me to pursue anything that might give us a lead.* “Supportive of what, Bernadette?” she asked, kindly. “Don’t worry, whatever you tell me here is in confidence, between the two of us.”

“Well, I...” Bernadette looked down at the table, with a nervous expression. “Our family has had – healing abilities for generations, and some of my teachers here don’t like that. They think it’s all trickery, or even dangerous. But Father and Mother always taught me to use my – my gift to serve the Infinity, and that’s what I want to do.”

Sister Miriam’s eyes widened. “Remarkable!” she exclaimed. “Don’t worry, child, I’m not ‘conservative’ on that particular issue. In fact, I’ve worked in children’s hospitals myself, as a novice, and I’ve seen some quite unusual things there. Remember, child, the Infinity works in many ways.”

“Thank you, Sister,” the girl replied, gratefully. “Goodness, I do seem to be meeting a lot of sympathetic people these days! But don’t let me distract you. Is there anything you wanted to know about our group?”

Sister Miriam smiled. "Yes, in fact. Do you remember a young man, a member of your group from Davenport, called Perrin?"

Bernadette frowned. "Thomas Perrin?"

"Yes, Thomas Perrin," Sister Miriam said, gravely. "What do you know, or remember, about him?"

"Not much, I'm afraid, Sister," Bernadette said apologetically. "He was rather interested in politics, and he and Father Gruber used to spend a lot of time discussing such things, especially the situation in the Varald Directorate." She shivered. "Is that why you wanted to speak to Amelia, too? Poor girl, she and Thomas were – good friends, before he left." She blushed.

Sweet Infinity, Sister Miriam thought, *no wonder the poor girl froze up at the mention of his name.*

"Good friends? Is that what you girls call it here?" she said, laughing, trying to put the younger woman at ease. "Well, it's not the way I chose, but it's certainly a good way. Infinity bless you boys and girls. But what do you mean by 'left', Bernadette?"

"Well, it was around my last term of school," Bernadette explained. "I didn't have much time for the Revival, because I was working hard, and I knew I needed good grades to get into a college like St. Nealus'. But I remember Thomas became a lot more serious. He would get into arguments with some of the other boys, asking them if they really understood what they were doing. And just before my exams, we heard the news that he'd - left the Church." She shook her head. "Father always told me that politics were dangerous – more dangerous than any magical or supernatural power in this world, and that only the Infinity himself could tame the designs of politicians."

"Left the Church?" Sister Miriam leaned forward. "Did he actually say so?"

"He never did, Sister," Bernadette replied, still looking sad. "He just stopped attending our meetings – it was around the end of 298, I think – and one day, Father Gruber announced at the beginning of our group prayers that Thomas had decided to leave the Church, and wouldn't be attending any more meetings. He was quite upset about the whole thing, especially since they'd been quite close. A little later, Amelia got the news that he'd....died in an accident. Poor Amelia, I tried to comfort her as much as I could, but she never could bring herself to talk about it. It was as if – something broke within her, after Thomas left."

"I'm sorry, my child," Sister Miriam said, gently. "And I'm sure she will recover some day, if the Infinity so wills. But tell me the truth, even if it hurts. Is that really what you'd heard? That he'd died in an accident?"

"That's all we heard, Sister," Bernadette said, closing her eyes. "Amelia did try to attend his funeral, but his parents apparently had a quiet ceremony, and didn't allow anyone besides the family to attend. They wouldn't tell her anything, poor dear. I did see his gravestone in Davenport, but that's all I know, except...." She coloured, and stopped in mid-sentence.

“Bernadette,” Sister Miriam said, gently but firmly, “there may be more to this story than you or I will ever know. Don’t hold anything back, unless you’ve taken a vow of silence. What else do you know?”

Bernadette was silent.

“Bernadette,” Sister Miriam said, “I’m sorry to say this, but Father Gruber is no more. He died of pneumonia just two months ago, and Father Joaquim and I nursed him through his last illness. Before he died, he told us certain things. I can’t tell you what he said, but he did ask us to find out whatever we could about that young man. I’m here because I have to honour the promise I made to him.”

“Father Gruber?” Bernadette exclaimed, shaking her head in dismay. “Oh, no....poor Father, and I never had the chance to see him after that year...” She covered her face with her hands, her body shaking.

Poor girl, Sister Miriam thought, rising from her chair. *Why did I ever agree to do this?* But before she could make any gesture of consolation, Bernadette raised her head, making a defiant effort to smile, and when she spoke again, her tone was confident. “I mustn’t weep,” she said, dabbing at her cheeks with one of her long sleeves. “I know you can’t tell me everything, Sister, but I understand that – something wrong has happened, and that you are trying to set it right. I will tell you everything I know.”

Sister Miriam took the girl’s hand and held it, consolingly. “You are a brave young woman,” she said, “and I’m glad that you’ve understood. Now, tell me. What is it that you know?”

“Let me start at the beginning, Sister,” Bernadette said. “It was in spring, when I first came down here, and was feeling a little homesick. The Rector called me and said he wanted me to do him a favour. He said one of my upperclasswomen was having trouble sleeping, and that he’d appreciate it if I agreed to share a dormitory with her, because she knew me and might be more comfortable with me.”

“Was that Miss Rushden?” Sister Miriam asked.

“That’s right,” she said slowly. “It was Amelia, though she was a year ahead of me, because she’d joined the College straight out of high school. She worked very hard, almost unnaturally so – it was as if she was trying to forget something by losing herself in her work. Her friends told me that she was probably just grieving for Thomas, and that I should just try and be nice to her.”

“I’m sure you must have been very kind,” Sister Miriam replied. “Did she tell you anything?”

“Not really, Sister,” Bernadette said. “It was the one thing she wouldn’t discuss with me. I tried to spend as much time as I could with her, and fortunately, we had common interests; we’d discuss the Missal, or the Book, quite often, and we’d help each other with our assignments. One night – it was about three months after I’d joined – I had a test the next day, and I was feeling rather nervous. I thought I’d go to the chapel to pray and compose myself a little, so I told Amelia I’d be back in an hour. I came back feeling a little better, and when I returned, Amelia was already asleep. I lay down in bed, but I only slept fitfully, and then I heard her crying. She was saying something, softly, to herself, but I was close enough that I could hear.”

“And what did she say?” Sister Miriam said, looking into Bernadette’s eyes.

“I couldn’t hear all of it, but I could make out two things. First, she said: ‘Thomas...why, why did they take you away from me?’ That confused me. I wondered if she was having doubts about her faith, because of her friend’s death. But then she said something that confused me even more. She said: ‘And I can’t tell anyone...it’s too dangerous’.”

Sister Miriam’s expression was somber. “Dangerous? Are you sure that’s what she said?”

“I’m quite sure, Sister,” Bernadette said, steadily. “Anyway, I got out of bed, and went to her bedside. She got up with a start, and looked at me strangely, as if she was scared of me.”

“Amelia,” I said, ‘are you all right? Take courage, my sister. The Infinity is with you.’”

“Bernadette? Did you....did you just wake up? Did you hear anything?’ she replied, rubbing her eyes.”

“It was obvious that she was afraid I’d heard something, so I’m afraid I told a falsehood; I told her I’d just heard her crying, but nothing else. That seemed to calm her. We talked for a while, and I tried to give her strength, though she wouldn’t say what was upsetting her; then we prayed together, and I kept vigil until she had fallen asleep. The next morning, she was quite herself, and quite friendly to me; in fact, we were closer after that.”

“I see,” Sister Miriam said, shaking her head. “Is there anything else, *anything*, that you remember, which could have a bearing on this?”

“There is one more thing,” Bernadette said. “At the time, I didn’t see what it could possibly mean, but I think I understand now. You see, about two months ago, they were renovating some of the dormitories, so Amelia and I had to temporarily share a larger room with three other girls. All of us have a little table beside our beds, in which we can keep any personal possessions that we use often – for example, I’ve got my copy of the Holy Book in mine, my diary, and a photograph of Mother and Father. Amelia also had some books and papers in hers, though I never asked her what they were. Soon after we moved into that room, a fire broke out one night.”

“Good heavens!” Sister Miriam exclaimed. “Were you hurt?”

“I was burned, but not too badly,” Bernadette replied, raising her hat slightly, and Sister Miriam’s expression softened. “Oh, you poor girl,” she began. “Were the others...”

“Thank the Infinity, our lives were all spared, though we all suffered burns,” Bernadette said, still trembling at the recollection, and closing her eyes. “It was – I know I should be grateful that we were all saved, but it was terrible. I thought for a minute that I was going to die, and die painfully, but fortunately, our warden spotted the fire, and she put it out as soon as she could. I still....dream about it, sometimes.”

Sister Miriam rose from her seat and wrapped her arm around Bernadette. “Now, child, don’t be afraid. It’s all over.”

“Thank you, Sister,” Bernadette said, leaning against her for a moment. Then she opened her eyes, and went on. “The next morning, the police came by. They couldn’t find out how exactly the fire had been set, and even suspected that it may have been done by a rogue mage, someone who could use low-power fire spells. But there was one unusual thing. All our tables were scorched by the fire, but the desk in Amelia’s room was completely burnt, with all its contents. Amelia was rather pale when we told her, but – it’s strange to tell – she actually seemed relieved, despite losing her belongings. She was calmer, and less nervous.”

“I think I understand, my child,” Sister Miriam said, “and I think you do, as well. There was something there, something that they wanted to destroy once and for all.”

“Perhaps it was a letter, or a keepsake, that Thomas had left her,” Bernadette replied. “But if someone is willing to go to such lengths, to hurt others for such a purpose, then....”

“Yes, child,” Sister Miriam said, and it was her turn to look disturbed. “I would have spared you this, but it looks like something terribly wrong happened, in connection with Father Gruber and his group. Even we don’t know the truth, but at least we are closer now. And don’t be afraid, I don’t think you’re in any sort of danger. I appreciate your courage and your honesty, child, and I shall remember you in my prayers.”

“Thank you, Sister,” Bernadette said simply.

“Tell me, have you ever considered a vocation like mine?” she asked, curiously. “You seem to be perfectly cut out for it, though I say so myself.”

“Well,” Bernadette replied, slowly, “Mother always wanted me to study, to be a scholar of the Holy Book, and I’m glad I could fulfill her dream. And I did consider becoming a Sister seriously, at one time. But now, I’m not so sure....” She blushed, though it was apparently more with pleasure rather than with discomfort, judging by her timid smile.

“Oh, dear,” Sister Miriam said, laughing gently. “I take it you have a ‘good friend’, too, then?”

“Not exactly, Sister, to be honest,” Bernadette replied, smiling, “but he’s been very kind to me, and we had a rather interesting trip to Lorean, a week ago. I met him at his home while I was witnessing in Davenport, and...”

Davenport? There aren’t that many Church members in Davenport, Sister Miriam thought. Goodness, it might even be...

“Well, I’m heading to Davenport myself, after passing through Hartridge,” Sister Miriam said. “I must make further enquiries there, and I hope Father Joaquim and I can get to the bottom of this. Now don’t worry your head too much about it, child. There is evil in this world, but there is good as well, and some of us must take up the task of defending it.”

"May the Infinity bless you, then, Sister, and keep your path straight. Give my love to Father Joaquim as well. He probably only remembers me as a little girl, but he'll remember Father."

"I will, Bernadette," Sister Miriam said kindly, as they shook hands. "I'll probably stay the night here, and leave tomorrow morning. And by the way," she asked, with an innocent expression, "if an old woman may take a friendly interest in your life, what is your friend in Davenport called? I'm quite certain I'd know him well."

"Henrik Spenson," she replied, lowering her eyes a little. "His father's a writer, and...he's rather busy, but Henrik was very patient with me when I visited their house, and that's how I got to know him. Do send him my regards, if you meet him."

It had to be him, Sister Miriam thought, smiling broadly. "As it happens, young lady, I know Henrik quite well. And I'll certainly do as you say. But now I must be going, I must have a little chat with the Rector as well. Goodbye, Bernadette, and may the Infinity protect you both."

"Goodbye, Sister," Bernadette said, rising and bowing. "I hope we'll meet again, in happier circumstances."

"Oh, I'm sure we will," Sister Miriam said, as she left the room. "May the Infinity bless you."

Bernadette sat down in her chair, trying to collect her thoughts, as the door swung shut. *Something bad is happening*, she thought, *something that could affect all of us, not just the Church. I wish there was someone I could talk to about all this. Father would help, I know, but my next home leave is only in a week....*

Then an idea suddenly occurred to her, and she brightened. *Maybe I'll write to Henrik*, she thought, with a little laugh. *For all I know, he and Thomas may have been classmates, and he's so intelligent! He's bound to know something...*

"You have not lost your touch, my young friend," Hocha said, appreciatively, as Ryan's sword found its mark once more. "How happy the Colonel would be, if he could see this." They were both in Colonel Whitworth's gymnasium, practicing.

"Heh, thanks, Hocha," Ryan said, an expression of intent concentration on his face. "I do think I've got the hang of the triple attack, now."

"There are legends of sword-masters who could use not three, but even seven or ten slashes, each in a different direction, in rapid succession," Hocha observed, taking off his black felt hat, which he still wore in honour of his master. "Perhaps you will be one of them someday, young one."

"Can't tell, Hocha, can't tell," Ryan said, laughing, as he brought down his blade once more on the swinging target, striking it at three different angles. "A lot of those legends are exaggerations, or at least that's what Henrik keeps saying."

“Perhaps they are, and perhaps they are not,” Hocha said, reflectively. “But tell me, why the sudden interest in swordsmanship? War has not yet broken out, and even the Zions have been silent for over a week, despite the death of their prince.”

“Hmm, Hocha, you see, Henrik was with the Colonel just before – before he died. And he couldn’t recognize Henrik near the end, he thought it was me. He said he wanted me to keep training, and to help you as well as I could.” Ryan smiled ruefully. “I guess I’m just honouring the Colonel’s memory, just as you are. Besides, there could always be war. The things I saw on board that ship convinced me that the Commonwealth just isn’t doing its work anymore...”

“Peace is always harder to secure than war, young Ryan,” Hocha observed, nodding his head. “And without someone as inspiring as Emperor Geraud to lead them, the Commonwealth is also learning, the hard way, that they are just men like us.”

“I wish the Commonwealth meeting would be over soon,” Ryan observed, striking the target at an angle, then stepping back to make a quick thrust with the flat of his sword. “They’ve been discussing Koketsu’s death, and who should succeed him, for two days now, and they can’t afford to keep delaying.”

“Ah, Ryan, you lack the patience required for international politics,” said Hocha, laughing. “Let the Commonwealth take care of itself, unless you are called to serve it, as the Colonel was.”

“I’m really not sure about that one, Hocha,” Ryan said, leaning forward into a single-arm sword thrust that transfixed his target. “I still haven’t made my mind up about what I want to do after summer vacation, and I don’t know if I’ll qualify for the Commonwealth Special Forces, even if I do try. After all, Dad didn’t make it, even though he wanted to...”

“The proverb ‘Like father, like son’ is not always accurate, my friend,” Hocha replied, encouragingly. “And reflect on this: by helping to save the Princess, you have already done your country a service. Perhaps the Galvenian Army will find a task fitting for you quite soon.”

“The Princess...” Ryan fell silent, as he parried the dummy’s forward swing. “You know, Hocha, there’s only one thing that still puzzles me about the Princess’ rescue. That Zionese agent, Striker. I’m sure he knows something important, but he never told us exactly what he was up to on that ship. He didn’t protect his own Prince, and yet he helped us all. I wonder if he’s actually working for Galvenia.”

“International intrigue is not my specialty, young man,” Hocha said, with a grin. “You forget that I am merely Colonel Whitworth’s batman, and not Colonel Whitworth himself. But why not ask the man himself? If he is honest, he would answer you.”

“I did, but he gave me a vague answer; he said it had something to do with his family. I thought he might be from Darington, perhaps...”

“That is unlikely, Ryan,” Hocha replied, shaking his head. “You described him as a young man, a little older than you. He would have been a mere child when the Zion Empire carried out its aggressive

designs; perhaps he was not even born at the time. Of course, his father or mother could have come from there.”

“Lord Derren!” an excited voice broke in. “Are you still practicing your sword moves? Heh, that’s just great, I could perhaps use you in my next play!”

“Ah, Mr. Tremfein,” Hocha said, bowing solemnly. “It is a pleasure to meet you. As a young man, I enjoyed reading your plays, particularly *The Adventures of the Princes of Factoria*. Davenport is honoured by your presence.

“What’s up, Tremfein?” Ryan asked, sheathing his sword. “I thought you and the others were going back to Lorean with the Princess.”

“Heh, that’s what we’ll do shortly, Rudolph!” Tremfein said, excitedly.

“Ryan, not Rudolph!” Ryan protested. “Tell me, Tremfein, what will you do when you run out of names beginning with the letter ‘R’ to call me?”

“Well, I’ll just move on to the letter ‘S’ – or perhaps I’ll surprise you all and go one back, to ‘Q’! Prince Quirinius of Galvenia, now *that’s* a royal name!” Tremfein said, causing Hocha to burst out laughing.

“Very funny, Tremfein,” Ryan said, a little impatiently. “So what’s keeping you here?”

“Naomi’s got a dress-making assignment from a woman at the Davenport Inn, Rupert,” Tremfein said, with a grin. “Some young lady from Itaria who’s marrying a soldier, and wants to look her best. Naomi always did enjoy designing wedding gowns, silly girl. But then, I shouldn’t say such things about my mother-in-law. She’s always been a loyal member of the troupe!”

“Your *mother-in-law*?” Ryan exclaimed.

“Ah, yes, Ricky,” Tremfein said, causing Ryan to turn red with annoyance. *Ricky? That’s the worst of them so far!* “Naomi’s daughter, Deborah, was my wife. Poor girl, she suffered from the same sickness as my Charlotte, and it claimed her just a few years ago, when we were touring at Alton. Perhaps that’s why we both began sailing aboard the *Paradiso*. To forget.” He shook his head, sadly.

“I’m sorry, Tremfein,” Ryan said. “Was she an actress, too? Your wife, I mean.”

“Yes, Ryan, she was a wonderful actress,” Tremfein said, closing his eyes and smiling at his own memories. “She’d have been on the stages of Caledonia by now, if her illness hadn’t prevented her from doing so. Dear me, I am rambling on.”

“Not bad, you actually got my name right this time!” Ryan said.

“Or maybe I should call you Ryu, and give you a pair of assassin’s knives,” Tremfein said, recovering his smile. “That ought to...”

“Tremfein, I’m *not* a Zionese mercenary!” Ryan protested.

“That would be an amusing sight, though,” Hocha observed. “Young Ryu, the brave warrior for hire.”

“Oh, give it a break, Hocha,” Ryan protested. “So what are you doing with yourself, while Naomi makes her dress, anyway?”

“Heh, old Tremfein always keeps himself occupied! There’s a fine group of young lads who are helping me put on a little musical comedy, as a benefit for a couple of sailors who are retiring this year! One can’t direct tragedies all the time, you know.”

“Musical comedy? Hey, I might just come by and watch that, as long as you don’t force me to act,” Ryan said. “When is it?”

“Tomorrow night, Roland,” Tremfein said, winking at Hocha. “We’re going to miss Willy, though, he was quite an amusing chap!”

“Willy?” An idea suddenly occurred to Ryan’s mind. *I wonder how much Tremfein could tell me about the mysterious Mr. Striker. Let me ask him.* “Tremfein, tell me, how did William Striker join your troupe?”

“Well, we were short by one actor during our previous cruise,” Tremfein explained, “and we were approached by a Zionsese gentleman, who said that he wanted to join us for a short while, because he had a job to do for his government and needed to reach Caledonia. Since he agreed to work for free, and was a barrel of laughs as well, we took him on. And it was fortunate we did, he saved us from those pirates back there!”

“Are you sure he was Zionsese?” Ryan asked, casually.

“Well, he could certainly *speak* Zionsese extremely well, so I guess so. He didn’t tell us much about himself, except that he had to get to Caledonia somehow. The wolf mask was his idea, he thought it’d be funny.”

“And did he say why he had to get to Caledonia?”

“Well, he just said it was government work. But between you and me, Raymond...”

“Stop it, Tremfein!” Ryan said, though he was laughing this time.

“Well, to tell you the truth,” Tremfein went on, lowering his voice, “between you and me, I think he was searching for someone. He had a little watch with him, and when he opened it, there was a photograph on the inside – though I couldn’t say who it was, because he’d close it quickly when he saw any of us around. Maybe he was searching for someone, or shadowing them.”

“Someone? A man, or a woman?” Ryan asked.

“I’m afraid I couldn’t tell, Roger,” he replied. “Like I said, I couldn’t get a close look. But now I must be going, I have a rehearsal in ten minutes! In fact, I just came by to invite both of you to our performance! It’s at Serin’s Peak tomorrow, at eight o’clock. I know Mr. Hocha likes my plays, and you’re an honorary member of the troupe, so you’re welcome as well!”

“Hmm, I’ll try to make it, Tremfein,” Ryan said, shaking hands with the dramatist. “Have fun with your show, I hope it goes well!”

“Oh, it will, no fear,” Tremfein said, shaking hands with Hocha as he left.

“That is quite an unusual man, young Ryan. I do believe his play will be quite entertaining,” Hocha said, grinning.

“Probably will,” said Ryan, “though I wonder where he’s getting his actors from. Well, I think I’ll call it a day for now, Hocha. See you tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it,” Hocha said, as Ryan walked away from the gymnasium.

“You do realize, of course, what these events mean, Your Highness. We must act.”

Emperor Charlemagne opened his eyes and leaned forward, realizing that he hadn’t been attention to what the man in front of him was trying to tell him. *This is what running an Empire comes to*, he thought, annoyed. *All the plans, all the intentions...and at the end of it all, you just feel drained. Empty. And this fine friend of ours isn’t helping much, with his insinuations.* “Sir Prescott, I am fully aware of what these events mean,” he replied. “And I am well aware of the discussions that my – late son had with your King, as well as with Sheffield and Socius. The question is, now, when should we decide to act?”

“The sooner, the better, Your Highness,” Sir Prescott said. “I can give you my pledge, on behalf of His Majesty, that Galvenia will be your loyal ally in the conflict to come. Already, I have placed the Rough Riders and three other armed divisions on high alert, ready to move across the border to join your troops in Darington. And Minister Sheffield has made arrangement with the Galvenian Royal Marines for further projection along the coast of Ghetz. We must strike fast, before the Varald have a chance to organize themselves.”

Charlemagne gave a short laugh. “With all respect, Sir Prescott, that wasn’t quite the song that my royal friend, Arlbert, was singing a little while ago. You are young, and perhaps you have dreams of being a victorious commander, of making your reputation in this war. But I still believe that we must bring the matter before the Commonwealth before making any further preparations. I appreciate your speed in mobilizing your men, but we must wait.”

“We cannot wait too long, Your Highness,” Felix Gessler interrupted, on a sign from his chief. “The Commonwealth Special Forces will take too long to mobilize, and if Terrin Hipper of the Varald replaces Koketsu, then he will use his veto and refuse to deploy them.”

“Terrin Hipper is not yet President of the Commonwealth, Lieutenant,” Charlemagne replied, with a small smile on his face. “And besides, the Commonwealth Special Forces cannot intervene in a matter of this sort, except to keep the peace between us and the Varald. Viceroy Kanoi already has my

instructions to strongly condemn the deaths of Koketsu and my son, and ask for an investigation into the role of the Varald Directorate. If the Varald refuse, only then will we be justified in moving against them.”

“That would achieve nothing, Your Highness,” Sir Prescott said, anxiously. “The Commonwealth is weak. They failed to protect our Princess. They failed to protect your son, Your Highness...”

“Leave me to worry about my unfortunate son,” Charlemagne said sharply. “Tell me, Sir Prescott, how many wars have you actually fought in? None, I would say. Otherwise, you would not be in such a hurry to thrust your kingdom, and my Empire, headlong into what would be a long conflict of attrition. No, Sir Prescott, war must be the last resort.”

Sir Prescott maintained a respectful silence. *Socius and Sheffield told me the old fool was straining at the bit to go to war, he thought, disconcerted. What's got into him now? Why this sudden respect for the Commonwealth? The man's half dead anyway, and losing his precious Wilhelm must have hit him hard. Why doesn't he want vengeance?*

“I sense your confusion, young man,” the Emperor went on. “You’re wondering why the architect of Darington, the man you Galvenians consider a *Kriegshetzer* and an expansionist, should recommend caution at this point. But I have my reasons, you see. I am grateful to you, and to Galvenia, for your – loyalty, shall we say? All the same, I have reason to believe that the deadlock at Unity Isle will be resolved soon. Then, we shall see.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Sir Prescott said, with a bow. *Something's amiss here, he thought. He knows something we don't, and I need to find out what it is.* “So are the terms of the treaty acceptable?” He turned to look at the large scroll that had been unrolled and placed on a table, in front of the Emperor.

Charlemagne looked at the treaty, which he had already read carefully while listening to Sir Prescott’s exhortations, once more. “Quite acceptable, Sir Prescott,” he replied, “However, I must insist that you leave me free to decide on the time frame within which we will act. While I reiterate my appreciation for your enthusiasm, we must not show our hand too soon either. Remember, you Galvenians have never had the experience of fighting the Varald. A war with them is not a glorious clash of arms; it is a game of slow manoeuvres and small victories, as my much-maligned ancestor, Johan, learned to his damnation. You are wise for your years, Sir Prescott, but you still have much to learn.”

“I bow before your superior experience and wisdom, Your Highness,” Sir Prescott said. “And I shall inform His Majesty of your decision. Be confident that we will respect your wishes with no reservations.”

“Good, good,” the Emperor said, a weary look crossing his face. “Now, Engel, where’s that old quill of mine?”

Klaus Engel, who had maintained a studied silence throughout the above exchanges, handed Charlemagne a large quill, fashioned from the feather of a Crowled Eagle, Zion’s national bird of prey. “Ah, quite sharp, Engel. Thank you.” Moving his arm slowly, he signed the Treaty of Alliance, rolled it up,

and handed it to Sir Prescott as if it were his umbrella or his cloak. "Once again, I thank you. Would you wish to remain with us for a little while? The road to Lorean is long, and you and your aide should refresh yourselves before you return."

"Unfortunately, Your Highness, we must return as soon as we can," Sir Prescott replied, in his best 'humble' tone. *And make enquiries about your sudden change of heart, old man. I know just who would help me there.* "His Majesty has requested me to assist Officer Trask in further securing Lorean Castle, after the recent tragedy. Besides, I must review the troops who will be linking up with yours, and ensure that they are in fighting condition. I must take leave of you, Your Highness, and I thank you for your kindness towards a simple soldier and his companion."

"Oh, think nothing of it," Charlemagne said, extending his scepter in the traditional Zionese gesture of dismissal. Sir Prescott and Gessler knelt down, bowed low, and then turned to leave. "And please convey my gratitude to Arlbert, as well as to Socius, though the fellow probably won't have any use for it." He laughed. "God speed, gentlemen."

"Farewell, Your Highness," the Galvenians said, as they left the Throne Room.

Arlbert. I actually envy the man, Charlemagne thought, sitting down in his throne once more, as his shoulders sagged. At least his daughter is safe with him, while my son....

"Your Highness?" Klaus Engel said, clearing his throat slowly but distinctly. "Is anything the matter?"

"Get me Admiral Yatsu," Charlemagne said, shortly, lifting his head up once more. "Engel, I am about to do something foolish, but I have no choice."

"I beg your pardon, Sire?" Engel replied, in a low tone.

"We need to make our preparations as well, Engel. And I must say that, at a time like this, I would rather have Yatsu in charge of our fleet than Eldon, God rest his soul. Summon him quickly, Engel."

As the Chamberlain departed, obedient as always, on his errand, the Emperor rose from his throne. He paced up and down the room slowly, his thoughts bringing him little comfort.

Wilhelm, you were right, my boy. You were in the right all along. I was a fool not to have listened to you, and now I am paying the price.

"We are no closer to a resolution," Speaker Reinholz said, looking as dispirited as the fifty members of the Commonwealth Senate. "The Senate has voted three times on the matter, and we cannot decide. We therefore return the matter to the Executive Council, for a final decision."

"Wonderful," Hideo Kanoi grumbled under his breath.

Commissioner Jansen, clearly pleased by this outcome, gave Kanoi a sly smile. "Very well, Speaker," he said. "What about the other matter at hand?"

“The Senate declares that, in view of a complete lack of evidence, there is no reason for making allegations about the responsibility of the Varald Directorate – or any other nation – in the tragedy of the *Paradiso*. We move to observe a moment of silence in honour of the brave men and women, from Galvenia and from the Empire, who perished in this cowardly attack. And we further move that the waters between Galvenia and Zion be subjected to further policing by the Commonwealth Fleet, pending the approval of the Executive Council.”

The minute of silence passed, and Lord Archibald Lucan, the Galvenian member of the Council, rose from his seat. “Very well, gentlemen,” he said. “Since you have made your views clear, we shall return to the Council Chamber, and make our final decision.” The five members of the Council headed away from the Senate floor, speaking heatedly.

“Where is the urgency, Lucan?” Representative Jedda of the Fulton Republic said, in his impeccable but accented Common. “Does it matter if we solve the question of who our next President is today, or tomorrow?”

“Perhaps it matters little to you anarchic Republicans,” Kanoi said, irritably, “but the Commonwealth must have a President. We have been seated here for almost a week, and the Senate has failed to decide whether Terrin Hipper, the current Vice-President, should assume the office that was vacated by skullduggery and treachery...”

“*Nabal!* Fool!” Jedda replied, coldly. “Do you have no better pastime, you arrogant Zion, than to inflame passions and make scandalous allegations? If you truly want a President, then accept the one that the stars have given you, instead of daydreaming about your Koketsu!”

“Your desert oaths cannot harm the memory of Junzio Koketsu,” Kanoi shot back, “all they do is dishonor you, as Aramondrius the Galvenian would say. And why must I accept Hipper, when it is clear that...”

“How low the Empire has fallen,” Archbishop Paul Mazarus muttered, shooting an angry look at Kanoi. “The elder sister of the Church of Infinity now behaves like a common wench. Saint Geraud, weep for thy children.”

“My comrades,” Lord Lucan protested, “such displays of temper are not fitting for us. Since the Senate has failed to decide, the burden of responsibility is on our shoulders. Let us accept it, if not cheerfully, then at least peacefully.”

“What perfumed words, Lucan,” Representative Jedda said, his lips curving into a smile. “Tell me, was it with such pretty dialogue that one of your young men enticed the Princess into eloping with him?”

Lucan looked as if he had just been slapped. “Jedda,” he said, a warning note in his voice, “you may speak freely about me, but do not insult the Royal Family of Galvenia. You will regret it.”

“Oh, I see!” Jedda laughed. “Well, Lucan, I will spare you the blushes now, but I am still curious to know how your future ruler ended up on the *Paradiso* in the first place. If she was not abducted, then it follows that she has brought shame to her family name, like some petty chieftain’s daughter...”

“Enough!” Archbishop Mazarus’ voice came suddenly, like a swift blow from a hammer. “Jedda, I know the Republic is known for dishonouring and humiliating its women, but there is no need for you to defame an innocent girl. Moderate your language, by the Infinity!”

“What dishonor do you speak of, Mazarus,” Jansen said, calmly, “you who refuse to allow women to rule over you? Truly, I think even Jedda can claim the high ground over you on that count....”

“Go ahead, you godless man,” Mazarus said, stepping forward. “But the Infinity has made it clear, in his holy Book, that only a man can....”

“All this is rather beside the point,” Kanoi said, fussily, as they all sat down at the Council table. “Frankly, the Emperor could care less about bride abductions in Fulton, or the patriarchy of Itaria, or how Princess Carranya went for her cruise. We have now been asked to make a decision. Should Terrin Hipper of Varald be allowed to occupy the President’s chair? Should the Empire be allowed to send a replacement, as I originally suggested? Or – *horribile dictu* – should we declare the elections null and void, and hold a repeat election, at great cost and inconvenience to the Commonwealth? This is the question before us. Let us make a decision, before our Commonwealth slides further into disarray.”

“Director Kievan’s instructions are clear....” Commissioner Jansen began, when the Council Chamber’s doors were thrown open, and a uniformed porter arrived, bearing a telegram on a tray. “For you, Sir,” he said, handing the message to Viceroy Kanoi. Kanoi rose, tore the telegram open with a snort, read it, and sank back in his chair, pale.

“Dishonour,” he said, too low for anyone but Jedda, whose ears were sharpened by his days in the Desert Legions, to hear.

“Good news, Kanoi?” Commissioner Jansen said, laughing quietly.

“At any rate, my own mind is made up,” Jedda went on, pretending to ignore what he had heard. “The Republic had no troubles during the rule of President Miller, and will have no troubles with any successor of his. In the interests of trade and security, I move that Terrin Hipper be allowed to assume office at the earliest. We cannot allow the economy of Terra to hang in the balance any longer.”

“I abstain,” Archbishop Mazarus said, shaking his head in disapproval. “Jedda, there is more to life than mere prosperity. Remember Janwen, and Meldia, and....”

“Do you never tire of quoting from that book of fairy-tales that you always carry?” Jansen said, coolly. “Frankly, even your own scholars now admit that much of it is made up of whole cloth....”

“Let the Archbishop speak, Jansen,” Lucan said, wearily.

“At any rate,” Mazarus went on, a defeated expression on his face, “it appears that our brethren in the Directorate must suffer a little longer. Itaria abstains, and may the Infinity soften Terrin Hipper’s hard heart.”

“Galvenia votes in favour of an Imperial replacement,” Lucan said, after a long pause. “According to the Fifteenth Article of the Third Amendment to the hallowed Charter, a President only assumes office when he is confirmed by the Senate in the presence of the entire Council, on Unity Isle. Since Koketsu was not yet confirmed, this means that...”

“Oh, don’t be disingenuous, Lucan,” Commissioner Jansen said, lighting a cigarette – something that he knew Kanoi hated – and blowing a ring of smoke in the air. “A President is a President from the moment the Senate declares the electoral result. He can only exercise power *de jure* once he is confirmed on Unity Isle, but he is still the President *de facto*. Really, is that the quality of education in King’s College these days? I move that Hipper be made President. It is a hard law, but it is your Lord Geraud’s law, and I intend to follow it to the letter.”

“You have not yet spoken, Kanoi,” Archbishop Mazarus said. “What do you say? Currently, we are at two votes for Terrin Hipper, one for the Empire, and one abstention.”

“Gentlemen,” Kanoi said, trembling with anger, and speaking through clenched teeth, “I have just been commanded by His Imperial Highness to...” He paused, and caught his breath. “...to inform you that the Zion Empire accepts the nomination of Terrin Hipper of Varald as President, and wishes him good fortune. And while I consider that this will bring the Commonwealth to ruin and damnation, I cannot oppose the Emperor’s orders. The Empire...” he paused, and spoke the next few words with an almost superhuman effort, “...proposes that Terrin Hipper be named President, in place of Junzio Koketsu.” Having said this, he crumpled the telegram and thrust it into his coat pocket, then leaned back in his chair, with an expression of dismay on his face.

“It seems your Emperor is more reasonable than some of the venerable Council,” Jansen said, with a broad smile. “The Director accepts your good wishes, Kanoi, and Terra shall move forward under the rule of Terrin Hipper, its new President.”

“By the Holy Martyrs of Factoria,” Archbishop Mazarus said, looking at the stricken Kanoi in amazement, “I cannot quite understand what has happened here. Subtle are the ways of the Infinity. May He, who can do anything, protect our....new President, as strange as his election may have been.”

“Wise words, Mazarus,” Jemma said, with a sigh of relief. “We live in strange times, but at least we have reached a decision, and that is something to be justly proud of. What do you say, Lucan?”

“My friends,” Lucan said, politely, “while I cannot claim to be overjoyed at this turn of events, it is clear that we must accept what has happened today. We shall await the arrival of Terrin Hipper, and he shall be confirmed in office as soon as possible, as there are several matters requiring his urgent attention.”

“The Director *will* be pleased,” Commissioner Jansen said, folding his hands together. “Come, gentlemen, let us not look so glum. To Terra, and to President Hipper.”

There were half-hearted sounds of agreement from around the table, and then the Council members filed out, one by one, to apprise the Senate of their decision. Kanoi was the last to leave, and he walked slowly, like one wounded.

God save the Emperor, he thought. He has lost his mind.

“Lavie!” Lina Wellesley called out, as Lavie walked briskly towards the “Café au Lait”, Mann Island’s ever-popular coffee and pastry shop. “What good wind blows you here, now? Daddy finally allowed you to buy those earrings you’d always wanted?”

Lavie giggled. “Very funny, Lina,” she said, walking up to the front of Lina’s open-air boutique. “I’ve just been coming to meet Mr. Evens for some extra lessons, and thought I’d catch a cup of coffee before I got back to work. He’s pushing me pretty hard, you know!”

Lina laughed in turn. “Sheesh, Lavie, you’re either an overachiever, or a glutton for punishment. Amber Ironside’s quite hot and bothered about it, you know. She can’t quite understand why you’d want to learn anything more, since you’ve already made it to Level Ten. Between you and me, I’m sure she’d willingly try to compete with you, but her folks want her to buckle down and study for the entrance to the Westchester School of Art.”

“The School of Art? That’s cool!” *Amber and I have been rivals at archery ever since I first seriously picked up a bow, especially since her grandpa was a champion in his day, but she’s always been great at drawing and painting. Of course, she can’t play the piano for nuts, so that makes us even,* she thought, chuckling. “So how’s business, Lina?”

Lina adjusted the large head-scarf, decorated with a humorously large skull-and-crossbones, that she always wore to work, and sighed. “Not so good, Lavie, ever since you decided to start economizing. Is Daddy still keeping you on short rations?”

“Not really, Lina,” she replied, with a wink. “In fact, he said he’d take us all shopping in Lorean some day soon. But I wouldn’t mind browsing a little! What’s new?”

“It’s fortunate you should say that,” Lina replied, “because I’ve got a little number for you that would fit in quite nicely with all that archery you’re doing, girl. She rummaged among the stacks of clothes that lay, rather untidily, on her counter, and extracted a lavender-coloured dress, quite unlike anything Lavie had seen before. “Wait a minute, there are also these!” Reaching under the counter, she extracted a pair of high boots, in white leather, with laces whose colour matched the garment she had just displayed. “And *voilà*, as they say in the Zion Empire! Behold, Miss Lavender, the very latest in fashion for young archers!”

“Very funny, Lina,” Lavie said, grinning. “And what, may I ask, is that supposed to be?”

“It’s the traditional attire of the Huntresses of Malava, from the old Galvenian legends,” Lina said, “or at least that’s what the old guy I bought it from claimed. A full outfit, the works, including two arm guards, and boots. It’s decorative, especially since you seem to be on some sort of a ‘battle archer’ kick these days. Try it on! It’ll fit you like a glove.”

“The Huntresses of Malava? I’ve heard of them, but who exactly were they?” Lavie asked.

“It’s a local legend,” said Lina. “My old mum used to tell me about it when I was a kid. And since today seems to be a lean day for commerce” – she sighed, and shrugged her shoulders – “I may as well kill some time by telling you about it.”

“It’s a story from the Empire, isn’t it?”

“Right you are! It seems that in the days when we were still part of the Empire, there was this guy whom the Emperor had appointed as a Viceroy, to rule over the southern parts of the continent, where Galvenia now is. This place used to be called the Province of Malava. This guy was a tyrant and wanted to make his own little Empire, so he took away the weapons of all the men in the towns he ruled, taxed them to the last cent, and made them work hard on the land. The story is that the people finally got fed up of being oppressed, and sent two elders from their towns, known for their wisdom and respected by all, to seek an audience with the Emperor and complain about him.”

“And what happened then?” Lavie asked, looking at the dress appreciatively.

“Well, the old Viceroy was furious when he learned of what the two old men had done, so he had their only sons locked away in prison. Now, these sons were both engaged to young women, and these two were very close friends, almost sisters. They swore that they’d save their lovers, and they began to train with bows and arrows in the woods, hunting beasts with which they would feed the poor of their town. However, the Viceroy’s men found out about it, and were about to throw them into jail, too, when a mysterious woman, who called herself the Angel of Malava, blinded the soldiers and handed each of the girls a longbow, telling them to use them wisely to free the elders’ sons.”

“Wow, I’d never heard of this one!” said Lavie, unfolding the garment and holding it against her. “So what did the two girls do?”

“They made their way into the Viceroy’s castle by night, and, slipping past the guards, they shot the warrior who was guarding the boys’ cells, blinding him in both eyes. They freed them, and were about to escape when the Viceroy and his guards, awakened by the warrior’s cries, came running towards them. In the scuffle that followed, the girls were accidentally separated, and each one, accompanied by her boyfriend, went to a different part of the castle. One of them reached the entrance to the Palace, fought off the guards with her bow, but was surrounded by more of the Viceroy’s men. The couple fought bravely, but was soon outnumbered, and was about to be captured. The Viceroy’s Sheriff tried to kill her on the spot, but she parried his blow with her bow, and the blade of his sword miraculously broke.”

“And how did she escape?” Lavie asked, leaning forward.

“Hey, let me tell this my way, Lavie!” Lina said, amused by Lavie’s absorption in the legend. “The other girl tried to escape to the top of the castle with her man, and was chased by the Viceroy himself. Finally, they reached the very top of the castle, and after dodging the Viceroy’s sword, the second girl shot the Viceroy with an arrow, and he fell off the ramparts of his palace. At the very moment he fell, the two elders returned, accompanied by a group of soldiers from the Emperor, who was angry with what his Viceroy had done. The Viceroy’s remaining men were routed, and though he survived the fall, he was seriously wounded, and lived out the rest of his life in the same prison he had kept the boys in. The two elders were named joint regents of the area, the twin huntresses married the elders’ sons, and they all lived happily ever after. It’s said that, many years later, the ghosts of the two girls would be seen in the woods, walking together happily. Or something like that,” Lina concluded, noting with pleasure the effect that the tale had produced on Lavie. “So are you up to being a Huntress yourself, Lavie?”

“Hey, that’s pretty cool, Lina!” Lavie replied. “Not sure about how well I fit your story, though. I’m never going to break into a dungeon to let some guy out, that’s for sure!”

“Ah, the safe life of Davenport and Regale, Incorporated,” Lina said, grinning. “You’d probably get Dad to send in a bunch of mercenaries to bust him out, if you needed to. Now if I could only persuade Mr. Sigmund to share some of his wealth with a small-town store, like mine…”

“You’re incorrigible, Lina,” Lavie said, between laughs. “Besides, I don’t have a guy to bust out of jail, at least not yet!”

Lina winked at her. “No guys yet? What about that guy you had a fight with, and wanted a present for? Has that bird flown away?”

Lavie blushed. “Hey, how do you even remember that? And anyway…”

Lina went on, mercilessly. “Besides, wouldn’t a mere mention of Mr. Regale’s millions be enough to bring any guy back to you? You know what they say, Lavie, the way to a guy’s heart is through his pocketbook.”

“You’re a laugh riot today, aren’t you, Lina?” Lavie said, winking at her. “Besides, I’m certainly not going to fall for a guy who only wants to marry my “millions”! So lay off the knocks at Daddy, okay?”

“Hey, hey, can’t a girl have a laugh every now and then? So do you want the costume, or not?” Lina asked, holding it up in the sunlight.

“You know what, I might actually take that one! It’s simply lovely. Besides, Daddy gave me a pretty generous allowance this month, and I guess a little splurge couldn’t hurt. How much is it?”

“Seven hundred Commonwealth dollars, take it or leave it,” Lina replied, with an expression of mock sternness. “The costs of living these days, I tell you!”

“Seven hundred? Come on, Lina, make an effort! You sound like Famous Ray, who asked me for two thousand dollars for a ride on his silly boat!” Lavie said, slyly.

“Ouch! Comparing me to Mr. Saucy Maiden? That hurt, Lavie dear. All right, then, how about six hundred and ninety nine dollars, and ninety-nine cents?”

“Hmph!” Lavie said, tossing her head. “That’s not funny, Lina. In fact, that joke is worth exactly one cent!”

“Just kidding, girl,” Lina said, with a chuckle. “Would six hundred dollars be fair, just for an old customer’s sake?”

“Hey, I’m not *old*,” Lavie protested. “But that sounds quite fair to me, if you’ll throw in the boots as well.”

“You *are* your father’s daughter, Lavie, no question about that,” Lina said, shaking her head with amusement. “Very well, then. Why don’t you pop into that cabin and try it on? I know you’re just dying to do so!”

“How well you know me, Lina,” Lavie said happily, as she picked up her new outfit and headed for the small changing room next to the coffee shop.

“*Hipper* as president?” Ryan exclaimed, setting down the Eramonds’ copy of the *Davenport Evening Times* with a sound of annoyance. “The Commonwealth isn’t what it used to be.”

“Well, son, Father always said that politics was a pastime for swine and sheep; he used to get Saunders’ goat by saying it when he ran for Mayor,” Theodore Eramond replied, sipping his tea.

“Now, Theo, dear, don’t start with the politics now,” Sheila said, as she placed a tray full of buttered toast in front of the two men of her household. “Just relax, and enjoy your tea!”

“Not a bad idea, Sheila, not a bad idea at all,” Theodore said, contentedly, “though I *do* find that two Varaldian Presidents in succession is a bit much of a muchness. Especially after Miller, who was terrible for international trade.”

“All right, Mum, we’ll change the topic,” Ryan said, grinning. “So tell me, Dad, what was in that package? The one I had to take to Caledonia, I mean.”

“I’m surprised you still remember them,” Theodore said, setting his cup down comfortably in its saucer. “Well, son, it can’t hurt to tell you now, especially since I’ve already shipped them by road after you brought them back safely. The package contained medicines for Emperor Charlemagne, who is apparently quite ill. They only make them in the Fulton Republic, so they reach him by way of Davenport.”

“That Zionesse agent told me that Charlemagne was sick,” Ryan said, “but medicines from the Republic? That’s quite far out. Don’t they make them in Zion, or Galvenia?”

“The Republic is a lot more advanced than us in many ways, Ryan,” his father replied. “While the Zionese are masters of magic and military technology, the men of Fulton are streets ahead when it comes to more peaceful uses of science. The Varald used to be close behind, but their Directors have stifled most research in the last few decades, and Fulton has pulled well ahead.”

“Cool,” Ryan said. “Maybe I should visit them some time, and study science over there.”

“Ah, son, you’ll have trouble with their language,” Theodore said, coolly. “Though they do speak Common, it’s sometimes hard to make out what they say. And when you add Republican, Old Republican, Cosmopolitan, and various other dialects to the mix, you have quite the mixed grill. Besides, why go all the way there? King’s College is right next door.”

“Cosmopolitan?” Sheila looked up from her toast, interested. “Emily used to have a tutor who’d give her lessons in Cosmopolitan. Apparently it’s considered one of the ‘classic’ languages of Terra, along with Itarian. She found it rather hard, poor dear!”

“I’d like to see *Lavie* learning any new languages,” Ryan said, laughing. “Though she’d probably want to learn Zionese, so that she could read those comic books with all the pretty boys in them...”

“Very funny, Ryan,” Theodore replied. “Speaking of *Lavie*, I haven’t seen her around much these days. Is she planning to go to University, by any chance?”

“Well, dear, Emily told me that she’d spent a few days with her grandmother, on Mann Island. And even after coming back, she’s been going there almost every day, for archery lessons. Maybe she wants to teach archery.”

“Hmm, I don’t see *Lavie* having the patience to teach anything...” Ryan began, but stopped short when he noticed Theodore’s disapproving look. “Okay, Dad, I’ll stop with the jokes now.”

“Good, good!” Theodore said. “So what are you doing this evening, Ryan?”

“Well...” He looked embarrassed, but continued. “Marianne sent me a note today, saying that she wanted to meet me at Davenport Park. She said she had a surprise for me.”

“A surprise? How sweet of her,” Sheila said.

“I hope it’s a *pleasant* surprise, though,” Theodore said, drily. “The last surprise she gave you wasn’t particularly pleasant, I should think.”

“Dear!” Sheila said, gently.

“Dad!” Ryan protested. “That’s all over now! Look, Dad, Marianne’s been having troubles, and she needs my support. She’s sorry about what happened. Why do you have a problem with that?”

“No problem, actually, son,” Theodore said, “as long as you’re convinced that what you’re doing is right. But remember what I told you. Loyalty is an important quality, Ryan, and you need to appreciate it. Now” – he said, noticing that Ryan was about to interrupt – “I’m not going to lecture you, because

you're old enough to know what you're doing. But remember that you can't always save others, the way you saved the Princess."

"Dad, those are two different things! Helping to protect the Princess was – oh, I don't know, it was just the right thing to do, as Grandpa always said. This is different. This is, well....personal," he ended, rather lamely.

"I understand, Ryan," Theodore said quietly, "and I'm not stopping you. Go ahead, and have a nice time with your friend, but just think about what I've said, when you have the time."

"All right, Dad, all right!" Ryan said, grinning. "Well, see you, Mum and Dad, I've got to be going. I'll be back in time for dinner!" He rushed up to his room to grab his jacket, and as he thrust his hands into its pockets, he felt something folded up in one of them.

What's that? he thought, taking the object out and unfolding it. *Oh, those tickets Tremfein gave me. I seem to be quite the ticket collector these days! I wonder if Marianne would be interested in going...maybe I should ask her, if she hasn't got any other plans.*

And, feeling quite light-hearted, he headed down the path towards Davenport Park.

"Well, hello, Sir," Tiffany, the ever-smiling receptionist at the Explorer's Guild, called out. "We haven't seen you for quite a while."

The man lowered his hood and looked around, carefully. The sun had set, and the low lights of the Guild gave the place, which was almost empty, a rather sinister appearance. On a notice-board hung a series of notices, listing tasks and assignments for would-be explorers and bounty hunters. He looked at them absently, smiling at the trivial nature of some of the tasks. *Not like that creature in Alton*, he thought. *I wonder if anyone will ever know the truth of that matter. Except a privileged few, such as me.*

"Has he arrived?" he asked Tiffany in a low voice.

"He's waiting for you in the back room," Tiffany said. "In fact, he got here quite early. Said he had other things to do in town, and people to meet tomorrow."

"Very well, Tiffany," the man replied, opening the door and heading into the small room at the rear. This room, which had no particular purpose, was often used as an *ad hoc* office for the young pretenders and aspirants to Estebian Via's post as the Explorer, while they laid their plans and schemed. On other occasions, as on this evening, it was simply a quiet and convenient meeting-place for transactions that required discretion.

"Ah, good evening," said the man who was already seated behind the small round table. He was tall, and well-dressed, and his posture was relaxed, his long legs stretching out comfortably under the table.

"What news, then?"

“Good news, sir,” the man in the cloak replied, sitting down opposite him. “Our agents have succeeded in intercepting the – shipment.”

“That will buy us some more time,” the tall man said, approvingly, “though Fate has already helped us there. What news from your town?”

“Nothing in particular, Sir, except that the task you have assigned me is nearing completion. Why, it may even be complete as we speak.”

“Excellent. Of course, there were many ways of doing the thing, but this was the simplest. With that man out of the way, one of our last obstacles will be removed for good. I thank you.”

“I trust that you have a more material way of expressing your thanks,” the cloaked man said, smiling. “There were anxious moments when I thought that my – collaborator had failed me.”

“Think nothing of it, man,” the tall man said, with a look of amusement passing across his lazy expression. “As I said, this was but one way. But you have saved us time and expense, and I am not ungrateful. Here, receive your reward.” He drew a small envelope from his doublet, and handed it to his companion.

The man in the cloak opened the cover, counted its contents carefully, and then placed it within his cloak, looking satisfied. “You are generous, indeed.”

“I know how to reward a good worker, that’s all. You may rest a while now, for the next task I have for you may prove to be – delayed.”

“Delayed in what way, Sir?”

“Delayed, in that events are not moving as fast as they ought to. The news from the Palace, for example, suggests that someone may have become aware of our actions.”

“But that is not possible, Sir,” the cloaked man protested. “I assure you that we have been careful, and...”

“I do not speak of you or your allies,” the tall man said, still calm. “I speak of fools, idealists who whisper lying promises into their rulers’ ears. You see, even after thousands of years of stupidity, most men do not understand what they truly need, if they wish to be free from war and misery. The Commonwealth was a folly that will, hopefully, soon be no more. Friendship. Compromise. Negotiation. The language of weaklings. It is time that we learned to grow comfortable with the language of strength, as our forefathers did. The language of true men.”

“Well, Sir, I don’t mind what language you prefer, as long as we all receive our due.” The man in the cloak laughed nervously. “I shall return, then, and await your instructions.”

“Very well. And do me a favour, friend. When you return, keep an eye open for any Itarians who may suddenly appear in your neighbourhood. They may be important. If you learn anything, inform me in the usual way. Is that clear?”

“Itarians?” The man looked puzzled. “They are rather scarce where I live, but I will do as you say.”

“Then farewell,” the tall man said, raising his hand in a gesture of dismissal, “and a safe journey to you. Even if you learn nothing, return here in two weeks. There may be something of interest for you.”

“Farewell, Sir Lugner,” the other replied. “I shall return, at the appointed time.”

“Wow, Gran, we’re travelling all over the place today!” Emily exclaimed, as Maria arrived with her latest gastronomic experiments.

“Indeed we are, dear,” Lavie said. “Dear me, there is still quite a lot of this story left, and there’s so much to tell. Well, we’ll just have to continue after lunch, won’t we, Emily?”

“Of course we will, Gran!” Emily said happily, as the two of them took their seats at table. Another enjoyable meal later, Emily climbed onto her favourite perch, and Lavie continued...

Ryan found her seated on the swing, the evening breeze blowing her blue hair and her apron around her. She was holding a small box close to her chest, and her expression, when she saw him, was shy, almost nervous. “Ryan,” she said, slowly, rising to greet him, “I’m so glad you came by.”

“Thanks, Marianne,” Ryan said. “Hey, want to sit right here, on the swings? It’s nice and quiet here.”

“I don’t mind if I do,” Marianne said, laughing lightly, as they both sat down side by side, one to a swing. “So...how are you, Ryan?”

“Fine, quite fine,” Ryan said lightly. “Though I still sometimes wake up with a start, thinking of those pirates.”

“You’re so brave, Ryan,” Marianne said, holding his hand. “So I thought I’d give you a hero’s reward, in my own little way. That’s why I called you.”

“A reward?” Ryan looked puzzled. “But Marianne, the King already gave me a medal, and...”

“Oh, who cares about the old *King’s* medal?” Marianne said, smiling at him and leaning closer. “I don’t care whose hero you are, Ryan, as long as you’re *my* hero...” Saying this, she opened the box, and handed it to Ryan. “Now, you can take a look, like a good boy!”

Ryan laughed. “What is it, Marianne?”

Marianne lowered her eyes. “I thought *you* were the clever one, Ryan,” she said, teasingly. “Why don’t you just look at it?”

Ryan looked into the box. Inside was a silver pendant, with a cluster of two stones set in it – one red, and one blue. He took it out, and held it under the yellow light of the Park lamps, where it gleamed with many colours.

“Wow, that’s....that’s beautiful, Marianne,” Ryan said, surprised. “What is it?”

In answer, Marianne drew a similar pendant from the pocket of her apron. The only difference between the two was that the order of the stones was reversed on hers – the blue stone came first, and then the red. “It’s something I wanted to give you for a long time. I hoped, and prayed, that someday you’d forgive me, and on that day I’d give it to you, and tell you how glad I was that we were together...” Her voice trembled.

Ryan patted her on the shoulder. “That’s all in the past, Marianne,” he said kindly. “Don’t think about it any longer, it’s not worth it. But this must have cost you quite a bundle!”

“I was....saving up, to get it for you, Ryan,” Marianne said softly. “For us. One for you, one for me. The merchant I bought it from says that these pendants are a pledge, that we’ll always be loyal to each other. And I promise I’ll never....” She faltered, again, and Ryan drew her close to him.

“Hush now, Marianne. Remember what I said? All that is over. Let’s....look forward to the future, Marianne. That’s what we ought to do, you know? And I couldn’t possibly stay angry with you after something like this.” He slipped the pendant around his own neck, and – with a deft, quick gesture – took hers from her hand, and placed it over her head as well. “To us, and to what lies ahead.”

“Ryan, I....I just don’t know what to say,” Marianne said gratefully, as their fingers intertwined. “Thank you, Ryan...”

“No, Marianne, I should thank you, for your wonderful gift. I’ll always treasure this, believe me,” Ryan said, earnestly. “And guess what, I’ve got a little surprise, too! A friend of mine from the *Paradiso* gave me tickets for a musical show tonight, at Serin’s Peak. Would you like to come with me?”

“Ryan, I’d love to,” Marianne replied, regretfully, “but I’m afraid I can’t. I have to help get dinner ready, now that Mother isn’t....there anymore. Father will be waiting for me. I’m sorry, Ryan.”

“Think nothing of it, Marianne,” Ryan said, holding her hand. “I understand. And I’m sure we’ll get many other chances to do things together, just the two of us. Till tomorrow, Marianne.”

“Till tomorrow, Ryan. You don’t know how happy this has made me,” she replied, simply, and then – waving goodbye – she headed back to her home, leaving Ryan sitting quietly, pleased but a little disappointed as well, as he ran his fingers over the pendant.

That was pretty awesome of her, he thought. Carranya was right, I needed to get back together with her. I’ve done the right thing. But I do wish we could have gone to that show together. Now, what do I do with these tickets? Maybe I’ll go alone.

As he headed up the path to his house, still dreaming pleasant dreams of Marianne, he found himself almost colliding with someone strangely familiar.

“Well, hello, Mr. Eramond,” a voice said, in a surprisingly kind tone. “So what are you daydreaming about, you goof, bumping into me like that?”

“Er...hi there, Lavie,” he said, flushing a little. “I was just...”

“Taking a walk in Davenport Park, huh?” Lavie laughed. “I can’t blame you, Ryan, it’s a nice place!”

Did she just wink at me? Ryan thought, looking at her. And what is she wearing? It looks strange, but...sort of fitting. She doesn’t look that silly anymore.

“Um...it sure is! What’s with the new outfit, Lavie? I’ve never seen it before.”

“Of course not, silly, I just bought it today! Apparently it’s an archer’s costume based on an old legend from the Empire. Or at least, that’s what Lina *claims*.” She laughed, and turned slightly to one side. “How do you like it?”

Okay, time to follow Dad’s instructions. “Pretty nice, Lavie,” Ryan said, politely. “And a nice colour scheme, too. Lavie in lavender. Quite poetic, really.”

Lavie laughed again. “Oh, you charmer! So where are you headed now? Going home? I just had to run a little errand for Mom, and I’m done!”

“As a matter of fact, I was wondering what to do with these tickets,” Ryan said, showing them to her.

“Mr. Tremfein, whom I met on board the ship, very kindly gave me these. He says it’s some sort of musical show.”

“The ship? You know, Ryan, I was so worried about you, and Daddy and I were waiting....” Lavie began, frowning.

“Yes, Dad told me,” Ryan said, kindly. “But fortunately, I made it out safe, and so did the rest of us. Thanks for....the concern, though, I guess. I’m all right now.”

“That makes me glad, Ryan,” Lavie said, beaming at him. “Say, do you think I could come to that show along with you? If it’s a musical, I’m sure there’ll be nice piano tunes! I love those!”

“Er...” Ryan hesitated. *This might actually be a good opportunity. It’ll just be for an hour or so, and it’ll get Dad off my back for a while! Especially after what happened at that ball in City Hall...* “Well, why not?” he said, and making an inward effort, he handed her one of the tickets. “After all, I do have a spare ticket, and I don’t think Henrik would want to come along. He’s too busy cramming. As for Armin, I really can’t tell where he is, half the time! What sinister activities is that boy up to?”

“Oh, dear,” Lavie said, laughing. “Well, thank you very much, Ryan. I see your manners have improved a lot, after meeting that Princess.”

“Very funny, Lavie,” Ryan said. *What is it with her? She’s not being as....as “sticky” as she normally is!* “The show should be starting in half an hour.”

“Then we’d better get moving!” Lavie said, brightly. “Tell me, Ryan, did you get to see any of Mr. Tremfein’s shows, on that ship? Daddy says he mostly writes about Galvenian history.”

Ryan turned a deep red, grateful that the dim light would not betray his embarrassment too much. *I wonder what Lavie would have thought if she’d seen me acting in that play!* “Well, you could say I did. He does have a flair for the dramatic. It was a play about Prince Derren and Lady Penelope, and the Galvenian War of Independence. But it didn’t have any songs in it. I wonder who’ll be helping him with the music today.”

“Prince Derren? Sure, I remember reading about *him* at school. Well, lead on, Ryan, I hope it’ll be worth the trip, though!” a smiling Lavie replied.

“All right, then, off we go,” Ryan said, a little hesitantly, as they headed down the path to the military docks. They walked together in near-silence, with each of them only making a polite remark every now and then. *And why isn’t she chattering away like she normally does?* Ryan thought. *You’d almost think she was growing up a little! Well, whatever it is, it ought to make for a peaceful evening. This may not be as bad as I thought it would be.*

“Goodness, Theo, look at that!” Sheila exclaimed, looking out of the window. “What *is* that boy up to? First Marianne....and now Lavie? Dear me, that boy *is* growing up.”

Intrigued, Theodore himself looked out of the window, and whistled. “As long as he’s developing a little common sense, I’m all for it, dear,” he said, laughing.

By the time they reached Serin’s Peak, the little hall next to the recruitment office was already quite full, but there were still many seats for ticket-holders left in front. Ryan and Lavie found a quiet pair of seats in the middle of the hall, and sat down. The stage was decorated to resemble a forest, and there were several young men – some of them wearing masks – walking around backstage, talking together excitedly. From time to time, a few piano chords could be heard.

“This looks like it ought to be fun,” Lavie said, looking at the actors’ costumes. “Do you have any idea what the show’s about, Ryan?”

Ryan consulted his ticket. “Well, it says here that it’s called ‘The Three Hunters’, and that it’s a farce. From which I presume that it ought to be funny.”

“You sounded just like your dad when you said that!” Lavie said, amused. “The Three Hunters – are they like the Twin Huntresses, or something?”

“Can’t tell,” Ryan said absently. “But old Tremfein loves adding his own dramatic details to history, I can tell you that much.”

“What was that play of his like, Ryan?” Lavie asked, taking her own ticket out of her bag. “The one you saw on the ship, I mean.”

Ryan cleared his throat, nervously. “Well, it was...”

“Sonny!” A cheerful voice, the voice of an elderly woman, interrupted him. “Well, what a pleasure to see you here. And Tremfein will be so pleased, I know. And who might this charming young lady be?”

“Hi, Naomi,” Ryan said, a little warily. “Lavie, this is Naomi Festa. She’s Tremfein’s assistant and dressmaker. She’s the one who made the Princess’ clothes, the ones she wore when she arrived at Davenport.”

“Wow!” Lavie said, looking very impressed. “That was....just so cool! The Princess in her golden dress, and Ryan carrying the flag! Someone ought to have painted it. Mrs. Festa, my name is Lavie Regale. Pleased to meet you!” She held out her hand.

Naomi looked at her with a maternal expression. “Miss Regale, weren’t you the one who played the piano at the King’s last dance? You were quite splendid, you know!” They shook hands, and Naomi sat down next to her.

Lavie beamed. “Why, thank you, ma’am,” she said. “I could say the same about the clothes you made for the Princess, too.”

“That’s very kind of you, my child,” Naomi said, grinning broadly in turn. “I only wish we had someone like you playing the piano tonight. One of the sailors is doing it, but you’d have done much better.”

“Oh, dear,” Lavie said, laughing. “Well, I’m sure he’ll be all right. So what’s it about, ma’am? The play, I mean.”

“Please call me Naomi,” the kindly dressmaker replied. “Well, it’s a sort of a parody of the Twin Huntresses of Malava. I assume you’ve.....Why, you’re dressed up like one of them, Miss Regale! How remarkable! Are you an actress, too?”

Lavie laughed out loud. “An actress? My, my, Daddy would have a fit if he heard that! I’ve done bits in school plays, but nothing else. And please, call me Lavie. ‘Miss Regale’ makes me sound like an old woman!”

“Oh, come on, dear, no one would accuse *you* of being old,” Naomi said, winking at her. “But that’s still a most remarkable dress, you know, Lavie. It’s giving me ideas.”

“I got it from a shop in Mann Island,” Lavie explained. “I go there to practice my archery, and she told me the story of the Huntresses, so I thought I’d pick it up!”

Ryan rolled his eyes. *Oh, sheesh, are these two going to chatter away like this all the time? And I hope Lavie doesn’t start thinking she’s a Huntress of Malava, and shooting arrows at us whenever she loses her temper! She’s unpredictable enough as it is!* The thought made him laugh, and he relaxed a little.

“Well, it was lovely meeting you, Lavie,” Naomi said, as she rose from her seat. “But this old woman has work to do, and the show will be starting any minute! If you should ever come down to Lorean, do look me up. I’ll be at the Actors’ Guild Hall. Who knows, I might be able to make you a nice costume, someday!”

“Thanks, Naomi,” Lavie said warmly, “though I’m not really a good actress or anything! All the best for the show.”

“Thank you, Lavie, I hope we’ll meet again. *Mazel tov*, as they say in the old Republic,” Naomi said, nodding happily as she hurried backstage.

“I think it means ‘good fortune’, or something like that,” Ryan explained to a puzzled Lavie.

“Wow, I wonder if I should actually ask her to make me an outfit!” Lavie said, excitedly. “Perhaps it’ll work out cheaper than buying one in a boutique. Hey, look, they’re about to start!”

And indeed, in a minute the stage lights went dim, and a hush came over the crowd. A few ominous sounding piano chords echoed in the background, and a dim green light shone on the centre of the stage. Tremfein appeared, wrapped in a long orange robe, with two elderly sailors standing one on either side of him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to be with you tonight, and pay tribute to these two brave naval men, who have faithfully served the Kingdom of Galvenia for years. Now that they are retiring, the Navy has authorized me to present you with this little story. Before I begin, let us have a round of applause for Engineer Robert Farwell, and Lieutenant Jim Harper, of the Galvenia Royal Marines! Thank you for your service, gentlemen.”

The two men stepped forward, a little shyly, and received an enthusiastic response from the crowd. *That must be their families in the front row*, Ryan thought, looking at a group of men, women and children whose applause was particularly hearty. *How proud they seem. It’s ordinary folks like them who make Galvenia, and the Commonwealth, what it is. Not people like Terrin Hipper.*

The felicitations over, the piano began playing the lively strains of the “Heliotrope Waltz” as the curtain rose. *Hey, that’s one of Lavie’s favourites*, Ryan thought, glancing at her. She was listening to the music intently, and smiled back.

A tall actor, wearing a bear-like mask and a thick fur cloak, stepped forward, holding an old scroll in his hands, as the music slowed down.

“For hundreds of years,” he said, in an exaggerated, ‘dramatic’ tone, “tales of bravery, chivalry, and what not have captured the hearts of the people of Galvenia. Every child knows about King Richard Lionheart, or the Twin Huntresses. These are the stories that they tell you about in school – tales of heroism, and derring-do, and adventure.”

There was a sudden pause.

“Unfortunately for us, my friends, today’s tale is *not* one of them! With apologies and regrets, I now present to you a tale of fools and folly – knowing well that the Infinity protects children, ships and fools with special care. Well, Infinity, I hope you enjoy this one, because I now give you some of the greatest fools the world has ever known: *The Three Hunters!*”

Three men, carrying large pasteboard swords and wearing improbable-looking armour, came out, and began singing a comic song in loud, enthusiastic voices. One of them stumbled as he entered, and looked down disconsolately at his sword, which seemed to have broken, before throwing its “blade” into the front rows of the crowd, where a young boy caught it to cheers from the rest of the audience.

Hey, they’re quite funny! Ryan thought, looking at Lavie, who was laughing and clapping. *I didn’t know Tremfein was into slapstick.*

The next hour or so passed by quite merrily. The Three Hunters, a group of self-professed “knights” and “mercenaries” – who weren’t quite sure, themselves, what either word meant – wandered through the woods of Galvenia in search of adventure and fortune, engaging in various hilarious battles with “the beasts of the forest”, who were actually quite harmless rabbits and raccoons. Each creature had a song of its own, and scampered away merrily when accidentally defeated, leaving the Hunters without a trophy. Finally, after many such misadventures, including their accidental destruction of an inn, they came upon a princess and a dragon sitting and talking together on a log.

Deciding that this was their chance at earning world-wide renown, they attacked the dragon, but were handily defeated despite their best efforts. The ‘dragon’ then removed its costume, revealing that he was actually a prince from another country. He was courting the princess in disguise to escape the wrath of her father, the King, who wanted her to marry an old baron for “reasons of state”. While this went on, the King appeared on the scene, furious, and challenged the knight to a duel. However, with the accidental assistance of the Three Hunters, the King was defeated and embarrassed, and was given a choice at sword-point: either consent to allow the princess to marry the man she wanted, or be forced to join the Three Hunters and wander the forest. Sensibly, the King chose the former alternative, and they all lived quite happily, with the last scene showing the Three Hunters finally achieving renown – as jesters in the King’s court. The cast left the stage to the strains of a happy folk tune, and as the curtain slowly went down, the crowd rose in appreciation and clapped loudly.

“I’ve got to say, that was pretty good!” Ryan said. Lavie, who was laughing so hard that she had to hold her sides, nodded her agreement. “Tremfein ought to work more in comedy, rather than in over-the-top drama.”

The cast came out for their final bows, and Tremfein, beaming at the entire audience, raised his hand and spoke. “Thank you, my friends, thank you! I am glad you had a pleasant evening. And I particularly thank a friend of mine, who helped me come up with the idea, but couldn’t be with us at the moment. But I would like to introduce a very important part of tonight’s play, who helped me not just with the script, but with the recruitment of extras for the play. Ladies and gentlemen, the Wild Raccoon of the Forest, Mr. Armin Tamas!”

“Armin?” Lavie exclaimed. “What’s *he* doing here, the dope?”

Ryan chuckled. “Armin’s up to a *lot* of things these days,” he said. “In fact, remember the goofy guys who crashed the King and Queen’s reception that night? That was him and some of the other boys. Davenport’s full of enterprising people, that’s for sure.”

“Ohmygosh, was that him making fun of the Mayor? That was pretty cool, even for Armin!” Lavie said, pleasantly surprised.

“Thank you, thank you,” Armin was saying, cockily. “Well, every story must have a moral, and I hope you’ve learnt yours tonight: don’t mess with us woodland creatures, and stick to picking on dragons instead! As long as they’re *friendly* dragons!” There was some laughter at this, and even Lavie, who didn’t care much for Armin in general, was forced to smile.

“Heh, that’s a pretty good one, considering Armin’s usual standards,” Ryan said, as they slowly filed out of the hall. “Maybe he’s been taking acting lessons from Tremfein.”

“Well, anything’s possible, Ryan,” Lavie said. “Maybe he’ll actually find something useful to do now, rather than trying to flirt with every girl he meets!”

“I think even Tremfein can’t cure Armin of *that* habit,” Ryan said, with a laugh. “Well, Lavie, I....hope you had a good time. I certainly enjoyed the play.”

Lavie coloured, paused, then answered in a steady voice. “Well, as a matter of fact, I did! Thanks for inviting me, Ryan. Thanks very much!”

“Oh, it was nothing, Lavie,” Ryan said, evenly. *I hope she’s not going to go overboard with the gratitude, now*, he thought, feeling a little alarmed. *The only thing worse than an angry Lavie is, well, a gushing Lavie!*

But Lavie went on speaking, quite normally. “And I must say, I must ask Daddy to lend me some of Mr. Tremfein’s plays when I get home! From what I saw today, they aren’t that boring!”

“Tremfein certainly isn’t boring, that’s for sure!” Ryan replied. They were now back on the road to Davenport proper.

“Hmm, what’s that you’re wearing, Ryan?” Lavie asked, her eyes suddenly catching sight of the pendant. “It looks pretty, did the Princess give you that?”

“Oh...this....” Ryan stammered, and shuffled his feet. “I just....um.....well.....picked it up somewhere.” *Bother! She’s bound to realize that it was from Marianne, and she’s going to lose her cool.*

It must be a gift from her, Lavie thought, anger rising within her. *But I’ll stay calm, like Gran told me to!* Making a supreme effort of her own, she took hold of it, and studied it more closely. “I must look for things like that, the next time I go shopping! And you’re not the only one who picks up jewelry, Mr. Eramond. Look!” She held out her wrist, and Ryan caught sight of her red bangle.

“A ruby bangle?” Ryan asked. “Pretty neat! Did you get that in Lorean?”

“No, as a matter of fact, I won it as a prize at the Archery Academy,” said Lavie, proudly. “It’s called a ‘Bangle of Flame’, and Daddy says it has a magic element, or something, in it!”

“An Elemental, you mean,” Ryan corrected her. “Wow, I’ve heard of those, but I never thought you’d have one! That’s actually quite cool.”

Lavie flushed with pleasure. “Well, thanks! Look, we’re almost at my home. I guess I should be saying goodnight now, huh?”

This was actually pretty easy. Maybe Lady Penelope is watching over me, Ryan thought, with relief.

“Sure, Lavie. I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. Well, see you tomorrow, and all that.” He looked at her again – her long huntress’ dress, and her hair blowing in the night breeze, and couldn’t help admiring her a little, despite himself. *She’s a little more natural when she cuts out all the primping,* he reflected, and held out his hand, a little awkwardly. “Good night, then.”

Lavie took his hand and gave it a friendly shake. “Good night, Ryan! See you around!” She turned away, and rang the bell to her house. “Now you’d better get home, before your mom and dad get worried!” She laughed.

“Very funny, Lavie,” Ryan said, as he turned to leave. *Phew,* he thought, as he made his way back home. *Now I can tell Dad about it, and he’ll get off my case for some time. At least Lavie was reasonable today, and didn’t make a fuss. Maybe she’s working off her temper with the archery. Whatever it is, it’s good!* He smiled, and returned home feeling quite pleased with himself.

It was perhaps fortunate that he did not look back at Lavie, who leaned against the wall and sighed. Carmen, opening the door, looked relieved. “Why, Miss Lavie, what are you doing out so late? I thought you’d be back much earlier! Is anything the matter?”

Lavie smiled bravely. “Well, Ryan and I...just took a walk down to the naval yard, that’s all. He had tickets for a play, and no one to go with him, so I went along. It was quite fun, actually.” They both stepped inside.

“A play? Oh, the sailors told me about that, Miss Lavie” Carmen said, looking at Lavie curiously. “Did you...have a pleasant evening?”

“Quite pleasant, Carmen,” Lavie said, and sighed again. “Of course, I guess he only asked me because....”

“Now, Miss Lavie, don’t look at things that way,” Carmen said, consolingly, as she accompanied Lavie to her room. “Young men are always quite silly about this sort of thing, but we can always hope that they come right, eventually. And after all, he did accept your company. Now why don’t you just freshen up a bit, and it’ll be just time for supper! You must be quite famished, Miss.”

“Thanks, Carmen,” Lavie said, gratefully. “I’ll do as you say!” As Carmen left to finish next next task, Lavie sat down on her bed, a pensive expression on her face.

I shouldn't expect too much, all of a sudden, she thought, cheering up as she remembered the Three Hunters and their antics. And it was quite fun, really! I know he was probably just being polite, or maybe his Dad told him to invite me. But we did spend that time together, in the end. Maybe that's what Gran meant - that I should be there for him when Marianne isn't. Who knows? And feeling quite herself, she began unlacing her boots.

And it was fortunate that she, in turn, did not look out of her window at that moment, or she would have seen a strange sight. Outside, leaning against a wall of the Regale household, a man watched silently, an expression of annoyance on his face.

"Fool," he said, too quietly for anyone to hear, even if someone had been listening. "This may complicate things."

CHAPTER TEN: REVELATIONS

*“Do not say, ‘I shall hide from the Lord,
who is going to remember me up there?
I shall not be noticed among so many people,
what am I in the immensity of creation?’”
(Ecclesiasticus, ch. 16, v.16-17.)*

Henrik read the letter again, looking bewildered. Closing his well-worn copy of *Galvenian History, Volume Two: From C.Y. 100 to the Present Day*, he got up from his chair, wondering what he could do, or should do. The simple message lay on the table, written on a single sheet of paper.

Dearest Henrik,

I know I shouldn't be taking too much of your time, but I've had a rather disturbing experience a few days ago. A Sister Miriam from your town came by, and spoke to the Rector of our College several times, as well as to some of the girls. She didn't tell me very much, but it was clear that something terrible had happened in connexion with a prayer group I once belonged to. One of its members, named Thomas Perrin, was from your town, and she seemed to think that he had something to do with it. I'm sorry I can't be clearer, because I don't know much myself. If you could spare the time, could I see you tomorrow? We have a half-holiday then, though we aren't allowed to go home. I'll be waiting for you near the statue of St. Nealus, by three o'clock. Please do come, as I am quite confused on what to do next.

*In friendship and prayers,
Bernadette.*

Thomas Perrin? The words brought back a painful memory to Henrik. *He committed suicide two years ago. What could that possibly have to do with anything?* Taking up the letter, he tried to remember all he knew about Thomas, hoping that it would shed some light on what Bernadette had said. A mental picture came to him, of a short, brown-haired boy, with intelligent eyes and an earnest manner.

He was a year ahead of us at school, Henrik recalled, gathering his thoughts. *Interested in history and economics, and quite fanatical about politics. He was a Church member, but didn't have too much time for Mother and I – he thought we were rather low-key and lukewarm, or at least that's the impression he gave. His own style of prayer was pretty extravagant. What was the name of that group he joined? Oh, yes, the Infinitus Revival, or something of that sort. They asked me to join, but Father said 'no' outright, and frankly, I was relieved. I never felt comfortable with those tub-thumping groups, where people keep ranting about the Varald and making up long prayers on the spot.*

It was all coming back to him now. *Thomas began spending more and more time in the group, and would sometimes miss classes. His grades were falling behind. Then, about a week before he – died, he stopped attending either church or school. We never asked, we thought he was just ill or something. And then, Mr. Anderson told us the news one day in school. Thomas had hung himself. He never left a note, never*

said why. Even the police just said it was a suicide, and moved on. We were all rattled for a while. His parents were quite broken up, and they had a very quiet funeral, just collecting the certificate from City Hall and going straight to the graveyard. None of us were allowed to attend, and the Church wasn't involved. They packed up and moved away soon after, and we never heard of them. For quite a while, no one wanted to take their house, because they thought it was haunted by Thomas. Old superstitions die hard. Even today, it's just being used as a warehouse by Clarissa Crenshaw, to store her "souvenirs". She got it dirt cheap. And she never goes there in person, but hires assistants to bring whatever she needs, because she's probably a little scared as well.

Reflecting on what he'd just remembered, Henrik was struck by something. *Those "Infinitus Revival" people – they were just like that crackpot Itarian professor, Gray, whom Bernadette and I listened to at King's College! In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if that corny "Sword of Infinity" song was one of theirs. They used to be strong on what they called "militant music". That's strange....So what was going wrong with that group? Were they the reason that Thomas killed himself?*

Making his mind up, he folded the letter and put it into his pocket. Scribbling down a rapid reply, assuring Bernadette that he would come at the time she mentioned, he headed down to the hall, where his father was tying up a bundle of typed pages, looking satisfied.

"Ah, Henrik," he said absently. "How are your studies going, boy?"

"Very well, Father, thank you," Henrik replied. "I've just received a letter from Alton, though, and I need to go there tomorrow."

"To Alton?" Alphonse Spenson. "Well, that's not too far away, and I know you've been working hard. However, I want you to be back the same day, is that clear? You're getting a little old for adventuring, Henrik, as I've already told you."

"I will, Father," Henrik said, relieved. *Not that he'd usually ask any questions, but I could have got a huge lecture about how "playing in the sandbox" was for kids, and how I had to study, all over again. Heavenly Father, thank you.* "I've just got to post my reply to St. Nealus', to let them know I'm coming."

"St. Nealus' College? I remember giving the women there an invited lecture, about four years ago, on *Technique in the Galvenian Novel*," Alphonse said, approvingly. "They were very polite, very respectful. Well, if you do meet any of the faculty, remember me to them."

Poor girls, Henrik thought, suppressing a smile. It must have taken all their religious training to keep from yawning during one of Father's talks! "Yes, Father," he said, as he headed for the post office. As he entered it, he was greeted by Constance Juno, looking quite happy. *She seemed satisfied with what I told her about Juno, he thought. Maybe he's come home.*

"Good morning, Henrik," she said. "I thank you again for finding out that Makarov was quite safe. In fact, I've just had a letter from him, and I'm going to post my reply."

“Good morning, Mrs. Juno,” Henrik replied. “Where is he, exactly? He did say he was making further plans, but he never came back, though he said he would.”

“He did, for just one day,” Constance Juno said, apologetically. “He said he had to meet an old military teacher or trainer of some sort, called Fossen, who lived near Straukpass. He’s staying with this man now, apparently, and taking lessons in combat. He must be preparing to join the Military Academy, like his father, I’m sure!” As always, when speaking of her late husband, Mrs. Juno’s expression softened, and she no longer looked like a woman older than her years. “I do wish he’d be more careful, but I know his father would be proud of him.”

“Training for the Academy?” *Actually, Henrik thought, the Academy doesn’t really require you to train much, though having gun or sword skills is recommended. And what happened to his plan to find Lugner? Anyway, the Academy will start on its next batch only in the fall, so he must just be getting prepared.* “Well, I’m sure that’s nice, Mrs. Juno. If he comes and visits you some time, tell him I said hello.”

“I will, Henrik,” said Constance Juno, as she placed her letter in the mailbox and left. “Peace be with you.”

“Peace be with you too, Mrs. Juno,” Henrik replied, waving goodbye. *A trainer in Straukpass? I didn’t even know anyone lived there. Except that crazy old soldier, who thought we were all Zions, and put us all through our paces. Well, if that’s the guy who’s training Juno, good luck to him!*

“Son,” Theodore Eramond said, entering Ryan’s room and looking worried, “I’m sorry to bother you, but I need your help with something.”

“Huh?” Ryan put down the graphic novel he was reading, and rose from his chair. “What’s up, Dad?”

“We’ve received a couple of telegrams, and they’re both saying the same thing,” Theodore explained. “One of them is from the Imperial Bursar at Caledonia, and another is from a scientist in Darington. They’re both complaining that the packages I sent them haven’t reached yet.”

“You mean the package with the Emperor’s medicines in it?” Ryan said, shocked. “That *is* pretty serious.”

“Indeed it is, Ryan, not to mention how much I’ll have to pay them as a penalty, unless we find out what happened! I’ve asked both of them for four days’ grace, and that’s where you come in. This is a little different from your previous assignments. I want you to find those packages.”

“Find them?” Ryan looked puzzled. “How do I go about that, Dad? After all, both Caledonia and Darington are across the border. I’d need a border pass to go that far.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Theodore said. “You see, all traffic of that sort has to go through Checkpoint Alpha, in Northern Galvenia, as I’m sure you know.”

“Checkpoint Alpha? I’ve been there, once, myself. So do you want me to go there and ask around?”

“No, no, your task is even simpler, Ryan. I’ve wired Checkpoint Alpha, explaining the situation, and they’ve sent back a reply saying that none of my men actually got that far. Something must have happened to them in Galvenia itself, perhaps a bandit attack. They haven’t crossed over into the Empire. I want you to head there. There are plenty of places around there, such as Lorean Glade and Mount Lorea Mine, where they could have been ambushed.”

“But if that’s so, wouldn’t the packages have been stolen, Dad?” Ryan asked.

“Indeed, son. But if you can find evidence that they were stolen, and inform the authorities in Lorean – or in the nearest town – then we’re in the clear, as our goods are always insured against theft. I know your adventures on the *Paradiso* have left you tired, but could you try and do this?”

“Heck, Dad, why not,” Ryan said, excited. “After all, it’s not just about the money. I’m sure the Emperor needs those medicines quite badly, and will want to know what happened to them. I guess I’ll do the right thing. In fact, I can start today itself, stay in an inn overnight if it gets too late, and then explore the area in daylight.”

“Excellent idea, my boy,” Theodore said, approvingly. “Considering it’s going to be a little more dangerous than usual, perhaps you should ask your friends to accompany you. I know you’re no stranger to danger...”

“Very funny, Dad,” Ryan replied.

“...but if there really are bandits or thieves around, it can’t hurt to be cautious. Why not ask Henrik or Armin to accompany you?”

“Or Lavie,” Ryan joked. “If my sword doesn’t get them, her brownies will!”

Theodore chuckled. “As much as that idea appeals to me, I think an errand of this sort is a little too risky for Lavie. You could ask Henrik or Armin if they were interested, though. Now good luck, son, and don’t try to play the hero. If things get dangerous, retreat, and inform the local police to come and help you out. Understood?”

“Right, Dad,” Ryan said, grinning. “I think I’ve used up my lifetime quota of ‘playing the hero’, anyway.” And, strapping on his sword and his gun-belt, he went off in search of his friends.

“Ah, Hipper,” Deputy Director Lev Andreyev said, removing his eyeglasses as the younger man entered his chamber. “Come in, there are some things I must tell you.” They were speaking in their own tongue, not in Common.

Terrin Hipper, looking as nervous as it was only possible for a President-Elect of the Commonwealth to appear, entered the room. “Good morning, Mr. Andreyev,” he said, sitting down as comfortably as he

could. The man in front of him was the second most powerful person in the Varald Directorate, next to Director Russell Kievan, but he had no honorifics or titles, and his office was as simple, in its own way, as an Itarian priest's quarters. *It's the way of the Directorate*, Hipper thought. *Thrones and scepters are only symbols. But we of the Varald know well how to wield power, even without any trappings.*

"Well, Hipper, it looks as if things are looking up," Andreyev commented, pleasantly, folding his hands together and resting them on his desk. "You will, of course, depart for Unity Isle tomorrow, as per Jansen's orders. Everything is in place."

"Thank you, Mr. Andreyev," Hipper replied. "I must confess that this is quite an unexpected turn of events, but it is good news for us."

"And for the Commonwealth, Hipper," Andreyev said, pointing to a photograph on the wall. "Your predecessor, for all his usefulness to us, was mediocre and corrupt. He forgot the Directorate's first rule – that while actions done to benefit the Directorate are commendable, actions that diminish it for the sake of personal gain are foolish and criminal." There was an unmistakable warning in his words, though he spoke calmly and politely. Andreyev never raised his voice, even when angry, because he had no need to do so.

"I understand," Terrin Hipper said, slowly. *I wouldn't like to be in Miller's shoes when Andreyev, or one of his minions, "debriefs" him. Most likely, he will end his days in a border prison or under house arrest. The Itarians and their Infinity may speak of forgiveness, but that is not a word that exists among the rulers of the Varald.* "Have all the necessary security arrangements been confirmed?"

"Yes, Hipper, they have. Rest assured, you are of no use to us dead. And even if the Zion Empire should make childish attempts at retaliation – which I doubt they will, now that that senile old man has lost his son – the Varald Army will protect you with their lives. Now, Hipper, I must tell you about your first task."

"I am listening, Mr. Andreyev," Hipper said, respectfully.

"Ever since the death of Koketsu, we have been preparing for the eventuality of war with the Zion. It is likely that the little kingdom of Galvenia will form an alliance with them, if they have not done so already. But recent events in the Commonwealth suggest that this may not be necessary."

"Are you referring to the way the Zions folded, and accepted my nomination as President?" Hipper asked.

"Exactly. Jansen tells me that Kanoi was about to be mulish, as he always is, but he received a telegram – perhaps directly from the Emperor – ordering him to change his views. Poor man, that must have cost him a good deal." He laughed quietly. "And – let me speak to you as one member of the Directorate to another – that serves our purposes perfectly well. As satisfying as it would be to fight the Zion Empire, it would not be wise, at this point."

“Why not, Mr. Andreyev?” Hipper asked. A veteran of the 19th Varald Detachment, as well as a military intelligence officer before running for public office, he knew quite well what the answer was, but he was curious to hear how much his superior would say.

“Because, my dear Hipper, there are times when peace, as boring as it is, is actually what the Directorate wishes, too. Despite Charlemagne’s attitude – witness his annexation of Darington – he has not taken any steps to destabilize relations with us. Even Kanoi generally confines himself to verbal aggression at Commonwealth meetings. We and the Zion have found it possible to co-exist peacefully, if not always pleasantly. It is good for trade, for agriculture – and for the stilling of any possible dissent among our own people.”

“Dissent?” Hipper seemed puzzled. “Mr. Andreyev, the last ‘popular uprising’ in Varald was a hundred years ago, and it was suppressed with hardly a fight. What dissent do you refer to?”

“I see you haven’t been briefed yet,” Andreyev said, apologetically. “Well, about two weeks ago, the Geheimpol uncovered a cell of conspirators who were meeting in an old Youth Club hall, here in Zhemu itself. We seized about thirty men and women, along with the usual half-baked literature – Alamoth Jakov’s books, pamphlets belonging to the Church of Infinity, and plans to conduct bombings in public places. They have all been silenced, of course.”

That’s how it is here, Hipper thought, with a nervous smile. *Criminals are punished and even executed, but conspirators are just ‘silenced’. They are here one day, gone the next, never to be seen or spoken of again.* “But that is commonplace foolishness, Mr. Andreyev. Surely you are not worried about such infantile displays of protest.”

“We are not, Hipper. What we are more worried about is that the entire incident, as typical as it was, showed signs of having been staged. The tip-offs that the Geheimpol received were surprisingly specific. The conspirators put up very little fight, almost as if they were accepting martyrdom for a greater cause. It looks like they were a convenient sacrifice, a distraction.”

“I’m sure the Geheimpol will get to the heart of the matter, whatever the truth may be,” Hipper replied. “At any rate, the 7th and 8th Varald Divisions, which began deploying towards the border after we heard of Koketsu’s death, have been instructed to remain on alert, at least until you have assumed office.”

“That seems quite satisfactory, Mr. Andreyev – By Terra, what was that?” Hipper rose from his chair, alarmed.

“What happened, Hipper?” Andreyev asked, smiling. “One would think you had seen a ghost.”

“There, at the window behind you!” Hipper said, his hand reaching for the pistol at his belt – a possession he had never rid himself of, even after completing his military service. “Turn around!”

Andreyev turned, and saw a man clad in black, his head completely covered by a monkish hood, standing there. “How did that imbecile get there?” he said, irritably. “No one is supposed to be able to enter these premises without passing by our guards....”

The glass of the window suddenly shattered, and before either man could react, the man was inside the room, standing calmly in front of Andreyev, and smiling – no, laughing.

Hipper drew his pistol. “I don’t know who you are,” he shouted, “but you will pay dearly for this intrusion.”

“Oh, is that so?” the man said, unperturbed. “It’s always a pleasure to meet high officials. Good day, gentlemen.”

Andreyev rang a bell on his desk, a panicky expression on his face. “Get out of here!” he said. “You are intruding upon the premises of the Deputy Director, and you will be punished.”

“Somehow, I don’t think so,” the man said. “Now, Mr. Hipper, do put away that pistol, you’ll hurt yourself if it goes off.”

“Damn you!” Hipper said, and fired, aiming at the man’s arm. *Whoever he is, we must capture him alive. I’ll cripple him, and then we’ll put him through a good old interrogation, Varald-style.* His aim was good, but the bullet stopped well short of its target, as if deflected by armour – except that it seemed to Hipper, completely dazed, that it had stopped several inches short of where the intruder’s arm would have been. *Lands of Ghetz, that didn’t even touch him!*

“I hope you understand a little better now,” the man said, shrugging his shoulders. “Now, Mr. Hipper, I bear you no ill will. In fact, if you do not interfere with me, you will have a golden future.” He drew closer to Andreyev, who stepped away clumsily, his face a picture of sheer terror. “But I cannot say the same of you, Mr. Andreyev. You’ve been a thorn in our side for too long.”

“Hipper, shoot him!” Andreyev screamed. “Where are those guards?”

Obediently, Hipper fired again, aiming for the man’s head this time. *He’s an assassin! I must save Andreyev at all costs.* By this time, a detachment of guards was rushing down the corridors, and were almost at the door of the chamber. However, as with his first shot, the bullet seemed to stop in mid-air, well short of his head, and fell away slowly, lying useless on the ground.

“Ah, I see we have company. Well, that is my cue to leave,” the man said, looking at the bullet with amusement. “Mr. Andreyev, I know you don’t believe in an afterlife, so I shall just bid you farewell.” He drew a short sword from within his robe, and before a shocked Hipper could react, thrust it into Andreyev’s chest. The Deputy Director cried out in pain, then fell face-first on his desk, bleeding.

“I really must work on my aim,” the man said, looking at his sword with some annoyance. “Well, as pleasant as this meeting has been, I shall leave you now. Good day, Mr. Hipper, and remember my words.” And as Hipper frantically fired two more shots after him, the man disappeared through the window, and was gone.

The guards, who had entered just in time to see the black-clad man depart, rushed forward to attend to the unfortunate Andreyev, but he was already dead.

“What in Zhemu was that?” their leader said, fear in his voice.

“I....” Hipper’s hand shook, and he lowered his gun. “That man broke the window and entered, and....I tried to shoot him, but it was as if he was armoured.”

“Mr. Hipper,” the guard said, respectfully, “that’s absurd. The window is broken, but he couldn’t have possibly entered that way! Look, the bars are still intact.”

“Zion!” Hipper shouted. “Only a Zionese mage could do something of this sort. They are probably seeking revenge for their precious Koketsu, whom they still accuse us of having killed. We must inform the Director at once! Leave some of your guards here, and come with me.”

“You’re....you’re right, Sir,” the guard replied, still shocked at the sight of Andreyev’s corpse lying prone on his desk. Leaving three of his men behind, the chief guard and President Hipper raced from their building to the Director’s base as fast as they could.

“I can’t believe it,” one of the guards said, brokenly, looking at their retreating figures and the broken glass. “The Deputy Director....we are all lost. We will all be punished.”

“But he couldn’t have entered that way, the Captain is right!” one of his colleagues retorted. “And look, there’s something lying on the floor, there!”

“Perhaps we should look at it,” a third guard suggested, taking a step forward.

“Look, but do not touch,” the first man said, raising his hand in a gesture of caution. “The Director will not be pleased if we tamper with evidence....”

The second and third guards looked at the object lying on the floor. It was a small piece of metal, about the size of a playing card. On its surface were markings that they could not recognize.

“It’s a bit of metal.....with some symbols on it,” the second guard replied, “but I don’t know what they are.”

“President Hipper is right,” the third man said. “This looks like the deed of a mage from Zion. But didn’t they tell us, during training, that the mages had been purged from Zion quite some time ago?”

“Perhaps they have kept a few for purposes like this,” the first man said, angrily. “Those vile Zion and their Galvenian allies....this is their doing. They will pay dearly for this cowardly act.”

The other two men nodded their agreement, silently, as they stood guard over Andreyev’s remains.

“I don’t quite understand,” King Arlbert said, shaking his head, as he looked at the dispatch in front of him. “It seems as if our Zion allies are having second thoughts.” He was in the Audience Chamber, and only two other men were with him – the Prime Minister, and War Minister Sheffield.

“Your Majesty,” Prime Minister Martell Socius said, softly, “consider the Emperor’s health. His presumptive heir is dead, and he knows that embarking on a war might create a vacuum, in which the rest of the Valtemond family...”

“I believe the proper term is ‘dynasty’, my dear Socius,” King Arlbert said, good-humoredly. Despite their political differences, he and the Prime Minister were close friends – in fact, it was often said, by the Opposition, that only the King’s favour had protected Socius from losing office on more than one occasion. Such rumours, though plausible, were untrue. Though he gave the impression that his entire policy was one of masterful yielding, and nothing else, Socius was a consummate statesman – and it was a quality that Arlbert could appreciate, even if he did not quite possess it. “I’m afraid my knowledge of Zion genealogy is rather rusty. Who stands to inherit the throne, now that Wilhelm is dead?”

“I believe that there are two candidates, each with a good claim to the throne, should anything happen to Charlemagne,” Alan Sheffield said, gruffly. “First is the King’s nephew, Renaud. He’s a little older than Wilhelm, and quite ambitious. He also has the support of most of the Court nobles. The other is a second cousin, Gerhardt. He is seen as being more stable, less grasping than Renaud, and he has the support of the Viceroys and the military. Should anything befall Charlemagne, there is every possibility that the Empire may find itself embroiled in civil war. Wilhelm’s death was unfortunate, indeed.”

“Thank you, Sheffield,” the King replied. A little older and harder than Socius, Sheffield was not only the War Minister, but he was the *de facto* head of Galvenia’s Overseas Intelligence – Sir Douglas McIverny, the aged noble who held the post on paper, was more than content to let Sheffield run things for him. While the King did not admire him the way he did Socius, he had the utmost respect for his acumen. “So, let us summarize. Following the death of Koketsu, Prince Wilhelm met us all, and discussed the terms of a conditional treaty of alliance against the Varald. After the attack on the Paradiso, we sent Sir Prescott to Caledonia with the formal treaty, couched in the most friendly and liberal terms. Now, Prescott writes back, telling us that Charlemagne has signed the treaty, but has asked us to defer any troop movements for now, advising caution. And, even more improbably, at the Commonwealth meeting, Kanoi of Zion voted in favour of Terrin Hipper, who will soon be sworn in as President. Gentlemen, what on Terra is going on?”

“The obvious explanation, as my colleague suggests, is that the Zion are afraid of civil war,” Socius said, calmly. “However, I find that too obvious. Charlemagne is ailing, true. He has tried hard to keep this secret, but we had our suspicions, and they were confirmed by what that Zion agent, Striker, told the Princess. But remember, Charlemagne is the man behind Darington. I find it hard to believe that he would develop cold feet, even if he were ill. Besides, the army is fiercely loyal to him.”

“Perhaps he is deliberately spreading misinformation,” Sheffield countered. “We still do not know what the man’s mission was, or what his intention was in speaking so freely to Her Highness. What is your theory, Socius?”

“It is simple, Sheffield,” Socius replied. “The Zion are probably weaker than we think they are. There is a lot of difference between blackmailing one’s neighbours into handing over a province, and fighting a war on all fronts against the military power of the Varald Directorate. The days of the Great Zion-Varald War

– which, let me remind you, ended in a stalemate even then – are over, and the Zions have disbanded and persecuted their own mage cohorts, leaving them reliant on technology alone. I’m not a betting man, Sire, and war is not sport, but if I could wager on the result of a second Zion-Varald War, my money would be on the Varald. That is why, even with our men on their side, they hesitate. Charlemagne does not want to fight a losing war. Hence, he also tries to pacify the Varald, by accepting Hipper’s Presidency without too much fuss. It all hangs together, Sire.”

Arlbert frowned. “But can we be sure of that, Socius? It’s an interesting surmise, but I find it hard to believe that the Zion are that weak. Sheffield, what are your thoughts?”

“I believe the Zions are playing both sides, Sire,” Sheffield said, confidently. “Just around the time of Koketsu’s death, there was another incident of significance, which I’m sure you remember, Socius. The arrest of Samuel Talmadge of Glendale. When he was seized, he was found guilty of not just corruption and larceny, but of making illegal copies of confidential military records – records pertaining to our own troop strength and border security. Now, who would be interested in those?” He let the question hang in the air for a moment, then went on. “Certainly not the Varald; they are too far away. Certainly not the plutocrats of the Republic, and most certainly not Itaria. That leaves us with only one option.”

“Come now, Sheffield,” Socius said, “remember that Talmadge is still safely in our custody; besides, his ally, Kodenai, was killed in a scuffle with our men on Davenport Peak, and all the documents were recovered on his person, hidden inside the hilts of his throwing knives.”

“That was fortunate, I agree,” Sheffield said, “but it still leaves a question unanswered: with whom were Talmadge and Kodenai trafficking? Those boys you hired said that Kodenai was trying to escape by sea. A ship could only take him to three places: Itaria, the Fulton Republic, and the Zion Empire. The conclusion is obvious.”

“Then you think the Zion have further designs on our territory?” Arlbert said, angrily. “Come, Sheffield, the idea is absurd. We have lived peacefully with them for almost two decades, now...”

“Too peacefully, Sire. Charlemagne is not Lord Geraud Valtemond. It is not difficult to see him, in his last years, dreaming of the reunification of the continent of Arlia – or at least the expansion of his boundaries. This would also explain why he had an agent aboard the *Paradiso* – not so much to protect Wilhelm, who had his own personal guard, but to convey information about Galvenia to his ruler.”

“Sheffield, you’re being absurd,” Socius said, with a soft laugh. “You assume that classified documents related to Galvenian national security would be of importance only to the Zions, because they are our neighbours. But consider this: if the Varald were seeking a war, and knew that we were allies of the Empire, wouldn’t such information be valuable to them? Talmadge and Kodenai were probably going to sell their knowledge to Varald agents, who would then create trouble for us once war broke out, perhaps through covert operations at the border. All that would fit in quite well with our experience of the Geheimpol, and the Varald in general. Deceit is part of their *modus operandi*.”

“Both of you make good points,” King Arlbert said, pensively. “But honestly, I am inclined to side with Socius on this matter. Remember, when all is considered, Striker helped to save my daughter’s life. Why would a simple spy do that?”

“Bluff, Sire,” Sheffield said. “He had no way of knowing that the Princess would – would act the way she did, and when he saw her in danger, he saw an opportunity of establishing his own credentials, at little risk to himself. It was the perfect way of slipping back to Caledonia unnoticed, with your blessing, and he took advantage of it.”

“I have spoken to the young man myself,” Arlbert said, shaking his head, “and while he was quite discreet about his mission, he was quite clear that it concerned matters of purely internal interest to the Zion. I may not be a spy myself, but I can tell when someone is lying, and he was not.”

“Intuition is a good servant, Sire, but a bad master,” Sheffield said, lightly.

“I will grant you that, Sheffield,” the King said, laughing. “So tell me, what instructions should we convey to Sir Prescott now? He sounded quite disappointed that Charlemagne was taking things so coolly, to say the least. He implied that I ought to impress the Emperor with the seriousness of the situation myself.”

“Sire, we cannot take risks simply because Sir Prescott wants to earn a few medals,” Socius said, patiently. “He is a young man, and has little understanding of what a war involving half of Terra might mean. Recall him quietly, before his passions get the better of him.”

“Oh, spare me your well-worn bias against all things aristocratic, Socius,” Arlbert said, mockingly. “He was merely following instructions.”

“As much as I admire Sir Prescott’s record,” Sheffield said, “I shall have to agree with Socius for once. The fight with the Varald is not our fight, Sire. If the Zion Empire wishes to attack, we will attack at their side. If they wish to wait, let them wait. That will give us time for some enquiries of our own.”

“Enquiries, Sheffield?” Socius asked, pleasantly.

“Yes, Socius, enquiries. Enquiries about the movements and actions of foreign nationals, particularly the Zioneese, in our country in the past few months. And, with all due respect to Your Majesty, enquiries about that man, William Striker, and his antecedents. It might be interesting.”

“I see I shall have to let you both have your own way, as usual,” the King said, shrugging his shoulders. “Socius, write back to Sir Prescott, advising him to return without any further delay, and await further orders. Also, make arrangements for my travel to Caledonia, for Prince Wilhelm’s state funeral. Sheffield, I permit you to look into any suspicious actions by foreigners – all of them, mind you, not only the Zioneese, but be polite. Don’t ruffle any feathers.”

“Will you be travelling alone, Sire?” Socius asked, in a solicitous tone.

“Why, Socius, that was my first idea, but I believe that the Queen and the Princess shall accompany me this time,” Arlbert said, with a smile. “I trust you can manage things in my absence. We must treat the Emperor’s son with the respect he merits, even in death.”

“The Princess?” Sheffield grinned. “Are you hoping that she will prove as popular with the Zion as she did in Davenport or Lorean?”

“Perhaps, my dear Sheffield,” the King said, rising from his chair. “Time will tell. Now, you have your instructions, and I wish you luck in carrying them out. Good day, gentlemen.”

The two ministers bowed before their ruler, and left in silence.

“Do you have to wear that ridiculous mask everywhere you go, Armin?” Ryan said, as he and his friend continued their trek along the highway. They were now close to Lake Derren, and the sun was setting. “Not that it doesn’t suit you, but we aren’t acting in a school play here!”

“Hyuk, hyuk. You’re a barrel of laughs, aren’t you, Eramond?” Armin said, removing the mask that had served him well, both in the Mayor’s house and on stage. “At least you don’t have good old Henrik to join you in mocking my lovely mask.”

“Yes, who’d have thought that *Henrik* would go dashing off to Alton to meet his new, ahem, ‘friend’?” Ryan said, chuckling. “He was almost turning red when he apologized to me for not being able to make it. Quite the smooth operator, our Henrik.”

“Feeling jealous, Ryan?” Armin said, teasingly. “Maybe we should have turned up at Alton unannounced, and provided some appropriate music. I have a new version of the Galvenian Wedding Anthem that would suit him and his girlfriend just fine!”

“Oh, please, Armin,” Ryan groaned. “Spare him. After all, she and Henrik seem to be quite happy with each other. I’ve only met them once, and that was quite a good day,” he reflected. “It was the day Marianne and I got back together, you know...”

“Geez, Ryan, did those pirates whack you on the head and make you stupid?” Armin said, irritably. “Marianne cheated on you, damn it! And now you’re going groveling back to her, just because she bought you a dopey pendant? Come on!”

“Armin,” Ryan said quietly. “Before you continue trashing Marianne, answer me this. How did you feel about your dad leaving the family, when you were a kid?”

Armin paused in mid-stride. “What has that got to do with anything?” he retorted.

“Answer the question, Armin, and I’ll tell you,” Ryan insisted.

“Oh, very well. I was.... Mad. Confused. Upset. And wishing that he would burn in hell for quite a while, if not forever. That good enough for you, Dr. Eramond? You going to ask me about my dreams, next?” Armin said, in an attempt at levity.

“Well, think of how Marianne would feel, to see her father and mother breaking up right in front of her, and not being able to do anything about it,” Ryan said, still calm. “She’d be hurt and confused too. She’d feel insecure. Right, Armin?”

“But you were her handsome hero, right? Wouldn’t she just turn to you for the hugs and smoochies, instead of that louse Jeremy Stockhelm?” Armin replied. “Sure, she’s upset, she’s having a hard time. But why Jeremy and not you?”

“Armin, when people are hurting, they don’t always think straight,” Ryan said patiently. “Marianne made a mistake, but she was going through a lot. She still is. What would you have me do? Ignore her?”

“Well, as long as you didn’t go and take up with *Lavie*, I wouldn’t mind that at all,” Armin said, laughing. “Just dump her and move on. It’s the smart thing to do. Aren’t you supposed to be the smart one, Mr. Straight A?”

“You sure are a fountain of wisdom, Armin,” Ryan said, laughing as well. “All right, how about this. You lay off the cracks at Marianne, and I let you wear your raccoon mask. Deal?”

“Ha ha, Compadre, you sure know the way to my heart! I guess the A-Man is willing to accept your deal, as much as he would like to continue this discussion,” Armin said, amused. “A member of the Brotherhood feels naked without his badge, you know?” He pulled his grotesque mask on quickly.

“We’re at Lake Derren now,” Ryan observed. “Do you think we should look here? I know we didn’t meet any bandits when we came by, but there are plenty of nooks and crannies here, and the lake itself is a good place to get rid of evidence.”

“Well, why not!” Armin said, his hand going to the knives at his belt. “We can check here and in Lorean Glade, before we hit Checkpoint Alpha.”

The two men walked forward confidently along the path that led to the lake, then circled it. Suddenly, they came upon something.

“What’s that, Compadre?” Ryan asked, as Armin knelt down on the ground.

“Looks like a little metal box,” Armin said, rising and picking it up. “So what kind of goods are we looking for?”

“Well, there are two packages. One of them was much bigger than this; it’s the one I was supposed to take to Caledonia myself. But this could be the other one. Dad said it was for a scientist in Darington, and it was in a small box.”

“Darington?” Armin scowled. “Compadre, I’ll trouble you not to mention certain words in my presence. Whenever I think of Darington, I just want to slap Socius silly!”

“Let’s not get started on the politics,” Ryan said, in a conciliatory tone. “Are there any marks on it?”

Armin looked at the box carefully. “It’s just a little chest that happens to be locked,” he said, and held it close to his ear as he shook it. “No sound. It’s either empty, or filled with something very light.”

“That might be it,” Ryan said. “Dad said the box contained plant and root specimens, for their museum there. Should we open it and check?”

“No, let’s look around a little more,” Armin said. “After all, how did it get there? Where are your dad’s delivery men? This ground’s too hard to pick up a trail, but if there was a scuffle here, there ought to be some traces of it.”

“Perhaps the ambush took place somewhere else,” Ryan said, “and the bandits threw this one away because it wasn’t what they wanted. But I’m with you. Let’s look...”

“*Freeze!*” The voice was loud and commanding, and it filled the quiet air around the lake. Before either man could react, a bolt of yellow light – almost like a flame – struck the box, knocking it out of Armin’s hand. Part of the ray struck his hand itself, and he yelped.

“Yowch! What on Terra was...” Armin began, then fell silent, his jaw dropping, as a blue-haired woman in military uniform emerged from behind a rock, her sword drawn.

“Stop there, the two of you! I am an official of the Zion Special Forces! If you try to resist, you’re going to get burned!” the woman said angrily.

“Sergeant Burnfist?” Ryan said, amazed. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Flaming fires! It’s you!” Sergeant Rebecca Burnfist exclaimed, lowering her sword with a laugh. “Ryan Eramond. What are you boys doing here?”

“I could ask the same question about you, Sergeant,” Ryan said, extending his hand to her. They shook hands, with Sergeant Burnfist’s grip still as strong as ever.

“Excuse me, Mr. Eramond, would you mind asking your friend why she tried to fry my hand there?” Armin said, heatedly.

“Oh, I’m sorry, son,” Sergeant Burnfist said, loudly but kindly. “Let’s just say I have an interest in bandits who are preventing the Emperor from receiving his goods. Now, that might sting a bit, but it won’t burn. I always use low power when I’m across the border. And who might you be?”

“I,” said Armin, looking admiringly at the Zionese soldier, “am the legendary Armin Tamas, of the Brotherhood of the Raccoon! Welcome to Galvenia, Miss Burnfist.”

The Sergeant laughed. "That's 'Sergeant' to you, son, but since you're not one of my privates, I'll let it pass. You seem to have a fine taste in silly masks," she said, "but any friend of Ryan Eramond's is a friend of mine. Unless your Brotherhood is a group of bandits, in which case..." She made a menacing gesture with one hand.

"Oh, Armin's pretty harmless," Ryan reassured her. "His mask is worse than his bite, that's for sure."

"Shut up, Eramond," Armin said, laughing and lowering his mask. "Well, it's quite the honour to meet you, Sergeant." He bowed with mock gallantry. "You see, my friend Ryan and I aren't bandits – we're bandit hunters! Ryan's dad found that two of his packages had gone astray, and off he went. Of course, Ryan's completely lost without my knife-throwing skills, so..."

"Enough of the chatter!" Sergeant Burnfist said, sternly, though she was still smiling. "Flaming lands, this is quite a coincidence. I was proceeding to Caledonia with a detachment from the border, when I received orders to find out why a particular package hadn't reached us yet. A quick wire to Alpha was enough to tell me that the trouble was on this side of the border, so I grabbed my pass and headed here."

"We're actually doing the same thing, as Armin said. Did you find the box first?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, son, I did," the Sergeant said, picking it up. "It was floating near the edge of the lake, as if someone hadn't thrown it in deep enough. I just took it out and stood guard for a while, thinking I'd use it as bait."

"Nice work," Armin said appreciatively. "Except that you got the wrong guys! Still, there must be some reason why it was here. Either the bandits did their job here, or they just chucked this away later."

"You're not very intelligent, are you, son?" Rebecca Burnfist said, chuckling. "That's a good quality in young men, as long as they learn to obey orders. Would a career in the Zion Infantry interest you? We'll make a man out of you, that's for sure."

"Hey, hey, nothing in Galvenia is as manly as Armin Tamas, lady!" Armin protested.

"Call me 'lady' once more, son, and I won't use low power anymore," Sergeant Burnfist said, hotly.

"Anyway, it's clear that this was put here either for disposal, or as a decoy. I'm going to check out Lorean Glade next."

"Shall we come with you?" Ryan suggested.

"As long as your pet raccoon keeps his mouth shut, I don't see why not, Ryan," the Sergeant replied, glaring at Armin. "We don't know who did this, but two and a half heads are better than one."

"Half a head? Why... Sergeant, if you want a half-head, my buddy Ryan is the one you want, not me! He's such a goof, that even after his girlfriend..." Armin began.

"Will you keep quiet, Armin?" Ryan said. "I think teaming up with the Sergeant is a good idea. She helped save the Princess on board the *Paradiso*, you know. Let's get going, Lorean Glade isn't too far."

“Okay, okay,” Armin said, “but no more cracks about my head, Sergeant. Pretty please?”

Sergeant Burnfist laughed. “You’re quite amusing, son. Now just stuff the chatter for a while, and let’s see what we find there.”

“Works fine for me, Sergeant,” Armin said, cockily. “Come on, Ryan. Let’s take the box and scramble!”

The town of Alton is a quiet one, and there are few passers-by who stop and spend much time near the statue of Nealus Hessen, the saintly founder of the Order of the Journeymen. If anyone had happened to pass by at four o’clock on that day, he would have come upon a young couple – a tall boy, and a blue-haired girl – engaged in animated conversation; he might have then smiled indulgently, thinking of his own youth, before walking on. But a more curious bystander would have noticed that the pair, though clearly on good terms, were more wrapped up in their discussion than in each other.

“And that’s what happened, Henrik,” Bernadette said, closing her eyes and trembling a little. “Sister Miriam was very kind, but it was still rather frightening.”

Henrik patted her hand gently. “Don’t worry, Bernadette, it’s all over now,” he said. “But it’s clear that something has gone wrong with Thomas and those Revival people. The more I think about it, the more I wonder whether Thomas actually committed suicide.”

“Suicide...” Bernadette shuddered. “Poor, unhappy soul. May he find peace and mercy when he stands before the Infinity.”

“Except that it’s *not* suicide,” Henrik insisted. “I’ve been thinking about it all day, and the more I look at it, the less sense it makes. If it was a suicide, why did they tell you it was an accidental death? Why should a group that’s so rigid on faith and morals tell a deliberate lie?”

“Perhaps they didn’t want to upset us,” Bernadette said, slowly.

“Next, look at what your friend, Miss Rushden, said. She said something was ‘dangerous’. A suicide may be tragic and distressing, but not *dangerous*. When she said ‘they took you away from me’, that didn’t sound like suicide, either.”

“Why, Henrik, I never thought of it that way!”

“Finally, look at the way poor Thomas’ family reacted: they packed up and left town without a trace. Of course, that could just be grief. But it could also mean that they were afraid of something. Bernadette, we’ve got to find out the truth! This could be very important. If Sister Miriam and Father Joaquim think there was something funny going on, it can’t be a simple, open-and-shut matter! They can’t proceed too far, because that youth pastor, Gruber, must have made a dying confession in confidence. But there’s nothing to stop others from looking into the matter.”

“And,” Bernadette said, with mounting excitement, “it would also explain the attack on St. Nealus! They wanted to destroy Amelia’s books and papers, because there was something in them that could be used as evidence! Unfortunately, it’s all gone.”

“That’s unfortunate, I know,” Henrik said, nodding his head, “but there’s one place where we can still look for evidence. We need to check out Thomas’ house, as soon as possible.” Briefly, in a few sentences, he explained what had happened to the Perrins’ home after Thomas had passed on.

“A warehouse? That means, unless the Perrins took all their possessions with them, there might still be something there!” Bernadette exclaimed. “But how do we get access to it? You said it was rented by that lady with the souvenir shop, now...”

“I have a plan,” Henrik said, grinning. And, leaning closer, he whispered a few sentences in Bernadette’s ear. She laughed, and nodded in agreement. “It’s worth a try, Henrik. We must make the attempt, at least! Even if she says no, we can’t let this rest. Let’s go ahead!”

“Are you sure you want to come along, Bernadette?” Henrik said, realizing the implications of what he’d just said for the first time. “If what we’ve guessed is true, we’re dealing with people who may have....”

“Taken an innocent life?” Bernadette shook her head sadly. “Now I understand why Sister Miriam herself was so nervous, and why the Rector has been worried ever since she came by. But surely no harm can befall us in that warehouse. Besides” – she smiled at him, shyly – “aren’t you the one who saved our town from the Gorn Jabola, Henrik? Didn’t you stand by me when we encountered those armed guards? I know I’m safe, and I’m not afraid, if I’m beside you.”

Henrik flushed and cleared his throat. “Thank you, Bernadette... but won’t your college ask questions if you’re gone too long? After all, it’ll take us some time to get back to Davenport, and you need to be back before your curfew.”

“That’s bothersome, certainly,” Bernadette said, discouraged. “And the longer we wait...”

“Actually,” a voice broke in, “I believe I can help you with that.”

Henrik looked up, and came face to face with a thin, elderly man, wearing a monk’s robes, but with a merry expression on his face. Around his neck hung a large medallion, bearing the insignia of Saint Guibert XII, the patron of Italian scholars.

“Do not look alarmed, children, I mean you no harm,” the man went on, holding his hand out to Henrik. “It is indeed a pleasure to meet future pupils of mine, even under strange circumstances.”

“Future pupils? Are you a teacher from King’s College, Father?” Henrik asked, shaking the elderly cleric’s hand.

“I’m afraid so, my young friend,” he replied. “My name is Marlborough – Father Terence Marlborough. I just arrived from Itaria a couple of days ago, and I came to pay Father Riordan a visit. We were just

looking over the entries for this year's scholarship. Some of them were quite good. However, there was one which was remarkable – 'On the Symbolic Significance of the Three Demons of Janwen'...."

Bernadette, on hearing this last sentence, turned a bright red, and lowered her head slightly.

"...for the originality of the exegesis involved. I asked Riordan to introduce me to its author, but he told me that you all had a half-holiday today, and would probably be somewhere about town. Fortunately, I did not have to look very far." He smiled at her.

"It looks like you've already made a name for yourself, Bernadette," Henrik said, looking at her proudly. "Father, did you happen to overhear much of our conversation?"

"I'm afraid I am already privy to the matters you have been discussing," Father Marlborough replied, with a sigh, "and, among my many duties, I have been asked to look into them. It is an unpleasant task, but I believe it is an important one."

"What should we do, Father?" Bernadette asked, still blushing at the recent mention of her essay.

"I'm afraid you're on your own, children, at least as far as visiting Davenport is concerned," Father Marlborough said, regretfully. "I must proceed to King's College by tonight, to complete certain formalities, and I will return to St. Nealus' only tomorrow afternoon. However, I believe I can intercede for you with Father Riordan, and obtain permission for you to, shall we say, investigate a certain warehouse in Davenport – excellent deduction, by the way, Mr. Spenson. He will not refuse me."

And it is a matter of historical fact that, after a short and painless interview with the Rector, Henrik and Bernadette – with the blessings of their new friend – set off on the path back to Davenport. As if aware of the nature of the task before them, they avoided discussing it on the way. Instead, as they walked side by side, and often hand in hand, Bernadette spoke of her childhood, of her mother, and of her year as a volunteer caring for children at Saint Integra's. Henrik, in turn, told her of his father's novels, of his eccentricities, and even of his own dear mother, glad to have a companion with a sympathetic ear. Before they knew it, they were at Davenport, and – a little reluctantly, realizing their walk together had to be interrupted – they headed for the gift shop.

"Why, *hello!*" Clarissa said brightly, beaming at Bernadette. "Henrik Spenson, and a new customer! Clarissa Crenshaw wishes you a good evening. Miss, I can tell by your attire that you *must* be an Italian nun! We have a special assortment of medals and relics, some of them blessed by Lord Geraud itself! Perhaps you would care to look at them? Or this dress, which is said to have been worn by Saint Marguerite herself, on the day when an angel appeared to her...."

"Actually, Clarissa, my friend and I have a little job to do," Henrik interrupted, "and we need your help. You see" – and here he repeated the story he had thought up, and which Marlborough had helped him embellish – "Bernadette is from Saint Nealus' College in Itaria. A visiting scholar has found records suggesting that an important document, of great significance to the Church of Infinity, may be in your warehouse. He has authorized me to offer you a reward of two thousand Commonwealth dollars, if you permit us to search for it."

At the words “two thousand Commonwealth dollars,” Clarissa – whose sales were lukewarm at the best of times – allowed her business instincts to overcome all else. “The old warehouse? Certainly, I have no objection. But remember, it’s supposed to be....haunted!” she said, laughing nervously. “Do you want some of these defensive charms, which the Journeymen themselves used when fighting demons?”

“Er, no, thank you, Ma’am,” Bernadette said, politely. “Unfortunately, our teacher told us to be very specific in our search. Could we have the key, please?” Strategically, Henrik drew two thousand-dollar Commonwealth notes from his pocketbook, and held them out in a gesture of invitation.

“Of course, my dear,” Clarissa said, accepting the notes eagerly. “Now, good luck with your search, and if things get too scary, run!”

“Don’t worry about that, Clarissa,” Henrik said, laughing. Two minutes’ walk brought them to the old house, and Henrik unlocked the door cautiously, drawing his sword before opening it.

“Henrik,” Bernadette said, laughing, “don’t overdo it!”

The house had been cleared of all furniture, and most of its rooms were still unused. One room, which had probably served as a kitchen, contained large piles of curios of dubious authenticity and value; another, which looked like it had been a bedroom, had a smaller number of knick-knacks of relatively recent origin. There were two large wardrobes set in the wall of this room.

“Let’s start here,” Bernadette suggested. “We could...”

God help you all....

The voice echoed through the deserted house, faint but clear, with an unmistakable threat in its tone.

“Did you hear that, Henrik?” Bernadette said, with a start.

“I did,” Henrik said. “Obviously those old stories have a grain of truth to them.”

Leave....leave now....

“Very funny,” Henrik said, loudly. Bernadette drew closer to him, and her hand slipped into his.

“Whoever you are, show yourself, wise guy.”

God save you.....if you trouble my rest.....

“Henrik,” Bernadette said, nervously, “this could be....more than we bargained for. But we must....stand firm. The Infinity and his saints will protect us.”

You don’t know what you are dealing with.....Leave, and God save the foolish soul who remains.....

“Wait a minute,” Henrik said, as he walked closer to the smaller room, where the voices grew louder.

....for he will suffer, he and his family....

“Henrik, wait,” Bernadette said, following him. “What if...”

“I’ve heard these words before,” Henrik said, illumination dawning on his face. “And I can safely say there isn’t a grain of truth to these stories about ghosts.”

“I believe in the Infinity, and I believe you, Henrik,” Bernadette said bravely. “But where have you heard them?”

“Perhaps ‘grain of truth’ isn’t the best phrase,” Henrik said, and he was laughing. “Perhaps a better term would be ‘crystal of truth!’”

“A...Memory Crystal?” Bernadette clapped her hands in excitement. “Henrik, that must be it!” Walking hand in hand, but quite fearlessly this time, they headed into the room itself. It was illuminated by a single electric bulb, which was apparently left burning all the time. Using Clarissa’s keys, they unlocked the first of the wardrobes. It contained a stack of books, most of them dusty and yellowing, and nothing else. The second wardrobe, when unlocked, contained another electric bulb, also burning, and a small object about the size of Bernadette’s fist.

“Eureka, as they say in Cosmopolitan!” Bernadette said, bending down to pick it up. It was still ‘speaking’, but its words had no power to frighten her anymore.

“Just keep it away from the light, and it will shut up,” Henrik suggested. “By the Infinity, what a bad joke!”

“Now, to look at these books,” Bernadette said, calmly, as she placed the Crystal in her handbag and closed it. “But tell me, Henrik, where did you hear this before? Have you been to the warehouse earlier?”

“Therein hangs a tale,” Henrik said in a ‘dramatic’ tone – causing his friend to laugh for quite some time – and, briefly, he told her the tale of his adventure with Ryan and Armin in the sewers of Davenport. “We found a Memory Crystal there, and returned it to the Guild to be sent on to the Museum,” he concluded. “It was broken, and the audio only came in snatches, but the words and the voice were exactly the same.”

Bernadette smiled. “I think Father himself did a few odd jobs for the Explorer’s Guild, in his youth,” she said. “But this means that the person or persons responsible have some connection to the Guild – that’s the simplest explanation for how the other crystal, which probably didn’t work, came to be abandoned in the sewers.”

“Somehow, I find it hard to draw a connection between a Church prayer group and the mercenaries of the Guild,” Henrik said.

“Don’t be hypocritical, Henrik,” Bernadette teased. “*You’re* a connection between the Church and the Guild, after all!”

“Ouch! You’ve got me there, my friend,” Henrik said, with a chuckle. “Come, let’s look at the books. There probably won’t be anything of interest, but we might as well try.”

Their task was simpler than expected, as most of the books were ordinary school textbooks, with the name of Thomas Perrin penciled in neatly on their fly-leaves, identical to the ones they had used themselves in high school. Despite a diligent, page-by-page search, they found nothing of interest, until they came upon a copy of *Galvenian Geography for Grade 9*. Unlike the other books, this one had several passages underlined.

“Perhaps it’s a clue,” Henrik suggested. “Or maybe, like me, he was just bad at geography, and found that the markings helped him remember.”

Bernadette flipped through the pages, but they could not find any particular pattern or meaning in the passages that had been marked out. “Let’s take it with us anyway,” Henrik said. “We can always look at it in detail later.”

“But....if I take it back to St. Nealus’, isn’t there a risk that someone might try to get at it, as they did with Amelia’s books?” She shook her head, and her hand went to her forehead.

“Don’t worry,” Henrik said, gently. “I’ll keep the book myself, and look at it slowly. Whoever is behind this ugly business, they’re far less likely to suspect me.”

“Henrik, I can’t let you.....what if they....”

“There’s no other way,” he said, quietly. “You’ve already taken a huge risk by getting involved in this, especially since you’re Miss Rushden’s friend. I can’t let you take on more than you should. Let me do this.”

“Thank you, Henrik,” Bernadette said, slipping the book into her bag as they left. Informing Clarissa that they hadn’t been able to find what they were looking for, they headed away from her shop, feeling excited, and a little frightened – but pleased, as well.

“It’s quite late already,” Henrik said. “Shall I see you back to your college, then? It’s not safe to travel alone at night.”

“Goodness, I’m tired,” Bernadette said, closing her eyes. “Perhaps I should just check in at the Davenport Inn, and I’ll head back tomorrow. After all, Father Marlborough was able to obtain permission for me to take a day off.”

“What about the Memory Crystal?” Henrik asked.

“We can hand it in to the Museum, but I think we ought to show it to Father Marlborough first,” Bernadette said. “He seems to be a wise man, and knows a lot more than we do about this sad affair.”

“Good idea,” Henrik said. “Well, then, let’s head for the inn, and I’ll check you in. I’ll come and pick you up tomorrow morning, around the Dawn Hour, if that’s all right.”

“That would be very nice, Henrik,” Bernadette said, and they both headed towards the inn when Bernadette heard the footsteps of someone running up behind her.

“Hey, wait a minute!” a girl’s voice called out, breathlessly. “I have to ask you something!”

“Lavie?” Henrik said, puzzled. “What’s the matter?”

Lavie, carrying her bow in her hand, came running up to them. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” she said, cheerfully, “but aren’t you Miss Aquary from Hartridge? I think we met briefly some time ago, when the Princess was in town.”

“Ah, I remember that, Miss,” Bernadette said, smiling back. “I’m afraid I’ve forgotten your name, though. Please forgive me.”

“Lavie Regale,” Lavie said, holding out her hand. The two girls shook hands, and Lavie continued speaking, hanging her bow on her back as she did. “Miss Aquary, if I remember correctly, isn’t your father a Healer? What, may I ask, is his full name?”

“Please call me Bernadette,” she replied. “My father’s name is Jonas Aquary. Why do you ask, Miss Regale?”

“Ohmygosh, then I was right! Your father.....Miss Aquary, I’ve just learned from my Gran that your father saved my life, when I was little. I wanted to thank him, and I just happened to see you here. What luck!” Lavie said brightly. “Is he with you?”

“What’s going on, Lavie?” Henrik said, totally confused by the turn the conversation was taking.

“I’m afraid Father isn’t with us right now,” Bernadette apologized. “Do you mean he cured you when you were sick?”

Skipping over the details of her grandfather’s letter, Lavie narrated the story that her grandmother had told her on Mann Island. “And she said he’d helped me because he had a daughter of his own, and he felt sorry for me. When I heard that, I was sure it must have been you! His name was Jonas, just like your father’s!”

“In the name of Saint Integra,” Bernadette said, a childhood memory suddenly coming back to her, “are you the granddaughter of Gerald Lancaster?”

“Yes, I am!” Lavie said, nodding her head. “Did your father tell you about me?”

“It was so long ago,” Bernadette said, with a warm smile, looking at Lavie with something very close to awe. “But I remember, now. What a blessed surprise! Miss Lavie, it’s a pleasure and an honour.” She bowed before Lavie – a low, reverent bow, such as an old-fashioned Italian might use in the presence of an Archbishop, or a Pontiff.

What’s going on? Henrik wondered.

“Please call me Lavie,” she replied. “Where are you headed now, Miss Aquary?”

“We’re just checking her in at the Davenport Inn for the night,” Henrik explained. “She came here on Church work, and she’ll be going back tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, no, you shouldn’t!” Lavie said. “Please come and stay the night at our home. I’m sure Daddy will be glad to meet you, too! The Davenport Inn’s all right, but I would really like to thank you in some way, for your father’s sake. You’d be much more comfortable with us!”

“Are you sure it wouldn’t be too much trouble?” Bernadette asked, anxiously. “I’m sure I can manage at the Inn, if I need to....”

“Please, Bernadette,” Lavie said, in a pleading tone. “It wouldn’t be any trouble at all!”

“Why, I believe I shall, Lavie,” Bernadette said, taking a step towards her, and still looking at her with an expression of the utmost respect. “Thank you so much for everything, Henrik. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, then.”

“You’re welcome, Bernadette,” Henrik said, as they bowed and shook hands. “And thanks, Lavie, I’m sure your place will be much more comfy than Mr. Sloen’s ‘luxury budget’ rooms!”

“You’re right there!” Lavie replied, and – still taking together animatedly – the two girls walked together to Casa Regale, leaving Henrik deep in thought as he returned home.

Who would’ve thought Lavie, of all people, would make such an impression on Bernadette? The way she looked at her – it was almost as if she were meeting the Pontiff, or a Saint, in person! I must ask her about it all tomorrow.

It was Commissioner Jansen’s turn to receive a telegram late that night, as the Executive Council were gathered in the dining hall, about to retire. As had happened with Kanoi, the news was far from pleasant.

“Is this what you call fellowship and peace, Kanoi?” he thundered, flinging the message down on the table, and bringing his fist down on it as well. “Conspiracy and murder! Are you satisfied?”

Kanoi, taken aback, dropped his cigar on the table, and hastened to pick it up before it left a burn. “My dear Commissioner, what are you talking about?”

“You may feign innocence,” Jansen went on, trembling with anger, “but rest assured that neither I nor the Director will take this lightly. It is one thing to disagree with a Presidential selection, and entirely another to perform an illegal, covert assassination. You will pay dearly for this.”

“In the name of Saint Guibert,” Mazarus protested, “explain yourself, Jansen. What are you raving about?”

“Raving? Why should I not rave? Listen to this, you prattling priest. Lev Andreyev, the Deputy Director of the Varald Directorate, has just been found assassinated, in circumstances which suggest that a mage, or mages, were involved. Who could achieve this, except the Zions and their Imperial Mage Battalion? The Varald condemn this action most strongly! We shall bring a motion for censure on the morrow, and have the matter investigated by the International Court of the Commonwealth....”

“How quickly we change our tune, Commissioner,” Lord Lucan said calmly. “When Koketsu and Wilhelm were murdered, you were silent. Now that the assassins come for your own, you begin raising the hue and cry. Truly, the wheel of retribution turns on, respecting no one.”

“What is that supposed to mean, Lucan?” Jedda said, clasping his hands. “One would almost think that you were accusing both the Zion and the Varald of planning the assassination of each other’s leaders.”

“There is no need to be so shamelessly literal, Jedda,” Lucan replied, smiling. “I refer not to nations, but to the lessons of history. When we abandon the Charter, and surrender to our desires for power, then war and strife gain a foothold. First Koketsu, then Wilhelm, and now Andreyev. Gentlemen, we are dealing with an enemy who understands our disunity all too well, and is exploiting it.”

“Spare me the cheap fiction, Lucan,” Jansen said angrily. “Perhaps that idea would read well in one of those yellow-backed novels that you Galvenians like to read on cruises, but this is the real world. Who but the Zion – envious of the election of Terrin Hipper – would dare to do such a thing?”

“You forget, Jansen,” Kanoi said coolly, “that the Zion themselves had trouble with their mages, and that the vast majority of them were slaughtered to a man at Inderness, long before you or I were born. In fact, some of them were rumoured to have escaped into the Republic. So perhaps you should be quarrelling with Jedda, not with the Zion.” He puffed calmly on his cigar – an affectation that was calculated to annoy both Jedda and Jansen – and leaned back in his chair. “Or perhaps your own people are rising against the oppression of the Directorate, as they ought to have long ago.”

“Your lies will serve you little, Kanoi,” Jansen shot back. “You realize that an act of aggression on this scale can only have one outcome, of course.”

“My brothers,” Lord Lucan said helplessly, “let us try to be reasonable about this. As was the case with Koketsu, and Prince Wilhelm, we do not have evidence to suggest that the death of Deputy Director Andreyev was due to a covert operation of any sort. Instead, let us observe a moment of silence for our departed comrade, and see how we can resolve this situation.”

“You speak sensibly, Lucan,” Archbishop Mazarus said approvingly. “May the Infinity, for whom all things are possible, forgive Andreyev his many transgressions, and grant him mercy.”

“You hypocrites,” Jansen replied, “what right do you have to speak of mercy and forgiveness? I move that a Commonwealth Commission be set up to investigate the Deputy Director’s death, and the complicity of the Zion in it. I am quite confident that President Hipper will support me in this.”

“You are welcome to try, once Hipper arrives here. Or should I say, if he arrives here,” Kanoi said, smirking.

“More threats?” Jansen rose from his seat, and walked up to Kanoi, who also stood up. Both men glared at each other, unflinching, standing face-to-face.

“Gentlemen, please!” Lord Lucan said, in a pleading tone. “There is no need for vulgar displays of aggression here.”

“That is an amusing idea,” Jedda said, laughing. “Instead of involving all Terra in a foolish armed conflict, why not let Jansen and Kanoi settle the matter here itself, like nobles? My money would be on Kanoi, of course. He would hit hard, even if Jansen would hit low.”

“Infinity preserve us,” Mazarus said, throwing up his hands. “Is this what the vision of Lord Geraud has come to? You dishonor his memory, all of you! Viceroy, as the representative of your nation’s official Church, I must ask you to remain seated, and settle this with dignity. Do not lower yourself to the level of the Varald.”

Kanoi shrugged his shoulders and returned to his seat, still smoking his cigar peacefully. “Very well, my dear Mazarus,” he replied. “Jansen, let us discuss this like gentlemen.”

“There is nothing to discuss,” Jansen said, harshly, and remaining upright. “The Director is already aware of your machinations against the Varald, and rest assured that you will soon learn what a terrible mistake you have made. Very soon.” Saying this, he turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, leaving the four other members of the Executive Council quite perplexed.

“Surely the Varald would not declare open hostilities,” Lord Lucan said, in an attempt at reassurance. “Come, my brothers, let us not be too swayed by what Jansen has said.”

“Your idealism is admirable, Lucan,” Mazarus replied, “But we of Itaria have just cause to fear the Varald. Do not underestimate the roars of a wounded beast; it is still a beast, and its wounds can heal alarmingly quickly.”

“Oh, by the Deity,” Jedda said, irritably. “A war right now would further destabilize our economy, as well as our trading agreements with the Varald. Let us hope that Hipper proves more sensible than his predecessor.”

“Indeed,” Kanoi replied. “But there is one question that none of you have considered. Who is it who desires war and conflict so badly, that he has been able to assassinate not just Koketsu and Andreyev, but our own future Emperor, with complete impunity?”

“Another Almonth Jakov,” Mazarus said, shaking his head. “Infinity preserve us all.”

“If this is true, then....” Lucan began, then stopped. “Gentlemen, let us not make any hasty decisions here. Let us await the arrival of Hipper, and hope that Jansen’s tantrum has settled down by then.”

“It is true that hope is a virtue,” Mazarus said, lines of worry appearing on his forehead, “but sometimes, an excess of a particular virtue is not goodness, but folly. Let us hope, for our sake and the sake of all Terra, that you are right and I am wrong, Lucan.”

“Release that woman!” The voice came from a thicket, and the two armed men stepped back from their prey, stunned.

Before they could react further, a young man had emerged from the bushes, and had rapidly disarmed one of them with a thrust of his sword. The second, a little more alert, made a feint to the right, but his newly-arrived opponent was quicker, and lunged forward, wounding him in the chest. Stunned, the second man groaned, and his seconds of hesitation were enough to allow his adversary to disarm him, too.

The woman, who had fallen to her knees, looked around wonderingly.

“You’re going to regret this, kid,” the second man said, his hand covering the bleeding wound over his chest.

“It is you who will do the regretting, you bandit,” the man said, and in a swift slash, he sliced through the man’s forehead, his blade gleaming blue against the full moon. Blinded by the sudden flow of blood before his eye, his opponent stepped back. The first man, reclaiming his sword, tried to attack in turn, but his opponent was too swift. The blue blade slashed through the air again, severing his ear, and he screamed.

“Now, have you learned your lesson, or do you want me to inflict further indignities on you?” the young man said, with a cruel smile.

“We’ll – we’ll get you for this!” the first man cried out, as he and his companion turned to flee. As they did, the young man raised his sword, aiming straight for the first man’s back. A blue beam shot out in a straight line from the blade, and he fell to the ground, a dazed expression on his face.

“Come, now, let us have an even fight, my friend. One against one. Are you man enough, or are you a filthy coward who enjoys molesting unarmed women?” the man called out, challengingly.

“You don’t know what you’re messing with, son,” the first man growled, wiping the blood away from his face, but before he could say anything more, a similar beam shot out from his antagonist’s sword, and he, too, crumpled to the ground, still groaning.

“Are....” The woman rose to her feet slowly, leaning on the young swordsman’s arm, her look of terror slowly giving way to one of relief. “Are they dead?”

“Unfortunately not, madam,” the man said. “I would have wished to inflict a just sentence on them, but the Code is clear. A life for a life. They had not yet taken your life, so I must spare theirs, too. They are stunned, and will remain so for at least two hours.”

The woman leaned against a tree for support. The young man watched her silently, making no attempt at a gesture of consolation, though his expression betrayed his concern.

“Whoever you are,” the woman said, gratefully, in a weak voice, “thank you...Oh, thank you! I thought my last hour had truly come, and that I would die without seeing my family again.”

“It is not safe to travel through the wastes of Northern Galvenia at this hour, madam,” the man said calmly. “I myself have heard tales of bandits lying in ambush, all the way from Lorean Glade to the border checkpoint. Vile individuals, all of them. I am glad to be of service to you.”

“Young man,” the woman said, extending her hand to him, with a tear of gratitude running down one of her cheeks, “I don’t know how I can repay you for this. You’ve not only saved my life, but saved something that even the Government finds important! Thank you, from the bottom of my heart!”

“Are you carrying something valuable?” He looked at her with a detached expression, as if studying a portrait. She was wearing a long white coat, of the kind that doctors in a hospital would wear, and which covered her completely, except for the long, old-fashioned black skirt that reached below her ankles, brushing the ground itself. Her short green hair was streaked with grey, but her face was youthful. She looked at him in turn, squinting.

“I believe these are yours,” the man replied, picking up a pair of eyeglasses and handing them to her. She perched them on her nose and smiled, trying to compose herself. “Thank you, kind sir. I’m quite blind without them! The fact is, I was asked to urgently make this trip to Zion, but I’m not much of a traveler,” she said, apologetically.

“To Zion? To Darington, then?”

“Yes,” she said, quickly and breathlessly. “My superior’s been called out of town to question some doctoral candidate or other, and when I got the call from the Prime Minister, I had to leave at once!”

“Madam,” the young man said, firmly, “perhaps it would be best to start at the beginning. Let me introduce myself, first. My name is Juno, and I am a Wanderer.”

“A wanderer? You mean you ran away from home in search of adventure? How exciting!” She smiled at him, and even Juno found it hard to be annoyed at her, despite what she had just said.

“Not exactly, madam,” Juno said, with formal politeness. “I am a Seeker of the Way. I serve Galvenia, and I serve Justice. And who might you be?”

“Oh, my! I haven’t even told you, I’m so sorry! Please forgive me,” the woman said, holding out her hand. “My name is Aline Sheldon, and I’m a researcher at the Museum of Science and Lore, in Lorean, Mr. Juno.”

Juno took her hand and shook it, a little stiffly. “And what are you doing wandering the highways at this unearthly hour, Miss Sheldon?”

“Oh, my, I’m getting all confused! Think, Aline, think!” she admonished herself, aloud. “Well, you see, a few days ago, my boss, Professor Hernandez, received a Memory Crystal that some youths in Davenport had found, quite by chance! It was quite remarkable, really.”

“Davenport?” Juno was taken aback, though his face remained impassive.

“Yes, that nice little seaside town, you know? I’ve been there once, myself, when I was taking my last vacation. The beach is so relaxing! Anyway, something funny happened to the Crystal – it started playing by itself, though we hadn’t exposed it to light or heat! I was in the room with the Professor, so I could see and hear it all. But I’m not supposed to talk about that, really!”

“I presume it contained confidential information,” Juno said, with a calm smile.

“Oh, yes! Very, very confidential! In fact, as soon as the Professor saw it, she scolded me just for being there, and said that I shouldn’t tell anyone what I just saw! Then she called the hotline in the Museum, to the Minister for Science and Technology, and he put her on to the Prime Minister! Do you like Socius, Mr. Juno?” she gushed.

“I take but little interest in the politicians of Galvenia and their empty works, Miss Sheldon,” Juno said, coldly.

“What a pity! He’s such a nice man, he reminds me a little of poor Father, actually. Though Father couldn’t make lovely speeches, the way Socius does! Anyway, the Prime Minister called us back a little later, after my boss had left for her doctoral committee stunt, and said that we were to take the Crystal to Darington, and hand it over to a Zion scientist called Fujiwara, in the presence of a Commonwealth official. Off I went, as far as my little legs could carry me, and I quite forgot that it could be dangerous out here.....It was quite fun, actually, until....” She leaned against the tree again, and shivered. “But they say the gods watch over the foolish, don’t they? They must’ve sent you to help me, Mr. Juno.”

“Is the Memory Crystal safe?” Juno asked, simply.

“Why, yes, it is! I even found a clever hiding-place for it! Look!” Reaching into a pocket of her lab coat, she drew a small firearm, and opened its magazine to reveal a small white cube. “The trouble is, with this in my gun, I couldn’t defend myself when those hooligans attacked! I was afraid, Mr. Juno, so, so very afraid!”

“The danger is past, now, Miss Sheldon,” Juno said, a little impatiently, “Please keep that object with you, as securely as you can. I believe I shall accompany you as far as the border, just to ensure its safety. If what you say is true, you may still be in danger. Those men were no ordinary bandits.”

“You mean....” Aline wrinkled her forehead, trying to digest what she had just heard. “You mean they *knew* I was carrying the Crystal with me?”

“Knew, or suspected,” Juno said, briefly. “But let us move, now. There is a small inn at Checkpoint Alpha, and you can find repose there, and recover from your recent fright. I will remain with you, in the event of further danger, until morning comes.”

“Remain with me? Why, that’s just so sweet of you, Mr. Juno!” Aline said, wide-eyed. “For a wanderer, you certainly are being very kind to a simple middle-aged woman, you know! Did your mother teach you to behave like that? She must be a very nice lady!”

“It is the Wanderer’s Way,” Juno replied, flushing a little. “To protect the meek and the innocent. And unless I am very much mistaken, you are going about your task in innocence. I shall protect you, and ensure that you reach Darington safely. It is what my master would have wanted me to do.”

“Ooh, I can’t believe this! I speak to the Prime Minister, I’m saved and protected by a mysterious swordsman, and who knows what happens next! Sweet lands, I’m a lucky girl!”

“Indeed you are, Madam. You are most fortunate, I would say,” Juno said sarcastically, but the effect was lost on her. She continued chattering away happily, walking beside her new companion, as Juno received a valuable lesson in patience and courtesy on the way to Checkpoint Alpha. And I am sure Fossen, his master, would have approved. For, as he always said, everything on the Way can teach a lesson if we are ready to learn it.

“We’ve combed the whole of Lorean Glade, and the surrounding wilderness,” Ryan said, shaking his head, “and there’s no sign of anything. The only place left to look is Straukpass.”

“Then I suggest we do so as soon as daylight permits it,” Sergeant Burnfist said, replacing her sword in its sheath. “Flaming fires, this is becoming quite tedious.”

“Hey, I have a good suggestion!” Armin said. “Let’s find us a nice quiet inn, a warm fire, and some ‘flaming fire’ in a bottle to keep us all warm. What do you say, Sergeant?”

“Very funny, Armin, you aren’t even of age yet,” Ryan said. “I’m sure your Mom would be thrilled if she found out you’d been having a tippie on the sly.”

“As much as I hate to concede it, Raccoon Boy’s right,” the Sergeant said. “It’s late, and we can’t make any progress now. Let’s head for the inn in Alton, and resume our search tomorrow.”

“Hey, Burnfist, I’m *always* right, it’s just that folks don’t like admitting it,” Armin said, replacing his knife in its sheath.

“Listen, son, you call me anything other than ‘Sergeant’ again, and I’m going to make things hot for you!” Sergeant Burnfist protested, though even Ryan could tell that she was slightly amused.

“Geez, Sarge, I’m not one of your privates! Lighten up a little. We’re supposed to be fighting bandits, not each other.”

“You have a point,” Sergeant Burnfist conceded, hiding her face with her glove to conceal a reluctant smile, “but my statement still stands. Call me by my title.”

“Guys, give it a break,” Ryan said, shooting a cautionary look at Armin. “We’re almost at Alton now, though I’m sure Henrik must have left.”

“Henrik?” Sergeant Burnfist looked at Ryan questioningly. “Who’s that?”

“A friend of ours who was visiting Alton today,” Ryan explained. “He’s also a good fighter, and would have been of great help if he was with us.”

“We’ll just have to make do with what we have,” the Sergeant said, shortly, as they entered Alton and headed for the inn. The innkeeper, a balding man with a large moustache, greeted Ryan and Armin with enthusiasm.

“Hey, our local heroes!” he called out. “What can I do for you gentlemen? You don’t know how relieved we all are that that ‘Gorn Jabola’ thing is dead and gone!”

“What in the name of Johan is a ‘Gorn Jabola’?” Sergeant Burnfist asked, as they all sat down at table, and the innkeeper brought them a plentiful supper. Armin opened his mouth to answer, but Ryan – deciding not to try the Sergeant’s temper any further – provided a brief explanation. As he spoke, the Sergeant listened with interest, particularly when he described how the beast had crumbled into dust when defeated.

“That reminds me of Koroath,” she said. “I didn’t know there were any of those things around, and in Galvenia of all places. I guess he was right, after all!”

“Who, your boyfriend?” Armin asked, winking at her.

“Burn you, raccoon!” Sergeant Burnfist growled, though her tone was still friendly. “No, I mean an Intelligence and Tactics Division officer I met before I boarded the *Paradiso*, a colleague of Agent Striker’s. He told me to keep an eye open for anything that looked....magical in origin.”

“Koroath?” Ryan asked, his eyes widening. “You mean the village where Kaleb, the legendary Journeymen, went to fight a demonic sickness, and ended up dying, due to his companion Samath’s treachery?”

“The same,” Sergeant Burnfist replied. “In his diary, Kaleb mentioned a number of lesser beasts that he and Samath had to fight along the way, which looked like animals or humans, but deformed. They all turned to dust when they were defeated. History of Magic’s something we all have to study in basic training, even if the Zion have dissolved their mage squadrons.”

“See, Ryan, I *told* you,” Armin said, pleased. “That Gam Jabuka *was* a beast from Hell itself!”

“Oh, Armin, give it a break, will you?” Ryan said. “So, Sergeant, why were you told to look for magical phenomena?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that right now,” she replied, shaking her head firmly. “Not that I mind telling you, but I’d need to get clearance from Striker or one of his men. I can tell you this, though: there are some who suspect that Koketsu may have been murdered by a rogue mage. I personally think it’s a silly idea – there are few users of magic left, even in Zion, and they’re all quite harmless – but when the Empire tells me to look, I look. And that’s what I was doing at Lake Derren, with that box, until Mr. Mask butted in.”

“You mean that was a *magic* box?” Armin said, incredulously.

“Not quite,” Sergeant Burnfist replied. “Look at the top of the box, and look carefully.”

Armin picked up the box gingerly, and looked at its lid. Near the lock was a small blob of sealing wax.

“That’s what we call a counter-charm in Zion,” the Sergeant explained, pointing to the wax. “It’s a strange substance – an alloy of Kibor and Thorium, which is soft and slippery, even though it’s made of two metals. It works by casting a bright light, which can be seen only by those who are mages. Since the bandits weren’t going to come back for a box they’d discarded, I thought I might put the charm on it, and use it to smoke out any wizards who were wandering around.”

“You mean they would have been attracted by the light, but those without magical skills wouldn’t?” Ryan asked. “That makes sense. Neither of us saw anything.”

“Now, mind you, having magical abilities is quite different from being able to use a magical artifact, like this weapon of mine. I’m not a mage by any standard, but I can use my Fire Sword just fine. The Counter-Charm only works on real mages.”

“But why look for them here?” Armin asked. “Galvenians aren’t too big on magic, unless you count magic markers! Ha, ha, ha!”

“Amusing,” the Sergeant replied, rolling her eyes. “To answer your question, kid, you need to know a little history and geography, and I don’t know if you’re in the mood for a lesson.”

“Armin Tamas is always in the mood for a lesson – provided the teacher is interesting enough,” he said, with a wink.

“Where *did* you pick up this guy, Ryan?” the Sergeant protested. “He sounds like Prince Ryle of Factoria!”

“Prince Ryle?” Ryan looked puzzled. “Never heard of him.”

“He’s a legendary figure from pre-Imperial times, though some historians say there was a real person around whom the stories sprang up,” Sergeant Burnfist said, looking at Ryan and ignoring Armin.

“Apparently he was the second son of a Factorian king, who wandered around doing the usual heroic stuff – saving kingdoms, killing monsters, and finally defeating a demon. One version of the legend has him teaming up with Lady Fina, another mythical figure, to defeat the Devil himself. Anyway, in most of

the stories, Ryle is a good fighter, but is also a terrible flirt, who's quite an ass when he tries to charm women."

"Sarge," Armin retorted, "criticize me as much as you want, but donkeys and raccoons are quite different animals! Anyway, your Prince Ryle sounds like my kind of guy, that's for sure." He laughed.

"Burn you, son," the Sergeant said, annoyed. "Anyway, Ryan, the fact is, this part of Arlia may actually have quite an interesting history as far as magic is concerned. Some even claim that the village of Koroth, where Kaleb met his tragic end, may be here, buried under a mountain or a landslide."

"But isn't Koroth in the Zion Empire?" Ryan asked.

"That's a matter of debate, especially since Nealus kept the location of Koroth carefully secret – he was afraid that some would-be Samath would go poking around there again. All we know is that it was a fishing village on the west coast of Arlia, which was buried in a landslide following Kaleb's battle with the demon. For a long time, scholars thought it was the town we now call Lesser Krotor, which has suffered several earthquakes in the past. But now, there are some who think it's south of the border, here in Galvenia."

"Here?"

"I'm not too fond of the idea myself, but I always did love archaeology, and us soldiers must have our hobby-horses in times of peace," the Sergeant said, pushing her empty plate away with a look of satisfaction. "If it's here, it must be due northwest of Alton, though that area is quite a wasteland now. But if that's true, then this would certainly be an area that mages would want to look at, especially if they were up to no good."

"That's interesting," Ryan said. "Anyway, we need to check out Straukpass tomorrow, before we call it quits. Let's turn in for the night, I'm sure we're all quite sleepy."

"Sounds good to me, Compadre," Armin said, as he and Ryan headed for their room, and the Sergeant walked briskly towards hers. "Sweet dreams, Sarge."

"Good night, gentlemen," the Sergeant replied.

"You know, Ryan, I was just thinking," Armin said, as they settled down in the comfortable chamber that the innkeeper had generously given them, "maybe that dame is right. Maybe there is some hidden magical source of power here, and that's where that Gorn Jabola thing came from in the first place."

"Hey, Armin, you know what?" Ryan replied. "That's a pretty good idea. Besides, remember who was hanging around the marsh, and attacked Juno the Luno in the bargain..."

"Damn it....Lugner!" Armin said, excitedly. "I knew the guy was up to no good, and now after what Miss Zion Army of 300 C.E. told us, I'm even more sure! Ryan, the guy must be a mage of some sort!"

"I don't think so," Ryan said. "If he was really a mage, why didn't he just mop the floor with all of us, Juno included, using his magical attacks? Instead, he needed those two bodyguards of his to defend him. I don't think mages need that kind of protection."

"Geez, you're just as much of a spoilsport as Henrik, sometimes," Armin complained. "Maybe he's really a mage, but his magic doesn't work on.....the Three Compadres!"

"Heh, that's a good one, Armin," Ryan said, laughing. "Tell you what, let's call it a day for now, and see if we can find traces of Lugner – or anyone else – in the neighbourhood. We'll even tell the Sergeant about him, in case she runs into him back in Zion."

"Works fine with me, Compadre," Armin said, yawning, as he stretched himself out comfortably on his bed.

"I must really thank you all, my friends," Bernadette said, beaming, as she rolled up one of Emily Regale's deliciously light pancakes. "You've all been very good to me."

"Think nothing of it," Sigmund Regale said, looking fondly at her, and sipping his coffee. "I still have nightmares about those days back on Mann Island. What if your father hadn't just happened to come by, just at the right time? I owe my child's life to your father, Miss Aquary, and giving you a little Davenport hospitality is the least that Emily and I can do. And feel free to come and visit my library any time you want; I don't have many religious books, I know, but you're welcome to browse around!"

"That's right," Emily replied, placing a dish of freshly fried eggs in front of her, before returning to her seat. "I never thought we'd meet in this way – in fact, I wondered if we'd ever see your father again! He just came into our lives, like an angel from the old stories, and then departed. Poor man, I'm afraid I was rather skeptical about him, and so was Father. It was Mother and Sigmund who carried the day, though." She laughed. "For my Lavie's sake, I'm so glad they did. And I'm sure your father must be very proud to have a daughter like you!"

"Aww, Mom!" Lavie said. "Stop embarrassing poor Bernadette. She's already as red as your strawberry preserves!"

Bernadette laughed. "That's funny, Lavie! My, this is turning out to be such a lovely morning, after what happened yesterday.....that lovely soft bed of yours, Mr. Regale's wonderful books, all this delicious food, and most of all, the pleasure of your company! I'm afraid St. Nealus' will seem rather plain after all this luxury!"

"Well, if you ever feel the need for a day or two of 'luxury', come by again!" Lavie said, kindly. "We could even play a little music together. You've got a lovely alto voice!"

"How....how did you know that, Lavie?" Bernadette said, turning red again.

“Hey, you know, sound carries pretty well from that guest room to mine,” Lavie explained. “I always liked those old Italian hymns, even if I don’t really like going to church, or anything. They’re so peaceful!”

“You’re right there, Lavie,” Emily said, approvingly. “Ah, it’s been a long time since I’ve heard them, myself. And Lavie’s got a very good ear, and if she says you sing prettily, she’s right.”

“Well, they were just a part of growing up for me, ma’am,” Bernadette said, looking both happy and embarrassed. “Picking herbs in the woods with Father, learning hymns from Mother, riding...”

“Riding, Miss Aquary?” Sigmund’s voice sounded unnaturally loud, even harsh, all of a sudden. Emily, surprised at his change in tone, looked at him with concern.

“Oh, yes,” Bernadette went on, happily. “Father used to have an old donkey, quite a harmless creature, really, and I used to ride it sometimes, just for fun! Sometimes we’d go together, but as we all got older, it couldn’t take too much weight, poor thing. It died, quite peacefully, about seven years ago. I was quite upset at the time, but Mother made sure we gave it a grand funeral, which cheered me up a little! Poor dear Mother, she was always like that.”

“How nice!” Lavie exclaimed. “I’ve never tried my hand at riding myself, though the Princess told me she had a fine horse of her own, at the Royal stables.”

Sigmund was now looking at Bernadette with a rather uneasy expression. “What happened to your mother, Miss Aquary?” he asked, gently.

“She fell ill when I was fifteen,” Bernadette explained, in a low voice, “and the good Sisters at Saint Integra’s tried their best, but neither they nor Father could do anything for her, except keeping her free from pain for two years. I’m only glad she lived to see me finish school; it was always her dream that I should go on to college, and study the Holy Book. Her family always had a love of books and learning, like you do, Mr. Regale. You would have enjoyed their company, I’m sure.”

With an unsteady hand, Sigmund raised his cup to his lips once more before setting it down. “My condolences, Miss Aquary,” he said, kindly. “So do you and your father live alone, at Hartridge?”

“I’m afraid so,” she replied. “Father was an only son, and I don’t have any relatives on my mother’s side, except an uncle. He and Mother were close in childhood, but Mother said he suffered a loss as a young man, which made him quite bitter. He joined the army after that, and left Hartridge. He did come to pay his last respects to Mother, but though we told him he’d always be welcome to visit us, he never came back.”

“Oh, that’s a pity,” Lavie said, sympathetically. “But don’t worry, Bernadette, you know you have plenty of friends here in Davenport now! Isn’t that right, Daddy?”

Sigmund, who had listened to Bernadette’s story with a somber expression, suddenly collected himself. “Ah... Ah, yes, Miss Aquary, Lavie is absolutely right. Please consider us all your friends, and tell your

father that if he should ever come to Davenport, he will find a safe and comfortable harbour here with us." Emily, who was puzzled by Sigmund's reactions, but pleased by his words, nodded in agreement.

"That's true, Daddy! Perhaps I should go down and thank your dad too, Bernadette," Lavie said, happily. "Maybe the next time you get a day off, you could come down here, and we'll all go together!"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea, Lavie!" Bernadette said, beaming. "Thank you so much, Mr. and Mrs. Regale, for your warm welcome and your hospitality."

"Oh, stay with us a little longer, child. After all, you said your Rector had given you a half-day off today, and it isn't that far to Alton," Emily said, patting her on the shoulder.

Bernadette looked at her watch. "I'd love to, Mrs. Regale," she said, apologetically, with a shy smile, "but I'm sure Henrik will be waiting to accompany me back, and I wouldn't want to keep him waiting too long!"

"Spenson's a fine young man, Miss Aquary, and I'm sure you'll be quite safe with him," Sigmund said, in a tone that was strangely paternal.

"Once again, I truly thank you all, especially you, Lavie!" Bernadette replied, pleased at the praise of Henrik. "Peace be with this household, and all who dwell in it." She bowed before them, and Lavie bowed back rather dramatically, causing Emily to chuckle.

"Goodbye, Miss Aquary," Sigmund said. "Please do take care of yourself, and stay safe."

"I will, Mr. Regale," she said, as, straightening her hat, she stepped out of Casa Regale and on to the path leading south. The girls exchanged a warm hug, and then Bernadette went on her way quite merrily, singing to herself in a low tone. Lavie and her mother, after waving goodbye, turned to enter the house, but Sigmund stood on the porch, following her as she disappeared into the distance, staring.

"Good heavens, Sigmund," Emily said, tapping him on the shoulder, "what are you staring at like that? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Perhaps I have, Sigmund Regale thought, composing himself with an effort. "Oh, I'm sorry, Emily. I was just thinking of that day when her father came to our help, and Lavie was restored to us. I'll never quite forget that, you know."

"Well, Sigmund," Emily replied, matter-of-factly, "I think Lavie's suggestion is an excellent one. We can always visit him when we get the chance, if you'd like to."

"We certainly shall," Sigmund said, as they entered the house together.

"And I must say," Emily added, "I'm quite pleased at the friends Lavie is making these days – first the Princess, and now that delightful girl. It's just what she needs, to take her mind off a certain young man we both know." She laughed.

“Very funny, Emily,” Sigmund said, smiling, as she headed towards the kitchen to plan the rest of the day together with Carmen and her staff.

Destiny certainly can play tricks on us when we expect them the least, he thought to himself, returning to his library and sinking into an armchair. *I wonder if that young lady even knows. I hope she doesn't. And I wonder if he is still haunted, the way I am.*

The journey through Straukpass, for the newly-formed trio, certainly afforded them more opportunities for combat than their travels of the previous day. However, their adversaries belonged to the animal, rather than the human, kingdom.

“Darn Garaknods,” Ryan said, as his sword sliced through the thick shell of the large, spider-like creature, allowing Sergeant Burnfist to finish it off with a ray of fire. “Why doesn't the Galvenian Government clear out this place?”

“Because,” Armin said, cockily, “that's what Governments are good for: doing nothing!”

“You have an unhealthy disrespect for authority, kid,” Sergeant Burnfist said, sternly, as the three moved forward. “A stint in the Army would do you a world of good.”

“Ha, sounds like fun! Commando Armin, that's what they call me,” Armin said, putting his mask – which he had taken off to fight the spiders – back on.

“Before you become a commando, there's a little something called ‘basic training’, which might be a bit too disciplined for the likes of you,” Sergeant Burnfist went on.

“Ah, the joys of military life. If it means I can get chewed out by someone who looks like you, Sarge, I might just take you up on your offer!” Armin quipped.

“Flaming fires, do you never quit, boy?” the Sergeant said, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Look, what's that?” Ryan said, his hand going to his pistol. “I saw them the last time I was here, but I have no idea what they're supposed to be.” He pointed to a tortoise that was ambling in their general direction, its shell covered with crystal growths.

“Hey, hey! Those crystals would make a spiffy necklace, that's for sure! Would you like a necklace, Sergeant?” Armin said, drawing one of his knives.

“According to the Zion Code of Military Conduct, soldiers are prohibited from wearing jewelry when on duty,” the Sergeant said, suppressing a smile. “Anyway, that's a double-shelled turtle, or a ‘Tortystal’ if you like using slang. They're quite harmless, unless you attack them. Their crystal shells can be used for a variety of things, including making Memory Crystals, assuming you know how to make them in the first place.”

“Leave it alone, Armin,” Ryan said, as the creature walked by peacefully. “Let's – Oh, God, what's that?”

The cause for his sudden interjection was a cloak that lay on the ground, of the sort that Galvenian travelers commonly wore. Though the material appeared new, it showed signs of having been slashed with a sharp instrument, and one side was blood-stained.

Armin whistled. "Looks like someone was stabbed over here," he said, picking the garment up. "And Ryan, I hate to bring bad news, but look at this."

"This" was a small monogram, bearing the letters E.D.S, near the cloak's collar.

"E.D.S – that's Dad's monogram, all right. Eramond Delivery Services. It's sewn into the cloaks of all his men, or at least those who make trips across the border," Ryan said, shaking his head sadly.

"It looks like one of them was hurt, perhaps even killed, judging by this cloak," Armin said, looking at it again.

"That's obvious, raccoon boy," Sergeant Burnfist said, dismissively. "The question is, where's the body, and who is responsible? Slashes like this suggest that we're dealing with common bandits, not with anyone using a magical weapon or a gun."

"We'll need to look around," Ryan said, drawing his pistol. "Armin, watch our backs, and cover us. The Sergeant and I will go forward."

"Good plan," the Sergeant replied.

"Hey, hey, why do I get to be the rearguard? Can't we play rock-paper-scissors for it?" Armin protested.

Sergeant Burnfist gave a short laugh. "This isn't kindergarten, kid! There are several caves ahead, where a brigand could either hide, or dispose of a body."

Proceeding cautiously, the trio examined the first of the caves, but it was empty except for a few animal carcasses. To their surprise, they found a door next to it, set in the rock."

"People *live* here?" Armin said, surprised.

"This could be interesting," Ryan said, replacing his pistol and drawing his sword. "I don't know who's behind that door, but it's hard to believe they'd know nothing about our men. At the very least, they would have heard something."

"Some dopey old hermit, probably," Sergeant Burnfist said, knocking on the door. After a minute's wait, it opened, and an elderly man, wrapped in a thick cloak of his own, opened the door.

"Unexpected visitors," the man said, squinting at Ryan and the Sergeant. "How quaint. Well, ladies and gentlemen, how may I help you?"

"Who are you?" Sergeant Burnfist said, challengingly, her hand going to her sword.

“Such impatience,” the old man replied. “You must be a Zion. Only the Zionese and the Varald expect the world to march to their time, as the men of Gyrus did long ago.”

“Answer my question, old-timer,” the Sergeant commanded.

“You may call me Fossen, my child,” the old man replied, calmly, eliciting a stifled laugh from Armin. Sergeant Burnfist glared at both of them. “Now let me ask you a question in turn. What is your business here?”

“Now listen here, old man...” the Sergeant began, hotly.

“We’re from Galvenia,” Ryan said, kindly, “and the Sergeant is from Zion. My father runs a package delivery service, and his customers complained that his goods had gone astray. We found some of them at Lake Derren, and we found this cloak here.” He handed the garment to Fossen, who looked at it carefully. “We’re afraid that they may have been attacked by bandits and robbed along the way. Do you know anything about this, sir?”

“My, you’re the polite one,” Fossen answered. “Well, I’m afraid you’re right about the bandits. A couple of days ago, my disciple and I came upon a brigand who was attacking a passer-by carrying a parcel, on his travels. Fortunately, we intervened on time, and we disarmed the bandit, who ran away yonder” – his finger pointed northeast – “perhaps towards that old mine. Since there was no point in chasing him, I asked my disciple to take the man, who was wounded, to Checkpoint Alpha for medical attention. You should find him there.”

Ryan replaced his sword in its scabbard. “Your disciple? Are you a teacher of martial arts, then?”

“Well, yes, young man. My days of glory are past, of course; all I can do now is meditate, teach, and make soup. Mostly the latter, now that I’m old. Would you like some?” he said, looking at Ryan and Armin kindly.

“You know what, old man, that would just hit the spot!” Armin replied, removing his mask. “Whaddya say, Ryan?”

“Sounds good to me,” Ryan replied, and a few moments later, the four of them were seated around Fossen’s simple table, a bowl of warm soup in front of each of them.

“I must say, this is quite good, old-timer,” Sergeant Burnfist said with gruff affection. “You’re all right.”

“So tell me, sir,” Ryan said, taking a long sip from his bowl and breaking into a smile, “what exactly do you do here?”

“Ah, that’s a long story, young man. Few have the courage to live as men lived at the very beginning. But from time to time, a young man does come, asking for help in wandering the Way – or at least, that’s what he claims. Most of them don’t stay long, because their idea of the Way is just – well – adventure, derring-do, heroism, glamour. Those things don’t last. The Way is a story that has no end, and it’s the journey, not the destination, that matters.”

“Are you a Journeyman, sir?” Ryan asked, intrigued.

“A Journeyman? By the Purpose, that’s a strange idea!” Fossen said, laughing. “No, my particular order is far older than Nealus Hessen’s, though there are some similarities. But let’s talk about your own little quest here, instead. I presume you’re on the trail of those travelers, or perhaps the goods they were carrying.”

Armin whistled. “Hey, pretty good guess there, Fossen! Do you read minds, or what?”

Fossen shook his head gently. “No, no. It’s obvious that you two are from Galvenia, perhaps Davenport, and from your friend’s clothes” – he pointed at Ryan – “it’s obvious that his family’s doing well for themselves, and have done so for some time. There’s only one way to do that in Davenport, and that’s trade.”

“Impressive,” Sergeant Burnfist said, nodding agreement. “So where’s this disciple of yours?”

“Oh, he’s on another journey,” Fossen replied, closing his eyes. “We were looking for mushrooms the other day near the border – I have to give him tasks like that, to keep him from growing proud, because he’s a rather good fighter and he knows it. We heard the sounds of a woman being attacked. He said he’d handle it himself, so I left him there and returned home. He’s probably escorting her to her destination now, whoever she may be.”

“Hey, I like this! So you run a protection racket, huh?” Armin said.

“Armin!” Ryan protested.

“Compadre, look at the facts! They don’t kill the bandits, they escort the victims – looks like a little scheme to me! Come on, Fossen, ‘fess up,” Armin retorted, cockily.

Fossen laughed. He had a surprisingly deep, merry laugh for a man of his age, and it echoed through his small hut. “I see you will have quite the journey in future, young man,” he said, addressing Armin, and seeming totally unoffended. “The Wanderers do not charge a fee. It is our Way – to protect the innocent, but not to take lives unnecessarily. Our Code is clear. A life for a life. A wound for a wound. Such is the Way of Justice.”

“But that’s stupid,” Armin protested. “Bandits are low-lives, especially those who prey on women. You should just get rid of them and dump their corpses in a convenient cave, if you’re all about justice!”

“My dear young man,” Fossen replied, looking at Armin intently, “your protestations do you credit, but tell me this: have you never been tempted to do a little banditry yourself - a little work on the side, just for the dollars, or credits, or whatever you call them nowadays? Indeed, have you never yielded to those temptations, at least once?”

Armin cleared his throat rather loudly, shuffled his feet, and looked down. “Um, I....” he began, in a low tone.

"I thought as much," Fossen replied. "By your own words, then, shall I – ahem – 'get rid' of you now?"

"Hey, hey, that's not what I meant, old man!" Armin protested. "I was talking about *real* bandits...."

"The line between *our* banditries and *theirs* is a thin one, my son," he said, still speaking gently. "No, the Purpose does wish us to exact retribution, but it also knows that a man's journey is not over until he decides it. Today's bandit may be tomorrow's hermit, or the other way around."

"You sound just like a Zioneese mage," Sergeant Burnfist said, thoroughly enjoying Armin's discomfiture. "As much as I'd like to see you take Raccoon Boy a notch down, though, we have work to do. You said you saw bandits set upon one man, and your disciple helped him. But we're actually on the trail of *two* packages, aren't we, Ryan?"

Ryan nodded. "That's what Dad said. One to Caledonia, and one to Darington. We recovered the box to Darington near Lake Derren, so it's clear that it's not what they wanted. Did you see what the man was carrying, Mr. Fossen?"

"I can do better than that, my son," Fossen said benevolently. "I recovered the package itself, and I was planning to ask my disciple to take it to Lorean, and hand it over to the authorities there. Unfortunately, he had to help that woman, as I've told you. I thought I'd ask him to do it, once he returned."

"Wonderful!" Sergeant Burnfist exclaimed, triumphantly. "Could you please hand that package over to me, sir? I'll take it to Caledonia myself."

"But what happened to the guy they ambushed near Lake Derren?" Armin broke in. "We've got his package, but he's vanished."

"Perhaps he, too, was wounded, and managed to reach a town nearby," Fossen suggested. "You might check Lorean or Alton, where he could have received medical attention. Or perhaps..."

We will never know how the sentence would have ended, for there was a sound of loud knocking on the door. Ryan and Armin started from their seats, and Sergeant Burnfist drew closer to the door, ready to draw her weapon.

"Open this door," a man's voice said, in loud, angry tones.

"Flaming fires, who's that?" the Sergeant shouted back.

"I *told* you that bandit ought to have been wiped out, old man," Armin grumbled, drawing a pair of knives.

"The door is open, my friend," Fossen called out. "Enter, if you wish."

The door was flung open, and a man in a cloak entered the room, a pistol in his hand. "You are harbouring contraband," he said, rather dramatically, "and I am an official of the Commonwealth Security Forces. Please hand over that which does not belong to you, and...." He stepped back, surprised, as he saw Ryan come into view. "You?" he exclaimed.

“Commonwealth, my foot,” Ryan said, hotly. “You’re the bandit here. That package was meant to be shipped by my dad to the Emperor at Caledonia. You can’t fool us.”

“Yeah, right, loser. Does Lugner write your lines for you?” Armin said, and in a flash, he had thrown one of his knives, hitting the “Commonwealth official” neatly on the wrist. He cried out in pain, and his weapon fell to the ground, firing a harmless shot across the floor as it lay there.

The man turned to run, but Sergeant Burnfist barred his escape. “Not so fast, scum,” she said, angrily, drawing her sword. “Do you have any last words before I send you to join your friend, the Lord of the Pits, to burn with him forever?”

“Young lady, please,” Fossen said gently, leaning upon a staff he had picked up. “There is no need for unnecessary violence. Your friend has disarmed this man, and perhaps it would be better if he told us what he knew.”

“That sounds like an idea,” the Sergeant said, with a cold smile. Forcing him onto a chair, she grabbed him by the shoulders. “Let’s do a little old interrogation, the Army way. Who are you?”

“I am not at liberty to answer that...” the man began, but was interrupted by the Sergeant’s gloved fist coming into contact with his jaw. He almost fell out of his chair with the shock, but managed to recover his balance.

“Wow, Burnfist, I didn’t know you could box!” Armin said, laughing.

“Speak!” the Sergeant commanded, as the man rubbed his jaw. “You know very well that we have ways of making you speak, even if you try to act tough.”

“Sergeant, wait,” Ryan said, warily. “This man has committed a crime by breaking into your home, or maybe even several crimes, but we can’t take the law into our own hands. He belongs to the authorities in Galvenia. We’ll just take him to the police station in Lorean. I’m sure they can handle the ‘interrogation’ part, and have a patrol here in case any of his friends turn up.”

“Hmph,” the Sergeant snorted. “At least answer this, *kuno-baka*. Whom are you working for? Who sent you here?”

The man remained silent.

“Leave him alone,” Fossen said, firmly but calmly. “Our young friend is right. The two of you can easily escort him to Lorean, and since that package belongs to the Zion, I think I shall entrust it to the blue-haired lady, here.”

Armin hooted. “Sergeant Burnfist of the Blue Hair Battalion!”

“Burn you all!” the Sergeant said irritably. Though she saw the justice of what Ryan and Fossen had said, she was unwilling to release a man who had tried, though perhaps unknowingly, to harm the Emperor, the ruler of Zion. “Very well, old-timer, I’ll play by your rules. But don’t blame me when he breaks

prison, or gets bail, and starts murdering men and women in the woods! And let me keep him quiet a little." Before any of them could react, she drew her sword, and a yellow beam shot out, striking the man in the chest. He fell out of his chair, with a drugged expression on his face.

"Ah, the Zionese version of the stunning attack," Fossen said, shaking his head. "A little crude, but an effective method all the same, dear lady. Well chosen."

"He's not going to try and escape now, that's for sure," Ryan observed. Using a coil of rope that stood in a corner of the room, gathering dust, he and the Sergeant bound the intruder, and left him leaning against a wall.

Fossen rummaged around in a cupboard, and brought out the same package that Ryan had placed into his knapsack, many eventful days ago. "I believe this is it," he said, handing it over to the Sergeant. "But there's one more item of interest, which I managed to recover from this man's friend when we scared him away. Perhaps you should take it, young man, to show the Lorean police." He drew a small object from the pocket of his tunic, and handed it to Armin.

"A metal plaque?" Armin held it in his palm and studied it carefully. "God, it's ugly. Get a load of this, Ryan."

Ryan took a look at it, and stepped back, with a shocked expression on his face. "My God, that's...." Sergeant Burnfist, stepping forward, looked at it, and covered her mouth with her glove as well, looking almost equally surprised.

"Hey, guys, what's so scary about that?" Armin said.

"Sergeant..." Ryan began, "look at that pattern. Don't you recognize it?"

"Hmm, three circles," Armin said. "They're supposed to be faces. I'd say this one is Socius, this one is Sir Prescott's ugly wife, and the one below – ugh, looks like those creepy paintings of demons in those wacky Itarian paintings! Strange thing to carry around."

"Not bad at all, my young bandit," Fossen said, laughing. "Those are, indeed, three faces, though I would differ with your identification of them. But they certainly represent a man, a woman, and a creature. By the Purpose, this brings back old memories, and not very pleasant ones at that."

"Flaming fires! That's exactly the same sign which that murderer had, tattooed on his arm," the Sergeant said.

"Which murderer?" Armin said, interested.

"A man who tried to kill Princess Carranya on board the *Paradiso*, in the disguise of a Zion soldier," Ryan explained. "The Sergeant managed to kill him, after I'd disarmed him, and when Agent Striker searched his body, we found a tattoo on him that looked just like this."

Armin's eyes widened. "That's *some* group of bandits we're dealing with! They dress up as Zions, as Commonwealth officials.....Compadre, aren't we getting in a little too *deep*, here?"

Ryan laughed. "Perhaps we were doomed from the start, Armin," he said. "Do you know what the signs are meant to represent, Mr. Fossen?"

"It's rather silly, actually," Fossen answered, with an apologetic expression. "Those faces are an old seal, or symbol, representing the Three Demons of Janwen."

"Old wives' tales," the Sergeant scoffed. "I know they're in the Church books, but you're right, old man. That *is* silly. What do old legends about Janwen have to do with bandits and murderers?"

"I don't really understand, myself," Fossen said, shaking his head. "The seal was used, thousands and thousands of years ago, by native Zionese, who resisted the Itarian religion. They claimed that the "Infinity" was not a real god, but an evil and self-serving demon, and that these three – the man, the woman, and the animal – were the three true gods whom everyone had to worship. But I doubt this man is a follower of a long-dead religion. It's probably just the symbol of a robber band, a gang of thieves, which they chose for its connotations of evil."

"Evil is as evil does," Armin said. "Hah, I'm quite the philosopher, ain't I, Ryan?"

"Very funny, Armin. I still think we should take it to Lorean," Ryan said, placing the plaque in his pocket. "If it's a gang's emblem, the police ought to know something about it."

"Yeah, the Brotherhood of the Three Ugly Faces," Armin said, chuckling. "Almost as scary as Lavie, I'd say."

"Enough chatter," the Sergeant admonished him, as she picked up the package and strode towards the door. "Gentlemen, I'll make my way across the border, and ensure that this reaches Caledonia on time. I thank you for your assistance, even the raccoon. Farewell."

"Hey, do I smell a compliment?" Armin said, beaming as he shook hands with the Sergeant. "Farewell, blue-haired lady, and think of me when you have the time!"

"Burn you, bandit," the Sergeant said, not unkindly, as she shook hands with Ryan and Fossen, and turned to leave. "And have a safe journey to Lorean."

"Thank you, Sergeant, we will," Ryan replied. Raising up their uninvited guest – who was still stunned, but could walk hesitantly – he and Armin thanked Fossen, and began their trek to Lorean.

Fossen looked at the three of them kindly, watching them disappear into the woods, before closing the door and sitting down at his table, deep in thought. *I wonder when that boy, Juno, will come back. And I hope, for their sake, that they're right about it being a thieves' sign, and nothing else. Because, if not....*

CHAPTER ELEVEN: A TIME FOR WAR

*“Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.
I am for peace; but when I speak,
they are for war.”*

(Psalm 120, v. 6-7.)

“Wow,” Emily said, looking at her grandmother with wide eyes. “Did Grandpa really do all that? That’s awesome, Gran!”

“I’m afraid that was only the beginning for poor Grandpa,” Lavie said, straightening one of Emily’s bows for her. “You see, sweetie, though he had come back a hero, and was moving on with his life, the world wouldn’t let him. Hard times were about to come, and both of us were caught up in them, though we never expected it.”

“You mean....war, Gran?” Emily shivered. “Mummy always says war is one of the most terrible things ever.”

Lavie shook her head sadly. “She’s right there, you know. When Ryan and I were young, we didn’t quite realize how dreadful it could all be, darling. We were all caught up in the excitement, and thought we were being heroes and heroines. It took a second war – the one my children lived through themselves – to teach us that we were all wrong, and that war was not something beautiful, but rather ugly and stupid. I wonder if we’ve learned our lesson, even now.”

“Don’t worry, Gran,” Emily reassured her. “I will. If I can ever do anything to prevent it, I will.”

“My, what brave words, sweetie,” Lavie said, with a distant expression on her face. “How glad Kaleb would have been, if he had lived to hear them.” She sighed, and Emily recognized the expression on Lavie’s face, both proud and regretful – it was the same that Mummy had on her face whenever she mentioned Uncle Kaleb, her big brother, who was a war hero, and whom she’d never known. Uncertain how to respond, she remained silent on her grandmother’s lap, looking at the floor.

“Oh, don’t be downcast, dear,” Lavie said, brightening. “Instead, let’s go on with what happened back then. The Zions were mourning their dead, and they had guests from Galvenia at the time, including a Princess and an old man we’d both already met....”

A week had passed since the formal proclamation of Terrin Hipper as President of the Commonwealth, and an uneasy silence had settled over most of the Zion Empire as the day of Prince Wilhelm’s state funeral dawned. Nowhere was the palpable sense of unrest clearer than in Caledonia, where, ever since the deaths of Koketsu and now of Andreyev of the Varald, the spectre of armed conflict hung in the air. Loyal citizens of the Empire were also concerned by the lateness of their Crown Prince’s funeral. Though a small ceremony, presided over by the Archbishop of Caledonia, had already been conducted at the

Palace and broadcast over the radio, the populace were still unsettled that such an august figure should be treated in such a modest, even inglorious manner.

“The Emperor is unwell,” wiser heads had said. “It is unjust to expect him to stage a public display at our convenience rather than his, particularly at a moment like this.”

Others had laid the blame squarely on their neighbours. To appease the Galvenians of the South, whose military assistance would be required should war break out, Charlemagne was awaiting the arrival of their King and his retinue before a formal funeral could take place. And what further proof of this was required, they claimed, than the fact that not only the King, but the Queen and the Princess – who had survived the same journey that had claimed Wilhelm’s life, and returned to Galvenia in triumph – were all attending the ceremony? Some of those making the claim viewed this as a shrewd move on the Emperor’s part; after all, they said, he would require every possible means of assistance if involved in a conflict with the Varald. Others were unhappy; the grief of the people, they countered, should be allowed expression, and should not depend on the convenience of a neighbouring ruler, and a weak one at that.

Neither of these explanations was completely correct, but they both had the advantage of supporting evidence, and their proponents sounded authoritative enough to convince many, and to still the worst of the grumbling. To Agent William Striker, who was being briefed on the security arrangements for the procession by Chamberlain Engel, it did not really matter either way. It was early in the morning, and the sun had not yet risen, but both men were early risers, and this fact did not perturb them unduly.

“I trust these arrangements are satisfactory,” he said, going over the plans, which Engel and his men had sketched out on a large map of the streets of Caledonia, once more. “We do not anticipate any real hazards, but there is always the danger that an over-enthusiastic group may begin demonstrating, and demanding immediate reprisals against the Varald. This is most likely to happen in the following areas” – he circled three residential districts on the map with a quill of his own – “and we have set up a cordon there, just to be safe. A separate detachment will remain with the Royal Family of Galvenia throughout, from the moment they land at the military docks until the moment they depart the way they came.”

“They are an added complication,” Engel said, fussily, glad that this young man was taking on so many of the responsibilities he assumed he would have to shoulder. “Arlbert himself would have been all right, but the presence of the Queen and the Princess is a problem, particularly if she is a target herself.”

“A target? Surely you jest, sir,” Striker said, shaking his head and smiling as his quill traced a line from the military docks to the Royal Palace, where Arlbert and his family would be received before proceeding to Saint Geraud’s Abbey. “Whatever dangers surround that young woman, she is surely safe in Zion. We are no longer in the days of Johan II, who had a Galvenian princess murdered when she no longer served his purposes.”

“Still, Agent, remember that she is alive, and Wilhelm is dead,” Engel said, cautiously. “There may be some people who resent that.”

“Granted, Sir, but we are prepared for that contingency as well. Leave it to the Intelligence and Tactics Division, if it should come to that,” Striker said, laying down his quill. “Are we expecting any other visitors from Galvenia? I know Socius and Sheffield are staying home, to run the show in the King’s absence – though some would say that they do so even when he is present.”

Engel laughed. “How true that is, Agent,” he replied. “The weakness of Arlbert and the pliability of Socius have certainly served us well. There is only one more guest from Galvenia, to my knowledge, who received a personal invitation from the Emperor – a retired scholar who has lived in Itaria for many years, and who was one of the late Prince’s tutors. Upon learning that the man was at King’s College, Charlemagne felt it would be fitting to ask him to attend.”

“A scholar from Itaria?” Striker’s voice was suddenly stern. “Why were we not informed of this?”

“My apologies, young man,” Engel said, “but surely it was not of much importance, was it? The man is apparently quite old, but the Emperor said that he was his son’s favourite teacher; he even resided in the Palace for a time in the past. His papers are quite in order, including a *bona fide* from the Pontiff of Itaria, whom he served as a member of” – Engel consulted his notes – “the Pontifical Council of the Evangelium. He has recently resigned this post, citing age, and has been granted a visiting professorship in his homeland; a sinecure, surely.”

“The Council of the Evangelium?” Striker said, in a low tone. “This is disturbing, Chamberlain. The Council is said to be infested with religious extremists, who consider Charlemagne a traitor for not opposing the Varald and their repression of the Church more strongly. One of their sympathizers, a theologian named Gray, was recently in King’s College himself, though he did not receive a very warm welcome. Apparently he insulted Socius during a lecture, and most of his audience walked out.” He laughed. “Perhaps it is because I have lived in the service of the temporal power rather than the spiritual, but I distrust the current Itarian bureaucracy and their ideology, and I wish this old man were not coming.”

“I do not think he is a man of that sort, Agent,” Engel reassured him. “In fact, I know the man myself, for I have met him briefly on several occasions, when he came to teach our late Crown Prince. His name is Marlborough, and he is a gentleman’s son. He is said to be temperate in his views; in fact, he may have resigned from the Council precisely because he disagreed with the sort of elements you mention. He will arrive today, on a passenger ship, soon after Arlbert does.”

“I will have him watched closely, nonetheless,” Striker replied. “The Varald without, the Galvenians and the Itarians within. This promises to be interesting, Sir.”

“Indeed, Agent,” Engel said. “And I must say I’m glad I have someone as efficient as you to assist us with the – ahem – arrangements. Though I must confess I was expecting someone older, you impress me favourably, young man. Good fortune to you.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Agent Striker said, warmly, shaking hands with the Chamberlain before departing. As he walked back to join his men and rehearse the final arrangements, but despite his outward poise, he was far from composed.

Providence has a cruel sense of humour, indeed. he thought to himself, giving his instructions with a detached look on his face. *This is an added complication. I need to be careful about that man and his movements, or all may be lost before we have even begun to fight.*

The reception for the Galvenian Royal Family, at the Emperor Friederich Military Bay, was respectful and even warm, though not exuberant, as befitted guests of importance who were, nevertheless, passing through on a sad occasion. A small detachment, led by Admiral Wells, Captain Baker, and their men, preceded the royals themselves, who carried themselves simply and with dignity, without expecting any undue pomp or display. As Carranya reached the end of the landing, and stood on Zionese soil for the first time, a strange sense of achievement – of homecoming, even – surged through her. She looked out at the rising sun, which seemed to be a good augury in itself. *Francis*, she thought, *I’m here at last. I never thought I would see the day so soon, but I have. Where are you?*

“Are you quite well, dear?” Queen Katarina asked, observing the far-away look on her daughter’s face.

Carranya flushed. “Quite well, Mother,” she replied, politely. “It’s just that – this feels strange and wonderful, somehow. Perhaps it’s just that I’ve never seen Caledonia, except in books and paintings.”

“I know,” the Queen replied, indulgently. “I was quite taken with the place when Arlbert and I – I’m sorry, I mean, the King and I – came here, twenty-one years ago.”

Carranya laughed. “Did you come here as newlyweds, then, Mother?” she asked. “That sounds just like one of Mr. Tremfein’s plays!” *The one I acted in, to be precise*, she thought, hiding her smile behind her veil.

“Indeed, my daughter,” Katarina said, looking at the sunrise with quite a nostalgic expression herself. “We arrived early in the morning, on a fine summer’s day, just like this one. But, hush, I shouldn’t be chattering like this. There comes your father, dear, so let’s all get ready for a procession, shall we?”

“Of course, Mother,” Carranya said, fondly. The King was now standing at the top of the landing, escorted by his own personal bodyguards, and descended slowly, with small mincing steps. Reaching the landing, he took the Queen’s arm, and Carranya took her position in front of them. The military band began to play a subdued, instrumental version of the Galvenian national anthem, as Philipp Durer, the Foreign Minister of Zion, came forward with the men of the 3rd Imperial Battalion to greet them. As if on cue, the Galvenian *cortege* began to march forward, and when they met, Durer broke ranks to greet the King and Queen.

“My apologies, Your Majesty,” he said. “The Emperor could not be personally present, but he will receive you in state at the Palace. We shall now accompany you there, and you may rest and refresh

yourself before the funeral, which will begin at noon at Saint Geraud's Abbey. On behalf of the Zion Empire, we welcome you and your family to our shores."

"Thank you, Minister, that will be quite satisfactory," Arlbert said, affecting a Zion accent himself, and causing Katarina to suppress a giggle. "Let us proceed, then."

And the procession marched forward, closely watched by members of the Zion Special Forces and the Intelligence Division, including Agent Striker, who had been asked by Engel to "keep an eye on them, in case the men with old Durer were caught napping." As he saw the Royal Family pass by, he looked at them closely.

How like her mother the Princess is, he thought. It's certainly a pleasure to see her again, though these are hardly the happiest of circumstances. I hope I won't have to shoot anyone for her sake, this time, though. The idea brought a smile to his face, though it did not last long, preoccupied as he was with his own work.

The journey to the Palace was short, and was completed in a little over half an hour. As they stepped across the bridge, and through the massive gates of the Palace itself, the band – perhaps growing tired of playing the same song – began a rather spirited rendition of "Daughter of Glory", *sans* the words. The familiar tune brought back memories of Davenport, and the Princess – recalling the eventful days she had spent there – thought of Lavie, and Ryan, and the Brotherhood of the Raccoon, and laughed.

"They really shouldn't be playing something as cheerful as that," Arlbert complained, in a low tone. "Aren't they supposed to be mourning their Prince?"

"I never really knew Wilhelm myself, my King," Katarina replied, "but from all I've heard, he was a brave and noble young man. Surely he would not have wished us to wail and weep all the time, like the Old Republicans do."

"Perhaps you're right, my dear," the King replied, as they entered a large room, where the Chamberlain stood in ceremonial uniform, arms extended in welcome.

"Your Majesty," he said, kneeling before the King, "welcome to Caledonia. We trust that your journey was satisfactory."

"Quite so," the Queen replied, brightly. "In fact, Carranya was even able to help me with the sea-sickness, so it was quite a pleasant experience. I see the Palace has changed little in over twenty years; it has still retained its charm and dignity. And I must offer you my condolences on your loss, Chamberlain. I know we sent you an official message, but such things are cold comfort. How is the Emperor?"

"He is as well as would be expected, Your Majesty," Engel said, pleased at being thus addressed by the Queen of Galvenia herself. "But remember that the Prince was the only child of his old age, and therefore, the blow has struck him hard. However, he faces it as a true Valtemond would."

"When may we meet him in person?" King Arlbert enquired.

“Very soon, Your Majesty,” Engel replied, politely. “Our men will show you to the East Wing, where you may prepare yourselves for the afternoon, and recover from your journey. At eleven o’clock, we will bring you to the Throne Room, where the Emperor will receive you personally. You will all depart together, in his own train, for the Abbey at half-past eleven. Refreshment is being arranged for you in the Banquet Hall of the same wing, and I shall leave two of my assistants with you, to help you with anything you may require. Is this satisfactory, Your Majesty?”

“Indeed it is,” Arlbert said, and after some more ceremonial greetings – which we need not dwell upon unduly – the three of them, and their attendants, were escorted to their temporary quarters in the palace, from whence they would be summoned in three hours. The King, eager for some rest, had gone ahead with his guards, while his wife and daughter followed at some distance, admiring their surroundings.

“I must say, this is quite a classy place, Princess,” Naomi Festa – who had been appointed the Princess’ personal dressmaker after the events of Davenport, and had prepared the Queen’s costume as well for the day’s formalities – observed, looking around curiously at the portraits and statues that lined the corridors of the East Wing. “Just look at these carpets!”

“The Zion have always been extravagant, Naomi,” the Queen informed her. “I’m sure you must have seen that for yourself, on the *Paradiso!*”

“Indeed, we did, Mother,” Carranya replied. “I think they had exactly the same sort of carpets on Deck B, where the Zion nobility stayed. I wonder if that ship will ever sail again, after what happened on it.”

“It probably will,” Naomi said, confidently. “Oh sure, they’ll take their time to fix it, rename it, clean it up, and maybe have it blessed by one of those clergymen of theirs. But that ship will sail, even if it’s suffered a shipwreck now. It’s meant to. That’s the way of the world. Besides, think of all the investors who’d want to recover their profit!” She chuckled. “Mark my words, Princess, you may be asked to break a champagne bottle over it, when it begins its next journey.”

“I should like to do that,” Carranya said, dreamily. “That’s a nice idea, Naomi.”

“But aren’t sailors generally superstitious?” Queen Katarina asked, gently. “They may not want to sail on a ship that is ‘haunted’...”

“Hmph, that’s what the Itarian priests are for, Your Majesty,” Naomi said, dismissively. “Now, I don’t hold much with that Church of Infinity, and all the additions they’ve made to our good old religion, but those priests are fine men – some of them, at least – and they’ll take care of any bogeys that the sailors are scared of.”

And talking happily in this way, they made their way deeper into the Palace.

I'm a little early, Henrik Spenson thought, checking his papers carefully to make sure nothing was missing for what seemed like the hundredth time. *A bit early even by her standards, and I know she's one of the most punctual persons on Terra.*

He looked up at the stark sign on the wall of the building he was outside of, opposite the bench he was sitting on. *King's College – Registration for New Students. Open Today. Working Hours: 0900 to 1700 hours.* The disappearance of the Princess had caused a delay in most aspects of administrative life in Galvenia, but with her safe return, the letter asking him – and every other new student – to come down and register had arrived fairly soon, to both his and his father's satisfaction.

"Henrik! There you are!" He did not need to look up – the now-familiar voice, and the strange sense of lightness that accompanied it, were enough to assure him of the speaker's identity, even as she waved at him – almost dropping her own thick folder as she did so – and walked up to join him on the bench. "Goodness, did I keep you waiting for long? Your letter did say eight-thirty, didn't it?"

Henrik rose to greet her, and they shook hands before sitting down together, comfortably, side by side. "Good morning, Bernadette, it's good to see you," he said, warmly. "And no, I wasn't waiting long; I had to come here a little early, because they'd asked to meet me at the Museum early in the morning. I finished my work there, and then I settled down here, knowing you'd come soon."

"The Museum? What for?" Bernadette asked, leaning closer to him.

"Remember that Memory Crystal we found in Clarissa's warehouse? I took it over to them, after leaving you at St. Nealus'. They weren't that interested this time, because it was a big one, but they did give me one thousand Commonwealth dollars for our pains. Here's your share." He took a five-hundred-dollar note from his wallet, and handed it to her.

"Thank you, Henrik," she said, blushing a little. "By Saint Integra, a few more Memory Crystals, and we can both retire and live off our fortunes!"

"Not sure about *living* off it, given the cost of living these days," Henrik observed, "but there are still plenty of things we could do. For example, we could sail to Itaria, and visit the Seat of the Faith ourselves..."

"How perfectly lovely," Bernadette said, enthusiastically. "Perhaps King's College will send us both on a field trip, as part of the course on Religious Literature, since all the best scholars live in Itaria City itself."

"That sounds like a great idea," Henrik replied, feeling more than a little pleased at her "both". "But actually, there's more to tell you about the Museum. This time, I didn't get to meet the Professor; she had gone to Zion University for a doctoral defence, or something like that. I spoke to one of her assistants, a green-haired lady who seemed rather scatterbrained, and kept dropping her glasses, but was actually very sharp. Her name was Aline Sheldon."

"Her glasses? Oh, dear, that sounds just like Father," Bernadette said with a smile.

Henrik laughed. “Anyway, she told me that the crystal we found in the warehouse, and the one I told you about, from the sewers, were both made by the same person; she’d analyzed the sounds quite carefully, and they matched. The one I found first was defective, which was probably why it had been thrown away. But there’s more.”

“Tell me about it,” Bernadette said, kindly. “What did Miss Sheldon have to say?”

Henrik lowered his voice. “Well, actually, what I’m about to tell you is a bit strange. She was chattering away happily, but what she had to say was actually quite serious. She asked me if I was a Church member, and I said yes. She then told me that a Church chaplain had come to the help of a dear friend of hers when he was dying, and that she owed them a favour in return. The she asked me if I knew someone from the Church to whom important information could be given.”

“Why, Henrik, you shouldn’t be telling anyone about this, then,” Bernadette said, gravely.

“You’re not ‘anyone’. You’re my dear friend, and you’re the only person my age I can trust when it comes to discussing Church matters,” Henrik said earnestly, causing her to turn red with pleasure.

“Thank you, Henrik,” she replied. “And I know I’d trust you that way too, if I were in your place.”

They remained in silence for a moment, before he spoke again. “Anyway, what important figures in the Church do we know?”

“Well, there’s Father Riordan,” Bernadette observed, “and Sister Miriam, and of course, Father Marlborough, whom we’ve just met, but who seems to both kind, and very learned! Do you know, I found a book of his in our library at St. Nealus’, quite a recent one. It was in the reference section, though. It was called ‘The Zion University Study Guide to the Holy Book’, and it had chapter-by-chapter notes, historical details, and archaeological findings.” She beamed, as if she had found a treasure chest of her own.

“Well, now I know what to get you as a birthday present,” Henrik said, brightly, causing her to laugh again. “Anyway, I thought of Father Marlborough too, since he helped us out with looking at Thomas’ house. I wrote him a letter, care of King’s College, telling him what we’d found on our earlier trip to Davenport, but I didn’t get a reply so far. But this was something I wanted to talk over with you, first.”

“With me, Henrik? Why, I’m flattered.” The pair laughed, and then Henrik went on. “Apparently the first Memory Crystal – the one we found at Davenport Beach, remember? – started playing by itself one day, and both she and Professor Hernandez saw what was on it.”

“What? That’s – that’s quite incredible!” Bernadette said, clutching at her hat as a stray puff of wind almost blew it off her head. “Father told me a lot about Memory Crystals, but I’ve never heard of one that runs on its own. Some need light or heat, others need a touch, and some respond to a key word, but this is the first I’ve heard of such a thing!”

“Your father certainly knows a lot of things,” Henrik said, appreciatively. “Perhaps we should discuss this with him, too. Anyway, she was sworn to secrecy about what was actually *on* the crystal, and was asked to go to Darington herself, to meet with a professor from Zion there. They spoke for quite a while, he viewed the Crystals himself, and at the end he told her that he would handle matters from there. However, he did tell her that there was trouble threatening both Zion and Itaria, and that if she knew anyone from Itaria who was trustworthy, she was to pass on the information to them. She was at her wit’s end, because the chaplain who’d helped her had passed on some time ago, and she knew of no one else until I happened to come by.”

“Henrik to the rescue!” Bernadette said, teasingly. “You seem to be making a habit of coming to the help of young women with problems, Mr. Spenson.”

“Oh, come on,” Henrik said in mock protest. “She was forty if she was a day.”

“I was just pulling your leg,” she said, brushing the hair away from her face. “But let’s be serious for a moment. Did she say what kind of danger it was?”

“I think she wanted to, but the Zions had probably threatened her with dire consequences if she did,” Henrik said, recalling Aline’s nervous expression when they had met. “But she did say one thing more. She mentioned a name, a person’s name, and asked me if I’d ever heard it. When I said no, she dropped the matter, though rather reluctantly.”

“And what was the name she mentioned?” Bernadette asked, as they drew slightly closer to each other, so that a stray lock of her hair was tickling his face. Henrik did not object to this – in fact, he rather enjoyed the sensation.

“Just a single name,” Henrik said, shaking his head. “Robert. I don’t know any Robert, though. Was there a Robert in that prayer group of yours, the one Thomas Perrin belonged to?”

Bernadette closed her eyes, making an effort to remember. “Why,” she said, amazed, “I do believe there was. A young man, named Robert, who used to play the guitar for the music group. He only came by a couple of times, because Father Gruber generally preferred us to sing without accompaniment.”

“We’ve got to find out more about him,” Henrik suggested. “And I think Father Marlborough could help us with it. Maybe we can try to meet him after we finish our registrations.”

“That’s an excellent idea, Henrik,” Bernadette said. “I think it might be time for us to join the queue, though!” She pointed to a slowly growing line of students, which was lining up to enter the students’ office, and which they had somehow not observed till then.

“Qua? I didn’t even notice that!” Henrik said, springing to his feet. “I hope we aren’t late.”

“Well, they say patience is a virtue,” Bernadette said, stretching herself as she stood up, and slipping her hand into his. “Come along, let’s finish this, and then try to get an appointment with Father.”

“Sounds good to me,” Henrik said, as they walked, hand in hand, to join the line.

Two men were seated in the small office of the Explorers' Guild. One of them was pacing nervously, wrapping the folds of his cloak close around him, while the other, taller and more richly clothed, seemed to be staring out of the small window, watching the sun set over the eastern districts of Lorean.

"You failed me," the second man said, in a level tone. It was not an accusation, but a simple statement of fact. "And not once, but several times. Really, I wonder why I even bother."

"Sir Lugner," the first man said, haltingly, "I offer you my apologies, but I must remind you that the circumstances were exceptional."

"We live in exceptional times, my friend," Lugner said, drawing his sword and resting it on the table. The two-edged blade gleamed threateningly in the light of the room's single lamp, and the cloaked man swallowed nervously. "And we require exceptional services. It seems the men in your employ are far from skilled at their task. Bandits who know nothing of banditry." He laughed.

"Sir, we could not count on the presence of that other bandit," the first man protested, "nor on the fact that a Zion soldier would cross the border so freely and involve herself in the affair."

"Listen to me carefully," Lugner said, standing up, and pointing his sword down at the ground. "It was bad enough that that fool Talmadge became greedy for lucre, and endangered our mission at the very start, leading to the death of Kodenai. Yet, we found a replacement for him. It was worse when the very gods themselves, and a foolish girl, conspired against us to foil our plans on the *Paradiso*. Yet, we shall have our war. But it is far, far worse" – and here, he paused meaningfully, sending a tremor down the other man's spine – "when something as simple as recovering our goods cannot be accomplished, simply because some foolish youths and one Zion soldier happened to get involved."

"You forget the other man, Sir," his companion replied, running a hand against his damp face. "The one with the sword, who could apparently use magic."

"A magical bandit?" Lugner laughed contemptuously. "I am not here to listen to excuses. I will even overlook the package you failed to 'intercept', as you so poetically put it, since your men seem to quake at the sight of Zion soldiers. I will even concede that the loss of the Memory Crystal was an accident, which you had nothing to do with. But I need it recovered. The fewer people know about it, the better."

"I shall try again, Sir Lugner," the man said, with a shudder. "I have men across the border..."

"'Trying', my friend, is not good enough. If that Crystal is seen by ordinary men, or even by the Emperor, it will mean little to them. But there are still wise men in Zion, who may be able to understand it, and if they do, then our plans are seriously compromised. Go, but if you fail, remember that not only your payment but your life is forfeit. The stakes we play for are too high for your stupidity to compromise them."

“I shall recover it, Sir,” the man said, backing away from Lugner as he stepped closer. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a little work to do at Mount Lorea Mine, and my time is precious to me. May fortune favour you, my good Robert – I shall continue to call you that, for now – because if it does not, I shall prove implacable.”

“Yes, Sir,” the man said, as Lugner strode out of the room calmly. Sinking down in a chair, he buried his head in his hands, and groaned. *I’ll watch his every move*, he thought vengefully. *He foiled me more than once, but he will not do it again. For I, more than even Lugner, know his weakest point, and I know how to strike at it.* He raised his head and smiled, and drawing a flask from his cloak, began to drink heartily, his confidence slowly returning.

Two hours had passed since the Royal Family of Galvenia had arrived at the Imperial Palace, and the Queen was suffering from a headache – a common enough complaint for her, especially after a long journey.

“I hate to trouble you, dear,” she told Carranya, “but could you go and fetch the physician who accompanied us, just to be on the safe side? After all, I’ve got to be in good shape for the ceremony, and he has all my medicines with him. He said he’d been given a room down the corridor, the third room after the left turning. I’d send one of the others, but the guards are all with the King, and Naomi is busy getting our clothes ready.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Mother,” Carranya said affectionately, as she set out in search of the doctor. However, absorbed as she was with thoughts of a certain young man, she missed the first left turning – which, to be fair to her, was not a very obvious one. She headed down the second, counted three rooms with mathematical precision, and found a room with its door ajar, which she entered confidently.

“Doctor Melbourne?” she called out. “Are you there? Mother was asking for you....”

But no sooner had the words left her mouth, than she realized her mistake. The room was a library, and not an accommodation of any sort, and the only person inside was a thin elderly man, wearing a brown robe, and leafing through one of the books on a top shelf with what seemed to be great concentration.

“I’m afraid I don’t know either Doctor Melbourne, or your mother, my child,” he said kindly. His voice had a quaver in it, which fitted well with his general appearance of frailty and his loose clothes. “But – Oh, my goodness, by Saint Guibert and his seventy scholars. Good morning, your Highness.” He bowed politely, and replaced his book. “I must say, this is quite the unexpected pleasure.”

“Do you know me?” Carranya asked, confused.

“Only by sight, Your Highness,” the man replied, politely. “I was to have visited the Palace once I returned from this mournful affair, and been formally presented to your august parents, but I see that at least some of that honour has been anticipated. Truly, the Infinity is not only good and truthful, but humorous.”

Carranya laughed. "I've never thought of it that way," she said, "but perhaps we learn more about the Infinity as we grow. When I was a child, I thought the Infinity was a sort of cosmic governess or tutor, with long lists of what should and should not be done."

"So did I, Your Highness," the man replied, amiably. "That is one of the unfortunate by-products of the old way of learning doctrine, using rote memory and lists of questions. It does have its charm, especially to the legalistic or logical mind, but it is far from perfect. Perhaps our ancestors had the same idea, and that is why they called him the Purpose. But let me remedy my rudeness, for I have not introduced myself. My name is Terence Marlborough, and I am actually one of your subjects, though I have lived in every continent of Terra at some time in my life. I have now returned home, in my eightieth year, to teach at King's College."

"King's College? We look forward to receiving you at the Palace," Carranya said, impressed. "What brings you to Zion, Professor Marlborough?"

"Ah, it's a sad thing. A little while ago, when I was still a young man of seventy or thereabouts" – he twinkled at Carranya, who laughed again – "I had the honour of being invited by Emperor Charlemagne to teach some of the children at the Palace: to wit, both his son, Wilhelm, and his nephew, Renaud. They were both very gifted pupils, though in rather different ways."

"You were Prince Wilhelm's tutor?" Carranya exclaimed. "Professor, I must say this is quite the honour for me as well. What did you teach him?"

"Many things, your Highness," Marlborough replied, looking into the distance as he recalled those days. "History, which is my own particular passion. Archaeology. A little theology, or at least what was appropriate for a young boy's mind. Philosophy, though they had a better teacher for that. And, of course, instruction in the faith of the Church, as befits all future rulers of Zion. I was here for about three years, and they were memorable ones. I was quite upset to hear of Wilhelm's death, and the Emperor was kind enough to invite me, so that I could pay my last respects."

"I am truly sorry, Professor," Carranya said, softly, "and I offer you my condolences."

"At my age, Your Highness, death is a fact of life," Marlborough observed philosophically, "one that we must wait for with as much dignity as we can muster. But the death of a young man like Wilhelm, who could have undone some of the errors of his predecessors, is a tragedy. I still remember him as a boy of twelve or thirteen – brave, imaginative, a true son of the Valtemonds." He shook his head, sadly. "What a sad waste. But in the midst of tragedy, the Infinity still shows mercy – he has spared you, Your Highness. Praise be to him."

"Yes, indeed, Professor," Princess Carranya replied, trembling as she remembered how she had been saved not once, but twice. "It was a miracle that I survived."

"Indeed it was," the Professor said, looking at her as he would at a favourite student. "Though I would love to converse with you at length, Your Highness, I am sure you have other tasks to attend to on this solemn day. If you are looking for the rest of your retinue, I believe they were given rooms at the

previous turning, and not this one. The error is natural, because the first turning is not an easy one to spot.”

“Oh, goodness,” Carranya said, abashed. “I forgot all about poor Mother. Thank you, Professor. I’ll go and find Doctor Melbourne, now. I hope we will have the pleasure of your company in Lorean.”

“I seem to be making a habit,” Marlborough said, bowing as she turned away, “of meeting quite remarkable young ladies these days, in the strangest places. Perhaps it is a good sign for the kingdom of Galvenia. Farewell, Your Highness, and peace be with you.”

“Farewell, Professor. Peace be with you, as well,” Carranya said, as she turned and left, hurriedly, in search of the physician and his physic. Marlborough looked at her with approval as she left, and suddenly, an idea – suggested by a rather amusing memory from his past – came into his mind.

Poor Wilhelm always had a sense of humour, he thought. Though of course such a thing is now not only improbable, but impossible.

At the very same time as the funeral procession was about to leave for Saint Geraud’s Abbey, an equally solemn exercise, though a less tearful one, was taking place on Unity Isle.

“Gentlemen, this is leading nowhere,” Terrin Hipper said, mildly, trying to placate the furious men who sat on either side of him. “Neither you, not the Senate, have been able to reach a decision that would carry a majority. I move, therefore, that the Varald Directorate conduct its own investigation into the death of Lev Andreyev, and that the Zion submit a copy of the report pertaining to their findings in the death of Koketsu. If the Executive Council, after reading both these documents, feels that Commonwealth intervention is required, let us have it by all means. But if not, let us not start an unnecessary quarrel.”

Jansen looked at Hipper with a smile. “I accept the President’s decision. The Geheimpol will uncover the truth behind the death of our beloved Deputy Director.”

“We object!” Kanoi said, irritably. “The Empire objects most strongly. As per the Commonwealth Code of Procedure, the documents submitted by a non-Commonwealth body have no legal status, except as hearsay. The scurrilous ramblings of the Geheimpol will be of no value to the Executive Council.”

“My dear Kanoi,” Representative Jedda said, with a sly smile on his lips, “I am afraid that the Code of Procedure applies only when the matter does not fall under the purview of the Charter. Under the Charter’s provisions, it is clearly stated that the opinion of the President, along with at least two members of the Executive Council, is enough to grant legality to a document, and have it admitted as evidence for internal enquiries.”

“Very well,” Lord Lucan said, officiously, “but tell me, Jedda, who apart from Jansen endorses this proposal?”

"I do," Jedda replied, calmly. "Gentlemen, while we argue over the relative vices, real or imaginary, of the Zion and Varald, Terra is paying the cost. Already, trade across the border has fallen off, in response to rumours of war. The value of the Commonwealth dollar has fallen by fifty-seven cents, ever since the death of Koketsu. I vote we settle the matter once and for all, in the Commonwealth, and avert an armed conflict, as much as Kanoi would love to see one."

"The motion passes," Terrin Hipper said, with a nod of approval in Jedda's direction. "By the powers vested in me as President of Terra, I vote that the documents I have mentioned be produced at the earliest, for perusal by the Council. The matter rests, gentlemen."

"Charlemagne was a fool to think that yielding to Hipper was ever going to work," Kanoi grumbled under his breath. Archbishop Mazarus, who was sitting next to him, smiled sarcastically.

"Commissioner," Lucan said, politely, "now that the President has set the proper procedures in motion, surely we can reassure the populace that there is no possibility of an armed conflict."

"I am afraid that depends on the results of our enquiry, Lord Lucan," Jansen said, stiffly. "If the Zion can be exonerated, then there is no cause for war, true. But if the opposite is true, then...."

"Let us not deal in counterfactuals, Jansen," Mazarus said, in his best 'lecturing' tone. "Now, on behalf of the State of Itaria, I have with me a message from the Pontiff, to be read to President Hipper on the occasion of his election."

"I needed an afternoon nap, so this would be a good time to read it," Jedda said, yawning and stretching his arms and legs. "Your Pontiff, like Lord Lucan, is good at saying nothing using many words. But unlike Lucan, he cannot say it with style."

"Is there any need to be so offensive, Jedda?" Mazarus said, annoyed. "If you wish to have a *siesta*, there is a hammock out in Unity Garden."

Kanoi chuckled. "By the Infinity, Archbishop, I didn't know you possessed a sense of humour. I am impressed."

"Gentlemen, let us not squabble," Terrin Hipper said, serenely. "Please read out the missive, my dear Archbishop."

"Thank you, Mr. President," Mazarus said, and drew a scroll from within his bishop's robes. "This is what is written:

"From His Holiness, Carolus Pope Pious XXI, Pontiff and Sovereign of Itaria, to his brother and fellow ruler in the Infinity, Terrin Hipper, President of Terra."

"Fellow ruler? I like that," Jedda said, making a dismissive gesture with one hand.

Mazarus glared at Jedda, then continued. "I join the Archbishops, Bishops, Clergy, Religious, Councils and Citizens of Itaria in sending you my heartiest felicitations on the occasion of your election. In the

light of the recent tragedies that have befallen us, Terra stands in need of peace, and it is my firm hope that you, Mr. President, will work to the best of your abilities, and ensure that the vision of St. Geraud endures, three centuries after the Commonwealth was born.

“True peace, of course, can only come when men realize their place and vocation on this world that the Infinity, in all his goodness, created for us. Man’s highest yearnings...”

It was at this moment that a guard from the Commonwealth Special Forces, carrying an envelope, entered the room. Saluting the President, he walked up to Mazarus, who was beginning to get into the spirit of his Pontiff’s message, and handed the envelope to him.

“Can this not wait?” Mazarus said, a trifle annoyed, but still speaking loftily.

“It is a message of importance, Sir,” the guard said.

“Very well, soldier,” Mazarus said, as he slowly opened the cover, running his finger along the seal and breaking it neatly. He read the message within, and the Pontiff’s scroll dropped out of his hands and onto the Council’s table.

“Saint Geraud, protect us,” he said, swaying and holding on to the table for support.

“What is the matter, Mazarus?” Lucan asked, sympathetically.

“Gentlemen,” Mazarus said, in an unsteady voice, “it is clear that we are facing a chastisement here. May the Infinity have mercy on us all. Pardon me, Mr. President, but there are some things that a man must face alone, or not at all.” And saying this, he walked away from the Council chamber, almost tottering, with the guard following on his heels. The telegraphic message lay on the table, forgotten.

“Good heavens, what is the matter?” Kanoi said. “You’d think the Pontiff had died, or something.”

Lucan picked up the piece of paper and read it, then handed it to Kanoi with a stunned expression. It was short and ungrammatical, but its import was terrifyingly clear:

ARSON AT ST ANNETTES CONVENT STOP FORTY FIVE WOUNDED EIGHT KILLED STOP RIOT AT ZION EMBASSY STOP REMAIN ON UNITY ISLE AND AWAIT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS STOP.

At Saint Geraud’s Abbey, amid a crowd of thousands who had come to pay their last respects to the much-loved Crown Prince, the funeral liturgy was almost over. The Archbishop of Caledonia, flanked by seven other priests – of which, Carranya noted, Professor Marlborough was one – conducted the prescribed rituals with a silent pomp and dignity that left the audience, if not happy, then at least satisfied that enough had been done for the late Wilhelm.

This isn’t just display, she thought. They really cared for him, perhaps far more than for the Emperor himself.

Finally, as the flame was lit in front of Wilhelm's coffin, the Emperor – accompanied by the Empress Antalya, his second wife and Wilhelm's mother – knelt down in front of it, and received the Archbishop's blessing.

"All comes from the Infinity," the Archbishop said, placing one hand over each of their heads, "and to him we must all return. Receive, O Infinity, the body and soul of one who was to have been God's hand on Terra and on Zion, that he may find eternal rest in thy sight, and remain forever with thee in Paradise. Receive, O Heavenly Father, the body and soul of Wilhelm Albrecht Francis Hohenzollern Valtemond, only son of the Emperor, so that he may find in thee a greater kingdom than any that exists on this earth. For this, we all pray."

"So let it be," the crowd replied in chorus, drowning out the Emperor and Empress' quiet replies.

Queen Katarina, moved by these proceedings, wiped away a tear, and turned to look at her daughter – only to find, to her surprise, that she had turned pale, and was holding on to the arm of her seat for support

Poor Carranya, she thought. We all show our sympathy and grief in different ways. My daughter seldom cries, but I can see how this has affected her.

Father Marlborough, stepping forward to the lectern, placed a pair of glasses on his nose, and raised his hand. A hush came over the crowd, as the master of ceremonies announced that Wilhelm's tutor, at the Emperor's invitation, would deliver a brief eulogy.

"I hope he isn't going to bore us too long," King Arlbert muttered.

"My friends," he began, in a gentle, solemn tone of voice. "There is little that one can say or do at a time like this. His Imperial Highness, who has most graciously invited me to speak on this occasion, suffers two-fold – as the ruler of the Empire, and as a most devoted father. Before I say anything more, I ask the Infinity, and all his angels and saints, to protect our beloved Emperor and Empress. He hath ordained them to this position, and may he grant them the strength to endure this terrible ordeal. May he comfort them, that they in turn may comfort you, the people, who mourn the untimely loss of your beloved prince."

Many of the audience had their handkerchiefs out by now, and Antalya was leaning on the Emperor's arm for support.

"I could almost wish that miraculous powers, like those of the legendary past, were granted to me now, that I could bring hope to a monarch, and solace to a mother's heart. But since this is not possible, I must do what Wilhelm himself would have wanted me to do. I was his tutor, but it is only fair to say that I learnt as much from him as he did from me. I have sometimes imagined that if Saint Geraud, from his heavenly abode, had sat in consultation with the Creator and designed our next Emperor himself, they could hardly have done better than the noble young man who now lies before you."

"Carranya," Queen Katarina asked, anxiously, looking at the pallor of her face, "are you quite all right?"

It's just a fancy, a foolish idea, Carranya told herself, forcing a smile. *I must be wrong.* "Yes, Mother, I am. Poor Father Marlborough, I'm sure he's also quite overcome."

"Wilhelm was always brave," Father Marlborough went on, "and it was his bravery, his willingness to place himself on the front lines in the service of the Empire, which cost him his life. He remained the same in his manhood as he was when yet a young boy – adventurous and daring, but also loyal and just. He dared to dream, but he also had the courage to bring those dreams to fruition. People of Zion, Wilhelm would want us to stand strong, and remain true to his dream – a vision of a world where the people of Terra would live in freedom, where the Empire would not be feared and loathed, but loved and respected. Today, he calls out to you from beyond the grave, asking you to remain loyal to him in death, as you would have remained if he had lived and reigned over you."

There were cries and sounds of approval at this, and he paused, letting the crowd give vent to their feelings, before they grew silent again.

If Father Marlborough – who would never willingly have caused pain to anyone – had known the effect his next words would produce, he would have sacrificed his tongue, and placed it in a reliquary, rather than speak them. But foreknowledge in its highest form is a divine and not a human quality, and, composing himself, he went ahead with his speech.

"Today, men and women of Zion, you grieve, and you are afraid. There are rumours of war in the air, and a feeling that your own safety, like that of Prince Wilhelm's, is no longer assured. You may feel that, because of your loss, your very citadel is in danger. And it is here that I remember a little story that your Prince narrated to me, when he was just a child of twelve."

"It seems that when he was on a vacation – and Wilhelm loved to travel, both as a boy and as a man, and visit places beyond the Empire – he once met a young girl on a beach, with whom he made friends."

No. The single word, like the sound of a clock striking, ran through Carranya's mind, and she held herself upright.

"Now, the two of them were building a castle out of sand, and it was quite a lovely one. However, someone accidentally trampled it, and it was ruined, leaving his little friend rather upset. Later that night, he came out to the beach alone, and rebuilt that castle by himself. I do not know how long it stood, and neither did his friend, whom he did not see the next day. He promised me that, one day, if he ever met her again, he would comfort her and tell her that no matter how many times their castle would fall, it could be rebuilt."

The priest's words echoed, in a blur, in the Princess' ears. *Francis.* It was the only word that would come to her mind, and she felt unable to speak, or even move.

"I do not know if Wilhelm met her again," Father Marlborough concluded, bowing his head and speaking softly. "Perhaps he never did. And perhaps, like her, you grieve because will not see him again, my friends. But today, Wilhelm would have wanted you to take comfort, and to believe that, even in the midst of this great tragedy, your citadel can be rebuilt, stronger than it was before. May the Infinity, who

granted us the gift of Prince Wilhelm for all too short a while, give you the courage that he had, the consolation that he would have wished on all of you, and the strength to rebuild your citadel. May the rulers and the populace of the Zion Empire believe that this is possible. May they not yield to despair, but live for his sake. This is his prayer for you in Paradise today, and it is mine on Terra. So let it be.”

“*So let it be,*” the people repeated with one voice, one that was muted, but brave.

It would be inaccurate to say that Carranya fell or collapsed. Instead, she seemed – to her horrified mother – to simply crumple to the ground, wounding her head against the carved stone arm of her chair as she did so.

“*Carranya!*” the Queen cried out, and all of a sudden, the eyes of everyone, including the Emperor and Empress of Zion – or so it seemed to an embarrassed King Arlbert – seemed to turn to the Royal Gallery where he and his family were seated. There was a rush of movement, and the Princess – still not quite conscious – was replaced in her chair by her mother, blood trickling down her right temple. She was only partially aware of two men standing beside her, one of whom was holding a compress to her head.

“How convenient,” Klaus Engel said, sarcastically, to no one in particular. “These Galvenians certainly have a sense of the dramatic.”

“Please do not move, Your Highness,” one of the men said, and the King recognized him as Agent Striker. “Doctor, please take good care of her. I must return to my post.”

“Certainly, sir,” the second man said, as he felt for the Princess’ pulse, but the Zionese agent was already gone.

“Dear me,” said Father Marlborough to the Archbishop in dismay. “That poor young lady. I hope it wasn’t something I said.”

The border between the Zion Empire and the Varald has a rich history. Thousands of years ago, when the Varald Directorate was the Kingdom of Gyrus and the the Empire was the Kingdom of Meldia, a ruler of Gyrus named Leskar – angry that his offers of a military alliance had been refused – marched five thousand of his men across the border, laying waste several villages, and destroying a temple that had been dedicated to the Dragon Goddess, a serpent-shaped idol with a woman’s head that had been one of Meldia’s principal deities. Such was the indignation provoked by this vicious attack that not only Meldia but Factoria rose in retaliation, and marching together in alliance, they launched a counterstrike that pushed the border of Gyrus back by several thousand miles. So angered were the people of Gyrus by their ruler’s error that they rose against him and had him hanged, and his successor – a distant cousin for whom the word war itself caused nightmares – hastily signed a treaty of peace, swallowing his pride and accepting the new frontier.

In the years after the fall of Meldia and the rise of Zion, border disputes between Arlia and Ghetz continued to feature prominently in the annals of history. The last great war across this frontier – the

“Great Zion-Varald War” during which the Galvenian rebellion took place – ended in the boundary mark being repositioned halfway between where it originally stood, and where the folly of Leskar had moved it. With the coming of the Commonwealth not long after, the boundary had remained in an unaccustomed state of peace for over three hundred years.

“What I wouldn’t give to be back in Darington, or even Caledonia,” Captain Schneider, the officer in charge of border crossings on the Zion side, said to his men, as he listened to their mid-day reports at 1400 hours that same day. “I agree that a little quiet is good, men, but this is beyond ridiculous. We’re doing the jobs of customs officers. They should just hand this place over to the police, and deploy us where we’re wanted. To think that we could have been at Wilhelm’s funeral, as part of his guard of honour, instead of twiddling our thumbs and filling out forms.”

“It is the Emperor’s will, sir,” his second-in-command, Sergeant Lautier, replied, rather pompously, eliciting a scowl from Schneider. He disliked Lautier, who was the son of a minor noble, and enjoyed lecturing and philosophizing at the slightest opportunity. “Besides, we have been asked to remain on alert in the light of recent events.”

“Recent events, hmph,” Schneider said, sitting down in his seat and crossing his legs. “Your Emperor took the deaths of Koketsu and Prince Wilhelm lying down, and even accepted Hipper’s presidency. He has gone out of his way to appease the Varald. What reason do they have to open hostilities, now that they have things their way, Sergeant?”

“Sir, the assassination of Lev Andreyev...” Lautier began.

“Oh, don’t give me that, Lautier,” the Captain said, irritably. “What is it to me or thee if the Varald have internal troubles and rebellions? They ask for it, the way they treat their own people.”

“Sir,” the guard at the door said, entering and saluting, “there are five men who wish to speak to you personally.”

“Five men, soldier?” the Captain said, getting up from his chair. “Lautier, see what they want.”

“That would not be fitting, sir,” Lautier protested, in his most ‘aristocratic’ accent, further annoying his superior. “You are our leader, and they request an audience with you.”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” the soldier replied, “like the Sergeant said, they specifically mentioned wanting to see you.”

“Unless they’re royalty, I don’t see why I should,” Schneider said, “but since you insist, let us have a look.” He headed to the security gate of the post, where five men in cloaks were waiting for him.

“What may I do for you gentlemen?” Schneider said, sarcastically. “A cup of tea, perhaps?”

“No, thank you,” the first man replied. “We would just like to show you something, before we cross the border.”

“Well, go ahead,” the Captain said, uninterested.

“Look ahead of you, Captain, to the west, and you may be a little more attentive,” the man said, in a stern voice that was almost an admonition.

The Captain looked up, still annoyed at being disturbed in this trifling manner in the middle of his work, but what he saw made him freeze on the spot. Trained directly on the border post, several miles off to the west, were two cannons, any one of which could have reduced the post to wreckage with a few rounds.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this preposterous insult, you fools?” the Captain replied, struggling for words. “Do you mean to...”

“Yes, we do,” the man replied, and raised his hand. A rain of shells began to fall upon the post, as the speaker and his four followers, agile as hares, ran as fast as they could, dropping their cloaks on the way to reveal the red uniforms of a Varaldian armed division.

“This – this cannot be happening!” the Captain shouted, in a panic. “Lautier – Men, evacuate the post! We are under....”

But that was all he said, for a shell struck the roof of the gate, dislodging a block of concrete which fell directly upon the unfortunate Captain. As he felt his life slowly leaving him, he could hear the sounds of further rounds of fire, and though he could see nothing, he was certain that the entire building was collapsing around him his men. Lautier, running out in horror, was struck directly by one of the shells, and fell beside his Captain, achieving a closeness in death that would have been impossible as long as they both lived. The sounds of artillery continued to echo in the air, despite there now being not a living soul left to hear them.

But none of these events, as strange and awful as they were, had become common knowledge yet in Davenport, where Lavie Regale, along with her mother and father, were sitting down to tea. Sigmund, switching on the wireless, looked with approval at Lavie, who was reading a book as she waited for Carmen to arrive with her steaming teapot and her little cakes.

“See, Daddy,” Lavie said proudly. “I actually started reading a wider range of books, just like you told me to!”

“Very well done, my daughter,” Sigmund said, looking at her tenderly. “So which author has managed to extract you from the grasp of Roxanne Winters?”

“Oh, Mr. Regale, sir, that’s my fault,” Carmen said, entering with her tea-time paraphernalia and smiling. “I’m the one who gave her *Farewell, My Summer* to read when she was laid up with a toothache, after all.”

Hmm, I wonder what's up with Daddy, these days! He's been extra-nice to me ever since Bernadette came by, and we had such fun at Lorean last week! It's only a pity that Ryan went goofing off with Armin, or he could have come with us as well. "It's a play by Mr. Tremfein, Daddy," Lavie said, "and it's pretty good! It's about the Galvenian War of Independence, and Prince Derren and Lady Penelope."

"Dear me, Sigmund," Emily said, pouring out a cup of tea for him and smiling. "Didn't we see that play ourselves, long ago? It must have been even before Lavie was born!"

"Really, Mom?" Lavie said. "That's funny, because Ryan said he saw it being performed on the *Paradiso*, too!"

"You're right, Emily," Sigmund said, taking a bite out of one of Carmen's little cakes, and nodding in approval. "We went to see that play soon after we returned from Itaria, and it was quite good. I remember Hugh Lightfoot as Prince Derren, and that young girl – what was her name, already?"

"Deborah something or the other – Ah, yes, Festa. She was a little thin for Lady Penelope, but she was quite a wonderful actress," Emily said, sipping her tea with appreciation, and beaming at Carmen. "Thank you, Carmen, this is quite delightful. I'm sorry I couldn't help you, as I had to sort out what we were giving to the Brothers of Goodwill when they came around."

"Think nothing of it, Mrs. Regale," Carmen said. "I do wish Juan would take me to a play or two, but his job doesn't let him."

"Working hard and saving up, huh?" Lavie said, giggling. "I've got to admire your fiance's dedication, Carmen. He must be very fond of you!"

"Or of my cooking, Miss Lavie," Carmen said, winking at Emily, who laughed in turn.

"Here comes Radio Galvenia," Sigmund said, as the familiar strains of the Galvenian National Anthem played over the wireless, announcing the beginning of the evening news. The broadcaster reminded them all of Prince Wilhelm's funeral, which had been attended by the Royal Family that afternoon. Sounding a little disconcerted, he informed them that the Princess had been indisposed during the ceremony, but was now quite recovered.

"Ohmygosh, poor Princess," Lavie said with concern. "She really shouldn't push herself too much. Even when she was here, she was walking all the way to Serin's Peak to cure somebody, though she told me she'd been wounded by the pirates."

"A brave woman, Miss Lavie," Carmen said appreciatively. Her ideas of Royalty were a little hazy, and derived mostly from historical novels in which the Princess was either a damsel in distress, or a heroine who donned armour when her men had failed in their duty to protect the kingdom. "She'll be all right once she returns to Lorean, mark my words."

Next, the announcer said, there was tragic news from Itaria. Miscreants had apparently attacked a convent dedicated to Saint Annette, mother of Saint Mikhail and a popular figure of devotion in Itaria

City itself. No one knew who was responsible, but several of the nuns had been wounded, and at least five were reported dead.”

Sigmund laid down his teacup with a soft *clink*. “In Itaria? Good heavens, the world’s last peaceful place, and they’re now victims of this sort of vandalism? The world is going to the dogs,” he said, disapprovingly.

“Poor Sisters,” Lavie said, sadly. “I wonder if Sister Miriam knows about it at all.”

“May the Infinity receive their souls in peace,” Carmen said, looking up with a solemn expression. “This is a troubled world, Miss Lavie. What we need is another saint, like Geraud, to come around and make things right.”

The disturbing news past, the announcer went on to regional and sporting news. Apparently Inderness had defeated Caledonia by an innings in the semi-finals of the Arlia Cup, and would now move on to face either the Galvenian Armed Forces or Darington in the finals.

“I remember going to several cricket matches as a girl, when Father would receive invitations to the Lords’ Box,” Emily said. “It’s a pity the game never really caught on in Davenport, I was always rather fond of it.”

“Cricket’s all right,” Sigmund said, “especially when it’s written about by a good chronicler. Those old volumes of the *Arlia Almanac* were favourites of mine at University. I even played a little myself, though I wasn’t very good.”

Lavie laughed. “Well, that’s better than me at least, Daddy! I’m not even sure which way to hold the bat, to be honest!”

There was a short report from the Museum of Science and Lore in Lorean, announcing recent breakthroughs in small engines that would make road transport, without animals, a reality in Arlia very soon.

“Don’t they have those already in the Republic?” Lavie asked.

“It’s a question of capital, my daughter,” Sigmund said, rather pontifically. “Internal combustion vehicles will arrive in Galvenia when the market is ready for them, and when that happens, I hope to be ready as well!”

Finally, the newsreader was about to bid his listeners farewell, when there was a series of clicks on the wireless, followed by a thud.

“Are you joking, man? I can’t read this!” a muffled voice said. “It’s....”

There was silence for a while.

“What on earth happened?” Emily asked.

“Perhaps that silly Armin and his boys in masks are playing a prank at Lorean,” Lavie suggested, with a smile. “They burst into the office and gave the reader a telegram saying Mayor Saunders had become king, or something.”

Sigmund laughed. “Sweet Infinity, may that never happen!” he protested. “Fortunately, that won’t ever happen, except in a nightmare! Imagine the future of industry in Galvenia with Saunders as our ruler.”

“Imagine the future of *anything* except afternoon naps, if he’s our ruler,” Lavie joked.

There was a crackle of static, and another voice – a deeper one, reading slowly and hesitantly – began to speak over the waves:

“Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt this broadcast to bring you news of the greatest importance. Today, at 1415 hours, a band of Varaldian soldiers, accompanied by two shell cannons, opened heavy fire on a border post of the Zion Empire, killing all seven men within and destroying the building itself. While awaiting the intervention of the Commonwealth, Emperor Charlemagne has begun mobilizing troops towards the border, and His Majesty, King Arlbert of Galvenia, has delayed his departure from Caledonia to finalize a Treaty of Alliance. The rest of the Royal Family has departed for Lorean in the interests of safety, and are on their way to the border now. We ask you to observe a moment of silence for our brave Zionesse allies, and assure them of the solidarity of the Galvenian people. Thank you.”

There was a sound almost like a sigh or a sob, and the wireless began to play a mournful dirge.

A sound of broken crockery echoed through the room, as a saucer slipped from Carmen’s numb fingers to the floor and shattered.

And the Regales stared at each other, horrified, as they realized exactly what this would mean – for them, and for their country.....

“We’ve checked the hospitals in Lorean and Alton, and there’s no sign of any of Dad’s men,” Ryan said, with a sigh, as the helpful nurse turned from answering his queries to tend to her other patients. “I wonder what’s become of the man who was delivering the small box. I hope he’s safe.”

“Probably hiding somewhere in the forest,” Armin said airily, as they both left the Royal Dispensary at Alton. “Or maybe the wolves ate him, or something.”

“Dude, not funny!” Ryan said, irritably. “Seriously, Armin, Sergeant Burnfist isn’t here anymore, so stop trying to make a one-liner every second, okay? One of the men working for my dad could be hurt, and we need to find him and make sure that he’s all right.”

“Sorry, Compadre. Anyway, we could always check the other towns,” Armin said, apologetically. “I doubt he’d have made it all the way back to Davenport, but we could check out Glendale. There’s an old doc there whom many people seem to like, for some reason. Probably because he doesn’t charge much!”

“That’s actually a decent idea, Armin,” Ryan said. “Let’s get going.”

“Fine with me,” Armin said cheerfully, as they headed quickly to Glendale. Their journey was fortunately without any further encounter with either bandits or tortoises, and it was almost nightfall by the time they reached. The worst of the heat had passed by as they entered the city gates.

“Any idea where this doctor is?” Ryan asked, looking around.

“Dunno, Compadre,” Armin said, shrugging his shoulders. “Maybe we could ask at the police station.” He pointed to a large stone building ahead of them, with the word “POLICE” displayed on a modest sign.

“Heh, I know the guy who works there!” Ryan said, brightening. “He’ll surely help us. After all, Lavie and I did him a good turn some time ago.”

“Did you say *Lavie*?” Armin said, incredulously. “What is it with you, Eramond? Marianne, and then Lavie? Next you’ll be eloping with Jennifer Clarkson and migrating to Varald.”

“Shut up, Armin,” Ryan said, stifling a laugh. “Strange as it seems, it’s true. I, Ryan Eramond, actually survived a trip to Glendale and back with Lavie, and actually ended up doing something useful.”

“How did she get to go with you in the first place?” Armin asked, with a look of suspicion on his face.

“It was all *Dad*’s idea,” Ryan grumbled. “Geez, if I didn’t know him better, you’d almost think he was trying to set up one of those arranged marriages, like they do in the Republic!”

Armin burst out laughing. “Funny idea, Ryan. Imagine. Your dad says he’s found you the girl of your dreams, you remove the veil, and out pops – the one, the only, Lavender Regale! Aaargh!”

They had reached the police station by now, and Inspector Bosley greeted Ryan warmly. “Sparky! Good to see you again! What brings you here, another necklace or something? And who’s your friend with the mask? Sorry, son, this isn’t a bank, you can’t hold me up.”

“This mask gets *no* respect, I tell ya,” Armin said irritably. “What have you got against raccoons, Chief Inspector?”

“Nothing really,” Bosley replied, with a chuckle.

“Inspector,” Ryan said, “we’re looking for a man who was probably wounded or attacked near Lake Derren. We checked the hospitals in the nearby towns, but there was no one there. Did someone like that come this way?”

“Why of course he did, just a couple of hours ago, in fact!” Bosley said, in a matter-of-fact tone. “In fact, he even reported the theft, and I’ve sent the report on to the Lorean police. He wasn’t really wounded too much, just stunned, so I asked him to see Doc Mellon before he left. He may still be there, if you want him. Was this another of your dad’s packages?”

“Yes, it was, and we suspect there are bandits in North Galvenia who are behind this,” Ryan said, and proceeded to briefly explain what had happened in Fossen’s house. “We took one of them to the authorities at Lorean, and they’ve detained him for questioning, but he wasn’t saying much.”

“Well, you could try at the doc’s,” Bosley said, “though he’s not the most communicative of folks. He’s a good doctor, though, and the people around here trust him, even if they find him rather grumpy.”

“Thank you, Inspector,” Ryan and Armin said, as they set off for the doctor’s house. It was quite close to the inn, and their knock on the door was greeted by a suspicious look from a middle-aged man within. He was not quite old, but there was something stooped about his posture that added a few years to his appearance.

“What do you want?” he said, looking Ryan straight in the eye.

“We’re looking for a man who was working for my dad,” Ryan said. “He was attacked by a bandit, and Inspector Bosley said we might find him here.”

“Bandits? Ah, that’s only to be expected,” the man said with a harsh laugh. “As it happens, your man is here, though he’s resting a bit. He received a blow on the head from a club, probably nothing serious, but I’m keeping him under observation till tomorrow, just in case. We can expect plenty more marauders in the days to come, the way things are going. You might as well come in, if you want to see him,” he went on, rather ungraciously.

“Why d’ya say that?” Armin said, looking around the doctor’s room. There was a license to practice medicine from the Royal Guild of Surgeons framed on the wall, and another plaque, which stated that the owner was a certified member of the Galvenian Armed Forces Medical Corps.

“Good heavens, boy,” the doctor said irritably, pointing to a couple of chairs, “haven’t you heard the news?”

“We’ve been travelling all day, Doctor,” Ryan said, apologetically. “What news? Has a gang of bandits been discovered here in Galvenia?”

“It’s much worse than that,” the doctor replied, sitting down behind his desk and drumming on the table. “It’s war, boy. War. Something that you may not know much about, but which I’ve seen too much of in my life, already.”

“War?” Ryan exclaimed. “But.....What do you mean, Doctor Mellon?”

“Good heavens, boy, you really should listen to the GBC, instead of tramping about the highways and wearing silly costumes!” Doctor Mellon said, angrily.

“Hey, my mask is *not* silly.....” Armin protested, but Ryan motioned to him to remain quiet. “Anyway, Doctor, what was the news on the GBC?”

“Some damn fool Varald soldiers attacked a border post near Zion. They were nice and polite about it on the radio, mumbling about the accursed Commonwealth, but I’ve seen too much to believe in them. It’s going to be us and the Zion, against the Varald. No quarter, and no prisoners. You boys will probably be drafted pretty soon.” He gave Armin a nasty look, and laughed. “Especially this one. You want to wear a costume, lad, you’ll soon have to, at his Majesty’s pleasure.”

Ryan and Armin stared at each other, aghast, not knowing quite how to respond.

Earlier in Caledonia, a solemn procession had returned to the Imperial Palace, including the Galvenian royal family, who were by now quite over their scare. They had returned to their temporary quarters, and Carranya was seated in a chair, her head resting in her hands.

“Forgive me, Father,” she had said, almost as soon as she had regained consciousness. “I suppose I’m still feeling the effects of my injuries from the *Paradiso*.”

Arlbert, glad at this rapid recovery, but also concerned for his child’s welfare, did not have the heart to admonish her. “Think nothing of it, my daughter,” he said, as he offered her his arm for support, with the Queen following behind, solicitously. “Now, we shall have to meet the Emperor, and offer him our condolences in person once more. That’s the standard protocol. But I think you ought to rest, Carranya. You shouldn’t strain too hard and ruin your health.”

“I assure you, I am feeling quite well, Father,” Carranya replied, gently but in an insistent tone. “Having come all the way from Lorean, it would be amiss if I did not speak to the Emperor myself.”

“But Carranya,” her mother protested, “how wise is that? I’ve heard that some of those poisons can remain in the body for a long time, leaving you feeling drained and tired. You really should listen to your father, at least this time.”

“Please, Mother,” Carranya said, holding out her hands in supplication. “I am already ashamed of my weakness, and I would not wish to compound the offence on a solemn day such as this.”

And Arlbert – anxious to make a good impression on his older and more powerful ally – finally yielded. With a little help from Naomi and the court doctor, her wound – which was not serious – had been made almost invisible, and in the short span of an hour, she seemed almost herself, though her expression still seemed troubled, at least to her mother.

“Is something the matter, my child?” Katarina asked. “Are you in pain?”

Carranya forced herself to smile once more. “Just a little, Mother. I should be quite well, presently.”

And at that moment there was a knock on the door, and Naomi opened it to find an Imperial army captain – accompanied by Engel, the Chamberlain – standing outside.

“Good afternoon, Your Majesty,” he said, addressing Arlbert with a polite bow. “I hope that her Highness is not suffering too much.”

“I am quite well, Sir,” Carranya said, standing up and holding herself straight. “It was merely an accident.”

“A regrettable one,” Engel said, nodding his head slowly and gravely. “His Highness, the Emperor of Zion, will receive you now in the Throne Room, if you are prepared.”

“We are,” Queen Katarina said, brightly, as she stood up and linked her arm with the King’s. “Please lead us on, Sir. As a mother, I can understand the sufferings of the Emperor and the Empress, and though I cannot say much, I must offer my sympathies.”

“Well spoken, Your Highness,” Engel said, his voice and expression both suggesting approval. “Kindly follow me. It is not a long way.”

And the three of them, accompanied by the King’s bodyguards, began their slow march down the corridors of the Palace. Carranya, following closely behind her parents, continued to hold herself in a manner that would have made her teachers proud, and even Engel, for all his earlier sarcasm, was impressed.

I must say, he thought, as he led them forward, that Princess of theirs may be tougher than I originally thought. I wonder what the Emperor would make of her.

Only the Queen – with that peculiar intuition that the Infinity seems to have granted to most, if not all, mothers – realized that all was not well, and continued to keep a watchful eye on Carranya. As they crossed the threshold of the room, she heard her sigh, almost inaudibly.

There’s something on her mind, Queen Katarina thought, shaking her head. It’s not just a wound or poison. I wish she would tell me what it was. There is such a thing as being too Galvenian, and though my child is a true Lionheart, she is also just a young girl. Something is troubling her, and I wonder if she can carry it alone.

Before any of them could realize it, they were in the Throne Room, which was strangely silent. The Zionesse flags within were all flying at half-mast, the electric lights had been switched off, and there was no one besides them, except Charlemagne and Antalya, seated on their thrones.

“My friends,” Charlemagne said, in a voice that was surprisingly strong, given his gaunt appearance, “it was good of you to come.”

“It was the least we could do, your Highness,” Queen Katarina said earnestly, as she bowed and curtseyed before the Emperor. “As the good Father said, there are no words suitable for an occasion such as this. But please accept my sympathies, not only as the Queen of Galvenia, but as a mother who has almost lost her own child herself. I share your sorrows, as do my husband and my daughter.”

The Empress, touched by this spontaneous – if rather informal – little speech, smiled at the Queen. “Thank you, your Majesty,” she said. “We appreciate your support at a time such as this, when it truly seems as though darkness has fallen upon our lives.”

“Your Highness,” Carranya said, in the earnest tone that many people – from William Striker to her own father – had learned to dread, “allow me to add my own condolences to those of my father and mother. Today, more than any other day, we are allies – allies in grief, but also allies in resolve to live bravely for the sake of Prince Wilhelm. May the Infinity grant us all comfort, but especially to you, Your Highness.” Her voice faltered, and a tear ran down her cheek, surprising Charlemagne.

How nicely that girl speaks, he thought. And I’ve seen enough insincerity, in sixty years at the Palace, to know that that child is sincere. She must inherit it from that little mother of hers, and not from that fuss-budget Arlbert, who wouldn’t know how to be sincere if the Infinity himself came down from Paradise and gave him lessons. “Thank you, child,” he said, kindly. “You are young, but you speak wisely, and I am sure that my son, had he but lived, would be moved by your words himself.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Carranya said, bowing and kneeling before him.

“The Kingdom of Galvenia, and I as its ruler, express our deepest and most heartfelt condolences, Your Highness,” Arlbert said hurriedly, feeling that he was being rather upstaged by the distaff side of his family here.

“Thank you, Arlbert,” the Emperor said, slowly, straightening himself with some effort. “Please be seated, now. We await the arrival of the Italian delegate, as well as the ambassadors from Varald, Fulton and Zion, who are all refreshing themselves after my son’s funeral. Once they are here, the Archbishop shall pray with us, and the Empress and I shall light the eternal flame, in Wilhelm’s memory.”

He would probably have said more, if a tall man in military uniform had not burst into the room, with an expression of the utmost dismay. “Your Highness! Sire! News from the border!” he exclaimed.

Charlemagne raised his eyebrows, and noted with disapproval that the intruder was not merely a guard, but General Rohmer, third-in-command of the entire Imperial Army, and chief of the Royal Guards. He could forgive nervousness and impetuosity in a guard, but years of experience with Rohmer had led him to expect a more dignified approach.

“Must you erupt in this manner, General?” he said, in a tone that suggested a strong rebuke was forthcoming. “This is a day for solemnity and silence.”

“But Your Highness,” Rohmer said, his voice growing louder and even high-pitched, “I bring news of the gravest import! The border post outside the town of Lesser Cornelia has just been attacked, leaving no survivors. Initial reports suggest that the attack was carried out by Varald artillery, Your Highness!”

The Empress started forward. “Are you certain of this?” she said.

“Sadly, your Highness, we are. Captain Schneider and his men have all been reported killed, and the post itself is half reduced to rubble.”

“So he was right,” Carranya said, so softly that even her mother could only see her lips move.

“My goodness!” Arlbert exclaimed, shaking his head vigorously. “That’s terrible!”

“By the armies of Heaven, General,” Charlemagne said, slowly, as if choosing each word with caution, “is that all they have done?”

“For the moment, there is no news of any further troop movements, Your Highness,” the General replied, a little more calmly. “As soon as we received the news, we deployed the 17th Border Battalion to patrol the area and watch for further incursions, and also began moving our own artillery from Greater Cornelia into battle positions, but there has been no further move on the part of the Varald so far.”

“Are you quite sure it was the Varald, General?” Charlemagne asked, taking up his scepter tentatively.

“Who else could it be, Your Highness?” Rohmer argued. “No Republican battalion could cross through the whole of Varald, even if they wished to attack, and the intensity of the firepower involved is beyond the capacities of the Republic.”

“Very well, General,” Charlemagne said, shaking his head with an expression which suggested annoyance rather than distress. “Kindly inform the Varald Ambassador of this – news, and inform him that he will have to remain with us a little longer, until we look into the matter. Also, Engel” – he turned to address the shell-shocked Chamberlain – “have Kanoi informed at once, and ask him to raise the issue before the Executive Council by sunset. Let the 17th Border Battalion remain in place, and strengthen it with further detachments from the garrison at Meldor, until further orders. Is that clear, General?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the General replied, amazed by his monarch’s apparent calm, but pleased with his instructions. “It shall be as you say.”

“Very good, General, you may leave. Also, Engel, wire Yatsu and tell him we may need his services shortly. And ask that young man who helped you with today’s security to meet me, for I will need him on a particularly delicate task.”

“Do you mean Striker, Your Highness?” Engel said, stumbling over the words.

“Yes, that would be the man,” the Emperor said, dismissively. “He is young and ambitious, but he is also efficient. Godspeed, Engel.”

As the Chamberlain left, Charlemagne turned to look at King Arlbert, who was tugging at his beard nervously.

“Arlbert,” Charlemagne said, after a long silence, “I believe it was your charming daughter who said that we were well and truly allies. How strange that you should have the chance to put those words to the proof, so very soon.”

Arlbert, suddenly feeling as though he were trapped, looked at the Queen nervously.

"I stand by my words, Your Highness," Carranya said, suddenly, holding her head straight and looking the Emperor in the eye. "Such acts of brutality and treachery – on the day of Prince Wilhelm's funeral, of all days – must be condemned, and you may count on any support we can offer."

"Carranya!" Arlbert said, feebly. "Let me speak, girl!"

"Truly, Princess, we are encouraged to hear you speak thus," Empress Antalya said, with a nod of approval.

And Charlemagne, despite the grief and the weariness he was feeling at that moment – not to mention his apprehension at the thought of what would probably be a long and bitter conflict – could not but smile a little, too, on listening to this exchange.

At around the same time, a rather more mundane scene was taking place at King's College, or rather on its outskirts.

"Henrik," Bernadette said, clutching her brand new copy of *The Zion University Study Guide to the Gospel of the Infinity* (subtitled *An Up-To-Date Translation from Itarian To Common, Based On The Most Ancient Source Texts, with Annotations by the Rev. T. Marlborough and Introductions by Archbishop Paul Mazarus*) to her chest with a blissful expression, "you really *shouldn't* have!"

"Qua?" Henrik said, feigning ignorance. "I just found it in the King's College bookstore, and I thought you might like to have one."

"But Henrik," she protested, not very convincingly, "wasn't it rather expensive?"

"Students with scholarships get a discount," Henrik explained, "and I was just browsing there, since they called me to register earlier than you did."

"Thank you so much, Henrik," she replied, looking up at him and beaming. "Did you pick one up for yourself, too?"

"I didn't need to," Henrik said with a grin. "Father knows a few publishers, and one of them works for Zion Press. He gave me a spare copy a month ago. They were discarding because it had a typo on one page, believe it or not."

"Oh, dear, I hope it wasn't a serious error," said Bernadette.

"No, it was a rather amusing one; in the last chapter of the *Book of Origins*, the name of Lexus is misprinted as 'Nexus'. Quite natural, since the L and N are quite close together in typesetters' presses."

"Nexus?" Bernadette laughed. "Poor lady, I wonder what she would think of that!"

“According to the Holy Book, she was quite forgiving; if she could forgive the man who accidentally *killed* her, I doubt she’d mind a misprint,” Henrik pointed out.

“But even with a discount, wouldn’t it have been quite expensive?” Bernadette said, a little guiltily. “I know you’ve always been exceptionally kind to me, but...”

“No ‘buts’, Bernadette,” Henrik said firmly. “The money from those Memory Crystals was burning a hole in my pocket, anyway. Plus, since I don’t know when your birthday is, consider it an advance present.” He grinned.

“Actually, it’s very soon after we reopen,” she replied, shyly. “The twenty-eighth of September.”

“Well, that’s not too far off. So if you want me to confiscate it, and give it to you only then...” Henrik teased.

“Very funny, Henrik,” Bernadette said, opening the book and running her finger lovingly across a colour illumination of the two Survivors of the Catastrophe. “I think I’ll hold on to it for now, thank you!”

“As you wish, my friend,” Henrik said gallantly. “Anyway, we’re done with registrations, and college won’t start for over a month. Unfortunately, Father Marlborough isn’t around. I just enquired at the information desk, while you were finishing your paperwork, and it seems he’s gone to Caledonia, to attend Prince Wilhelm’s funeral.”

“What a pity,” Bernadette observed. “It looks like we will have to wait quite some time before meeting him. Is there anyone else we could speak to?”

“Well, there’s Father Joaquim back at Davenport,” Henrik said, “though, considering he’s been sworn to secrecy about poor Thomas.....Which reminds me, I think I actually figured out what the passages in that geography book meant! The trouble is, I’m not sure.”

“You did?” Bernadette replied, excited. “What did you find?”

“Well, you see...” Henrik began, but he was interrupted in mid-sentence by the sight of a middle-aged woman in a nun’s habit, calling out his name and running towards him in a way that suggested great urgency.

“Goodness, that’s Sister Miriam!” Bernadette said, raising her gloved hand and waving back. “She seems to be looking for us.”

“You’re right,” Henrik said, as they both began walking towards her.

“My children,” Sister Miriam said, breathlessly, adjusting her coif, which was in danger of falling off her head entirely. “Thank the Infinity that I found you, Henrik. Your father told me you’d come down here

for your registration, and I remembered that Bernadette would be here, too. I must talk to you both, soon!”

“What’s the matter, Sister?” Henrik asked, looking at her anxious expression with concern.

“There is so much to say,” Sister Miriam said, apologetically, “and I’m not sure how to say it. Terrible things have happened today, and I was only just informed of them. First of all, Saint Annette’s in Itaria City has been attacked, in a fire attack that seems just like the one at Saint Nealus’, but much worse. Radio Itaria says that eight nuns have perished, and many more are injured.”

“Saint Annette’s? But that’s – that’s just a mile or two away from the Pontiff’s Palace!” Henrik said, shocked.

“A fire attack?” Bernadette seemed to shrink and sway, and Henrik placed his arm around her to steady her. “Sweet Infinity, why? Why?” Her tone was dazed, as if she could not understand how such a thing could ever happen.

“We don’t know,” Sister Miriam said, shaking her head. “Next, there’s been a report that the Varald have attacked a border post in Arlia. We hardly have any news yet, but it looks like the Zion may choose to retaliate. Dear me, this is a sad state of affairs.” She looked at the numb expressions of the young pair before her – Henrik standing firm and impassive, and Bernadette leaning on him for support - and prayed with all her heart that they might be spared the ordeal to come. *Those poor children. If things had been different, they would have gone on to college together, and learned to love each other, like any other young man and woman on Terra. They would certainly have lived ordinary, happy, peaceful lives. But now that girl is implicated beyond recall, and Henrik with her. This world of ours is cruel sometimes.*

“War between the Varald and the Zion?” Henrik said, quietly. “I wouldn’t have thought the Varald would be fool enough to provoke them into that. And surely, it’s too much of a coincidence that both Itaria and Zion were attacked on the same day....”

“A good observation, Henrik,” Sister Miriam said. “Now, I think the time has passed for any of us to remain silent, for the stakes are too high. If you are willing, could you come with me back to St. Nealus’? Father Joaquim and the Rector are waiting there for me, and there are things that we all need to discuss with them.”

Bernadette let go of Henrik’s arm and stood up. “We will,” she said. “The Infinity forbid that we should be thrown into a war, but if he so wills it, we must play our part.”

“I’m with you there,” Henrik said, as the two of them followed Sister Miriam. They walked silently and swiftly to Alton, huddling close together as they followed the highway. When they arrived at St. Nealus’, the nervous novice who let them in stared as if she had seen an apparition, though Bernadette tried to set her at ease with a smile and a kind word.

“The Rector is waiting for you in the office, with some other people,” she said, hurriedly, before scurrying away in the opposite direction.

“Commander, answer this, and answer this truthfully. Who gave you that order?” The words, in the native tongue of the Varaldians, had a hissing menace that they lacked in Common, and General Basil Lyzhnov – Supreme Commander of the Varald Armed Divisions, and second only to the Director himself in authority over the entire military – flinched.

“Our instructions were clear, Sir,” he replied, slowly. “Following the murder of Mr. Andreyev, we received your directive, informing us to mobilize troops at the border, but take no further action until the results of the Commonwealth enquiry were made known to us. I followed those instructions to the letter.”

“Then,” Russell Kievan – Director, or rather dictator, of the Varald Directorate, said, in a smooth and even deceptively friendly voice, “what is the meaning of today afternoon’s drama, Commander? Have you, perhaps, decided to take a little initiative of your own?”

“I swear to you that I did not, Sir,” Lyzhnov replied. “I can confirm that the 45th Border Division received orders to send five men forward at 1200 hours, and attack the Zion outpost at Lesser Cornelia, but those orders did not come from my Command. As soon as I received this news, I countermanded the order, but the damage had already been done.”

“Where, then, did the order come from?” Kievan asked, raising his eyebrows in a gesture that, Lyzhnov knew, could mean rigorous punishment, even death, for the one responsible. “I bear no good will towards the Zion, much less towards those imbeciles, Charlemagne and Koketsu, but I do not enjoy having a war started without my consent, Commander.”

“Sir, I have since received a reply from Brigadier Gulnik, the leader of the 45th Border Division,” the Commander said, speaking in a rush, and handing the Director a telegram. “He confirms that he received a personal order over the wire, from....from *you*, Sir, even giving your own code and personal call-sign. Seeing this, he decided to obey. His men have since returned to their post, and await further instructions.”

“From me? How very amusing,” the Director said, though he looked far from amused. “So tell me, Commander. Who is there in the entire land of Varald, apart from me, who would know such things?”

“I do not know, Sir,” Lyzhnov replied. *And that’s the truth, by Mikhail. Andreyev, who might have known, is dead. Bronfeld, the head of the Geheimpol, would know, but he would never dare to interfere with the military. The Director is a widower, and he has always been careful to let his only daughter stay away from politics; she’s training as a classical dancer, and has been raised by an aunt, far from Zhemu. It’s insane,* he thought.

“Do you know, Lyzhnov, neither do I.” Kievan laughed, and his laugh was surprisingly good-humoured. “It seems that I have friends, or perhaps enemies, that even I do not know of. Tell me, Commander, do you play chess?”

“A...a little, Sir,” the General replied, surprised by the unexpected question. While the image of Varaldian officers playing chess was almost a literary cliché, Lyzhnov was actually quite a talented player, and had composed several problems himself, though he refrained from saying so to Kievan, who was a mediocre player and was known to demote anyone foolhardy enough to defeat him across the board.

“Don’t be modest, Commander,” Kievan said, still smiling. “As a good player yourself, surely you’ve heard of situations where a player makes a bad move, but further analysis shows it to have been inspired.”

“I have heard of such things, Sir,” Lyzhnov replied, exhaling slowly. *He seems to be settling down now, but I’m hanged if I see why. It’s good news for me, though.*

“Well, my friend,” the Director replied, “it seems like we are in a situation of this sort. I do not know who had the audacity to give an order in my name, and if I ever do find him, he shall hang for a fool and a traitor. Having said that, he may actually have done us a service, by making us fire the first shot. The Zion are not the force they were, Lyzhnov, and I am not sure if they realize it themselves.”

The General sighed with relief. *He’s going to go ahead with it. That’s good for the army, and good for me. I hoped he would take this line, but I’m surprised he would do it so easily.* “Yes, Sir,” he said, respectfully. “What are your orders?”

“Inform all the divisions that they are not to respond to any instructions by wire, unless they are personally confirmed by you,” Kievan said, smiling. “Prepare the rest of the border forces. Seal the border with the Republic, for we never know whom those vipers will bite. And as for the brave men of the 45th” – he laughed cruelly – “place them near the front and order them to cross over into Zion if we receive no word from the Commonwealth by tomorrow. Let them learn that discretion, as well as valour, is essential to a member of the Varald Divisions. You may go now, Commander.”

Poor 45th. Rather them than me, though, Lyzhnov thought. “At your order, Sir,” he said, and saluted as he left.

As Sister Miriam and her two young friends entered the room, they were confronted by a strange group of people. First, looking nervous and unhappy, was the Rector himself, with a large glass of Italian wine on the table in front of him. Second, looking stern in his brown robes and spectacles, was Father Joaquim, the normally kindly Pastor of Saint Hilda’s Chapel at Davenport. The third was a short, grey-haired gentleman in a suit, whom Henrik recognized as Bartholomew Perrin, Thomas’ father. And the fourth, Bernadette observed with a shock, was her senior, Amelia Rushden, whose implacable

expression reminded her of the pictures of heroines that she had seen in her father's books of myth and fable, intent on vengeance.

"Thank you, Miriam," Father Joaquim said, firmly, as the three of them found places at the table, Henrik and Bernadette sitting close together next to Amelia, and Sister Miriam joining him. "Good work finding them so quickly, because we need some answers, by the Infinity."

"Good afternoon, Father," Henrik said, bowing respectfully to both the priests. "We just heard the news from Sister Miriam, and..."

"One thing at a time, Henrik," Father Joaquim said, kindly. "I have been speaking to both Mr. Perrin and Miss Rushden at some length, and what they have told me is of the greatest importance. Let me apprise you of it first. Riordan, would you like to begin?"

Father Riordan took a sip from his glass, and began, speaking hesitantly. "I have served the Church of Infinity faithfully for over twenty-five years," he said, "and in all these years, I must confess that I have never felt as afraid as I did today. If there is one thing I know now, it is that few evil deeds are as dangerous as those that are done with good intentions, or a good motive. And now, it seems, the tragedy that enveloped Mr. Perrin and Miss Rushden two years ago has now become a threat, not only to the Church, but to the world at large."

"I was never personally a member of the Infinite Revival, though – being a conservative churchman myself – I was quite in sympathy with their views, especially those on politics, and therefore, I allowed them to use our campus for their youth meetings, though they were open only to school students and not to my own girls. I was wrong to do so."

"The first signs that something was wrong were in 297 C.E., three years ago. I would attend their regular meetings when I had the time, and I noticed that three of their most enthusiastic followers – two boys and a girl – were no longer attending meetings. When I asked Father Gruber what had become of them, he was quite apologetic, and said that they had been carried away by politics and had left the Church. Since this is a not uncommon event in adolescence, I did not press him further on the matter. I should have."

"A year later, Miss Rushden joined the College. Though she has always been one of our best students, it was clear to me – with my many years as a teacher – that something was troubling her. On more than one occasion, I asked her if she wished to unburden herself, either to me, or to another member of the staff, but she seemed unwilling and even afraid to do so. Following Sister Miriam's recent visit, however, she has been bold enough to speak her mind to me freely. Miss Rushden," he went on, gently, "would you like to tell these people of what happened yourself?"

Amelia Rushden rose from her seat, and took a step forward. The impassive look on her face was gone, and she seemed both determined and angry.

“Thank you, Father,” she said. “I am here, and Thomas’ father is here, because we want justice to be served. I will tell you all that I know, if you want me to.”

“Come now, child,” Sister Miriam said, “we’re all among friends here. Joaquim and I already know something of your pain. Let it out.”

“Sister....” Amelia paused, and turned to look at Bernadette, who gave her a smile of encouragement. “Very well. It was about two years ago that I joined the Revival, and encouraged Bernadette to join along with me. It was there that I met Thomas, who was from the Academy at Davenport, and who was my own age. We all found our places in the group; I was involved in the prayer and worship services, Bernadette looked after the music and the readings, and Thomas was always more involved in social and political issues, and would organize discussions on them.”

“I must confess to you that I know very little about politics. I’m fully aware that the Church is persecuted in the Varald Directorate, and I pray for them each day, but Thomas took it more personally. He felt that the Zion Empire – which had backed us in the past – was now abandoning us for their own selfish motives, and that this would bring the anger of the Infinity on them. I’m sorry, I’m not putting this very well. Thomas would have said it better.”

“My wife’s brother was a member of the Brothers of Goodwill, and was imprisoned by the Varald for his charitable work there,” Bartholomew Perrin explained. “Thomas took it rather hard, poor boy.”

Amelia sighed. “At any rate, about six months after I joined, Thomas and I went out for what would be our first date, on Davenport Beach. He was excited, and told me that Father Gruber had been spending a lot of time with him, and was keen on sending him to Itaria, to train for missionary work of some sort. He asked me if I wanted to go with him, and I was, so I asked him to find out more.”

“To Itaria?” Henrik asked. “For a scholarship of some sort, or to a seminary?”

“He didn’t know. A week later, we were both having lunch at the Harp and the Sea in Davenport, when he told me that he’d spoken to Father Gruber about it, and Father was rather upset that he’d told me at all. He said the work was very important, and that Thomas ought to keep it to himself. He even implied that Thomas was weak in his faith, for spending time with me when he ought to be getting trained for his future task. I’m afraid we quarreled a little about it, and Thomas went away without saying much more. Thomas...” She leaned against the table, and Bernadette rose to support her.

“Take courage, Amelia,” she said. “If what we all suspect is right, you are honouring Thomas’ memory. May his soul rest in peace.”

“Thank you, Bernadette,” Amelia replied, her voice growing stronger. “About a month or so after that, he met me after one of our meetings, and apologized for what had happened the last time. He said that he’d been wrong to take Father’s rebuke so literally, and that he....needed me in his life.” She smiled, and went on after a short pause. “We spent a lot of time together after that; we went trekking in Northern Galvenia that week, and we’d make the most of the time we had, though we lived in different

towns. in fact, the rest of that year was perhaps the happiest time of my life. But it ended....it ended too soon." She trembled.

"Amelia, my sister, why don't you sit down?" Bernadette said, gently. "I'm sure none of us would mind. We aren't in a magistrate's court."

"Quite right, Miss Aquary," the Rector said. "We appreciate your frankness and your courage, Miss Rushden. Please be seated."

Sitting down, Amelia rubbed at her eyes with her sleeve, and then began to speak again. "The new year began. It was our last year of school, but Thomas was spending a lot of time studying books that Father Gruber had given him, and he confessed to me that he wasn't doing too well in his classes, because his work with the Revival took up a lot of his time. He was also growing disturbed at some of the things he'd had to study. A couple of times, he told me he wanted to discuss things with Father Joaquim, who was his Pastor, but Father Gruber had warned him that Joaquim was lax on many important issues, and might give him bad advice. He wasn't sure what to do. Poor Thomas, he was quite upset."

Father Joaquim snorted. "Gruber was singing quite a different tune when he lay dying, I can assure you, Miss," he said, with some asperity. "Go ahead, Miriam and I are a little more familiar with the rest of your story, but the others aren't."

"I calmed him down, and told him....that I loved him, and that he could always confide in me. And that's what he did. He told me that three people like him had already been sent ahead to Itaria – the young people you mentioned, Father Riordan. They hadn't 'left the Church', but had pretended to do so in the eyes of the world, so that no one would ask inconvenient questions."

"Dear me," the Rector said, looking puzzled. "Where was the need for such an extraordinary proceeding?"

"He told me," Amelia explained, "that they, and others like them, were being recruited to work for an elite group in Itaria City, whose purpose was to put political pressure on the Pontiff and the Council of the Evangelium, as well as make appeals and draft statements to the Commonwealth. I didn't understand why there was such a need for secrecy, because it all sounded quite harmless. But Father Gruber had told him, it seems, that there were conservative groups on the Council who were opposed to change, and it was because of them that things had to remain confidential."

"I wish Marlborough was here, so that he could laugh at your statement, Miss," Joaquim said, folding his hands together. "Poor Gruber seems to have told your young man a pretty pile of stories."

"The year went on, and Thomas grew more troubled. Though we were still the best of friends, I could tell that....something had changed. He was affectionate to me, but his heart and his mind were somewhere else. He was carrying a load, and despite my best attempts, I couldn't get him to share it with me. I'm sorry, Mr. Perrin," she said, looking at Thomas' father sadly.

“My poor child,” Bartholomew Perrin said, remorsefully, “I was his father, and I had no idea about all this myself. I just thought he was being political, as all the Perrins are. When I was his age, I would neglect my own schoolwork to spend time with the Young Conservatives, and I thought he was just following in his father’s footsteps. I am only grateful that you were able to make him happy in the last years of his life. Don’t blame yourself.”

“Thank you, Mr. Perrin,” Amelia said, warmly. “It was a little before the summer break that something strange happened. We’d agreed to take a trip to Lorean, to visit the Hall of Heroes, which is where we’d shared our first k.....I’m sorry,” she said, blushing and collecting herself. “I shouldn’t speak of such things.”

“Think nothing of it, child,” the Rector said, kindly. “Go on with your story.”

“On the way, Thomas seemed worried, and his hand kept going to his pocket, as if he had something valuable in there. Just as we entered the city, he asked me to excuse him for a moment, as he had something to look up in the Royal Library. We headed there, but I got the impression that he wanted to be alone, so I went to another section and was just browsing there. Thomas was in the Mythology wing, and he was going through some of the reference books.”

“I wouldn’t have interrupted him, if it hadn’t been for an accident. A soldier had come in, a short gentleman in a rather fine uniform, and he was inebriated. He began to sing an old drinking song, and was leering at the women around him, including me. I felt uncomfortable, and told the security guard there about it; he told me that he would take care of it quietly, and asked me to move away for now. I was quite scared; I’ve always been scared of drunk folks, since I was a child” – she shivered, and Bernadette patted her hand – “so I thought I’d stay close to Thomas.”

“Miss Rushden’s late father had a – drinking problem,” the Rector explained to Father Joaquim, in a discreet tone.

“He was absorbed in the book he was reading, and didn’t notice me until I was very close. He started from his seat, and closed his book with a bang, looking nervously around, though he seemed relieved that it was only me. He said he was finished with his work, and was eager to leave. I could tell that he was hiding something, but I was also ready to leave, because that soldier was making me nervous. He was still making a scene, saying that if he was removed from the library, he would complain to some noble or the other; I can’t remember the name he used. We both left, and headed for the Hall of Heroes, where Thomas seemed a little more relaxed.”

“What was the book he was reading, Miss Rushden?” Henrik said, suddenly.

“I couldn’t really see the page, because he shut it so quickly. It was a big illustrated volume, called *Legends of Janwen, from the Age of Wanderers to the Age of Cities*. Or something of that sort,” Amelia said, closing her eyes.

“It makes sense, now!” Henrik said, excitedly.

“What is the matter, Henrik?” Father Joaquim asked. “Do you know something about this?”

“I believe so,” he replied, taking a book of his own from within his jacket, “but let Miss Rushden finish first.”

“An excellent idea,” Sister Miriam said, beaming at him. *I’m glad we have Henrik with us at a time like this*, she thought. “Go on, Miss Rushden.”

“Soon after this, Thomas seemed to be keeping a little distance from the Revival, and for a while, it was almost like the old days of the year before. But one day, after the liturgy of our meeting was done, Father Gruber asked to meet Thomas after the final hymn, and took him aside. They spent quite some time together, and even though they were behind closed doors, I could tell that Father was shouting, though Thomas wasn’t. I couldn’t hear what the argument was about. When Thomas came out, however, he wasn’t scared; he looked angry and determined, and asked me to forgive him for being rather distant of late. He had made some wrong decisions, he told me, but he was going to try and set them right.”

“A little after this, Thomas invited me to his home for tea. I’d already met his parents before, and was happy to see them again, but when I arrived, they said he’d been locked in his room upstairs for most of the day, and wouldn’t come out. He did come down to tea, but he didn’t say much.”

“By this point, I was a little worried, though I thought he and Amelia had just had a quarrel,” Mr. Perrin added. “But she assured me this wasn’t the case.”

“After tea, Thomas returned to his room, and on an impulse, I followed him. I entered his room just as he was about to close the door, and he gave a shout when he saw me...”

“Amelia.....Please, please, leave me. Leave at once. It’s not safe for you, darling.....” Thomas said, with a look of abject terror on his face.

“Thomas? What on Terra is going on?” Amelia exclaimed. “I’ve been so worried about you...”

“They’ve come in here,” he said, still staring, not at her, but at something beyond, something that had him scared almost out of his wits. “I don’t know how, but they’ve been in my room, they’ve even taken the notes I’d made. Infinity, help me.” He sat down on his bed, hiding his face in his hands.

Amelia sat down next to him, and touched his arm gently. “Thomas, please....please trust me. I don’t know what has happened, but if there’s anything I can do to help you, I will. Believe me.”

“No,” Thomas said, recovering his poise and shaking his head. “It’s too dangerous. For all I know, my own life could be in danger, if what I’ve learned is right.....Oh, Infinity, why did I ever agree to this in the first place?”

“Thomas,” Amelia said, cradling his head against her shoulder, “please – if you love me, tell me what’s wrong. I can’t bear seeing you like this. We can always get help from someone else in the Church, if you’ve had trouble with Father Gruber...”

“Amelia,” Thomas replied, standing up all of a sudden, and looking at her sternly, as if ashamed of his earlier display of fear, “this is far bigger than the Church. We’ve made a terrible mistake. I only hope I can try to set it right, and that the Infinity will forgive me.”

“But what have you done?” Amelia asked, bewildered.

In reply, Thomas handed her a small book, bound in leather. The cover read simply, “Prayers and Devotions of the Church of Infinity.”

“Keep this with you safely, darling,” he said, pressing it into her hands. “Don’t lend it to anyone, but if a time ever comes when you can’t see me again, read the book carefully, and you will know what to do. Please, Amelia, do this for me.”

“Thomas...” Amelia sobbed. “Please, Thomas....don’t try to be a hero! If anything were to happen to you, I don’t know how I could go on...”

“You will, darling,” Thomas said, firmly, with a note of courage in his voice that made him seem far taller than his five feet and six inches. “If the time should come, look in that book, and look for the truth. Please remember this. And now, leave, I beg you. I still have so much to do, and time is running out.”

“Thomas, I won’t leave you...” Amelia began, and suddenly the two were clinging to each other, as if both afraid that a mighty wind would arise out of somewhere and tear them asunder. “Don’t ask me to leave you...”

“Amelia, I want you to live. There’s still a good chance that I may be able to defeat them, and if I succeed, then we’ll be together, always. I promise you that. But I have to try, Amelia. Please understand me.”

“Always?”

“Always,” Thomas answered, letting go of her reluctantly. “Goodbye, Amelia.” Gathering her bag, into which she had thrust the small book, hurriedly, she rushed down the steps, and stammered a quick farewell to the Perrins as she ran out of their home, a storm raging within her.

Amelia stifled a sob and bowed her head, and Bernadette hastened to comfort her.

“Do you still have that book, Miss Rushden?” the Rector asked, when she had grown more calm.

“Not anymore, Father,” Amelia said, shaking her head. “It was burned when a fire broke out in our dormitory, along with most of my other books. But it wasn’t the book that Thomas wanted me to have. I learned that the next week, when Father Gruber told us he’d left the Church. Fearing the worst, I waited till I was alone at home, and went through the book. It was an ordinary prayer book like the ones we all had, except that one of the prayers was circled with a red pen. It was the Afternoon Hour for the day of St Mikhail’s martyrdom, and the line circled was *‘In memory of the glorious son of Varald, who died rather than renounce the true faith.’*”

“What does that mean?” Sister Miriam asked, wide-eyed.

“I also found this at the same page,” she said, and removed the glove on her left hand, displaying a bracelet with a medallion of St Nealus – commonly worn by many girls in the College – around it. Next to the medallion, clipped on like an additional charm, was a small metal object about the size of a thumbnail. She removed this, and handed it to Father Joaquim.

“What on Terra is that supposed to be? Miriam, my eyesight isn’t what it used to be. Could you take a closer look?” he replied, shaking his head.

“It’s small, but remarkably heavy,” she said, weighing it in her hand. “It seems to be metal of some sort, but it has no markings or engravings on it.”

“Actually, I think I know what it might be,” Henrik broke in. “Miss Rushden, am I right in guessing that Thomas died soon after that?”

“You’re right, Spenson,” Bartholomew Perrin said. “Soon after that, we returned from a visit to a neighbor to find Thomas – hanging.” He shuddered, but went on, though his voice was weak. “We called the police immediately, and they were very secretive about the whole thing, taking measurements and even calling in a coroner from the neighbouring village to help them. A day or two later, the police inspector called us both to the station, and questioned us closely, asking us about Thomas’ friends, and if he had any enemies. At the end, he admitted that, from what he could see, Thomas couldn’t possibly have hanged himself – he couldn’t have reached the beam from which he was hanging, even with the chair or table in his room, given the length of the rope....”

“My God,” Henrik said, horrified. “Then...”

“I didn’t want to face it, and neither did my wife,” Mr. Perrin went on, “but at the same time, though I knew Thomas was having his problems, I couldn’t believe that he had – taken his own life. The Inspector told us that it was going to be difficult to proceed, because there was little evidence to go on, but he promised he’d help us. However, the next day, we received an anonymous letter, threatening us. It said that if we tried to look any further into the matter, then not only we, but Amelia, would all be murdered.”

“Sweet Infinity!” Amelia cried out. “What is the meaning of this....this horror?”

“We were scared stiff,” he continued, “and stayed up all night, wondering what we should do – when Fiona suddenly spotted something in our backyard. A fire had broken out, and we ran to put it out. As we did, we heard someone speak, though we couldn’t see him. He said that if we didn’t leave town soon, we would all pay the price. I tried to see who it was, but he ran away before I could do so. The next morning, we decided to make a run for it; it wasn’t the bravest thing to do, but we couldn’t risk poor Amelia’s life, as well as hours. We had a quick, quiet burial, and moved away as soon as we could, staying with Fiona’s sister at Trinden for a while, and then settling down in Westchester. We’ve lived with this for two years, until we received Father Joaquim’s wire.”

“I have already told you about Father Gruber’s death,” Father Joaquim said, “and while I am not at liberty to reveal all he told me, his story was consistent with Miss Rushden’s account. Apparently the Infinite Revival had made some rather strange friends, and they had silenced Thomas because he had learnt a little too much about them. To think that anyone associated with the Church would do such a thing...” He shook his head, slowly and disapprovingly. “And going by their *modus operandi* of arson, I strongly suspect that these wretched people, whoever they are, were behind the attacks on the Perrins’ home and on your college, Riordan, as well as today’s outrage in Itaria. Gruber may have believed he was making a valuable alliance, but his fine friends have betrayed him – and they intend to do further damage to Itaria and Zion, if they are permitted to do so. He had received information before his death that the *Paradiso* would be attacked, though he knew no details. Miriam and I passed this on to Archbishop Elias, the Pontiff’s secretary, and they told us they would inform the concerned authorities in Zion.”

“But why?” Bernadette asked, bewildered. “Why would anyone associated with the Church, and its message of peace, choose the path of terror instead?”

“I would love to know the answer to that myself, child,” Joaquim replied, “but first, I think Mr. Spenson has something to tell us.”

“Bernadette and I came to quite similar conclusions, based on what Sister Miriam and Father Marlborough told us,” Henrik explained, in a calm tone, trying to conceal the turmoil he felt at Amelia Rushden’s revelations. “We found that someone had planted a Memory Crystal in Thomas’ old house, to create the impression that it was haunted. And we also found this book.” Henrik turned the pages, until he found what he was looking for, and laid it open on the table, in front of the two priests. “Note that there are passages underlined on several pages, all of which deal with the geography of Northern Galvenia and Zion, near the border. That can’t be a coincidence, especially since Thomas was reading about Janwen. Both Janwen and Estrana, the city built on its ruins, are in that area, according to archaeologists.”

“Is that all?” Father Riordan said, disappointed.

“No, Father,” Henrik said, confidently. “There’s more. On several of the pages, words beginning with the capital letters E, N and C have been underlined twice.”

“E, N, C.....An encyclical!” Father Joaquim exclaimed. “The boy must have been trying to refer to a Church document.”

“No, it’s something simpler than that,” Henrik went on, pointing to the tops of four of the pages. “Now, if you’ll look here, you’ll find that four page numbers are underlined, two of them once, and two of them twice. The numbers are 2, 7, 19 and 53.”

“Those are all prime numbers,” Riordan observed, “but....”

“I was racking my brains, too, until I went home and looked at my own bookshelf, and saw the book I’d used the most in my last year of school, and that Thomas would have had to use often, too: the *Galvenian Students’ Encyclopedia*. Neither of us could have finished our homework without it.”

“An encyclopedia! That’s clever, Henrik. I suppose the page numbers are entries in it,” Sister Miriam said.

“I tried pages 2, 7, 19 and 53, but they didn’t make any sense,” Henrik said. “Then I tried combining them in various ways. Finally, I found something on pages 219 and 753. Page 219 is about the Duchy of Inderness conflict, and mentions that some of the survivors of the massacre sought refuge in Itaria, and even petitioned the Pontiff to condemn the actions of Emperor Friederich during the battle. Page 753 is about Thorium and its alloys, and says that one of the uses of Thorium, according to Zion scientists, was to make memory storage devices, similar to crystals but using metal alloys instead.”

Sister Miriam looked at the object in her hand with an awed expression. “This little thing is a - Memory Crystal? But how do we view it?”

“I don’t know. But I’m sure there’s something important on it, Sister. Thomas may have found it by mistake, viewed it, and found something compromising on it; not knowing what to do, he passed it on to Miss Rushden, whom he trusted. Unfortunately, he died before he could explain things to her further. But I’m sure that we’ll understand things better, including the tragedy at Saint Annette’s, once we figure out what’s on it, and what are the links between Inderness, the Infinite Revival, and Itaria.”

“By Saint Guibert, I must say you make a good case, young man,” Father Riordan said, appreciatively. “Now, Miss Rushden and Mr Perrin, I must ask you to make a decision.”

“Me?” Bartholomew Perrin said blankly.

“Yes, since you are the ones Thomas cared for during his life, before his untimely death. If you wish us to place the entire matter into the hands of the Galvenian police, and have a formal investigation into his murder re-opened – for I do not doubt anymore that it was murder – then we will surrender these objects, the metal card and the book, to your custody. But if you wish us to handle the matter, then we will work discreetly, and try our best to ensure your safety. We can leave tomorrow morning, with Mr. Spenson and Miss Aquary, for the Museum of Science and Lore, where I know someone who can help us with this unusual object.”

“You mean Aline Sheldon, right?” Henrik asked.

Father Joaquim raised his eyebrows appreciatively. “I can see how you won your scholarship to King’s College, Henrik. You may lack your father’s skill at constructing a brilliant sentence, but you are certainly well ahead of us in this particular matter. Yes, Aline would always be willing to help us out. But it’s getting late, and it might not be safe for you to travel now, Mr. Spenson. Besides, given the kind of people we are dealing with, an able-bodied man on the premises would be welcome. Could you stay with us tonight. We will accommodate you and Mr. Perrin, if he so wishes, and I suggest Miss Aquary stay with Miss Rushden in a room nearby, for safety’s sake.”

“No problem,” Henrik said, nodding his agreement.

“Thank you, Father,” Amelia said, earnestly. “Father Riordan and Bernadette have always been good to me, and I trust them. I will entrust my troubles to you and to the Church, and I hope that Thomas, and those poor Sisters at Saint Annette’s, will be avenged some day. I do not speak of personal revenge, but I want justice to be done to his name.”

“That is a long way off, my daughter,” Riordan said, “but we can always hope. There is always hope. May Saint Annette pray for us all, and may the Infinity preserve us.”

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE WAY OF JUSTICE

*"...because the judgements you give are the judgements you will get, and the standard you use will be the standard used for you."
(Matthew ch. 7, v. 1-2.)*

"Gran," Emily asked, in a small voice, "what happened to her? Poor Miss Rushden, I mean...."

"Oh, Emily," Lavie replied, kindly, "I think she was quite all right in the end, poor girl. You see, by the end of the war, there was quite a lot of work to do in Itaria. There were many people who were sick and wounded, and not enough people left to look after them. She wanted to help them, and Father Joaquim arranged to have her sent there. She became first a nurse, then a Sister herself, and she and Bernadette always kept in touch with each other, though they lived quite different lives, and the convent she lives in is actually quite close to Professor Spenson's home in Itaria."

"I'm glad to hear that, Gran," Emily observed. "I hope she's happy there."

"She certainly is, darling. But for now, let's get back to Grandpa, shall we?" Lavie said, laughing at an old memory...

Ryan awoke with a start, shaking his head in disgust. *This darned war is giving me nightmares, and it hasn't yet started*, he thought, pushing the covers away from him. A quick look at the watch on his bedside table informed him that it was far too early for him to wake up, and he sat on the edge of his bed, trying to clear his mind.

The same dream, too, for two nights running. His return to Davenport, ten days ago, had been uneventful, and his father had been very appreciative of his efforts in recovering the goods that were lost. The deliveryman they had found at Doctor Mellon's was only slightly injured, and was now back home, recovering under his family's care. Armin had left town, saying that he was on another journalistic assignment of a "secret" nature. *Knowing Armin, it's probably going to involve taking more corny pictures of the Royal Family, while wearing that goofy mask of his.* The Commonwealth was deadlocked on how to intervene in the Zion-Varald dispute, and there had been further skirmishes across the border, but these had been trivial, and no lives were lost. The Queen and Princess Carranya were due to arrive in Lorean today, and the King – whose negotiations with the Emperor had not yet been discussed in public, except in the broadest terms – would reach the day after.

That cranky doctor didn't know what he was talking about, though, Ryan thought, with a smile. Prime Minister Socius, in fact, had said that Galvenian troops under Sir Prescott would soon be deployed across the border, to join the Zion army, but no further statements of military intent were forthcoming. *And they probably won't, if the Commonwealth can get its act together. If a majority votes in favour of allowing the Special Forces to patrol the border, and keep the peace – or better, if the Varald and Zion representatives can agree on a cease-fire – then even Sir Prescott's men won't be needed. Not that I mind serving in the Army – if they asked me to volunteer, and Galvenia was threatened, I'd do it in a*

flash. It's just that if the Zion and Varald go to war, things will be long and bloody, as Striker said. Not to forget that the Commonwealth's standing would be ruined for good.

He shook his head. *It needn't come to that. The Zion already accepted Hipper, so they're not exactly raring to go.* Then he remembered his dream, and shuddered slightly.

My mind can think of some really stupid things. It's been the same since yesterday. I'm on the Paradiso, trying to save Carranya from Blackheart. Blackheart is trying to choke her, and I raise my gun, pull the trigger and shoot. But Blackheart ducks, and Carranya is hit. I rush forward, shooting blindly a second time, and Blackheart is hit in the throat. He falls into the water, bleeding. I try to lift Carranya, to see if she's all right, but she's shot in the face, and hurt badly....and then I look at her face, and realize to my horror that it's Lavie, and not Carranya. Sweet Infinity, Lavie. Can't you leave me alone in my dreams at least, you silly girl?

Ryan yawned and lay down again, stretching his arms and legs. *Though, to be fair, she hasn't been pestering me the way she usually does. She's still going to Mann Island almost every day, practicing with that longbow of hers, and even when I've gone to her place for dinner, she hasn't gone overboard with the gushing. Lady Penelope must really like me, I guess. Maybe it's because I protected her great-great-and-many-more-times-great-granddaughter, or something. She's been friendly, sure, and she's even come over here once for tea, but Auntie Sheila's Stuffed Crumpets must have scared her away.*

As ever, the thought of his mother's culinary experiments made him groan and laugh at the same time. *I wonder what the dream means, though. Dad would probably say "It means you should spend more time with Lavie, son," or something annoying like that. Anyway, I'm fagged out, especially after Hocha and I spent the whole of yesterday afternoon practicing feints and lunge cuts. There's nothing like Galvenia Sword Skills to keep you in shape. Marianne said we'd go for a picnic in the woods tomorrow, so I'd better get some sleep!*

He curled up comfortably on one side, and closed his eyes, but though he was tired, he did not fall asleep at once.

And I wonder what Henrik is up to. He's been unnaturally quiet ever since he came back from King's College with that girlfriend of his. In fact, he came back only the next day, saying that one of his course teachers had wanted to speak to him about something. Since then, he's been spending a lot of time at the Academy library. Poor guy, I've heard that the entrance test they take in their first week is pretty stiff. I'm not sure if I could stick to College life, myself. Maybe Socius should reintroduce the draft, and maybe I should do a little stint in the army. The key word being "little"; I don't want to spend the next five years at the edge of Ghetz, waiting to see if the Varald will get me or not! I should see Henrik, though, we need to catch up on stuff. Before I know it, he'll be in Lorean for good.

His eyelids felt heavy, and he finally fell asleep, snoring lightly.

“Aww, was Grandpa dreaming of you, Gran? That’s sweet!” Emily said teasingly.

“I suppose he was,” Lavie said, with a gleam in her eye, “though they weren’t very nice dreams. I suppose it’s flattering for a girl to hear that a boy dreams of her, but not if he dreams of accidentally shooting her in the face!”

Emily laughed. “Anyway, that’s one dream that never came true, Gran!”

“Indeed, sweetie, it didn’t. I never did like guns, anyway. In the meantime, the sun was rising, and I was just getting up myself...”

The knock at the door was unexpected. Davenport was an orderly town, and people did not knock at your door at eight o’clock in the morning, when people were just rising from the peaceful slumber of a summer night. Even though she was already dressed and ready for the day’s work, happily dusting the paintings in the hall, Carmen found the sound strangely jarring and annoying.

“Who in Galvenia could that be?” she thought, walking up to the door, and looking through the small panel that afforded the Regales a preview of their visitors. Standing outside it, holding a scroll, was a cheerful young man in livery, wearing the seal of the King of Galvenia on his armband and his hat, and looking as if he had just completed a long journey.

“Goodness, who are you?” Carmen said, staring at him. “I’m sorry, but both Mr. and Mrs. Regale are asleep. If you have a message for them...”

“I’m sorry, Miss,” the man said, in a chirpy tone that grated on Carmen’s nerves. “But I’ve been asked to hand this message over in person to Miss Lavender Regale of Davenport. This is her home, isn’t it?”

“Miss Lavie?” Carmen said, taken aback. “What on earth would you want with her?”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to see her before I can answer that,” the man said, without any change to his ingratiating smile. “You see, I’ve just come all the way from Lorean Castle, and Her Majesty, the Queen of Galvenia, was quite clear that I should give this to Miss Regale, and only to her.”

His words had the desired effect, as a completely flustered Carmen ran upstairs, calling out loudly. “Mrs. Regale, ma’am! Miss Lavie! There’s a messenger from the Palace for you! A message from the Queen!”

Lavie, still in her pyjamas, opened the door of her room, running a hand through her hair and rubbing her eyes. “Huh? Carmen, what’s the matter? I just woke up a few minutes ago...”

She was soon followed by her mother, in a dressing-gown, and with her hair still covered by a neat cap. “Lavie? Carmen? Goodness, what *is* going on here at this unearthly hour? Has war broken out, or something?”

“Miss Lavie,” Carmen said, excitedly, “there’s a man down there who says he has a letter from the Queen! He wants you to take it from him!”

“Ohmygosh, from the *Queen*?” Lavie exclaimed. “But why?”

“That’s the strange thing, Miss, I have no idea!” Carmen exclaimed.

One of Lavie’s good qualities, which she inherited from her mother’s side of the family, was a certain unflappability. Within moments, she had put on a dressing-gown of her own, combed her hair, and secured it in a safe but unfashionable fashion with the first red ribbon she could find. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she followed Carmen downstairs and to the door.

“Good morning, Miss Regale,” the man said, doffing his hat and bowing. “My name is Henry Daniels, and I’m a footman in the service of the King and Queen of Galvenia. Her Majesty returned to Lorean today, just after dawn, with the Princess, and as soon as she reached the Palace, she handed me this message, charging me to ride as fast as I could, and bring it to you. Which is what I did.” He handed the scroll to Lavie, who broke the seal, and read the following short message – accompanied by her mother, who had joined her by now.

Dear Miss Regale,

I am writing this to you, not as a Queen commanding her subject, but as a mother worried about her only child. During Prince Wilhelm’s funeral in Caledonia, my daughter Carranya seemed ill and upset, and she actually fainted when one of the priests there was delivering a eulogy. Since then, she has seemed more silent and thoughtful than usual, and has lost something of her normal good cheer, though she keeps up a brave front. I do not wish to pry, but it is clear that something has caused her pain. Carranya has always referred to you as a friend, and you may be a better person than I to console her, and win her confidence, at this moment. If it does not inconvenience you or your family, I would appreciate it if you would visit us at Lorean Castle for a few days, and set my child’s mind at ease.

Yours in friendship,

H.R.H. Katarina Traznov Lionheart

“Merciful heavens!” Emily Regale exclaimed, more loudly than she had intended. “Why, Lavie....what an honour!”

Lavie turned to her mother with a somber expression. “Poor Princess,” she said. “I wonder what happened to her.”

“You’re right, dear,” Emily replied. “The Queen is a very sensible person, and she wouldn’t write in this way until something was seriously wrong.”

“What’s all this ruckus at eight-fifteen in the morning?” Sigmund Regale said, suddenly, standing at the top of the stairs and adjusting his eye-glasses. “Emily, what *is* going on?”

Lavie turned to face her father, and her expression was grave. “Daddy, we’ve just had a letter from the Queen. It seems the Princess isn’t well, and the Queen thought she might appreciate my company a little.”

“The Queen? Today isn’t the First of April, my daughter,” Sigmund said, climbing down the stairs. “Or could there possibly be some truth to what you’re saying?”

Lavie handed him the scroll, which he read with great concentration. “By Terra, Lavie. You weren’t joking.”

“I shouldn’t lose a minute, Mom,” Lavie said, with a determined look on her face. “If the Princess needs me, I must go!”

“All at once?” Sigmund asked, with a bewildered expression. “Lavie, what *is* going on?”

“I don’t know,” Lavie confessed, “but I’m sure it must be something important. The Princess isn’t the kind to make a fuss over nothing; she’s a very strong person. Something bad must have happened when she was in Caledonia....”

“Well, if the Queen has personally invited you, I see no problem in your going, Lavie,” Sigmund conceded, “but please, do take your time and get ready, as you may need to be there for a few days according to the Queen’s letter.”

“Of course, Daddy!” Lavie said brightly. “Carmen, could you pack a few things for me, please?”

“Why, of course, Miss Lavie,” Carmen said, springing forward. “I’ll hardly take any time.”

“Miss Regale,” Henry Daniels said, “I’m glad you’re taking it this way. In fact, the Queen has told me that I could bring you back with me in her own carriage, if you were willing to come.”

“Cool!” Lavie said, nodding her head quickly. “I wouldn’t mind that, for sure. Do you know what’s happening to the Princess, Mr. Daniels?”

“I’m afraid not, Miss,” Daniels replied. “I hardly had the time to see her after she arrived; I just came rushing here, as per the Queen’s instructions.”

“Do you want me to come with you, Lavie dear?” Emily said, patting Lavie on the shoulder.

“I think I can manage on my own, Mom,” Lavie said, with a resolute expression. “Just give me a little time to get ready, and I’ll be with you.”

And, indeed, it is a fact that Lavie was as good as her word. In an hour's time, dressed in her huntress' dress and carrying a small suitcase, she made short work of Carmen's hastily prepared breakfast, and was ready to leave with the footman.

"Don't forget to wire us once you reach Lorean, darling," Emily said, as she kissed her daughter goodbye. "Stay as long as you need to, but if you need me or your father, please tell us."

"I will, Mom," Lavie replied.

"Good luck, dearest," Sigmund added, embracing her. "I hope you'll be able to help the Princess out, whatever her problems may be. But do you really need that bow with you, Lavie?"

"Better safe than sorry, Daddy," Lavie replied, winking at him – a gesture that caused Sigmund, sleepy as he was, to laugh a little. "I'll be back as soon as I can!" Waving goodbye, she stepped into the waiting carriage, and Daniels took hold of the reins as it sped away, heading for Lorean.

"There goes our brave girl, Emily," Sigmund said, nodding his approval. "I don't presume to guess what's happening at the Royal Palace, but I'm sure she'll try to set things right."

"I hope so, Sigmund," Emily said, waving one last time as the carriage disappeared into the distance.

Lavie looked out of the carriage's window, admiring the forest outside Trinden as the horses, under Daniels' skilled hand, proceeded quickly down the highway towards Lorean.

Maybe it's just the idea of war that is causing her pain, Lavie thought, shaking her head. For the life of me, I'll never understand why so many boys in Davenport keep talking about enlisting. They think fighting a real war is like playing War. They're very wrong.

Suddenly, there was a loud sound, like a firework exploding, and the horses reared, frightened. Lavie started from her seat, and looked to see that the road ahead of them was obscured by reddish fumes. Their smell was oppressive, and Lavie coughed, then reached for a handkerchief to cover her nose and mouth.

"What – What was that?" she asked.

"Can't say, Miss," Daniels said cheerfully. "It could be a smoke bomb of some sort. Children these days, I tell you..."

But before he could say anything further, two hefty men in long tunics stepped out from behind the trees. They began to move towards the carriage, with menacing expressions, their daggers drawn.

"Good heavens! Bandits!" Daniels said, nervously, reaching for his own short sword. "Miss Regale..."

“Stop that bleeding carriage,” the first man said, his words cutting across the smoke and ringing through the air. “Drop that little knife of yours, and step out. Now.”

“Miss Regale,” Daniels said, nervously trying to regain control of his frozen horses, “keep your head down. I’ll see if I can...”

“Shut up, little man,” the man replied. “We know she’s in there. Now hand that spoiled brat over, and we promise we won’t hurt you or your little ponies.”

Lavie, who had watched this scene with a frozen look on her face, now felt her temper rise within her. *These.....How dare they? I’m not going to be afraid, I’ve got to reach the Princess! She risked her life for us all. I can’t let her down.* Silently, she reached for her bow, and took an arrow from her quiver.

“Miss Lavie, no!” Daniels said, unnerved by the red gleam in her eyes.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Daniels,” Lavie said, confidently. “Like I’ve always said, a deputy doesn’t complain!”

“But Miss, those bandits could easily...”

“They can’t stop us!” Lavie said – and, scraping the arrow against her bangle, she lowered the glass pane of her window, and fired through it. The arrow caught one of the bandits in the arm, bursting into flame on impact. He screamed, more with surprise than with pain, and turned to run.

“Now isn’t that cute, a wench with a hunter’s toy. Drop that bow, girl,” the second man said, and he stepped forward. As he did, Lavie noted – to her horror – that he was holding on to the arm of a middle-aged woman who was behind him, pushing her forward as he twisted it brutally. “Try anything funny, and I’ll kill this lady here.”

Ohmygosh! That’s Aunt Agatha! Lavie thought, with dismay.

“Lavie?” Agatha Regale exclaimed, with a brave expression on her face, despite the pain she was feeling. “Run away, darling! Don’t take any risks! Save yourself...”

“I said put that toy away, girl,” the man growled. “Stop that carriage, and step out, or...”

“I won’t leave you, Auntie,” Lavie said, bravely, though her hands were trembling. *Mr. Evens taught me what to do if this happened! I’ve got to help Auntie!*

“You’re asking for it,” the man said threateningly, reaching for another dagger, and preparing to throw it at the horses.

Removing three arrows from her quiver quickly, she fired one at the feet of the second man, who stepped back, blinded, as the grass before him burst into flame and smoke, loosening his grip on Agatha.

Now! Shoot straight, Lavie! Aunt Agatha needs you! Lavie thought, feeling her heart beat as if it would burst through her chest any moment. Steadying her hand, she fired the second and third arrows, in rapid succession, directly at the face of the second bandit. He just managed dodged the first one, but the second struck him in the face, and he screamed with pain, dropping to his knees and letting go of Lavie's aunt as he did so.

"Now, Mr. Daniels! Go ahead! Please!" Lavie cried out, and Daniels – still shocked by the suddenness of it all – managed to get the horses into a steady trot, running straight into the path of the first bandit, who hit the ground, his face making unceremonious contact with the dirt of the highway. Lavie held the door open, and gathered her dazed aunt, into the carriage with a swift motion. Seeing this, Daniels spurred his team of horses on, and they sped away, the two attackers slowly receding from them, spluttering and cursing.

"L-Lavie?" Agatha said, trembling with fear as Lavie drew her onto the seat of the carriage.

"You're safe, Auntie," Lavie said, firing another arrow towards the first bandit, which struck him on his boot and started another fire as the carriage drove forward as fast as it could. The excitement over, she felt bathed in a cold sweat, and held on to her aunt to find that they were both trembling.

"Lavie," Agatha said, in a faltering voice. "You saved my life...."

"Let's get out of here!" Daniels said, in a nervous voice, as the carriage raced down the highway, leaving a cloud of dust behind it.

Recovering herself, Lavie turned to look at her aunt, taking her hand in both of hers. "Are you all right, Aunt Agatha?" she said with concern, noting that she seemed to be on the verge of fainting.

"Good heavens, Lavie...." Aunt Agatha said, in a choked voice. "Thank you, thank you, darling..." Her fear overcame her, and she buried her plump face against her niece's shoulder, her frame shaking with sobs.

"It's all right, Auntie, they're gone. I didn't realize that those extra lessons would come in useful so soon!" Lavie said, soothingly, surprised at her own boldness.

Agatha's words came in bursts, as she clung to her niece, who listened silently, letting her speak. "Those men....I was just heading down to Glendale..... to pick up some potions for Vincent, and that man just grabbed me.....He said he was going to hold me prisoner...." She shook her left arm, and flinched, tears coming into her eyes. "This.....pain....."

"Auntie, are you all right?" Lavie asked, anxiously. "Are you bleeding?"

"My arm..." Agatha raised her head and smiled weakly. "I thought they were going to break it....My God, I've.....such pain...."

“Mr. Daniels!” Lavie said, almost shouting. “We need to get to a doctor, quickly! Aunt Agatha is hurt!”

Daniels, still breathing heavily, turned back to look at them, giving Lavie an awed, almost frightened look. “Miss, where did you learn to shoot like that?”

“Oh, we girls have our secrets,” Lavie said, trying to smile as she held her aunt closer to her. “But can’t we discuss that later? Do you know where we could find a hospital nearby? Auntie’s hand...” She held Agatha’s left hand in hers, and looked at the bruises on her arm with anger. “Those monsters....They deserve to die!”

“There’s an old doctor in Glendale, Miss,” Henry Daniels said, “but since those bandits captured your aunt on the road to Glendale, it isn’t safe to go there. I suggest we all go to Lorean. The Court Physician would certainly be able to tend to her, and we could make a formal complaint with the authorities there.”

“The.....Court Physician?” Agatha said, so softly that only Lavie could hear her. “Lavie....what’s going on? Where.....are we going?”

“Hush, now,” Lavie said, looking at her affectionately. “We’re going to Lorean Castle, to visit the Palace. I’ll explain it all later. But you need to rest, dear Auntie. Do you have a pillow or something with you, Mr. Daniels?”

“Yes, Miss,” Daniels said respectfully, producing a cushion and a first-aid kit. “This may help with the pain, too.”

“Cool!” Lavie exclaimed. After settling herself comfortably against one window and placing the cushion on her lap, there was more than enough room for Agatha to recline, which she did gratefully. Inspecting the contents of the first-aid kit, Lavie came across a jar of salve, which she applied to her aunt’s arm.

“That....that feels a little better now, Lavie.....Thank you, thank you....” she said, feebly, until, worn out by fear and pain, she fell asleep, and the carriage sped on.

Neither of them looked back after they had made good their escape, or they would have seen a young man emerge from the shadows, carrying a long, light sword, and looking at them with a strange, satisfied smile on his face.

Well, well, Juno thought. I could easily have disposed of those two, but that was not necessary. Strange that she should be so skilled. But she and Spenson were always a class above Eramond and his buffoon of a follower, Tamas.

The two bandits, rolling on the grass and looking more like circus clowns than hardened criminals, had somehow managed to extinguish the flames by then, and whimpered in pain.

"I'll kill her!" the second man yelled, covering his face with his hand as he tried to raise himself from the ground. "I'll murder her and that old hag...."

But he had no chance to speak, for the young man was upon him in a flash, holding the point of his sword at the bandit's throat.

"Who are you, scoundrel?" he said, softly and menacingly. "Speak, if you do not wish your head and body to be put asunder."

"N-no! D-don't kill me!" the man pleaded, terrified by the blue gleam of his new adversary's blade. "Please...."

"You were speaking of killing two innocent women, if I recall correctly," the young man said, in a friendly tone of voice. "Perhaps you would like to reconsider those words. Instead, tell me who sent you here, and tell me the truth. Do not try to deceive me, or you will suffer far worse than a simple arrow to your disgusting face."

"I—" the second man began, then shouted desperately. "Get him! Get him!"

Juno was too quick for him, and turned to see the first bandit heading in his direction, dagger drawn. Raising his blade, he aimed a beam of blue light directly at the man's throat, and he fell to the ground, making strange, choking sounds.

"Miserable hound, did you really think you could dispose of me so easily?" Juno said, lifting the second bandit by his hair and pointing his sword at his heart. "Now speak. I do not care who you are, or how much you were paid. I ask one thing – the name of the person who is your employer."

"I....don't know...." the bandit began, perspiration streaming down his face.

Juno closed his eyes, and a burst of blue shot forth from both edges of the sword, striking the man in the chest. He screamed, and fell prone, writhing in pain. "No! No.....please.....no....." he mumbled.

"Would you wish to experience that again, my friend?" he said, calmly. "We can continue this game for as long as you wish. Tell me his name, and you shall go free."

The man opened his mouth, bringing out the words with an effort as the pain slowly left him. "At the....Explorer's....Guild.....never t-told....me.....name....."

"Tsk, tsk," Juno said. "I see you need a little more medicine...."

"No!" the bandit screamed, terror on his face. "Please.....not again.....will tell you....."

Juno leaned forward. "Be my guest."

"Two of them.....one.....in a cloak.....Robert....."

“Robert? Did he have no other name?” Juno asked, glaring at him.

“I swear....never told....me,” the man pleaded. “The other.....was a nobleman....Lugner! His name was Lugner! That’s...all I know! Please! Let me go!”

Annoyed by the man’s screams, Juno fired a stunning beam at him, and he lay silent.

How interesting. Juno smiled with cold satisfaction. *You escaped me twice, but not this time. Not this time, Lugner. You will pay – pay for what you have done to me, and to Galvenia.*

What a lovely day, Carmen thought, as she walked happily past her precious flower beds, carrying a watering-can and singing to herself...

*“The sun rose over Lorean,
and never went away,
the day that good King Lionheart....”*

“Top of the morning to you, Carmen!” Ryan said, grinning at her as he passed by. “Still keeping the old soprano voice in shape, I see. Between your cooking and your singing, that swordsmith of yours is going to be a lucky man!”

Carmen laughed. “How kind of you to say that, Master Ryan,” she replied, setting down her can. “In fact, today’s my half-holiday, and Juan and I are going to the Swordsmith’s Guild in the evening. They’re having a summer dance for all their members!”

“Good for you, Carmen,” Ryan said, approvingly. “I’m sure the two of you will be the envy of the dance floor, speeding away on one of those fancy Republican nandangos, or whatever they’re called.”

“*Fandangos*, Master Ryan,” Carmen said, suppressing a laugh. “Nandango is a town in the Fulton Republic, where my own father was born. They sound alike, but they’re quite different!”

“Whatever,” Ryan said with a laugh. “Anyway, have fun. Lavie isn’t around, is she? Not that I’m dying to see her or anything, but I just thought I’d say hello, see how she’s doing.”

“Miss Lavie left this morning for the Palace at Lorean,” Carmen said proudly. “It is a pity, for she certainly would have enjoyed your company.”

“The Palace? Whatever for?” Ryan said, looking puzzled. “I know she talks about wanting to visit it, but surely they’re not letting in visitors at *this* time! Besides, the Royal Family just got back today, didn’t they?”

"It's strange, isn't it, Master Ryan?" Carmen said, picking up her can and watering a small clump of lilies. "Today morning, we were woken up by a messenger from the Palace, saying that the Queen had invited Lavie to come and keep her daughter company for a while. Isn't that an honour?"

"It sure is, Carmen," Ryan said, "though I hope Lavie won't start getting into one of her moods and quarrelling with poor Princess Carranya. Or cook her a batch of brownies..."

"Ah, Master Ryan, you will have your little joke, won't you?" Carmen said, laughing into her gardening gloves. "But in fact, Miss Lavie told me that she and the Princess..."

Before Carmen could finish, a carriage – finer and more decorative than the one the Queen had sent – drew up to the path leading towards Casa Regale, and came to a halt. On one door was a large red crest, bearing the images of two eagles and a sword, and with the words "*Noblesse et Justice*" emblazoned on it in old-fashioned, Varaldian-style characters.

"Looks like you've got company, Carmen," Ryan observed, looking at the crest. "Some wealthy book collector, perhaps?"

"Why, no, Mr. Regale never mentioned anything of that sort," Carmen said, shaking her head in puzzlement. "I've never seen that particular crest or carriage before. Who on Terra could it be?"

The carriage door swung open, and two men stepped out. Ryan did not recognize the first one, but gave a start as he looked at the second man's face.

"Sir Prescott?" he exclaimed. "What's *he* doing here, of all places? Is he a relative or a friend of Mrs. Regale's, or something like that?"

"*Sir Prescott?*" Carmen said, with a shocked expression.

Her hands lost their grip on the watering-can, which began to spill its contents over the pavement, and hastily stooped to pick it up. "Oh, dear, Mr. and Mrs. Regale will be quite displeased!"

It was Ryan's turn to be confused. "Well, I don't think much of him either, but why would they mind? He's a noble and all that, isn't he?"

"Master Ryan, that's a rather – embarrassing question to answer," Carmen said hesitantly. "But I can always tell *you!* You see, when Miss Lavie went to Checkpoint Bravo to wait for you, she and her father met Sir Prescott, and he started – goodness, how do gentlefolk say it? – paying attentions to her. Neither of them were happy, and Miss Lavie was quite angry!"

Ryan's jaw dropped. "Sir Prescott...courting *Lavie*? Is he *nuts*? She's only seventeen, for the Infinity's sake! Besides, I've had a run-in with him once, and he's a noble jackass! I wouldn't wish him on anyone, not even Lavie!"

But he had to interrupt this interesting series of reflections, for Sir Prescott and his companion had now walked up to Carmen.

“Good morning, Miss,” Sir Prescott said, beaming at her, while his companion leered. *Ugh! Who is that creepy guy with him? Ryan thought. He looks like a cheap hood from a comic-book adventure! And why’s he staring at poor Carmen like that?* “Please inform your mistress that Sir Prescott T. Chuselwock has come, and wishes to speak to her.”

“I’ll inform Mrs. Regale at once, Sir,” Carmen said, with an innocent look on her face.

“Oh, no, not Mrs. Regale, my girl,” Sir Prescott said unctuously, causing Carmen to flush with annoyance. *What a dunderhead! Carmen’s twenty-eight, she’s hardly a ‘girl’! If this is how Sir Prescott talked to Lavie, no wonder she lost her cool!* Ryan thought. “I mean your young mistress, Miss Lavender. She and I are” – he paused meaningfully – “acquainted.”

Let me take this guy down a notch or two, Ryan thought, remembering their duel at the Military Academy. “Actually, Sir Prescott,” he said, rather loudly, “Lavie isn’t here. The Queen’s called her away for something important or the other. Maybe you could come by some other time?”

Sir Prescott glared at him. “I don’t remember addressing you, boy,” he said.

“The name’s Ryan Eramond, Your Grace,” Ryan said, sarcastically. “Only Mum gets to call me ‘boy’, and you certainly aren’t her!”

Carmen began to laugh. *Goodness, Master Ryan! That is quite a blow!*

“I’m not interested in your mother, boy,” Sir Prescott said, haughtily. “Now, Miss – whatever your name is, please tell your fellow domestic that he is to behave himself in the presence of a nobleman and a soldier. And please tell your mistress, Mrs. Regale, that I wish to speak to her.”

Fellow domestic? Why, the.... Ryan thought, but controlled himself before he could speak, contenting himself with giving Prescott a goofy grin, which incensed him further.

“Oh, Master Ryan isn’t part of the staff, Sir,” Carmen said loyally. “He’s our local hero! He was on board the *Paradiso*, and helped the Princess when she was attacked by pirates!”

Sir Prescott, quite at a loss for words, glared at his sidekick, who shuddered and looked at the ground pointedly. “That’s good of you, Carmen,” Ryan said, warmly, “but I see you’ll be quite busy now. You’d better take these gentlemen in to see Mr. and Mrs. Regale, anyhow. *Adios!*”

“Take care, Master Ryan,” Carmen said, waving goodbye as he walked away, slowly and calmly. “Sir Prescott, please come in,” she went on, curtsying. “Wait in the hall a little while, and I’ll call the mistress to see you as soon as she can.”

“Thank you,” Sir Prescott said coldly, as he – with Gessler trotting behind, wishing he were somewhere else – entered Casa Regale.

“Quite impossible, Viceroy,” Terrin Hipper said, calmly, folding his arms across his chest. “There are no grounds for any sort of intervention by the Commonwealth Special Forces.”

“But following the cowardly incursion of the Varald – an offence we have strongly condemned here, Mr. President – don’t you understand the gravity of the matter?” Kanoi spluttered. “You think that these are just border skirmishes, but sooner or later, civilians are going to get hurt, and that will mean all-out war!”

“Believe me, Kanoi, if we wanted to target civilians, we could do it quite easily,” Jansen said, closing his eyes and taking a long drag on his cigarette. “The incident is regrettable, but apparently occurred due to a faulty signal or instruction. There is nothing more to say, unless you wish to escalate the matter further.”

“Damned right we will, Jansen!” Kanoi said angrily. “Mr. President, we are on the verge of the first armed conflict in three hundred centuries! It is imperative that the Commonwealth Special Forces deploy at once, control the Ghetz border, and begin peacekeeping operations until we receive an unconditional apology from the Varald. Otherwise....” He paused, and glared at Jansen, who was still smoking calmly.

“My brothers,” Lord Lucan said in his best ‘diplomatic’ voice, “let us not be carried away. This incident, though regrettable, need not lead to a full-scale war. I agree with President Hipper that deploying the Special Forces may not be necessary. Let the Varald apologize and make reparations, and let the matter rest there.”

“A sound idea, Lucan,” Mazarus said, shaking his head. He had always had a melancholy expression, but the news from his home country – where seventy-eight people had just been arrested for a protest at the Zion Embassy, and were now in the custody of the Itarian Guard – seemed to have aged him further. “Kanoi, do not be eager to go to war. You know little of how painful it can be, and how difficult it is to end a war that has started. The Zion have forgotten this, as they have forgotten the faith that can sustain them at this moment.”

“Hah!” Jedda said, contemptuously. “You Itarians cannot even agree on what your Faith is anymore, my dear Mazarus, so do not presume to lecture *us* on it. When you can control your own people, perhaps then you could legitimately teach the rest of us about morality.”

“Worship your idols as much as you want, Jedda,” Mazarus said, heavily, “but they will not save you.”

“Indeed?” Jemma smiled. “Now, Jansen, I think the matter is quite simple. The President is not in favour of using the CSF, but he can be overruled if the rest of us decide otherwise. Let us put the matter to the vote.”

“The Zion approve, of course!” Kanoi shouted. “If the Varald continue their brinkmanship, we could soon see a war far worse than any in the history of Terra.”

“And the Varald refuse,” Jansen said firmly. “We will not be swayed by your hysteria, Kanoi. We understand that you grieve the loss of Wilhelm, but do not blame us for that!”

“Itaria abstains,” Mazarus said, shooting an angry glare at Jemma. “Deploying the CSF would only escalate the conflict. Let the Zion and the Varald settle this diplomatically, like civilized men. And let them both learn to trust in God, and not in their armies.”

“Keep your God, Mazarus,” Jansen said, irritated. “We have no need of him.”

“Galvenia approves,” Lord Lucan said, slowly. “While I agree with Mazarus that such matters can be handled among us, as brothers, the presence of a policing force may prevent excesses from either side, and defuse the conflict.”

“The Republic opposes the motion,” Jemma said, closing his eyes. “My brothers, you are fools if you think the CSF is some sort of panacea for the troubles of the world. If it is written that there is to be war, so let it be. If the Zion and Varald can stop throwing tantrums, so let it be. We do not wish to involve our forces in something as uncertain as this.”

“The motion is locked, and my veto stands,” Terrin Hipper said, with a sigh of relief. “Now, Kanoi, tell us what exactly you require from the Varald, and let us see if we cannot reach some sort of solution.”

“It is simple. The Emperor has authorized me to offer a cease-fire, and the immediate withdrawal of the 17th and 18th Border Battalions, on the following conditions. First, that the Varald offer an unconditional apology for their cowardly attack, and withdraw their troops in turn. Second, that they hand over the men responsible to the Commonwealth Court of Justice for a fair trial. And third, that they permit a Commonwealth inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Prince Wilhelm,” Kanoi said firmly. “Nothing less than this is acceptable to the Empire.”

“Are you still flogging that dead horse, Kanoi?” Jemma said, with an ironic smile. “Koketsu and Wilhelm both died on the same sort of ship, and presumably by the same hand. Accusing the Varald of one, while exonerating them of the other, just shows the absurdity of your position.”

“The Varald would be willing to consider an apology,” Jansen said, blowing smoke at Kanoi with a nonchalant expression, “and will punish the soldiers responsible themselves. Handing them over to the Commonwealth is unnecessary. As for any further inquiry into the death of Wilhelm, I agree with Jemma that your request is nonsensical, Viceroy. We are ready to accept a ceasefire, but on the terms I have just mentioned, and not yours.”

Kanoi brought his fist down on the table. "Enough! The Empire has had enough of your impertinence, Jansen. You may think you can hide behind Hipper, and cloak your vile deeds with legality, but you are pushing us beyond the limit! If you refuse the Emperor's offer, then...."

"I do not refuse anything," Jansen said, inhaling smoke and smiling. "I merely ask that Charlemagne use his common sense before issuing his ultimatums. I understand that the man is senile, but surely, his advisors can give him better advice...."

"Really, Jansen," Lord Lucan protested, feebly.

"Your snide comments about the Emperor of Zion will only make things worse, Jansen," Kanoi said, trembling with anger. "For the last time, before I inform him of what has transpired, will you accept the Empire's terms, for your own good?"

"I cannot," Jansen said, looking intently, not at him, but at President Hipper. "And the Director instructs me to tell you this firmly, and to convey this to your Emperor, with all our respects."

"Rest assured that the Emperor *will* hear of this," Kanoi said, rising from the table and walking away angrily from the Council room. As he reached the door, he paused. "And if you think he will take this lightly, you are sorely mistaken!"

"I see I shall have to make my report to the Director as well, President," Jansen said, with a laugh. "Good day, gentlemen. I shall meet you again tomorrow." With these words, he stubbed out his cigarette in a conveniently placed ashtray, and left as well.

"Dear me," Lord Lucan said, "this is quite a predicament."

"Children squabbling on a playground," Jedda said, in a biting tone. "That is what the great Empire and the powerful Directorate have come to. Truly, any thought of the Emperor being 'God's hand on Terra', in the light of his recent conduct, is sheer absurdity."

Mazarus was about to make an angry reply, when a messenger entered the room.

"Archbishop Mazarus," he said, bowing formally, "there's a visitor for you in your quarters. He says he's an envoy from Itaria, and comes with instructions from the Pontiff. It seems to be quite urgent."

"An envoy from His Holiness?" Mazarus said, puzzled. "I had no word of this until now. I wonder what is happening. Good day, and may the Infinity guide you, my colleagues," he said, rising and following the messenger, who led him back to his own apartments in the Council residential complex. He entered to find a man, covered by a red cloak, waiting in his small antechamber.

"Ah, Archbishop," the man said, nodding in recognition. "Please be seated. What I have to say will not take long." The messenger bowed before both men, and left on what was presumably the next of many errands.

“This is most unusual,” Mazarus replied. “I did not receive any communication from the Pontiff about your arrival, sir. Indeed, I am quite certain we have never met before.”

“The Pontiff is preoccupied with other matters of import, my dear Archbishop,” the man said, removing his cloak to reveal the costume of an Italian of noble family, though a layman. “Itaria faces grave troubles, and he must deal with them as well as he can. Please be seated, for the time is short.”

Mystified, Mazarus sat down next to the newcomer. “Very well. Could you kindly explain the purpose of your visit, then? Perhaps an introduction would be in order.”

“Oh, that is hardly necessary,” the man said, with a grin. “My name would mean nothing to you; I am merely a messenger, like the nameless prophets of the Holy Book. You see, my dear Archbishop, you have not served your Pontiff or your faith in a satisfactory manner. The time has come for you to return home.”

Mazarus turned pale. “The Pontiff is recalling me? In the name of Saint Geraud, why? I have always served him faithfully, and carried out his instructions to the letter. Why should he dismiss me, and in such a cavalier way, through the agency of a – nameless noble? This is hardly believable.”

The man laughed. “Oh, not the Pontiff, my dear Archbishop. I speak of the highest, the most infinite Justice. The Infinity Himself is displeased with you, and he is calling you to your home, the home of lost and hopeless souls. And he has chosen me to bring you His message.”

Mazarus rose from his chair, alarmed. “Sweet Infinity, what are you speaking of?”

“It is very simple, Mazarus,” the man said, firmly. “You have failed to follow your own way, the way of Love. Now, the way of Justice has overtaken you. Return to where you came from.” He drew a short sword, almost a dagger, from his belt.

“Guards!” Mazarus cried out, reaching for the bell that would summon the complex’s security staff. “Help....”

A bolt of yellow light struck Mazarus in the chest, felling him, before he could say anything more.

“Goodbye, my dear Archbishop,” the man said. Placing the blade of his sword over the fallen cleric’s heart, he closed his eyes, and another bolt – brighter and stronger than the first – issued forth. Mazarus’ entire body shuddered, and he felt a mist descend in front of his eyes.

I’m dying, he thought, helplessly. Infinity, receive my soul, and pardon this man....

“Ah, I almost forgot,” the man said, drawing an object from his pocket and holding it in front of the Archbishop’s eyes. “You wanted to know who I was, didn’t you? Look at this, and think for a moment on what has befallen your faith. Reflect, with your last breath, on a world that no longer exists, and grieve that you failed to find a better Way.”

Mazarus looked at the object, which was a simple black and white photograph in a frame, and his eyes widened in horror. *No. No, please.....Infinity save us. If this is true, we are lost, all of us.....*

Suddenly, all was black, and he ceased to breathe.

A few minutes later, there was a sound of footsteps climbing the stairs, as the messenger who had brought Mazarus to his chambers returned with another message. "Archbishop Mazarus? The President wants to know if you'll be joining him for supper tonight, and...."

Then he screamed.

"Goodness.....the Archbishop's collapsed!" He knelt down, felt his pulse, looked at the contorted face of the dead man, and rang the bell instantly. Within moments, he was joined by two soldiers and the Council's personal physician, who instantly shifted the Archbishop's corpse onto a sofa, and began his own examination. After a quarter of an hour, he rose, shaking his head.

"He's had a heart attack, it would seem," he said. "He must have collapsed and died almost instantly."

"But his face, Doctor," one of the soldiers said. "Look at it. He looks like he was scared to death."

"Maybe it had something to do with that man who came to visit him," the messenger suggested, nervously.

"What man?" the physician asked.

"A man from Itaria, who was in this room just a while ago," he replied. "I left them together, and..."

"There's no sign of anyone here, or of anyone having gone down the stairs recently. We were patrolling the stairwell all the time, and we saw him come up, but he didn't come down," the soldier said.

"But he *was* there," the messenger said, helplessly. "He couldn't have left any other way."

"Well, he isn't here anymore," the second soldier said, firmly.

"What nonsense is this?" the physician said, irritably. "A dead man, and another who vanishes into thin air." He shook his head. "Sweet lands, what *is* the Commonwealth coming to?"

"You see, Mr. Regale," Sir Prescott said smoothly, sipping his cup of coffee, "I come to you with an open heart, and no false pretenses."

Sigmund Regale, thinking of the old hunting rifle he still kept in a closet in his room, was tempted to fetch it at once and give Sir Prescott a piece of his mind. "Sir Prescott," he said, making an effort at politeness, "reflect on the situation. As you have said yourself, you may soon be deployed to help the

Zions with their war, and it threatens to be a long one. In such a position, how could you expect us to agree to your proposal, generous as it may be?"

"I understand your concern as a father," Sir Prescott said, undaunted. "But I have a record of success, and I do not intend to fall in combat. Rather, I will return, and if you permit me, I will return to claim Miss Lavender's hand, as my lawful wife. That is all I ask of you, Mr. Regale."

"My Lavender is still young," Emily said, looking worried, "and honestly, Sir Prescott, I am surprised at your making this offer, noble though it may be. After all, you are hardly acquainted, and she has scarcely given marriage a thought so far. It was only a few months ago that she was still a schoolgirl, accustomed to a quite different life. I understand your feelings, but I only ask that you consider mine, as her mother, and as someone who knows her well. She may not be in a position to return your affection, Sir Prescott."

"What need is there of acquaintance?" Sir Prescott said airily. "When two young hearts, of noble descent, are willing to embark upon a life together, why should we follow the customs of the modern world?"

"The question is, Sir," Sigmund said, suppressing the sharp retort that came to his lips, "is she willing? My daughter has currently gone to the Royal Palace, at the Queen's own summons. I do not know when she will return. Perhaps you may consider me modern and *bourgeois*, Sir Prescott, but I would like to discuss this with her, before allowing you to proceed. Lavie is a forthright girl, with strong likes and dislikes, and I would not like to give you false hopes."

"I appreciate your solicitousness, Mr. Regale," Sir Prescott said, "and I share your wishes for your daughter's happiness. Promise me, then, that when she returns from Lorean, you will speak to her of this, and that if she consents, you will send word to me. My only wish is that I may make Miss Lavender happy; my fortune, my lands, and my position are all at her disposal."

"Sir Prescott," Emily said, gently, "you speak well, and you speak kindly. As Lavender's mother, I also desire her happiness more than anything else. But if it should happen that she is unwilling or unable to consent to your offer – or if her affections are engaged elsewhere – I ask you, as a gentleman, to give her due consideration, and to withdraw your suit. If these conditions are acceptable, then I accept your terms as well."

"Mrs. Regale, you are the worthy daughter of your father," Sir Prescott said, causing her to squirm with embarrassment. "I promise that it shall be as you say. I shall not say a word without your consent. And now, I must return to the Military Academy, for my final meeting with the War Minister before I am sent on to Darington. Good day to you, ma'am."

"Good day to you, Sir Prescott," the Regales said, with relieved expressions, and they exchanged formal bows before Sir Prescott left, returning to his carriage, where Felix Gessler was waiting eagerly.

"How did it go, Sir Prescott?" Gessler asked, with a look of excitement on his face.

"I must say that these Regales surprise me," Sir Prescott said, with some annoyance. "The father, in particular, is disgracefully middle-class, and even his wife, for all her noble birth, seems to be contaminated by foolish and modern ideals. What is the nobility coming to, Gessler? Nothing good can come of this mixing of common and noble blood."

"Ah, Sir Prescott, there may be a reason for that," Gessler said, slyly. "While you were talking to them, I made my own enquiries in town, including at the docks and at the Inn. It seems the girl is infatuated with a young man, though this young man does not return her affections, and has taken up with a barmaid at the local public-house. That could explain why she and her parents are being cagey about the whole thing."

"A young man? And a *barmaid*?" Sir Prescott chuckled. "Dear me, we seem to have wandered into a sordid novel of the sort that the domestics at Chuselwock Manor all relish. But continue, my good Gessler. Who is this young man?"

Gessler shuffled his feet. "Well, Sir Prescott...." he began, then stopped.

"Come now, Gessler," Sir Prescott said, kindly. "There is no need for hesitation, even if the young man is your own son. You may speak freely."

"Sir Prescott, it's....that young man we met today morning. The one from the Academy. The Eramond boy, Sir Prescott...."

For all his aristocratic bearing, there were times in his life when Sir Prescott found his temper getting the better of him, and this was one of them. "Ryan....Eramond?" he exclaimed. "That.....young....*dog*...."

"Now, Sir Prescott, don't get worked up..."

Sir Prescott drew his sword and thrust it angrily into the floor of his carriage, where it stood, quivering. "That insolent boy...." He paused, and then spoke coldly and calmly. "Gessler, does this not make you yearn for the days when an arrogant commoner could be punished for his presumption?"

Gessler, forgetting his own far-from-noble origins, nodded enthusiastically.

"But never mind that. Ryan Eramond and his barmaid. How very poetic, Gessler, don't you think? Well, if that is the case, I may not even need to do anything; I can just leave things be, and once he decides to marry her, then my turn will come. But that might take too long, Gessler. The fortunes of the Chuselwock family can brook no such delay."

Gessler, who was more acquainted than any other man with his master's financial position, shook his head. "Indeed, Sir Prescott. You're right."

Sir Prescott ordered the coachman to drive to Lorean, then leaned back, closing his eyes and thinking. "War, Gessler. War changes everything. The common rabble believe that war is a leveler, and that they

may rise to our heights simply by acts of brute force and courage. They are fools, Gessler. There is not a single commoner in the Hall of Heroes, is there?"

"No, Sir Prescott," Gessler said, obediently.

"And there never shall be, as long as I live," he said. "Come now, let us not be despondent. This is not the best of news, but I would not be who I am, if I could not turn this to my own advantage. Miss Regale *shall* give her consent, as long as I can help it. And as for Mr. Bartender Eramond, if he crosses me again... he will have cause to regret it for the rest of his life. Do you understand what I mean, Gessler?"

Gessler laughed. "If I know you, Sir Prescott, it means nothing good for that boy."

"Let us not be crude, Gessler," Sir Prescott said, wrinkling his nose. "Let us merely say that when his will opposes the will of Sir Prescott T. Chuselwock, it is a foregone conclusion as to who will be the victor."

"We're moving on," Lieutenant Shemei said, as the second cannon moved into place. "Halt right there, men. This is where we've been asked to stop. Fall back."

"Yes, sir," the men of the 19th Border Battalion replied in chorus.

"Now, let me explain the mission," the Lieutenant said. "As you know, the Intelligence reports have said that the Varald may be stocking ammunition along this stretch of the border, which is why we've been asked to link up with the 17th and the 18th. While they hold the line, we will proceed east, and launch a surprise attack on the depots that have been identified so far. Half of the men will cover us with their rifles in case we are sighted, and the rest will move forward into the border town of Phaznograd, which is our target. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir," they replied enthusiastically.

"Very well." The Lieutenant made a final roll call of his hundred men, and positioning fifty of them all along the border, the remainder began to march forward stealthily. They were not spotted until they reached a watchtower near Phaznograd, whose sole occupant began to sound the alarm.

"Don't panic!" Shemei ordered. "First and second rifles, tell that man to be quiet!"

Four shots rang out in rapid succession, and the sound of the alarm died out suddenly.

"Now. Bring the two cannons forward," Shemei's second-in-command, Sergeant Hanno said, barking out instructions about the alignment and positioning of the two weapons to the engineers in his battalion.

"There. That's fine."

There was an uneasy silence for several minutes, and then the men at the front began to notice movements at the gates of the city.

“The border guards are coming out,” Shemei observed, studying the scene through his binoculars. “Now remember, men, no unnecessary deaths. Fire one round in front of them, and scare them away. Give them fair warning.”

The first canon pivoted into position, and two shells landed just before the gates of Phaznograd, filling the air with smoke.

“Some of them are falling back,” the lookout shouted, “but there are still a few moving forward.”

“Well, if they desire a noble death, I cannot fault them,” Hanno said, philosophically. “Fourth to tenth rifles, fire. Just once, now. No one need die, unless they want to.”

Seven shots rang out, and two of the Varald guards fell; the rest stepped back, beginning to signal towards the city gates for reinforcements.

“We’ve got their attention now,” Shemei said, smiling. “Now, our targets are those two buildings, there.” He pointed to two nondescript concrete warehouses, a little distance off to the northeast. “Can you reach them from here? We must be quick, before they can send in more men. If we can destroy their supply of ammunition, their leaders will be forced to back down.”

“Ready when you are, Sir,” the gunner and the engineer replied.

“Goodness....Sir, they’re coming out in full force!” the lookout said frantically.

“Fall back!” Hanno commanded, as the men on the front line began to retreat. “Don’t let them get us by sheer force of numbers.”

“Fire now,” Shemei said, raising his hand. At his signal, the two cannons began to unload their ordnance on the two concrete buildings. One of them was hit squarely, and there was a loud explosion as the second round of shells pierced its walls.

“Good old intelligence,” Hanno remarked. “Now the second one, gunner. Be quick, they’re crossing the line of fire now! They could be upon us if we’re not swift.”

The cannons fired again, and the wall of the second building was breached.

“Once more, now. Let’s blow up their ammunition before they use it on us!” Shemei said. “First to tenth rifles, fire again.”

Ten shots rang out, but the Varaldian line continued to move forward, raising their own rifles as they did so. They began to fire, quickly and desperately, and three of the Zion soldiers fell.

“Damnation! One more round, gunner, and then we retreat! Men, take hold of your comrades, and fall back!”

But a stray shot had hit the gunner on the forehead, stunning him and obscuring his vision. Reacting instinctively, he fired a third round of shells, but two these went astray, striking a smaller building to the east of the second depot. The second depot burst into flames, blocking his field of vision further.

“That’s enough for now!” Shemei barked. “Retreat now! Rearguard of the 19th, cover us!”

And, gathering up their fallen comrades, the Zion soldiers retreated to the border. There were further exchanges of fire between them and their Varald counterparts, who were advancing rapidly, but a further cannon shot dispersed them, and the Zion retreat was soon complete.

“Good work, men,” Hanno said, as he made arrangements for the four wounded men, including the gunner, to receive immediate medical attention. “That’ll give them something to think about.”

“That third building we hit by mistake,” the engineer said. “Was that also a depot?”

“Whatever it was, we’ve hit it,” Shemei said, shaking his head as the doctor announced that two of the men were already dead. “And they’ve hit us. This is war, gentlemen.”

“You’re right, sir,” the engineer replied. “And it’s only going to get worse from now on.”

Randall Trask looked at the carriage, which was now drawing up to the Palace, with some surprise. *That’s one of the Queen’s own*, he thought, and scowled. There was no love lost between him and the Queen, whom he considered a singularly unfit ruler. *I wonder who that is. Probably some fool dressmaker or storyteller.*

“Mr. Trask, sir,” Henry Daniels said, opening the door and helping Lavie and Agatha climb down, “I’ve brought some visitors for the Queen and the Princess.”

“I see,” Trask said drily. “Do you have papers to confirm that, man?”

“Yes, I do,” Daniels said cheerfully, handing the Queen’s letter to Trask.

“Hmm, Miss Lavender Regale?”

“That’s me!” Lavie said, looking at Trask warily. *Hmm, that’s the guy who wouldn’t let Ryan and I visit the palace, that time! How long ago that seems, now!*

“You may proceed, Miss,” Trask said, in a disinterested voice. “But who is that other woman? I don’t see her name on this letter.”

“That’s my aunt,” Lavie explained. “She was being attacked by bandits, and they hurt her, so we brought her here thinking that she’d be safe! Can you help her?”

"I'm afraid Lorean Castle isn't a charitable hospital," Trask said, shaking his head. "The letter specifically permits you to enter, Miss, but I can't allow any strangers inside, not after what happened to the Princess."

"Is that so?" Lavie said, her temper rising. "Well, instead of worrying about poor Aunt Agatha, you'd better make sure that the roads are kept free of bandits! It's a wonder we managed to escape them, and you needn't be so mean about it!"

"Please calm yourself, Miss," Trask said, making a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Orders are orders. If you want, I can ask the coachman to take your aunt back to Alton, for medical attention. But I can't possibly allow her inside."

"Lavie, dear," Agatha Regale said, kindly, "it's no trouble at all..."

"Oh, you are such a....." Lavie said, glaring at Trask, who found himself shrinking from the tinge of red in her eyes. "What is wrong with you, anyway?"

"Miss, this is the Royal Palace. Please conduct yourself appropriately..." he began, but was interrupted by a voice that came from behind him.

"Miss Regale! What a pleasure to see you here," Queen Katarina said, waving at Lavie. "I was hoping you would come soon, but this is very quick indeed. Trask, why didn't you tell me they had come?"

"Your Majesty," Trask said apologetically, "Miss Regale is accompanied by an unauthorized person, and..."

"She is *not* an unauthorized person!" Lavie said hotly. "She's my aunt, Agatha Regale, and she's been wounded by bandits! What is so difficult to understand about that?"

"Bandits? Oh, my goodness," Katarina said compassionately. "Please come in, both of you! Mrs Regale, I'll have someone attend to you at once. Daniels, run down to the Royal Surgeon's residence, and tell him that I desire to see him immediately."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Daniels said, bowing before he turned to leave in search of the surgeon.

"And Trask," she said, severely, "do not try to take the law into your own hands. That you should confuse an innocent woman with an intruder does not reflect well on your intelligence. The King shall hear of this." Guiding her two guests into the Palace, she walked away, talking kindly to Agatha and asking her the details of her misadventure.

"Thank you so much, Your Majesty!" Lavie said, giving Trask a mocking look.

Trask looked after the upright figure of the retreating Queen angrily. *Once again. Once again, you humiliate me, when I am trying to do my duty, Your Majesty. You will regret this, as you will regret what*

you did, all those years ago, he thought. And indeed, if the look on his face could actually have been translated into action, Galvenia would have mourned her Queen on that very day.

“My brothers, this is a sad day,” Pontiff Pious said, shaking his head as he finished leading the Council of the Evangelium in their morning prayers. “We have just received news from Unity Isle that Archbishop Mazarus, our faithful servant, was found dead in his quarters last night from a heart attack. May he live with the Infinity and his saints in Paradise.”

There was a minute of respectful silence, and then the Pontiff spoke again.

“Unfortunately, our world is in such a state that we scarcely have time to mourn our dead. We must, of course, send a replacement for our fallen comrade to the Commonwealth as soon as possible. But the news from there is far from encouraging. President Hipper has vetoed the use of the Commonwealth forces in keeping the peace between the Varald and the Zion, and the Council could not gather enough votes to overrule him.”

“With all due respect to the dead, Your Holiness,” San Martino said coldly, “did not Mazarus abstain from voting on this issue? His vote could have broken the deadlock.”

“Archbishop,” the Pontiff said, gently but firmly, “you know very well that such a move would only invite further persecution of our brethren by the Varald. Many of our monks, including the Brothers of Goodwill, still languish in prison, a sad reminder of what happened the last time we voted against the Varald at the Commonwealth. Besides, this is not our war. It was up to Zion and Galvenia to vote in favour.”

“The Republic, as expected, voted against,” Schliemann said, shrugging his shoulders. “Frankly, I think this is as good a time as any to place sanctions on them. What use is it for us to treat the Republican Church as brothers, when their politicians seem determined to oppose us at every step?”

“Forget the Republic,” Legrand said genially. “Those men detained in Saint Marcus’ Castle are our own citizens, not Republicans. Your Holiness, what are we to do with the unrest in our own country?”

“That is precisely why I have summoned you, my brothers,” the Pontiff said, smiling at Legrand. “In recent times, we have seen brutal attacks on the holy convent of Saint Annette, which lies just outside our own gates. A lesser attack, wounding three novices, has since taken place at an orphanage in Lucano. Besides these, there have been two demonstrations at the Zion Embassy, the last of which turned violent. We were forced to deploy the Itarian Guard, especially since two of the protesters threatened to use firearms, and seventy-eight citizens in all were arrested, including twenty women. They claim that they were protesting against the Zions’ abandonment of the faith – I quote their own words – and accused us of pandering to the Zions by sending a representative to the funeral of Prince Wilhelm. Marchmont, you were charged with investigating these people, and studying the reports of the Guards’ interrogations. What have you learned?”

Bishop Marchmont spoke, nervously. "We have spoken to five of the women and most of the men," he said, consulting his notes, "and have charged them sternly to tell the truth. Of the seventy-eight, four are ordained priests, and two are Sisters; the remainder are laypeople, from unremarkable backgrounds. Most of them come from Itaria City itself. They deny any knowledge of the attacks on St. Annette's or the orphanage; they deny being involved with any specific group or organization, but say they are motivated by a desire to protect the Faith in other lands, and to oppose the wickedness of rulers who fail to do their duty by the Infinity."

"I could have guessed as much," Archbishop Elias said, dismissively. "Don't you have anything more substantial?"

"I'm afraid not, Archbishop," Marchmont said, turning a page. "You know very well that we are permitted to question these men charitably, and nothing else. It is against the laws of the Infinity and our country to extract a forced confession."

"Your Holiness," Elias said, annoyed, "surely such a law does not apply in an emergency like this. We need to know where these blasphemous attacks are coming from, before more lives are lost, and before fear grips the whole of Itaria."

"I beg your pardon, Elias," Schliemann said calmly. "If you wish to preach peace and non-violence, as you and the Pontiff have done, you must extend that principle to all, even to our enemies."

"You, of all people, dare say this?" Elias shot back. "Why, just the other day, you were defending Ronald Gray and his jingoistic writings, and advocating that the Zion spread our faith down the barrel of a gun."

"We both seem trapped by our inconsistency," Schliemann said, folding his hands.

"Tell me, Marchmont," the Pontiff said, having listened to the above exchange with interest, "did you impress upon them the danger that awaited their immortal souls? That if they remained contumelious, they would not only risk a prison sentence, but might die separated from the Church, and spend eternity apart from their Heavenly Father?"

"I did, Your Holiness," Marchmont said, "and it seemed as if some of them wavered, but they still would not speak."

"I move that we investigate this problem at the source," Legrand said, frowning. "It is clear that despite their protestations, these men and women are driven by the ideologies of men like Gray, Bastow and Kartner. We must begin our enquiries there, since they will not speak."

"What evidence do you have for that, Legrand?" San Martino said, affably. "We are not the Varald, you know. It is not the custom of the Itarians to accuse one's fellow man without any evidence."

"Evidence, my dear San Martino? What need have we of evidence? These men's actions are themselves an accusation against those who would upturn our Faith," Legrand said, firmly.

“That may be a good deduction,” Schliemann conceded, “but if they are responsible, is it wise to provoke them? Bishop Marchmont, I suggest you continue collecting information discreetly. In the meantime, we must also decide on a replacement for poor Mazarus.”

“There is also the question of what to do with those we have detained,” Legrand added. “We cannot imprison them indefinitely.”

The Pontiff looked around at the anxious faces of the Council, then raised his hand and spoke.

“Let me make one thing very clear, my friends. Acts of this sort cannot happen unless there is a collaboration from within. Where this comes from is, for the moment, unclear. Bishop Marchmont, I charge you to hold the men in your custody at Saint Marcus indefinitely, pending my further orders. You are to place them in individual cells, and provide them with the minimum rations necessary, that they may fast and do penance. Take some of the younger clergy with you – I suggest the Fathers of Good Counsel – and encourage these men to repent and confess, for the sake of their souls; do not harass them, and do not use violence, but exhort them without ceasing. Let us see if we can save some of them.”

“Your Holiness,” San Martino protested, “it is quite against our traditions to coerce the fellow faithful, even if we use only spiritual means. We have not done so for over five centuries, and a tradition cannot be broken that easily....”

“There are certain things that transcend tradition, San Martino,” Pious XXI said sternly, “and the lives of innocent women and children would fall into that category. Next, as Supreme Pontiff, I hereby charge and nominate you, Archbishop Schliemann, to represent me at the Commonwealth Council. Hold the same line that your illustrious predecessor did; do not provoke the Varald into further insults, but be a voice for peace and reason. If war should break out in full force, I authorize you to vote in favour of peace-keeping operations, and if you should be in doubt, always counter-check your decisions with me personally.”

“I accept, Your Holiness,” Schliemann said, bowing and smiling, “and I will follow your instructions in letter and spirit.”

“That is good, Archbishop. Next, we come to the painful matter of identifying those who would take our lives and terrify us. I am informed by some of my faithful servants, currently in Galvenia, that the threads of this plot are being untangled even as we speak, so I must caution you, Legrand, against premature accusations of any group or theologian. Even if they are in error, we must treat them with respect.”

“Galvenia?” Archbishop Elias said, surprised. “What has Galvenia got to do with the matter, Your Holiness? The Church in Galvenia is small, almost non-existent!”

“My good Elias,” the Pontiff replied, “we err when we neglect that which is small and insignificant; we all matter before the Infinity, and what my friends have to tell me from there is certainly important. We

shall discuss this matter once I have more definite information. In the meantime, I charge you to discharge your duties as you would normally, to avoid disseminating information that would cause panic, and to comfort the people of Itaria. May the Infinity guide us all in this difficult period.”

The Council members all rose, and the Pontiff led them in prayer before they all left the hall in an orderly manner, with the Pontiff leaving last of all. As he walked down the hallway leading from the Palace’s conference hall, accompanied by Elias, Legrand came up to them, looking worried.

“Your Holiness,” he said, “if I may say a few words...”

“You may, Legrand,” the Pontiff said, nodding his agreement.

“Your Holiness, far be it from me to question your judgments, but is it truly wise to send Cardinal Schliemann to speak for us at the Commonwealth? He is old and wise, but has distinct sympathies for some of the new movements I spoke of, and they may affect the decisions he makes.”

“I am aware of that possibility, Legrand,” the Pontiff said benevolently. “However, he is too experienced and too conservative to take risks, and he has always been loyal to us. I did consider alternatives, particularly Marchmont and Marlborough, but I need Marchmont here, and if I were to send someone of lower rank, it would ruffle episcopal feathers.” He laughed lightly. “Schliemann is a safe choice, Legrand, I assure you. And even if he were not, consider this: would not the Commonwealth be the safest place for him, either way?”

“I submit to your wisdom, Your Holiness,” Legrand said, clearly pleased. “I only hope he does not get into arguments with the Republicans. Representative Jedda has a gift for sarcasm.”

“That will be a hazard,” Elias commented, “but I think he will have to learn to handle that on his own, Legrand.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness,” Legrand said, as he walked away.

“Elias,” the Pontiff said, watching the tall figure of the Republican bishop recede, “do you think he had designs on that post himself? After years of observing Councils, I can no longer tell the difference between ambition and concern with ease.”

“I cannot say, Your Holiness,” Elias said, loyally. “If something is beyond your capacities, how could I hope to achieve it?”

“Ah, Elias, there is no need for flattery,” the Pontiff said. “But I can tell you that he has something in mind. Sooner or later, we will find out what that is.”

"I'm so glad you could come," Queen Katarina said, taking Lavie by the hand and leading her up a long stairway. "I've often wished Carranya had more friends of her age, and she needs one more than ever today."

"What exactly happened, Your Majesty?" Lavie asked, with a worried expression. They had just left Agatha Regale in the safe hands of the court surgeon, who had found that her wrist was badly bruised and sprained, but thankfully not broken. "Your letter said she was unwell during the funeral."

"She fainted, and was slightly hurt during the fall, but I think something is bothering her. She was very brave when we spoke to the Emperor, and even he was favourably impressed with her, but I think she's just keeping up appearances, Miss Regale."

"Oh, please call me Lavie, Your Majesty," Lavie said. "Was it something that priest said during his speech? I've heard that some of those Itarians can get quite emotional when they preach. Maybe he went overboard with his sermon..."

"No, he was actually a Galvenian, Lavie," the Queen replied. "He was very kind, very respectful of our feelings. He even told us a little story about the Prince's childhood, and used it to give the Zionese some courage. It was quite touching, really, about a little girl and her sand castle. I would like to speak to that man myself, someday."

"Oh..." Lavie said suddenly, stopping in mid-stride, as memories of her encounter at Davenport Park came to her. "Your Majesty, tell me – this Galvenian priest, was he an old man? Elderly, I mean."

"Oh, certainly! He was old enough to be my father, Lavie," Queen Katarina said, with a smile. "Apparently he's coming down to King's College to teach for a while, and he was Wilhelm's tutor when he was a boy. Why do you ask?"

Comprehension dawning on her, Lavie's face clouded over. "Oh, my God....then it was *him*," she said, softly. "Poor Carranya....oh, no...."

"Lavie?" Queen Katarina paused herself, and looked at Lavie with concern. "Is something the matter? Is there something she's told you, that has a bearing on this? Please tell me if you know something."

"Your Majesty, I...." Lavie paused. *The Queen is such a gentle lady, and it's clear that she's unhappy too. She may be the Queen, but she's reacting just like Mom would if I was unhappy. Should I tell her?*

"Lavie," Katarina said gently, taking Lavie's hand in both of hers, "I know my child. I know that whatever it is that's happened to her, it's something I will understand. If you're worried about how...her father would react, I will explain things to him if I find it necessary. Otherwise, this will remain between the three of us, I promise."

"Your Majesty," Lavie said gratefully, "I will tell you everything, but can I speak with her first? I need to be sure that I'm not making a mistake, first. I *could* be wrong, though I don't think so."

“Very well, Lavie,” the Queen said, looking relieved. “She’s just up those stairs, in her room. Go on ahead, I’ll wait in this antechamber here until you’re done.”

“Thank you so much, Your Majesty,” Lavie said, curtseying. As she climbed the stairs, a young man passed her by, and raised the Zion University cap he was wearing. “Good day to you, Miss,” he said, looking at her with an eye that was respectful, but admiring.

“Well, hello,” Lavie said brightly. “And who might you be?”

“Oh, I’m just a visitor from Zion,” the man replied. “My name is Striker, and I work for Zion intelligence. I was on the *Paradiso* during the pirate attack, which is how I got here. The Emperor’s asked me to remain as a liaison officer with the King and the defence forces, should war break out.”

“Will that happen?” Lavie asked, anxiously.

“I cannot say for sure, Miss,” Striker replied, shaking his head. “I can only hope that it doesn’t, but that depends on so many things. Are you one of the Princess’ ladies-in-waiting, Miss? I know the Princess is keen to avoid a war; she told us that during our rescue.”

“Oh, no,” Lavie said, smiling. “I’m just a friend of hers from Davenport, coming for a visit.”

“Well, I hope you enjoy yourself, Miss,” Striker said, replacing his cap as he climbed down the stairs. “Have a pleasant day.”

“You too, sir,” Lavie said, waving at him.

Goodness, Lavie thought, he’s quite nice! I wonder if he and Ryan got to know each other on that ship? Intelligence work can be dangerous, I’ve heard.

That’s a pleasant young woman, Striker thought, as he climbed down. Davenport, she said. I wonder if she’s a friend of young Eramond’s? She must be a noble, if she’s on such good terms with the Princess. Galvenian women are certainly interesting – but get a grip, Wolfman, and stop playing the wolf! You’ve got a job to do!

Lavie knocked at the door of the Princess’ room. “Princess Carranya? It’s me, Lavie!”

“Oh, young lady? Is that you?” Naomi said, as she opened the door. “How delightful to see you here. I’ve just been playing a game of chess with Her Highness, but this old woman isn’t much of an opponent! Do you play, Miss Regale?”

“I’m afraid not, Mrs. Festa,” Lavie replied. “Mom and Dad play sometimes, but I’ve never really learned much! I know the moves, but that’s...”

“Lavie?” Princess Carranya rose from her seat, and looked at her visitor affectionately. She was dressed in a long black gown, indicative of mourning, but which still exemplified sartorial skill and elegance. “Oh, Lavie, it was good of you to come....I didn’t know you’d decide to visit so soon, though!”

“Now why don’t I leave you two girls alone,” Naomi said tactfully. “I’m sure you’d like to have a nice chat together.” She walked out of the room hurriedly, closing the door behind her.

“Princess, to tell you the truth, your mother asked me to come,” Lavie said, choosing her words carefully. “She thought you might need some company after – the funeral.”

“Mother?” Carranya smiled. “Dear Mother, she can be like that sometimes. Please come and sit by me, Lavie. I can see you want to ask me something, but you’re not sure how to begin.”

The two women sat down, Carranya in her armchair, and Lavie at her right hand. “Wow, I don’t know much about chess, Princess, but it looks like you’re winning there!” she observed.

“Indeed, I am. Dear Naomi, she tries her best to keep me company, but I’m afraid I’m not very good company right now, Lavie,” the Princess said, and there was an awkward silence between them.

“Princess,” Lavie began, hesitantly, “I’m – I’m sorry....” She looked at Carranya sympathetically, trying not to betray her own feelings. “I wish things could have been different...”

Carranya looked at Lavie, studying her expression carefully. “Lavie, why.....Oh, my goodness, no....how could you possibly know?” She shook her head, sadly. “Does Mother know?”

“No, Princess,” Lavie said, holding Carranya’s hand. “Your mother was telling me about what happened at the funeral, and when she mentioned that preacher and his story....I knew what it had to be. I just knew. Carranya....I’m so sorry, I....”

And suddenly, the two of them were weeping together, silently, Lavie holding the Princess’ head against her shoulder. “Lavie, I’m.....glad you’re here,” Carranya said, softly, after a long while. “The day I landed in Caledonia, I was.....it was like a dream. I somehow felt that the time had come.....that I was going to find him, at last. And, strangely enough, I did.....I found him at last...” Her voice failed, and she could not go on.

“C-Carranya, please, you don’t have to talk about it now, if you don’t want to. I just want you to know that I’m here. You were there for me that day in Davenport Park, and I am here for you now. Not as a subject, but as your friend,” Lavie said, bravely. “Please, Princess Carranya, let me stay with you, and help you with this. I know I’m just a silly girl out of high school, but I’ll try to help, as best as I can.”

“Thank you, Lavie,” Princess Carranya said, with a weak smile. “You know, when they read out the Prince’s name.....I never even knew that Francis was one of his middle names, and I felt a chill. But I told myself....that it was a common name. Then, when I saw that kind old man, who was crying for....for the Prince himself, I felt that.....I could hardly stand, I was just holding myself upright with whatever I had

left. Then he began to speak so gently, about that day at the beach, and then I knew. I couldn't fool myself any longer, Lavie. Prince Wilhelm Francis...my Francis....was gone. I never had the chance to....to just say goodbye, to show him that I loved him the way he loved me and helped me. I wonder if he ever knew....how much I cared...."

"Princess, please....please don't start thinking like that," Lavie said, passionately, speaking so fast that she had to catch her breath several times. "I remember once, when I was eleven or twelve, we were talking about funerals at home for some reason. I think it was Granddaddy's death anniversary. Daddy took me aside and spoke to me. He said one of the most terrible things you could feel was regret, the regret that you didn't have the chance to say goodbye to someone close to you. He said Mom and Gran were lucky, because they didn't have to deal with it when Granddaddy died, but that others, like his own father, hadn't been so lucky when his own mother had died. He told me that even if it happened to me, I shouldn't keep thinking about it, but just imagine that the person wanted me to be happy, and to move on. Even if he or Mom died suddenly, he said, I should just live the best I can, and that would make them glad." She paused. "Did....that make any sense?"

Carranya took Lavie's hand in hers. "Thank you, Lavie. That made more sense than you'll ever know....Yes, I understand. Francis wanted me to live, to be....my own person. That's why he helped me get on that ship. And I.....I must continue to do so, for his memory. I know I'll see him again, someday, but somehow.....that doesn't comfort me too much right now." Her grip loosened, and she began to sob in a strangely muted manner, as if ashamed of her own grief.

Lavie, sensing that words would be unhelpful at this point, held the Princess close to her, her expression slowly turning to one of anger. *War or not, those who killed Prince Wilhelm must be made to pay*, she thought. *They're monsters! They ought to be punished!*

Carranya suddenly looked up. "Lavie? Is something the matter?" she asked, drying her eyes quickly. "Are you..."

"No, Princess, it's just that....If Wilhelm loved you that much, he was a good man! He wasn't like his father, I'm sure! Those who killed him were evil, and they must be brought to justice!"

"Justice," the Princess said, and the single word sounded ominous in the silence of her room. "Yes, I have thought of that too. For long, I dreamed of preventing the war, but now I see that I owe something to....Francis. Justice for the dead, Lavie. As long as I live, I shall try as hard as I can to ensure that the men who killed him.....will face retribution."

"That's....the Way of Justice, right?" said Lavie, feeling a little awed by the determined look on Carranya's face.

"By the Infinity....Lavie, where did you learn that?" Princess Carranya exclaimed, shocked out of her sorrow for a moment.

“Remember when we talked that day in Davenport Park, Princess?” Lavie replied. “Well, soon after, I took your advice. I went down to Mann Island to stay with Gran, and took quite a few archery lessons, too! They came in quite handy against those bandits.”

“Lavie, did *you* fight those bandits off?” Carranya said, looking at her admiringly.

“Yes, Carranya, I did!” Lavie said, the smile on her face slowly returning. “Anyway, Gran and I spent a lot of time together, and she told me about the three Ways. She even told me a strange story about Granddaddy, and something that happened when I was little.” On seeing the inquiring look on the Princess’ face, she briefly explained what she had learned from Anne. “And the strangest thing is that the man who saved my life was the same Healer who met you that day in Davenport. I met his daughter a little while ago, and even invited her to my home! She’s a very nice girl, you know, though she’s a bit old-fashioned. I’m sure she’d do a better job of comforting you than I do, with my silly stories!”

“You’re doing very well, Lavie, my friend,” Carranya said, affectionately. “Some people call them by different names, but those are the Ways. When I was a child, my teachers called them the Angel Path, the Deity Path and the Warlock Path, but they mean the same. The Angel Path is love. The Deity Path is justice and retribution. And the Warlock Path...” – she shivered – “is the way of evil. The way of Wilhelm’s murderers. Lavie, you may not know it, but you will play an important part in the days that are to come. Yours is the Way of Love, and you must walk faithfully along it, as you have so far.”

“That’s what Gran said, too,” Lavie said, puzzled. “But I can’t see how I could do something big and important. Sure, I’m a better archer than I was before, but it’s not like I’m going to win a war or something!”

“The Way of Love has nothing to do with war, Lavie,” Carranya said, leaning close to her friend. “Even your presence here, today, is a fulfillment of the Way. Francis may be....gone, but I know I can count on you.”

“Thank you, Princess,” Lavie said, looking at her tenderly. “But....the Way of Justice is about war, isn’t it? Does this mean that Galvenia has to go to war now, to – to avenge Francis?”

For the first time since she had left Caledonia, Carranya smiled – not a facsimile, not a valiant effort, but a real smile. “Not always, Lavie,” she said, slowly. “You know, the night I reached your town, I took a walk down Davenport Beach, where we first met. And I heard him speak to me, telling me not to be afraid, and that he’d see me in a better world. I didn’t know what it meant then; I thought I was dreaming. But now I understand. I’ve heard stories of people who could speak from beyond the grave....and now I know that they must be true. Even though he’s no longer on Terra, he still misses me....and watches over me.”

“Wow,” Lavie said, “That sounds just like what Gran says about Granddaddy, even though he’s been gone for eight years now.”

“Is it?” Carranya said, with a far-away look in her eyes. “I can believe her. Aramondrius, the philosopher, once said that those who love can face the future with a heart full of fire. Perhaps that fire can reach beyond the grave, Lavie..”

“I believe it can, Carranya,” Lavie said, and the two women held hands. “And I believe that you, too, will follow the Way of Justice, and become a great Queen of Galvenia some day.”

“Thank you, Lavie,” Carranya replied. “And now it has occurred to me that, to do justice to the man I love, a war may not be necessary. When I was young, I learned legends and myths about the Third Way, and the kind of men who walk along it. One of the men on board, a Zionesse agent called Striker....”

“I’ve met *him*,” Lavie said. “He was just going to see the King, or something.”

“Yes, the Agent has been sent by the Emperor to assist us,” Carranya said. “He suspected, and now I suspect, that this war is not just a matter of Zions and Varalds fighting with each other. Someone is working behind the scenes, planning this war – someone powerful enough to kill not only Koketsu, but Wilhelm, and now one of the Varald politicians as well.”

“But then..” Lavie shivered. “Isn’t your own life at risk, too?”

“Not if I can help it, Lavie,” Carranya said, raising her head high. “Ryan Eramond and the Zion soldiers saved me on board the *Paradiso*. You have given me courage today. And if I cannot be with Francis, I will find those who took his life and started this war, and I will make them pay. I promise. I will find them, and when I do, Francis will find peace, and the war will end. May the Infinity, who has preserved me so far, and surrounded me with loyal friends, grant me this.”

“I’m sure he will, Carranya,” Lavie said, as the two stood together, feeling their resolve increase. “And if there’s anything I can do to help, no matter how little, I will.”

“Out of the question,” Commissioner Jansen said, angrily, cutting off Lord Lucan’s polite interjection. “The Zion have shown, by their actions of late, that they are committed to an unjust war, in which they intend to target civilians. This is absolutely illegal, according to the provisions of the Commonwealth Charter. Look at these photos, Lucan, and tell me if you still dare to believe that we can accept your ridiculous idea of a cease-fire.”

Lucan picked up the photographs, then dropped them, recoiling in disgust. They showed the wreckage of a simple building of red brick. The bodies of two young girls in white dresses were being carried out of it by shocked adults, while a crowd gathered, mourning. “Are you – certain of this horror?” he said, looking at Kanoi disapprovingly.

“These are the latest dispatches from the front. The Varald mourn the loss of innocent children, while the Zion talk glibly of ‘surgical strikes’, and attack a ballet school for girls claiming that we are stockpiling ammunition there,” said Jansen, stubbing out his cigarette.

“If you choose to store your ammunition next to a girls’ school, Jansen....” Kanoi began, irritably.

“Kanoi, do not try to defend the indefensible,” Lucan said, sternly. “Even though we are allies, Galvenia must place her disapproval of your actions on the record. Even if you have a legitimate grievance against the Varald, you are not permitted to target civilians, particularly children. That is what Lord Geraud taught, and I intend to hold you to it.”

“Instead of spouting rhetoric, Lucan,” Kanoi said, glaring at the photographs, “you would do better to criticize the depravity of the Varald, who use children as shields for their acts of aggression! Will you deny, Jansen, that the Zion army *did* destroy two illegal stocks of ammunition on the Ghetz border? Show us *those* photographs, if you dare.”

“There is nothing to show!” Jansen said, waving the photographs in front of Kanoi. “You are merely trying to provide a cloak for your actions. The blood of these children *shall* be avenged by the Varald Divisions, and you will learn this to your regret!”

“What about the blood of Prince Wilhelm? And Junzio Koketsu?” Kanoi thundered. “Your hypocrisy is unbelievable!”

“If your Navy is too feeble to defend itself against pirates, do not blame us!”

“Pirates? You liar!”

“Child killer!”

“Gentlemen, please,” Lord Lucan pleaded. “As members of the Commonwealth Council, we cannot afford to stoop so low! The situation is becoming dire, and I move that the Commonwealth Peacekeeping Forces be deployed at once, before more innocent blood is spilled! There is no other way.”

“That requires either a Presidential decision,” Jedda said calmly, “or a majority vote from the Council and the Senate. And the Council cannot vote on this until the representative from Itaria arrives.”

“I have received a wire from the Pontiff,” Terrin Hipper said, uncomfortable at the thought of using his executive powers in such a situation, “and he is sending a replacement for Archbishop Mazarus, who has left Itaria two days ago. His name is Martin Schliemann.”

“Itaria? Good heavens, that means a week more of this madness!” Kanoi said. “Mr. President, while I deplore the Commissioner’s exploitation of the recent incident...”

“You cold-blooded child murderer,” Jansen shouted. “You kill civilians, and you call it an ‘incident’? Mr. President, men have been impeached for less!”

“Please, my colleagues,” Hipper said, softly. “Enough of this. Viceroy, there is no need to minimize the seriousness of what the Zion Battalions have done. I personally feel that the involvement of the Peacekeeping Forces would introduce too many complications. First of all, by the time they reach the border, more time would have passed, and more tragedies of this sort would have taken place. Second, the Forces contain Zion and Varaldian soldiers themselves, and there is every chance that they may either refuse to serve, or defect to their national armies. Without a majority vote by the Council, I cannot impose my decision on either nation.”

“Mr. President, I move to condemn the illegal acts of the Zion Empire,” Jansen said, sternly, raising his fist, “and I move that the Zion Empire be asked to pay an indemnity. Otherwise, we will have to take steps to defend ourselves.”

“You see?” Kanoi said, blowing a cloud of cigar smoke in his direction. “His outrage is only a pretext, and he uses the situation to make more threats...”

“If I hear you refer to your cowardly deeds as an ‘incident’ or a ‘situation’ again, Kanoi, you will soon realize that these are not mere threats!” Jansen retorted, as his trembling hands lit another cigarette.

“Mr. President,” Lucan pleaded, “can you not reconsider your decision? Why not let the Senate vote on this, and if a majority approve, then deploy the Peacekeeping Forces, at least at sensitive points along the border? Terra cannot afford a further increase in hostilities.”

“As much as it may surprise you, Lucan, I agree with you there. Simply seal the trouble spots, and let the Zion make amends for their deeds, Mr. President. We owe this at least to the civilians living along the border,” Jemma said.

“I object!” Kanoi said. “We are not at fault here. Let the CPF be deployed, certainly, but what is this talk of amends and indemnities?”

“I object as well,” Jansen said, staring at the President. “We request a unilateral withdrawal of troops by the Zion Empire, as well as an indemnity.”

“I must say that Lord Lucan speaks sensibly,” the President said, “but I agree with the Commissioner that reparations are due.”

“What about reparations for the border post at Cornelia, and our five soldiers?” Kanoi shouted. “What about the three men killed by Varald fire during the recent encounter? Are their lives worth nothing?”

“Combatants, my dear Kanoi,” Jansen said sarcastically, “must expect to fall in combat, but this does not apply to children.”

“We were not formally at war when you slaughtered those men, Jansen!” Kanoi replied. “They were not combatants in any sense of the term.”

“If it comes to that, Kanoi, we are still not formally at war, and yet your Emperor orders ‘tactical strikes’ for which our children must pay with their lives! Lands of Ghetz, you deserve a declaration of war, and nothing better!”

“*Raca!*” Jedda said, spitting the epithet out. “The two of you seem to be engaged in a battle to demonstrate who is the most foolish! It is true that you have not formally declared war on each other, but tell me, at this point, are you really waiting for an invitation from the Director or the Emperor? Mr. President, ignore these men, and listen to Lucan. He may be foolish, but at least he is a peace-loving fool.”

“Why, thank you for the compliment, Jedda,” Lord Lucan said coldly.

“Mr. President, that would not be wise,” Jansen said. “Remember that you must seek not only peace, but justice. Justice, Mr. President. Justice for two children and their grieving parents, who know nothing of Charlemagne, Kanoi and their machinations! Let the Senate vote on censures and indemnities, before wasting the lives and time of the CPF!”

“We are not suggesting that justice be ignored, Commissioner,” Lucan said, in a placatory tone. “But are justice and peace mutually exclusive? The Commonwealth is a place to rule on both.”

President Hipper looked first at Jansen, then at Lucan, and then spoke, slowly.

“My colleagues,” he said, “I must admit the justice of both Lord Lucan’s words, and those of the Commissioner. Of course, one option open to us is to have the matter decided by the Commonwealth Court of Justice...”

“Out of the question!” Jansen said, raising his hand. “The Court has a long record of showing undue favour to the Zions, and...”

“Let me speak, Commissioner,” Hipper said, looking sternly at Kanoi, who was about to rise and make his own objection. “Unfortunately, the Court of Justice works slowly, and its jurisdiction in military matters has always been a subject of controversy. I move, therefore, that the Senate vote on two matters. First, whether the Zion Empire is liable to pay an indemnity to the Varald for their recent actions; if the Senate votes in favour, the Council shall fix the amount. Second, whether the Peacekeeping Forces are to be deployed; if the Senate votes in favour, then I shall uphold their decision, given the gravity of the situation. Decisions regarding a cease-fire treaty must be ratified by the entire Council, however. Is this satisfactory, gentlemen?”

He looked anxiously at Jansen and Jedda, but though both seemed displeased, they did not express their dissent openly.

"We accept, Mr. President," Jansen said, coldly. "I hope the Senate will vote wisely on the matter. In the meantime, let my condemnation of the Zion be officially recorded."

"There is no help for it," Kanoi grumbled. "We accept, though I must request you to record our protest at the absurd notion of any indemnity."

"This meeting is now adjourned, gentlemen," Terrin Hipper said, letting out a discreet sigh of relief as the Council members, all of them looking grave except Jedda, rose from their seats and left the room. *The Director has asked me to hold the line, he thought, and that's what I shall do. But we cannot afford this war, and I hope the Senate can come to a decision soon.*

"Are you truly sure this is wise, Socius?" King Arlbert said, shaking his head. "I know I don't object personally, but shouldn't something of this sort go through the Lords, first?"

"The Lords?" Sheffield said, sharply. "Considering the latest antics of Lord Lucan at the Commonwealth, I think the Lords should be apologizing to us, first!"

"Admittedly, his position was difficult," Prime Minister Socius said. "He could not approve the Zions' killing of civilians, even if – as Agent Striker claims – it was due to a tragic accident. But he need not have condemned Kanoi outright, and his siding with Jedda and Hipper creates the wrong impression. I doubt very much that Charlemagne will be pleased with his stance, and we need to do something to counter it."

"Charlemagne is patient," Agent Striker said, calmly, "but I would agree that Lucan has, perhaps, gone a little too far."

"It still seems unnecessary," Arlbert said. "If the Varald were to strike on our own territory, or even at the Zion-Galvenia border, I could understand the need for voluntary recruitment. But at the moment, there is only one theatre of conflict, which is the Ghetz border. Given this, even if we announced a drive for Army volunteers, how much of a response could you expect? And what would we use them for?"

"Diplomacy, Your Majesty," Socius replied. "Such a move would convince the Zion Empire of our intentions towards them, and a force of able-bodied volunteers can never be wasted, even if all they do is train for a war that they may never be a part of. Besides, it would appease those of the Lords who have been, shall we say, annoyed by our cuts to the military budget, and it would put Sir Prescott in his place."

"Sir Prescott?" Arlbert looked puzzled by the mention of the Rough Rider's name. "Why do you mention him?"

"Because," Striker pointed out, "his recent conduct has been quite interesting. Why should he urge you to push the Emperor into declaring hostilities? What does he stand to gain from this, besides a

minuscule change at glory on the battlefield? As His Majesty says, the Rough Riders may not even see active combat, unless the Varald make sizeable inroads into our country, and that would be hard to imagine.”

“He’s an interesting bloke, for sure,” Sheffield said, laughing. “I heard that just before he left for Darington, he paid a visit to Davenport to cultivate an acquaintance with a young woman of noble birth there, and even asked her parents for permission to pay her his attentions. Hardly the action of someone who wants to rush into combat, wouldn’t you say, Agent Striker?”

“I must say I’m impressed,” Striker said. “How do you learn of such things?”

“Oh, it’s what you’d consider amateur work, Agent.” Sheffield chuckled. “We maintain good relations with the Swordsmiths’ Guild, and one of their younger members has a sweetheart who works for the family in question.”

“Well, if he wishes to settle down, that is admirable,” Socius said, “though I must say he has quite a reputation for sowing his wild oats...”

“Enough!” King Arlbert said, stuffily. “We are not here to gossip about one of our best officers, and the son of a Commonwealth Senator and a Peer of the Realm. If the young man wishes to marry, what concern is that of ours? In fact, he has my blessing to do so, if he wants it. Sheffield, you ought not waste time on such trifles.”

Agent Striker laughed. “As you wish, your Majesty,” he said. “The question, now, is this: if you decide to announce a scheme for volunteers, with or without incentives, how do you break the news to the public? A formal announcement may not carry much weight, given how far away the war is for most of your people.”

“A wise question, young man,” King Arlbert said, nodding in agreement. “Sheffield, how should we – ahem – popularize the idea?”

“Do it the Galvenian way, Your Majesty,” Sheffield suggested. “Wait for the formal declaration of war from either side – which will not take long, if the Zion continue massing troops near the border – and then organize a War Fund charitable event of some sort, perhaps a horse race, or better, a cricket match. Invite the Lords as guests of honour, and then spring the idea of voluntary service on the public. Have the proceedings broadcast over the radio. And” – he smiled slyly at the King – “you might consider using your best and fairest ambassador, and ask her to speak on your behalf. Few would resist her.”

“The Princess?” King Arlbert exclaimed. “Really, Sheffield, is it prudent to use her in this way? We almost came to grief when she came with us to Caledonia...”

“Came to grief? Come now, Your Majesty,” Socius said, in his most persuasive voice. “She merely fell or swooned during a hot summer day – and even that can have its advantage; it positions her as having her own frailty, a true ‘Galvenian rose’, if you will...”

“Socius, when I want your sarcasm, I’ll ask for it,” the King said, irritably.

“My apologies, your Majesty,” Socius said, calmly. “But my point was quite a different one. When she met the Emperor, she spoke openly in favour of an alliance with us, did she not, Agent Striker?”

“So I was told,” Striker replied. “And I must say that both the Emperor and the Empress were very favourably impressed – both at her apparently sincere grief for our poor Prince, and at the courageous way in which she condemned the Varald attack.”

“I still don’t like the idea entirely,” Arlbert said, hesitantly. “I know Carranya is of age, and does not lack courage, but making her a public figure of that sort has its own disadvantages. Besides, she has always been something of a pacifist; I don’t know how happy she would be endorsing an action of this sort.”

“Ask her, your Majesty,” Socius said, still keeping calm. “It cannot hurt. And even if she refuses, I still agree with Sheffield’s plan. Organize an event in a week or two, by which time the Commonwealth’s position would have crystallized – say the eighteenth of July, which is Sir Raymond Chester’s birth anniversary. It would please everyone – the Lords and the Zion Empire – and it would make the people’s acceptance of such a decree easier.”

“Very well, Socius. You have my permission. A cricket match would be easier than a horse race, but I leave the sporting side of things to your discretion. However, allow us to speak to the Princess first, so that we can make our plans,” the King said, feeling both enthusiastic and doubtful about the entire notion.

“It certainly could work well, if nothing extraordinary happens in the next two weeks,” Agent Striker said, as he, along with the two Ministers, left the Throne Room.

“This just....feels right, somehow, Ryan,” Marianne said, as they settled down in a comfortable corner of Lorean Glade. “Our own little corner, away from the buzz of Davenport, and the noisy customers of the Queen’s Head!” She laughed. “Some of them can be quite – interesting!”

Ryan looked at her with concern. “Do they bother you a lot?”

“Ooh, someone’s getting jealous,” Marianne said, touching his face lightly. “No, Mr. Eramond, they do not ‘lead me into temptation’, as the Itarians would say. Most of them just get pickled up to their eyeballs, and start showing how badly they sing! Ever since that Princess came by, they seem to like patriotic songs.”

“Patriotic drunkards?” Ryan said, laughing as he squeezed her hand. “Now that’s a new one. Maybe they should all be drafted into the Army, then they’d stop making such a racket.”

“But Mr. Vellin’s been good to me, Ryan,” she went on. “I think both he and Jaina know about Mother, but they’re not talking about it, thankfully. I’m just scared about what will happen once Cathy starts spreading her rumours....” She looked upset, and Ryan hastened to slip his arm around her, and draw her closer to him.

“Don’t worry about those silly girls, Marianne,” Ryan said, gently. “Whatever Cathy or Lavie may say, remember that it isn’t your fault. You are not responsible for what your parents may or may not have done. Repeat that to yourself every day, until you end up believing it.”

“Oh, my very own personal therapist,” Marianne said, leaning contentedly against him. “Thank you for – for being there, and for standing by me, Ryan....”

“I’ll always be there, Marianne. You know that, don’t you?” Ryan said, looking into her eyes.

“Ryan....” Suddenly, she looked troubled again. “You know, I’ve been wondering....”

“What is it, Marianne?”

“Ryan....you know, there’s been so much talk about war. It’s so ugly....why should we suffer because of what happened in some other country? Promise me you won’t go running off to war, and leave me alone. Don’t leave me behind, Ryan....”

“Marianne..” Ryan held her face in his hands, and spoke in a soft voice. “There’s no real danger of that. It’s been over two months since all these troubles started, and no one – not the King, not the Prime Minister, not even the Commonwealth – has come knocking at my door, asking me to get drafted. It’s not going to happen, darling. You’re right, this isn’t our war.”

“But what if they ask you to volunteer?” Marianne said, sadly. “What if you.....just want to be a hero, like you were on board that ship? Would you go and....sign up?”

Ryan smiled at her. “Not unless I had a good reason to, sweetheart. Not unless our own country, and our own town, were in danger. And right now, the best reason I have to *not* sign up is beside me, where I want to be.”

“Do you really mean that, Ryan?” Marianne said, her expression brightening.

“I do, Marianne,” Ryan said, running his fingers through a stray lock of her hair, which was blowing in the summer breeze. “This war isn’t greater than us both, and I pray that it will never be.”

“That’s what I want, too. That nothing should come between us, and separate us. I’ve been....I just don’t want to be alone, Ryan....”

“Trust me,” Ryan said. “That isn’t going to happen, not if I can help it.”

“Ryan,” Marianne said, placing her arm around him, “I....I just love you so much....”

He leaned closer to her, and what followed was a scene that some artists would have loved to paint – not like the arrival of the Princess in all her regalia, but a simpler and perhaps a happier scene; the morning sun, the lush grass of the glade, and the young couple – perhaps the fairest of the youth of Davenport – joined in their embrace.

Marianne looked up into Ryan’s eyes. “Goodness, Ryan.....I’d almost forgotten what that felt like,” she said, blushing.

“Oh, is that so?” Ryan said, teasingly, though his own heart was beating fast. “Well, let me – remind you a little more, then!”

“No, mister,” Marianne said, happily. “It’s my turn now!”

And she was as good as her word...

“Gran,” Emily protested, her face showing as much moral disapproval as a child of ten could, “I don’t really like this part of the story...”

“Well, my darling,” Lavie replied, tenderly, “neither do I. But I’ve got to tell you the truth, and sometimes the truth is hard to bear. But it can also make us see things more clearly, and it can also – free us, in a way. Both your Grandpa and I had to learn some hard truths along the way, but I think they actually did us good.”

“Like a shot?” Emily said, laughing. “I remember Daddy telling me, when I had to have my shots last year, that they would hurt. But he said that they’d keep me from falling sick for the rest of my life, so I had them anyway! Is it something like that, Gran?”

“My, that’s a good comparison, Emily. But let’s go on. In the meantime, strange things were happening in another part of the world...”

“We are in position, Sir,” Chief Broyude said, consulting his map, as the *HMS Princess Alexandra* pitched slightly, moved by the waves.

“Good work, men,” Captain Baker said. “I still don’t quite understand the purpose of this mission, though.”

“Well, Captain, that makes two of us,” Broyude said, laughing loudly. “But when Sir Prescott and Minister Sheffield give the orders, we just have to obey, don’t we?”

“I’m glad you’re here, Lucas,” Captain Baker replied. “I never was too happy when they put you on the *Paradiso* in the first place, and I’m glad you’re back in the colours. Anyway, these were our instructions –

to deploy towards the waters between the Republic and Varald, and watch for any Varaldian ship movements to Zion. If their Vanguard Fleet wants to reach Zion from the coast, they'll have to pass this way."

"Thank you, Harold," Broyude said. "I suppose I just needed a little time away from the Navy, after I lost Martha, but I'm glad to be back in harness. I understand that they want us to keep an eye on the Varald, but I still have three questions. First, why us? The Zion could very well have used their own ships, at least for the moment. Second, if the Varald should pass this way, should we engage them? There are only four more battleships with us, and they may not be able to stand up against an entire fleet. And third, why do we have the Royal Marines on board? Surely we're not planning a landing on Varald soil, not with this small a force."

"Those are good questions, Lucas, but I'm afraid you and I are just ordinary sailors, and we aren't privy to what Prescott or Sheffield are planning. I've spoken to the Marines myself, and they're quite in the dark, too; most of them are just privates, though there are two who have recently been promoted to the rank of Sergeant. Quite an inexperienced lot."

"Perhaps we will receive further instructions later," Chief Broyude said, though his expression suggested that he was doubtful about this. "But I've never liked Prescott, and I have an uneasy feeling that he has sent five ships of His Majesty's Fleet on a fool's errand, simply to achieve some diplomatic goal of his own with the Zion."

"Perhaps he's courting a Zionese noble," Baker suggested. "I've heard enough stories about Sir Prescott's – conquests, is that the right word? He is quite the ladykiller."

"I wouldn't know about that, Captain; the only woman I ever cared for is with the Five Angels now, and I hope she's watching over us," Broyude said, a smile coming to his face.

"Captain Baker, Sir." A woman in Marine uniform, entered and saluted the two Naval officers.
"Permission to speak, sir."

"Oh, good day, Sergeant Burns," Captain Baker said, kindly. "What news, pray?"

"Sir, the ensigns on lookout duty have sighted seven ships. I have confirmed this observation myself, Sir, and three of them appear to be Varaldian cruisers, but I cannot identify the other four. What are the orders, Sir?"

"Seven ships?" Broyude looked worried. "That is troublesome, Captain."

"Let me have a look at this myself, and decide how troublesome it is. Come with me, Sergeant."
Followed by the Marine, Captain Baker ascended to the main deck, where the two lookouts were standing at attention, looking nervously into the distance.

“It’s a pity we don’t have range detectors, as they do at Checkpoint Bravo, Sir,” Sergeant Burns said. “We’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

“Hmm, Checkpoint Bravo? That’s a Commonwealth spot, Sergeant, so they’d have the latest. Isn’t Arnoldus, the Republican, posted there? He’s a good man. I’ve worked with him, when I did my compulsory tour of duty with the Commonwealth Fleet, long ago. You wouldn’t happen to know him, would you, Sergeant?”

“Indeed, I know him rather well, Sir,” the Sergeant replied, with a smile. “He is my own mother’s brother. He still chaffs me about the fact that my mother married a Galvenian, but an uncle’s an uncle for all that.”

“How interesting, Sergeant,” Captain Baker said, with approval. “Well, let us see what these seven ships are up to.” He removed his telescope from his pocket, extended it to his full length, and walked to the edge of the deck, looking through it at the waters of the Ocean of Ghetz.

“Three Varalds, indeed” he said, looking thoughtful, “and....My goodness, Sergeant. What on Terra are those ships doing there?”

“Do you recognize them, Sir?” Sergeant Burns, asked, in a concerned tone.

“I never.....Sergeant, those ships shouldn’t even be anywhere, except in a museum. They’re old warships from the days when Itaria wasn’t so peaceful, centuries ago. It looks like someone has – renovated them. What on earth are they doing behind Varald cruisers?”

“Itarian ships?” the Sergeant exclaimed. “I didn’t know such a thing existed. I didn’t know Itarians could build anything other than those little rowboats for starry-eyed couples, frankly.”

“Well, it was quite long ago, but I’m sure I’m right. It’s either that, or the Varald have been studying old books on naval history,” Captain Baker said, drily. “And they seem to be heading straight for us.”

Chief Broyude, who had joined them by now, looked out of his own, rather antiquated *longue-vue*, which was something of a family heirloom. “By the sharks and monsters of the sea, you’re right.”

“What are the orders, Sir?” Sergeant Burns said, returning to her stiff military manner.

“Broyude, transmit a message to the Admiralty,” he said, “and, to be on the safe side, send one to Minister Sheffield, as well. This may be what they were expecting.”

“Are we to prepare for combat, Sir?” Broyude asked.

“It might be more prudent. Keep the cannons ready, cut our speed by half, and transmit the same instruction to the rest of the fleet. No need to take unnecessary risks.”

“Aye, aye, Sir,” Broyude said, and departed obediently to carry out his Captain’s commands.

“They should be within firing range in an hour or so,” Captain Baker said, shaking his head. “I don’t like the look of this. I can accept a fool’s errand, but not a madman’s.”

“They seem to be speeding up, Sir!” one of the ensigns said, excitedly.

“They’ve sighted us, in other words. Sound the signal, Ensign. All battle hands on deck, and prepare for the worst. We may be five against seven, but one of us is worth three of those leaky Varald tubs.”

“Yes, sir!” the ensign replied, scared but inspired by his leader’s brave words. The horn sounded, and the men on board – along with Sergeant Burns’ Marines – all moved into their appointed positions, waiting anxiously for what would come next.

“Sir, they’re raising a flag, Sir,” the ensign said, leaping from his position. “I don’t recognize it.”

“Sweet Infinity, boy, didn’t they send you to school?” Captain Baker said, sharply. “Let me.....Goodness, Ensign, you’re right. That’s.....” He stepped back, and addressed the Sergeant. “It’s like a Varald flag, but the Varald colours are red and white. This one is blue and white. I’ve never seen it before, either.”

“Blue and white?” Sergeant Burns looked shocked. “But Sir – those are the Commonwealth colours.”

“True, Sergeant, but the pattern – the hammer and the anvil – is that of the Varald. By the Five Angels,” he thundered, “I wonder what this could possibly mean.”

“They’ve gathered speed, now, Sir,” the ensign said, his hands trembling as he lowered his telescope. “The seven of them are forming a V, now.”

“Sir,” Chief Broyude said, returning to the deck with a darkened expression. “I have transmitted the messages, and received a reply from the War Office. They instruct us to proceed on our course, and raise the yellow flag, indicating that we are on a mission of exploration, and not one of combat.”

“The only thing yellow here is the War Office, Lucas,” the Captain said, darkly. “They don’t look like they’re going to be friendly in the least. Raise the flag, but run up the Galvenian colours at full mast too. We will not let them intimidate us.”

Suddenly, the sound of an explosion thundered through the still air, startling all of them. There was a large splash of water, drops of which fell onto the foredeck, and the ship swayed slightly.

“They’ve opened fire!” Sergeant Burns said, in dismay. “Captain, we should fight back!”

“Their range seems to be better than ours,” Bakes said. “Gunners, prepare the two forecannons. Lucas, tell our ships to form a wing; spread out, so that they cannot damage two of us at the same time. And increase our speed as much as you can.”

“Aye, sir. Maybe they’ll stop when they see the yellow flag,” Broyude said, firmly, signaling instructions to the engineers and the gunners, who hurried to obey their Captain.

The two fleets drew closer, and Captain Baker looked at his unknown adversaries with a determined air. "Broyude, send word to the authorities that we are under attack. Whether we survive or not, let Galvenia know that we stood firm."

"Aye, Sir," Broyude said, with a smile, as he ran below the main deck.

"That's close enough, men. Fire now," Baker said calmly, and two shots rang out from the cannons of the *Princess Alexandra*. One of them landed wide into the water, but another struck the hull of one of the Varald ships, which swayed and went off course, slowing receding under the turbulent ocean.

"Got'em, sir," the first gunner said, exultantly. "That's the trouble with a V. That cruiser's going to hit its neighbor, and they're not going to like that."

"Now again, a little to the west, gunner," Baker said, raising his hand. "If we can cripple the two ships on either side of that Itarian thing in the centre, they ought to have second thoughts."

A second volley was fired, and a second ship – which was approaching at an alarmingly high speed – was hit, though above the waterline.

"Good work," Baker began, but now the seven ships had all opened fire, in a confused and chaotic manner. One of the Galvenian ships was hit below the water, and began to flounder.

"Damnation!" Baker said. "That big Itarian ship, or whatever it is – Curse it! Broyude! Tell all our ships to concentrate their fire on that one! Now!"

Broyude was signaling frantically, and the Galvenian ships all complied, in a rather more orderly manner. Two of the shots went wide, and a third Varald ship, hit squarely, began to sink. The large ship in the centre, however, though hit twice, was still proceeding forward, as if seeking a collision with the *Alexandra*.

"Flaming pits of hell," Broyude cursed. "Do they want to take us down and perish as well?"

"Sergeant," Captain Baker commanded. "Signal to all the ships to head starboard. We can force a passage that way, since those two smaller ships are hit. Gunners on the fore, fire again, aim only at the hull of that suicidal ship. Gunners on the flanks, be ready to fire when I give the command."

"Good heavens!" the ensign shouted, as if terrified. "Captain....Look at that!"

"What in...." the Captain said, struck speechless for once. Out of the deck of a smaller "Itarian" ship, a small cannon was pouring fourth a stream of flame, which seemed to burn all the more as it struck the water, rather than being quenched. It surrounded one wing of the Varald fleet with a barrier of fire, a barrier that would certainly destroy any ship that dared transgress it.

"What on Terra is that, Captain?" Sergeant Burns exclaimed.

“Broyude,” Captain Baker said, breathing hard, “transmit the distress signal to the authorities, and to any of the Galvenian Navy who happen to be nearby. There is no easy way now. Starboard, all!”

At his signal, the gunners on the fore all fired at the large ship, and this time, their blows finally struck home. A large hole was blown through the ship’s steel hull, and it began to take in water.

“At last,” Baker said. “Now, from the sides. Destroy that wing, or at least disperse it. We cannot possibly pass that wall of fire, whatever it is!”

“Is that....a magical attack?” Sergeant Burns said, wonderingly. “I’ve never heard of fire that can burn on the surface of an ocean!”

“No time for questions, Sergeant,” Baker shouted, above the roar of the enemy cannons, which were now firing desperately, now that the combat had been reduced to four ships aside. A second Galvenian ship was hit, several times, and began to sink with alarming rapidity.

“My God,” Sergeant Burns said sadly. “My men.....”

“May their souls rest in peace, Sergeant,” Broyude said solemnly.

The Galvenian cannons fired again, and the “Itarian” ship was hit, falling out of line as it began to sink, colliding with its neighbor and sending it off course.

“We’re out of their course, Captain,” one of the navigators called out, “but still within firing range. Should we...”

But before he could go on, another of the “Itarian” ships fired a similar jet of flame, barring their way.

“Hold the line, men! Slow down!” Captain Baker barked out. “If we continue at the same speed, we’ll be burned to ashes! Take that ship down, before it can do any more damage!”

The navigators hurried to their posts, but one of the Galvenian ships – late in receiving the signal from the *HMS Alexandra* – had already made contact with the spreading flames, and began to literally fall apart as the flames licked at its hull. The *Alexandra* and its remaining companion fired, blindly, striking the fire-wielding ship time and again, and it began to disappear from their sight.

“Two on two, Lucas,” Captain Baker said, panting. “Send word to the authorities about this....new weapon! It’s diabolical!”

The two remaining enemy ships began to swerve, but were effectively blocked by their own flames. They continued to fire, and the *Alexandra* was hit several times, tossing badly.

“Captain, we’re hit!” A cry arose from beneath the decks. “One of the engines has been damaged!”

“Send word to the other ship to retreat at once!” Baker shouted. “No panic, men. Ask them to find a safe harbor at San Severe, or wherever they may go! All men on deck, and fire as fast as you can.”

“But Captain,” the Sergeant replied, “shouldn’t we let them stay here....”

“Sergeant, I am the master of this ship,” Baker said simply. “We can’t risk losing all our ships, when we can do the job ourselves. We are not sinking, merely limited in our mobility. Destroy that Itarian wretch. We’re going to take as many of them as they can.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the gunners replied, and the cannons pivoted and fired on the two remaining enemy ships. One of them was hit, and its hull splintered.

“Good work, men,” Baker said, but the last of the “Itarian” vessels was now firing rapidly, in sheer desperation. Two of its shots hit the hull of the *Alexandra*, which shuddered and swayed, sending waves over one side of the deck.

“By the Five Angels,” Broyude exclaimed, running onto the deck. “Do those fools want to be destroyed? They’ve trapped themselves behind their own wall of flame, and....”

“Starboard, now, and fire! For Galvenia!” Baker said, implacably, as the *Alexandra* fired another round from its flank, steering with difficulty. The ship was hit, and went down slowly, still firing its cannons as it did.

The smoke hung heavy in the air as the last of the adversaries sank beneath the surface. “What – on Galvenia – was that supposed to be?” the chief navigator said, bewildered.

“I don’t know,” Captain Baker said, “but I’m proud of you, men. Has the other ship left?”

“Affirmative, Sir, it’s disappearing into the distance, heading southeast,” the rear lookout called out.

“Thank the Infinity for that,” Broyude said, wiping his forehead with one of his large hands.

“Well, I don’t know who those lunatics were,” Baker said, firmly. “They fought like landlubbers, and we could have taken more of them down if it hadn’t been for their engines – and that jet of fire of theirs. By the Krakens of Meldia, what sort of weapon was that?”

“I don’t know, Sir,” Sergeant Burns said, still shaken by the loss of the ship carrying her men, “but I’ve heard of Zionesse fire mages who could achieve such things. Those were no Zions, however, Sir.”

“My condolences, Sergeant,” Baker said kindly, offering his hand to her. They shook hands firmly, and then he went on. “Now the trouble is, where do we go from here? Waiting for support to arrive is dangerous; we don’t know how many of our friends are lurking around here, and their ships must have transmitted our position before they went down.” He walked to the staircase leading to the engine room, and called out to the men there. “Engineer Fox, is there any possibility of making repairs?”

“Negative, Sir. We’re not taking in water, but the shock has damaged both the engines, and one of them has been partly destroyed by a cannonball. We lack the necessary materials.”

“It seems we have no option but to wait,” Broyude said.

“Sir,” a Marine said, running up to the Captain, “we have a signal on the wireless. An official of the Galvenian War Command wishes to speak to you.”

“That was quick,” a surprised Baker said, as he climbed down to the communications room. “This is Captain Baker speaking, aboard the *HMS Alexandra*,” he said, firmly. “Sir, we have just been engaged in combat by a fleet of seven ships, three of whom bore Varald emblems. We defended ourselves, but have lost three of our own vessels. One of our ships is on its way back to San Severe, but our engines are damaged. We cannot navigate for any distance now.”

Even allowing for the distortion that the wireless caused, the voice that replied was harsh and cold. “Captain Baker,” it replied, “you are a fool.”

“What?” Baker shouted.

“Did we not tell you, Captain, that this was a delicate mission? Who authorized you to engage in combat?”

“Sir,” Baker said hotly, “we were fired upon, and we were defending ourselves.”

“Is that so?” The voice sounded frankly unbelieving, and Baker felt his sailor’s temper rise. “In any case, you have also erred greatly, in passing on your position to nearby ships, and to the Admiralty. You were instructed to contact us, and us alone, if anything happened.”

“With all due respect, Sir,” Baker replied, “we were attacked, and I was following the standard procedure for Galvenian Navy operations.”

“Captain, at the moment, you do not answer to the Galvenian Navy, but to us. You have seriously jeopardized our operation by your hasty actions, and have cost us dearly. And, for your own safety, we cannot deploy anyone to come to your rescue. Take your lifeboats, Captain, and head to the nearest Republican port, if you wish. I trust they will be more merciful than we will. Lie low, and keep out of our sight. Perhaps we may forgive you at some point in the future. But for now, if you make any attempts to return to us, rest assured that justice will overtake you.”

“Damnation, what are you speaking of?” Baker shouted, but there was a blast of static, and the line went silent. He dropped the transmitter, staring at the device in shock.

“Imps of the Pits, Captain,” Broyude said quietly, “what on Terra do we do next?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE WAY OF LOVE

*“Love no flood can quench,
no torrents drown.
Were a man to offer all his family wealth
to buy love,
contempt is all that he would gain.”
(Song of Solomon, ch. 8, v. 7)*

“Ryan!” Henrik called out, as he noticed his friend passing by the city square, looking preoccupied.
“What’s the news, Compadre?”

“Oh, hello, Henrik,” Ryan said, stopping and smiling. “I’m just in two minds, that’s all. And that’s not something I like.”

“What’s the matter?” Henrik asked.

“Well, it’s about that Chester Memorial cricket match they’re having at the Lorean Oval this weekend,” Ryan explained. “Ever since that attack by the Varald Navy on our ships, the news from the Commonwealth....hasn’t been good. Hipper refuses to deploy any of the peacekeeping forces, and Lord Lucan is going to formally condemn the attack. Just imagine. Five of our ships, completely destroyed, just like that. I even knew one of those sailors, for the Infinity’s sake! Those were good men. Commonwealth or not, something has to be done about the Varald. They’ve gone too far.”

“I agree, Ryan,” Henrik said, “but what were our ships doing there?”

“According to the official statement from the War Office, they were patrolling the waters between the Directorate and the Republic, to keep a watch out for any Varald invasion that way, when they were suddenly attacked.” He shook his head, sadly. “And the fighting on the border still goes on and on. The Zion could soon be attacked on two fronts, and if they can manage an invasion by sea, the Varald could even cross the border into Galvenia.”

“That’s not going to happen so soon,” Henrik observed. “The Republic’s a long way off. But what does this have to do with a cricket match, anyway?”

“Haven’t you read the papers, or heard the news?” Ryan said, surprised. “Where have you been all this time?”

“Well, I’ve been quite busy studying, and....” Henrik said, not very convincingly.

“Henrik!” A cheerful voice called out to him from behind, and he turned to look, with what Ryan would describe as his “goofy grin” slowly appearing on his face. “Thanks for waiting for me here. I brought the second volume of the *Reader* along today, so we can work on that!”

“Hi, Bernadette,” Henrik said, happily. “That sounds great. Literature never was my strong point, especially poetry and stuff, so I appreciate the help.” He helped her with a pile of books that she was carrying with some difficulty, keeping them on an empty bench.

“Hello, Ryan,” Bernadette said, noticing him and greeting him with a friendly wave. “So what acts of heroism are you and Henrik planning in your spare time?”

“Good one,” Ryan said, laughing. “No acts of heroism for me; in fact, I’m just having trouble making a decision here, so I thought I’d ask Henrik for some advice.”

“Oh, I know how that feels,” Bernadette said, sympathetically. “And Henrik always gives such good advice! Want to talk about it? We could always sit down right here. Or if it makes you uncomfortable” – she smiled at him – “I could always wait until you men have finished your man-to-man chat!”

“It’s nothing of that sort, er – Bernadette,” Ryan said, a little touched. *I knew Henrik would always fall for a “Church girl” in the end, but I have to admit, she’s quite kind! That stupid hat doesn’t suit her, though. Must be some Itarian tradition.* The three of them sat down, Henrik and Bernadette on one bench and Ryan opposite them, and he went on. “You see, after our Navy was attacked, the Prime Minister announced a fund-raising event for our troops, in the event that war should occur. There have been rumours that he’ll probably start asking for voluntary recruits, too, since the Zion border has actually been pushed back a little.”

“How terrible,” Bernadette exclaimed, closing her eyes. “I do pray that the Commonwealth can resolve things soon. I’ve heard enough about war from my father to know that it ought not to be.”

“Was your dad in the army?” Ryan asked, interested. “I didn’t know the Army had official healers.”

“No, he was always quite a pacifist, as I am,” Bernadette replied. “But when he was a boy of fourteen, his father took him to Unity Island, just after the battle of Chespa Bay, to help care for the wounded as part of a Church mission. It was dreadful. He could never bring himself to discuss it fully, not even with Mother or with me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Ryan said, causing her to smile. “Well, anyway, Socius is organizing a cricket match for that purpose at Lorean, and the Royal Family will be attending it. Because of what happened on the *Paradiso*, I’ve been invited, along with my family, and they’ve even given me an extra ticket. The only other invitees from our town are the Mayor, Hocha – who will represent Colonel Whitworth – and the Regales.”

“Wow. That’s quite a distinction, Ryan,” Henrik replied. “Congratulations! So what’s the trouble, then?”

“That’s the funny bit. You see, my girlfriend....” He hesitated, wondering how much he should say.

“Oh, Henrik’s told me about her, Ryan,” Bernadette said, with a light laugh. “You don’t need to worry about embarrassing me, or anything. I’m glad you’re back together.”

“Well, I thought I’d invite Marianne to come with me; it’d be a fun outing, and it would be quite a nice change for her! She’s even a cricket fan, and has a big pin-up of Joe Patterson in her room.”

“Well, why not?” Henrik said. “I know that if I had such tickets, I’d take a certain student from St. Nealus’ College along, even though cricket really isn’t my cup of tea....”

“Stop it, Henrik,” Bernadette said, slapping his arm playfully and laughing. “Your father would probably lecture us both about the importance of study, if we did that!”

“Oh, is that so?” Ryan said, amused. “Well, the funny thing is, when I asked Marianne to come along, she actually got quite upset over the whole thing! I don’t understand why.” He shook his head. “I thought we were getting along just fine...”

“Upset? But whatever for?” Henrik asked. “Was she afraid of meeting Lavie there, or something? I know the two of them don’t have a relationship made in Paradise, to put it mildly. But surely the Regales would be in a Royal box, and you’d be with the regular guests, right?”

“Lavie Regale?” Bernadette’s expression brightened. “Oh, Miss Regale and I are friends too, Henrik! She’s such a lovely, kind person. And her father was so nice to me, even though we only met once. He treated me almost as if I were his own daughter. He lent me some very interesting books of his, about old legends and myths, and said I could always borrow some more!”

“Are you sure we’re talking about the same Lavie here?” Ryan said, looking suspiciously at Bernadette. “The Lavie I know isn’t exactly the kindest person in the world.”

“Oh, really?” Bernadette said, surprised. “Well, I’ve often found that most people can be kind, if you treat them the right way. Isn’t that true, Henrik?”

Henrik laughed. “Lavie’s all right,” he said. “It’s just that she has a bit of a temper, if you know what I mean.”

“Anyway, Marianne wasn’t upset about Lavie. It was something quite different,” Ryan explained. “She said it was selfish of me to go there, because it meant I was interested in the war, and in signing up for the army. She asked me to stay with her, and maybe go out to the beach that day instead. I couldn’t understand why. I explained that it was just a formality, that the Royals invited me, and that it would be rude to refuse such an honour.”

“And what did she say to that?” Bernadette asked, with a bewildered expression on her face. “It’s true that the Prime Minister might ask people to join up – it’s been in the papers, after all – but surely, she would believe you, wouldn’t she, Ryan?”

“No,” Ryan said, looking confused. “In fact, that seemed to make things worse. She said that if I really loved her, I’d place her above the Royals, who just wanted to go to war. She was afraid that I’d sign up, because of my actions on the *Paradiso*, and that something would happen to me. She said the politicians

would try to use me as a figurehead, and get other young men to sign up using me as a tool. It was all quite absurd, and I told her so.”

“Hmm, that’s the sort of thing I’d expect from Lavie,” Henrik said. “She can be a little, er, sticky at times, though not *this* much! But Marianne? This sounds rather serious, Ryan. Has she even lost a loved one in a war, or something?”

“Not that I know of,” Ryan replied. “You know her dad, right? He’s a broker and trader, dealing in antiques, jewelry and books; I’ve never heard of his having had any dealings with the Army. Her mum and dad are divorced, and her mum lives in Trinden now, but I never really knew her that well. I can’t understand why she’d take it this way, I thought she’d be leaping for joy! Anyway, I comforted her as best as I could, and told her that I’d think about it, but even if I went, I wouldn’t necessarily be signing up for anything. She wasn’t entirely convinced, and she sent me a note today, asking me to meet her on Saturday in the park. It’s all quite confusing.”

“Maybe it’s just class consciousness,” Bernadette said, recalling her sociology lessons. “Perhaps she doesn’t like the Royals and what they stand for. Maybe she feels that, since she’s from a middle-class background, she wouldn’t belong at a place like the Lorean Oval. I know I’d feel a little awkward in a setting like that, though it’s vain of me.”

Henrik patted her hand. “That’s a good suggestion, Bernadette. Or maybe her dad just has different political views, and told her to stay away from anything to do with the war, or with Socius. Maybe he’s a supporter of Breckenridge, like Armin is.”

“The question is, what do I do now?” Ryan said, feeling more than a little annoyed. *Even Henrik and his girlfriend wouldn’t mind going, though I’m sure they’d rather be singing sleepy songs in some old church! What’s the matter, Marianne?* “I really ought to go, after all that happened back there, and I’m sure the Princess would expect me. But if I do – I don’t know. I know Marianne’s still quite broken up about her mum’s leaving. I don’t want to hurt her, but I don’t understand why she’s being so unreasonable.”

“Ryan,” Bernadette said gently, “sometimes, what seems unreasonable to one person may seem reasonable to another.”

“You mean, like that headgear of yours?” Ryan joked. “I know I couldn’t wear a thing like that, but if you’re able to obey the Infinity that much, more power to you!”

Bernadette flushed and looked down, and even Henrik looked uncomfortable.

“Um, did I say something wrong?” Ryan said, hesitantly.

“Oh, no, Ryan,” Bernadette said, quickly. “It’s just that that particular topic has got a little old for me! But coming back to Marianne - of course, I don’t know her, so I’m just guessing. She may have reasons that she doesn’t want to tell you about, yet. You should be patient with her, but you should also do right by the Princess, who respects you. Tell Marianne that you care for her, and that you’re just fulfilling a

social obligation. Nothing more, nothing less. And when you get back, take her out somewhere and talk things over, as she wanted. Life is short, Ryan. Sometimes the worst regrets come from not having spent enough time with those who matter to us." She smiled at him. "I know I may be a little out of place in speaking so frankly to you, but it's something my own dear mother told me, and I still believe her."

"You sound just like the Princess, when she suggested that Henrik and I make up our quarrel," Ryan said, smiling back. "I seem to be destined to run into people who offer me good advice, somehow."

"I think she's right, Ryan," Henrik said, looking at her with fresh admiration. "Just explain the situation to her, enjoy the match. Maybe bring back an autographed picture of Joe Patterson, as a peace-offering, if she still isn't convinced." Both he and Bernadette burst out laughing at this, causing Ryan to feel both happy and dissatisfied at the same time.

They've hardly known each other for a few months, he reflected, but they trust each other. Perhaps there's something to be said for the Church of Infinity. I've known Marianne for much longer, but I'm still not sure if I understand her, or if I ever will. He sighed.

"Ryan, are you all right?" Bernadette asked, with concern.

"Oh, quite," he said, gratefully. "I think I'll do as you say; it's the right thing to do, as Grandpa always told me. Thanks for the time and the support, honestly. But I guess I'd best be leaving you to your studies, right?" He winked at Henrik, and Bernadette blushed.

"You're always welcome, Ryan," she said, "It was a pleasure talking to you."

"Heh, hopefully next time I won't be in such a complaining mood," Ryan said, with a nod. "Now, have fun, guys. I think I'd better go and have a little honest talk with a certain person."

"Good luck, Compadre," Henrik called out, as Ryan walked away from them, taking the path that led to the Robertsons' home.

Bernadette adjusted her hat. "Poor Ryan," she said. "Maybe we should have offered to take those tickets off his hands for him!"

Lord Lucan's face was somber, and his voice, though firm and clear, made his anger obvious to all his listeners. "My friends, the Commonwealth was meant to maintain peace, but that does not mean that it must remain a silent witness to atrocities of this sort. It is true that the Zion and the Varald are at war, and that Galvenia and the Zion are allies. This is no excuse for what we have just heard."

"Speak for yourself, Lucan," Jansen said, coldly. "You, the master of excuses, now accuse us of doing the same? Your hypocrisy will be the death of you."

“Your words cannot hurt the brave sailors of the Galvenian Navy, whom your fleet attacked and destroyed in the most cowardly manner possible. Every nation on Terra is now a witness to your perfidy. Our ships were stationed in Republican waters, and were not engaged on an offensive of any sort when you decided to commit this atrocity. Mr. President, Galvenia strongly condemns the actions of the Varald, stands by the Zion, and is determined to continue this war, until the lives of our men are avenged. I am a member of the Commonwealth Council, but I am a Galvenian, and I love my country. I cannot let this go by silently. Deploy the CSF and the Commonwealth Fleet, and restore the peace, or worse things will happen.”

“You seem to forget that all our ships were destroyed too, Lucan,” Jansen said, angrily. “You have lost men, and so have we. That is war. Accept the realities of the situation, instead of taking refuge in patriotic outrage. Besides, we have reason to believe that one of your ships escaped. You have actually been more fortunate than the brave men of the Varald Vanguard Fleet, who defended their country against your incursion.”

“That ship has been lost too, Commissioner,” Lucan said, with dignity. “They were ordered to turn back by the fleet commander, but we have lost all contact with them, and it is certain that they, too, were hit and succumbed. That does not change the fact that you attacked us covertly, and with a dangerous and new weapon. The last dispatches of the *HMS Alexandra* were clear.”

“I am inclined to agree with you, Lord Lucan,” Archbishop Schliemann said, stiffly. “The Varald cannot be allowed to continue with impunity. Besides, the situation on the border is dire. Kanoi, would you read out the latest news from the front?”

Viceroy Kanoi stood up and read from his reports, with an unsteady voice. “The Varald Divisions have now pushed the Zion army several miles back, and have occupied both Lesser and Greater Cornelia, as well as the border city of Sayaki. The garrison at Meldor is under siege. Reinforcements from inland are arriving, but the news is clear. The Varald have occupied our territory by force and fraud, and we will not cease to fight until we have recovered our towns, and defeated their evil plans.”

“So the mighty Zion army is not quite the force it was, without its mages,” Jedda said. “I always suspected that, but now we know. The Republic takes no stance in this matter, though I do wish Galvenia and the Varald would take their fight elsewhere. Sea combat is bad for trade.”

“I would expect nothing less from a Follower of the Deity, whose morals make even the Varald seem respectable,” Schliemann said, outraged. “Tell me, *effendi*, is there nothing in life besides trade for you? You trade in slaves, including women and children; you trade in abducting and selling brides to chieftains; you trade in smuggled weapons and goods; you deal in infamy with the Varald, and you justify it all in the name of the almighty Commonwealth dollar. Do you have no conscience?” He stared at the Representative, who returned his gaze with some puzzlement.

“Dear me, Archbishop, if you wish to have a fraternal discussion on the merits of our religion, this is hardly the time or the place,” he replied, though his expression suggested that Schliemann’s shot had clearly gone home. “We are discussing the war here, if you remember.”

“My colleagues,” President Hipper said, with a nervous smile, “the Senate has voted against both propositions that we brought to them before: the deployment of the CSF, and the payment of indemnities. However, since the Council is present in full strength, I am willing – as Lord Lucan suggests – to consider a fresh vote on the deployment of the CSF and the Commonwealth Fleet, in the light of recent events. Let us proceed to this without delay, since the matter is of some importance.”

“Galvenia accepts,” Lord Lucan said. “Stop this carnage, and let a ceasefire be set in place.”

“The Republic rejects this absurd proposition,” Jedda said, shooting a venomous look at Schliemann. “The Commonwealth Fleet, perhaps, but why waste the lives of the CSF? Let the almighty Varald and Zion settle their differences, since they are dying to do so.”

“The Varald oppose the motion,” Jansen said, with a stony expression. “Their presence would merely complicate the matter.”

“The Empire accepts, of course,” Kanoi said, shakily. “Enough of this.”

All eyes were fixed on Schliemann, who smiled at Kanoi and raised his head.

“I sense your unease, Kanoi,” the Archbishop said. “Men like you have been rebellious against the Infinity, and have trusted in worldly power, for too long. If the matter were up to me, I would abstain, and leave you to save yourselves. The Empire, once the daughter of the Church, has now rebelled and married foolishly, without our consent. Let your spouse, the Varald, save you, since you have rejected us and our good counsel.”

“Good God, man,” Kanoi said, anxiously, “get to the point.”

“Now, the proposition is simple. The Church of the Infinity has always preached non-violence, and is clear that a war can only be prosecuted if two conditions are satisfied: if it is defensive, and if it is just. The Infinity does not permit us to expand our territories by shedding the blood of our fellow men, though they be foreign. So the question now becomes: First, is the war just? I would say so, given that the first shots against both Zion and Galvenia were fired by the Varald, something that even Mr. Jansen cannot contradict.”

“Will you ever stop with your prating?” Jansen interrupted, angrily. “All we want is a yes or a no! Do you have to deliver a sermon wherever you go, like that unlamented colleague of yours? Lands of Ghetz, you make me wish that Mazarus were still there!”

“Ignoring your uncharitable remark,” Schliemann said icily, closing his eyes, “the second question now has to be answered. Is defending the Zion and Galvenia against the Varald just? I have discussed the

matter with the Pontiff, and I am his obedient servant. Though he deplores the apostasy of the Zion and the impiety of Galvenia..."

"My dear Archbishop," Lord Lucan said, in a formal tone, "moderate your choice of words."

"I can only stand on the truth," Schliemann went on. "Though there is much to deplore, there is far more to deplore among the Varald, and the time has come to be silent no more. Itaria votes in favour of the immediate deployment of the CSF, an end to this futile war, and a hope that the Zion will show more respect for her spiritual fathers in future."

"This is an outrage," Jansen shouted. "The Director will not permit this!"

"Do you have to make it so difficult, Schliemann?" Kanoi said, resting a trembling hand on the table and sighing with relief.

"Repentance, my dear Kanoi, would go a long way towards making it easier," Schliemann said. "And remember, we hold you to this. If we should find you falling back into your old ways, we will be all too glad to return to neutrality."

"Nothing quite like spiritual blackmail, is there?" Jedda muttered, under his breath.

"Gentlemen," Hipper said in a tone of profound dissatisfaction, "as President of the Commonwealth, I cannot do anything but accept the decision of a majority of the council. The Commonwealth Naval Authority will deploy its ships in the Ocean of Ghetz, to ensure safe passage there. And the CSF will deploy towards the border of Ghetz, departing from Unity Isle tomorrow. I shall sign the order myself, as soon as this meeting is adjourned."

"This is not the last word, Lucan," Jansen said, storming out of his chair and pointing an accusing finger at the Galvenian peer as he walked away. "Director Kievan shall learn of this, and you, like your Zionsese friends, will soon regret what you have done today."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that myself, Jansen," Archbishop Schliemann said, but Jansen was already gone.

"It's good to have you back, Miss Lavie!" Carmen said, laying a generous portion of Emily Regale's signature fruit-cake in front of her young mistress. "Goodness, who would have thought that you'd stay with the Princess for ten days?"

"I'm glad I did, Carmen," Lavie observed, between mouthfuls. "Dear Princess, I'm glad I was able to make her feel a little better."

“So what was the matter with her, dear?” Emily asked. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, dear, but I suppose that, as a mother myself, I am a little concerned. It seems as if she’s pushing herself too much; she’s making a public appearance at Serin’s Peak on Saturday, to speak to the Navy, and there’s that benefit match on Sunday as well. All things said, she’s just a little older than you, Lavie.”

Carranya said I could tell my parents, Lavie thought. ‘They deserve an explanation, Lavie, since they were good enough to send you to me,’ that’s what she said. But I needn’t go into details. Poor Carranya.

“Actually, Mom and Dad,” Lavie said, with a serious expression, laying down her spoon, and lowering her voice a little, “don’t tell anyone else this, but she was in love with Prince Wilhelm, and his death was a huge blow to her. She’s getting over it, but she needs time.”

“*Prince Wilhelm?*” Sigmund exclaimed, though his expression was sympathetic. “That poor girl. I wonder when they even met, but.....Good heavens, Emily. Just think of it. Prince Wilhelm and Princess Carranya. What might have been, indeed.” He shook his head sadly. “I’ve never been a Royalist, and I never will be, but I’m sorry for both of them. It’s never easy when such a thing happens – especially for the person left behind, Lavie.”

“Oh, dear,” Emily said, realizing that the words were inadequate, but using them out of habit. “Dear me. That poor young woman. I’m so glad you were able to lend her a hand, if only for a little while. Do the King and the Queen know about this, darling?”

“The Queen knows, Mom,” Lavie said, with a sad expression on her face. “She asked me to confide in her, but she hasn’t told the King; all that he knows is that Carranya....”

“Are you on first-name terms with her now, Miss Lavie?” Carmen said, amused.

“Why....I guess I am, Carmen!” Lavie said, surprised. “I guess we were from that first day, when she – told me all about it. I didn’t know what to say, but I just held her and tried to speak as kindly as I could. Poor Carranya. She’s so strong, but on that day, I felt that I was the one giving her a little strength. I hope I did.”

“I’m sure you did, Lavie,” Sigmund said approvingly. “Often, those are the things that matter the most.”

“You’re right, Sigmund,” Emily said, patting Lavie’s arm affectionately. “This modern world of ours may not have much place for kindness, but I believe that a kind word or deed still matters, and I’m glad it was my daughter who could offer it at the right time. I’m proud of you, Lavie.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Lavie said, blushing. “Anyway, by the second day, she’d talked about it with me quite a bit, so I asked her if she’d like to go outdoors. She agreed, and we went near the stables, where she said she’d met him once. I didn’t know what to say, so I just held her hand, and she knelt down on the grass; she was....praying for him, with her head bowed. Then she got up, and she seemed much better after that. She was still grieving, but she was brave. She wasn’t going to give up.”

“Letting go is always hard, dear,” Emily said, consolingly. “I remember when Father died, your father and I just stayed with Mother for some time, and I just – revisited all those places, the old well where he’d told me to make a wish on my wedding day, the tree where we used to sit when he’d tell me stories. Somehow, that helped a lot. Of course, Sigmund was there, too, to lend a hand when I needed one.”

“I remember, Emily,” Sigmund said, and she smiled at him.

“Anyway, from then on, we decided that we’d just spend time together, doing ordinary things. There was a little dance at the palace, for the Duchess of Westbrook’s birthday, and we just went there as part of the audience. We were feeling rather like wallflowers, but the King invited us to join him. He’s a little grumpy sometimes, but Carranya says he’s not all that bad.”

“I resemble that remark,” Sigmund said with a philosophical air, provoking a giggle from both Carmen and his wife.

“Anyway, Carranya danced with the King, and with the Duchess’ son, who wasn’t a very experienced dancer, though he was quite sweet.” Lavie laughed. “I wasn’t sure what to do, but there was this Zionese envoy there, who was rather funny! He insisted on wearing a cap to the ball, and he invited me to dance.”

“A Zionese envoy?” Sigmund chuckled. “My, you’re moving in high circles, my daughter. Who was he?”

“He was an Intelligence agent whom the Emperor had sent to Lorean,” Lavie said, recalling what he had told her. “His name was Wolfgang Striker, though he said he preferred being called William, because Wolfgang was a dopey name!”

“Hey,” Sigmund said in mock protest. “Wolfgang is a perfectly good Gyrusian name, like Sigmund!”

“Is that so, Daddy?” Lavie laughed. “Well, I’m a terrible dancer myself, but he said he’d take me through the paces, and I don’t think I stepped on his feet *too* many times,” she said, doubtfully. “He was rather nice about it, though, and said he’d like to meet us again. Carranya was quite tickled by the whole thing, and she said it was the first time she’d laughed since....since Prince Wilhelm’s funeral. She invited him to visit us the next day, because she wanted to ask him some questions about the Prince, but he said he had to head to the Military Academy on work.”

“My, your first dance, and it happened to be in Lorean Castle,” Emily said, appreciatively. “I wonder what Mother would think of it all.”

“So anyway, we also had a new dress made for the Princess, for that cricket match! It was quite like the one she wore to Lorean, but it was silver, with a shorter train, and a black veil. Carranya said that she chose silver was because it was a favourite colour of Prince Derren’s, and she would be honouring Wilhelm – who died bravely, like Derren did – by choosing it. The King and Queen were also there for the fitting. It was quite fun, really, almost like she was dressing up for a wedding...”

"I see the Galvenian stiff upper lip still survives," said Emily. "And I must say that I rather look forward to seeing her at her wedding someday. She's still young, Lavie, and time heals all wounds."

"I...guess so," Lavie said, a little hesitantly. "Anyway, she also took me to the Gardens, and showed me the very first flowerbeds, the one that go back to Princess Alexandra. We visited the stables again, and she had a lovely brown mare, so we did a little riding together!"

"We?" Sigmund said, a little taken aback. "But Lavie, you don't know how to ride..."

"Oh, I told Carranya that, but she said not to worry, so I accompanied her! It was quite fun, and we went rather slowly.....Why, what's the matter, Daddy?"

"I.....I'm afraid I've always been afraid of horses, from my youth. It's an irrational fear, but I can't help it," Sigmund admitted, a little sheepishly. "Sorry, Lavie."

"That's true," Emily said, sympathetically. "He never could stand them, otherwise I'm sure you'd have had riding lessons, as I did when I was your age, dear. So what else did you do?"

"Ohmygosh, I forgot to tell you!" Lavie exclaimed. Walking to her suitcase, and opening it, she took out a golden dress, of the same material as the one the Princess had worn during her triumph at Davenport, but simpler and slightly shorter. "When we were finishing Carranya's dress, the Queen said she wanted me to have one, too! I was sort of embarrassed, but she insisted it was no trouble, at all. So she got the same dressmaker, an old lady named Naomi, to make me this one!" She unfolded it and held it up in front of her, striking a pose. "Isn't that *cool*? I said I'd wear it when I came to the match!"

"My goodness, Lavie," Emily said, drawing in her breath sharply, "you're going to look like a princess yourself, if you wear that!"

"That's beautiful, Lavie," Sigmund added. "Those dressmakers in Lorean certainly know their craft."

"I wonder what Ryan Eramond would think of it," Carmen said, slyly, as she placed cups of tea in front of the Regales.

"Very funny, Carmen!" Lavie said, with mock annoyance, turning the dress around to display it in all its majesty. "Anyway, she's also invited us to join her in the Royal Box! What do you think, Mom?"

"I think it's an excellent idea, Lavie," Emily said. "You will, of course, have to convince your *father*..." She laughed.

"As Lavie would say, very funny, Emily," Sigmund retorted, with a smile. "I still have no truck with Royalty and Royalists, but I have no objection to a social outing with my daughter's close friend and her parents. They can't help being silly Royals, after all."

“Daddy!” Lavie said, as she burst out laughing. “Now don’t go saying those things in front of Carranya, please?”

“As you wish, my child,” Sigmund said benevolently. “I shall be on my best behavior, if that’s what you want.”

“Oh, and one more thing, Mom,” Lavie said, sipping her tea. “On the last day I spent there, Gran came over! Apparently the King wanted to see her, so he’d sent a launch to pick her up and bring her to Lorean. We had quite a fun time together, and I was playing the piano, while Gran was singing along with Carranya and her maid-in-waiting! That evening, Gran spent some time talking to the Princess alone, and after we said goodbye and the ship took her back, Carranya finally seemed – I don’t know – peaceful, at rest. It was so good to see her that way, Mom...”

“Goodness, Lavie, Mother certainly seems to be getting around, these days? Is she invited to Sunday’s event, too?”

“The King and Queen wanted her to come, but she said she had someone she needed to visit on that day, and she couldn’t cancel. It’s a pity, it would’ve been great to see Gran again! But I’m sure we’ll get the chance some other time, right?” She yawned. “Gosh, I’m tired! I didn’t feel it till now, because I knew I was on my way home, but right now I feel like a nap!”

“Just a moment, Lavie,” Sigmund said, in the “serious” tone that Lavie had learned, if not exactly to dread, then to respect. “There’s something your mother and I want to discuss with you, and it’s not entirely pleasant, my child.”

“Huh?” Lavie said, looking up, for she was literally “nodding off”, to Carmen’s amusement. “What happened, Daddy?”

“Lavie, sweetheart,” Emily said, “soon after you left, we had a visit – from Sir Prescott. He wanted to speak to you, but since you’d left already, he spoke to us.”

“Sir *Chucklehead*?” Lavie said, surprised and annoyed. “What did *he* want with us, Mom? I heard at the Palace that he was being sent to help the Zion with the war....”

“You see, dear...” Emily began, then hesitated.

“Huh?” Lavie said, taking another sip of tea.

“Well, not to put too fine a point on it, dearest,” Sigmund said, with a scowl, “he came and asked us – for your hand in marriage.”

Shocked by the statement, Lavie began to cough, and Carmen hurried to pat her on the back. “Now, now, Miss Lavie. Are you quite all right?”

The red glint, long dormant during her days of comforting Carranya, now reappeared in Lavie's eyes. "Marry me? Is he – is he out of his *mind*, or something, Daddy? Why, I wouldn't marry Sir Prescott if you paid me a billion dollars, or if he was the last guy living on Terra! Sir Prescott! Hmph!" She brought her fist down on the table angrily, and the crockery clattered.

"Now, Lavie dear, please calm down," Emily said, gently. "We told him that we needed to ask you, first, and that you were too young to be married, too. Both your father and I told him that quite clearly."

"I should hope so, Mom!" Lavie said, her eyes flashing. "Why, I don't even know him, and the little I know convinces me that he's a total jerk, a dope, and absolutely the *last* man that any girl would want as a husband! I'd sooner marry Armin Tamas or Mayor Saunders than him!"

"Armin Tamas? Goodness, Miss Lavie!" Carmen said quietly, chuckling.

"We thought you might feel that way, Lavie," Sigmund said, "so we told him not to bother us for now, and said we'd ask you when you came back, and write only if you were interested. We'll always support your decision on a matter like this, you know."

"Why, the – the *jerk!*" Lavie said, still angry. "If he were here, I'd – I'd shoot him in the face with a burning arrow, like I did with those bandits! Ewww! I can't even stand the idea of him coming to Casa Regale, with that little skunk of his trotting behind him..."

Sigmund's cup landed in its saucer with a harsh *clang*. "Bandits?" he asked.

"Bandits, Miss Lavie?" Carmen gasped.

Lavie, still breathing hard, unclenched her fist, remembering what had happened to her on the way to Lorean. "Yes, Daddy," she said, speaking fast. "When we were driving to see the Princess, we passed by the road near Trinden, and there were two bandits there! They had kidnapped Aunt Agatha..."

"*Agatha?*" Emily said with dismay. "Good heavens, Sigmund!"

"Lavie, what on Terra happened?" Sigmund asked her, urgency in his voice.

"...and they called me a wench and a spoiled brat, and they were trying to hold me up! But fortunately I had taken my lessons from Mr. Evans, and I shot both of them, and we took Aunt Agatha away in the carriage! The Queen was very nice to her, and asked the doctor there to look after her wrist, which was sprained. She stayed there for three days, and they arranged for a carriage and guards to take her home..."

"You *shot* them?" Emily said, wide-eyed.

"Lavie..." Sigmund said, heavily.

"I had to save Aunt Agatha and reach the Princess, Mom!" Lavie argued. "I didn't kill them or anything, just hit one in the face and one on the arm, with burning arrows, so that we could escape!"

"Is this true, Lavie?" Emily asked, still looking shocked.

"Yes, Mom..." Lavie began.

"Lavie," Sigmund said, and there was something like reverence in his voice. "What you did was extraordinarily dangerous, my child, but it was also very brave. I – I'm so proud of you, Lavie."

"Darling," Emily said, rising from her chair and embracing Lavie, who had also stood up. "Lavender Regale, how did you ever do a thing like that! I'm – I don't know what to say, Lavie..."

"I – I just had to help Auntie, Mom," Lavie said, a little embarrassed. "It was on the spur of the moment, and they were hurting her, and trying to break her arm! I was so angry....and scared, and I knew I had to do something, *anything*, to just try and save her!"

"Lavie," Sigmund walked over to her and embraced her warmly, as he did when she was a little girl listening to his bedtime stories. "There's an old Republican legend, my daughter, about a girl who was worth more to her parents than a thousand sons. I – I didn't know she was living under my roof all this time, Lavie, but I do now."

"Thanks, Daddy," Lavie said, starting to feel a slight choking in her voice. "I love you both, so much..."

"Thank the Infinity you're safe," Emily said, and her own eyes were bright. "Lavie, you're not a child anymore. You're a woman now, and you're old enough to make important choices. Be brave, darling, like the Princess is, and – don't be afraid to aim high, and pursue your dreams, Lavie. That's all I want for you."

"Thank you, Mom," Lavie said, leaning against her mother's shoulder. "I'll do my best...." She paused, and laughed. "As long as it doesn't involve marrying Sir Prescott!"

"The Infinity forbid that, dear," Emily said, "but tell me, Lavie" – she released her daughter, and looked at her affectionately – "leaving that absurd man aside, have you ever – thought about such things? About marrying, I mean."

Lavie turned a bright red, and Carmen hid her smile behind a fold of her apron. "I....guess so, Mom," she said. "A little bit, maybe. But....I don't know. Ohmygosh, this is all so sudden, and...."

"Time enough to talk about it later, Lavie," Sigmund said, smiling at her. "Remember what your grandmother told you. When the right person comes along, you'll know."

To understand what Anne Lancaster and the Princess had been talking about together, it is necessary to wind back the clock a little, to the day after Lavie had left for Lorean, and to travel to Mann Island.

“Good morning, Mrs. Lancaster!” Lina Wellesley said, cheerfully, as she raised the awning over her store. “It’s been quite some time since we saw you here.”

“Oh, indeed,” Grandma Lancaster said, looking with amusement at the clothing and jewelry on display. “My goodness, young girls these days wear the most extraordinary things, don’t they?”

“I’m sure your grandmother would’ve said the same thing about *your* clothes, Ma’am,” Lina said, with a giggle. “Fashions sure keep changing! But sometimes the old-fashioned stuff sells for quite a price. Lavie was here a while ago, and she bought a rather sweet huntress’ outfit, like in the old stories.”

“A hunting outfit?” Anne smiled. “Well, I must ask her to show it to me some time. But I’m just looking for a nice shawl today, Lina. Something a bit thinner, for the summer. I’m afraid most of my lighter ones are showing signs of wear.”

Lina, eager to oblige Anne, who was a perennial favourite on Mann Island, brought out a wide variety of shawls, and she selected a cream-coloured one after some deliberation.

“Here you go, Lina, forty dollars. Thank you,” Anne said, draping it over her shoulders. “Goodness, I shouldn’t be so vain about clothing at my age, but it does look quite lovely.”

“Indeed it does, ma’am,” Lina said, then stopped, as she noticed someone coming up from behind. “Well, hello, who are you?”

“Are you Mrs. Lancaster?” the newcomer’s voice said. It was a woman’s voice, deep and even melodious, but there was a clear note of fear in it.

Anne Lancaster turned around to face her interlocutor. She was a tall woman, a little taller than Lavie, wrapped in a travelling cloak, and carrying a simple suitcase. She was still quite young, perhaps in her late thirties, and there was something quietly attractive about her dark hair and blue eyes; yet, what struck Anne was that her face was lined, as if by worry. There were circles under her eyes, and she glanced around from side to side, as if afraid of being overheard.

“Why, I am,” Anne said, kindly. “How can I help you?”

“I came looking for you at your home, Mrs. Lancaster,” the woman said, “but I couldn’t find you there. I’ve been searching for you, because.....I need your help. I’m sorry to intrude, but I’m at my wit’s end.” She sighed.

What a lovely voice and diction she has, Anne thought. *I wonder what the matter is? She looks like quite a nice girl.* “Well, my dear,” Anne said, “I can always try to help, though I don’t guarantee anything. First of all, I think introductions are in order. Who might you be?”

In reply, the woman drew a letter from within her cloak, and handed it to Anne silently. Anne read it, her expression changing from surprise to concern at once.

Dear Mrs. Lancaster,

I am not sure if you will remember me, but I used to be the magistrate at Trinden, and I was acquainted with your late husband.

The woman bearing this letter is in need of assistance. She came to my town some time ago, seeking my help. However, it has recently become evident to me that she is being followed and harassed. She had a strange tale to tell me, which I prefer not to trust to ink and paper, for she is quite capable of telling it to you herself. Your husband was known for being a servant of justice, and he always spoke highly of you. If it is in your power to help her, please do; if not, please advise her to contact the authorities at Hartridge.

Yours sincerely,

Ellesimar Vryce, Mayor.

Anne thought for a moment, then summoned up the memory of Ellesimar Vryce, a simple, gentle soul, balding and grey even in his fifties, who did most of the legal work in Trinden because he was the only one wise enough. He had been a magistrate, and had worked with Gerald on some cases, but largely made his living as a stonemason and merchant. *So he's the Mayor now? Merciful heavens, time does march on*, she thought.

The woman trembled, and looked behind her.

"My dear lady," Anne said kindly, "I don't think this is the place for this sort of discussion. Why don't you come back to my home, and you can tell me all about it."

"Th – Thank you, Mrs. Lancaster," the woman said kindly. She took a few steps towards Anne, then lost her footing, and Lina and Anne hastened to catch her.

"Gosh, what's the matter with her?" Lina asked, puzzled. "She looks like she's been running from something!"

"I'm afraid that may be the case, Lina dear," Anne said, offering the woman her arm for support. "Are you hungry, dear?"

"I left early this morning," she said in a low voice, "and I didn't have the time to do anything except pack my bags. I'm sorry for causing you this inconvenience."

"Never mind, dear," Anne said, speaking to her as she would have addressed a young Emily or a young Lavie. "Now can you stand up and walk a little? You can have something to eat at my place, and then you can tell me what's bothering you."

“Thank you,” the woman said, bowing her head. Still leaning on the older woman, she followed Anne on the path that led to Westchester, and to the Lancaster home.

Wow, Lina thought. That’s pretty mysterious! I wonder what Lavie would think about it? Poor thing looks like she was a fox being chased by hounds.

Then, shrugging her shoulders, she returned to arranging her wares.

The journey to the Lancaster residence was slow, as Anne’s new companion could not walk very fast. However, with a little perseverance, they arrived at their destination, and Anne immediately offered the woman a comfortable seat.

“Do rest a while, my dear,” Anne said, helping her off with her cloak, “and let me make you a nice cup of tea. You look famished.”

Tears came to the woman’s eyes. She was wearing a simple red dress with a large collar, which had clearly seen better days, and her stockings and shoes showed clear signs of reaching the end of their lifespan. One stocking was torn at the shin, exposing a wound that had not yet healed. Her cloak was giving way in more than one place, and had been patched in some of them.

She shook her head, and her black hair fell rather wildly about her shoulders. “Thank you, Mrs. Lancaster,” she said. “You’ve been so very good....I wondered when I’d see a kind face, or hear a kind word, again.” Despite the meanness of her attire, there was something refined about her accent and her bearing. “Mr. Vryce was helpful, and when I had to leave Trinden, I wondered what would become of me.”

“Oh dear,” Anne said, looking at the woman’s knee with a sad expression. “You’re hurt. Let me look after that for you.”

“Mrs. Lancaster, you don’t...”

“Nonsense, girl,” Anne said, firmly but kindly. Within a few minutes, Anne had removed the remnant of the torn stocking and its accompanying shoe, and had dressed the woman’s wound. She looked at her with what Lavie would describe as the ‘grandmother look’. “There, that’s much better. Are you being pursued by bandits?”

“I wish it were that simple,” the woman said bitterly.

“Now, now, dear, don’t despair. You’re safe for the moment, remember that. But first of all, tell me your name.”

“Mr. Vryce told me to use my maiden name, so I shall,” the woman said, slowly and heavily. “I was born Julianne Tulor, the eldest daughter of the Earl of Tulor.”

“Sweet Infinity!” Anne Lancaster almost leaped from her chair. “Are you a Tolor, young lady? I knew the House of Tolor had fallen on dark days, but....Goodness, that almost makes us relations, at least by marriage. I’m not a Lancaster, dear, but my husband was.”

“Dark days, indeed,” Julianne said, sadly. “You would certainly have heard of how the Tulors were stripped of their lands and properties, because some of them were foolish enough to support the uprising at Chespa Bay, in 253. Those of us who were left, had nothing but a family name to hold on to. Father and Mother were left quite poor, and both of them died when I was young. My sister and I made our peace with the world, and settled down where we could find a home. It was not an easy life, after being one of the first of the noble Houses of Galvenia, but we tried. And today, I am perhaps the last of them, and I do not know how long I will live.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Anne replied, stoutly. “Never say die, Julianne. I’d never turn you away, believe me. Tell me, dear, what are you running from?”

“That’s the strange thing, I don’t really know myself,” she said, pausing to collect herself. Anne, in the meantime, emerged from her kitchen with a pot of tea and a plate full of little cakes.

“Now start from the beginning, dear, and don’t be afraid to confide in me. I may look like a frail old woman, but I know people who could help you out.”

“It all began about the time I was married, which was about twenty years ago,” Julianne replied, looking into the distance and making an effort to remember. “I was living with an aunt then, and was quite unhappy there; she was rather resentful about having to keep me, and she would take it out on me and my younger sister, Suzanne. It was at her home that I met a young man, who was a member of the same merchant’s guild as my uncle. He was kind to both of us, and though I didn’t really love him, I saw that I could secure a future for myself and for Suzanne, and I accepted his proposal.”

“A common tale, my dear,” Anne said sympathetically. “Don’t think too badly of yourself, though. My own daughter married a businessman herself, and they’re quite happy; I have quite a lovely grandchild, and she visits me when she can.”

“Is that so?” Julianne said, smiling a little. “I have a daughter, too. Anyway, we lived quite peacefully together, though my husband would often be away from home, as part of his job. We weren’t very well off, but we were comfortable, and we even bought a home of our own. It was about three years ago that the trouble started.”

“Did he treat you badly, dear?” Anne said, patting the younger woman’s arm, which was bruised in more than one place.

“It wasn’t him, really,” Julianne said, shaking his head. “But he would come home late from work, and strange men would visit the house – rough men, who looked like they might be mercenaries or criminals. My husband often seemed frightened of them, but they had some sort of a hold on him, and he would spend hours talking to them, and sometimes travelling with them. I wasn’t happy, because it

wasn't the right sort of atmosphere for my daughter, who was growing up. But she seemed to get on with them quite well; she was always close to her father."

"Daughters are like that, my child," Anne said. "Go on."

"Since the beginning of last year, things got worse. These men would often stay over at our place, and some of them would get drunk. On more than one occasion, when I tried to – to remonstrate with them, I was ill-used." She closed her eyes and laid her head on the table, more out of weariness than despair.

"Would you like to rest a little, dear? We can always talk later, if you want," Anne said, patting her head.

"No, let me finish," Julianne said, raising her head and holding it proud and upright. "I told my husband about this, but he was cold – it was as if he'd either ceased to care for me, or was afraid of those men. They would talk about all kinds of things – politics, trade, the military – but none of it made sense to me. My husband wouldn't let me leave the house, unless it was to the market nearby, and even when I received a telegram that Suzanne was ill...."

"Oh, you poor thing," Anne said, offering her a handkerchief. "Was your sister still living with your aunt, then?"

"No, she'd married a soldier," Julianne said, "and they lived near the border. They stayed in a little place with her father-in-law, who was quite a nice man; in fact, he was the one who wrote to me when Suzanne took ill. I wanted to go and be with her, because her husband was doing a tour of duty with the Commonwealth, and her father-in-law was quite old. But – my husband wouldn't let me go. I tried pleading with him, but he remained silent. One night, I couldn't bear it anymore, so I tried to leave the house late at night. Unfortunately, two of the men were standing near the door, looking at what seemed to be a pile of jewelry. I asked them to let me go, and told them about my sister, but they just laughed and cursed. I tried to run past them, but one of them struck me with his fist, and I must have fainted."

"I told my husband about this, but he was angry with me; he said I'd interrupted something very important, and I shouldn't ask questions or speak about what I'd just seen. I begged him to let me go to Suzanne, but he refused. Two days later, I received word from her father-in-law – that she'd passed on, asking for me just before....." She looked at Anne desperately, her voice shrinking to a whisper. "Sometimes, I still dream of my little sister calling out to me...."

"Now, dear," Anne said, gently, "come and sit by me, and rest a little. I'm sure your dear sister is in a better place, and she would want you to live, and not despair." She allowed the young noblewoman to rest her head against her for a moment, with no more reserve than if it had been her own daughter, and when she was recovered, she began to speak again.

"I tried to keep my child out of the home as far as possible, by asking her to get a part-time job, and she was quite willing. Though those men never treated her badly – I kept a strict watch on them – she was starting to become afraid. Finally, this spring, things came to a head. There were a new set of visitors now, who seemed better dressed; some of them seemed to be from the military, though they never

wore their uniform. One night, I awoke, disturbed by a sound, as of a quarrel or a brawl. I crept down the stairs to the hall, and saw four men around the table, one of whom was my husband. They were looking at what seemed to be a map, though I couldn't see it clearly. I was about to leave when one of the men spotted me, and grew wild. He threatened me, saying that I'd seen something that I never should have, and he took hold of my arm and twisted it. I promised I hadn't seen anything, and my husband tried to step forward and intercede, but the other two men motioned to him to be silent, and he just – sat down in his chair, staring at me. Finally, he said he'd – take my life if I ever spoke about what I'd seen, and released me. I was terrified; I just ran to my own room, locked the door, and stayed awake the whole night, wondering what to do."

"My poor child," Anne said. "There are no words, but I do hope those evil men are brought to justice some day. I promise I'll help you as much as I can."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lancaster," Julianne said. She was still pale and shivering. "The next morning, all four of them left on a journey, leaving me alone at home; my child had gone to school, and she would be spending the evening at a dance with a young man. I left a letter for my husband, saying that I was leaving, and gathering all my savings and a single suitcase, I headed for Lorean. I knew there was a lawyer there, a friend of poor Father's, who would help me. I stayed with him for a few days while he sorted things out, and tried to write to my husband, explaining the situation, but he sent back a cold reply saying I wasn't welcome at home anymore."

She shook her head. "I stayed with him for a while, but though he was kind, I didn't want to impose on him. I looked in the papers for a job, and found that Mr. Vryce at Trinden needed a housekeeper; I'd already been my aunt's housekeeper in all but name, so it was not a hard task for me. I summoned up all my courage, and went to see my husband for the last time. I told him I was leaving him, but he seemed totally unconcerned. He only said that he wouldn't let me see my daughter again, but my mind was made up, as painful as it was to leave her. I moved to Trinden a couple of months ago, and Mr. Vryce gave me shelter in his home."

"However, two months ago, I received a letter from my sister's father-in-law, asking to see me. I asked for Mr. Vryce's permission, and set off on my journey. However, I had just left the village when a group of three men set upon me. I recognized one of them as having been with my husband on that fatal night, and I turned to run, but they seized me and threw me to the ground, which is how I hurt my knee. I begged them to leave me, even offering them all my money, but they refused. They were about to bind me with a rope when a young man suddenly appeared, as if out of nowhere."

"A young man?" Anne said, holding her companion's hand. "What was he like, Julianne?"

"He was wearing a cloak, and had a long, thin sword; he looked brave, but his head was hooded, and I could only see his face. He stunned two of the men, and wounded the third; then he escorted me all the way back to Trinden, and told Mr. Vryce what had happened. I wanted to thank him, but he said he was merely following his code of honour, and he left. I didn't even change my clothes; I was at the end of my tether, and I think I just fell asleep the minute I reached my room."

“The next morning, Mr. Vryce told me that it might not be safe for me to remain in Trinden. He had seen men roaming around during the night, and he wasn’t sure if the local police could handle them. Instead, he arranged for a carriage, placing one of his guards in it, and had me taken to the docks at Davenport, early in the morning. He gave me this letter for you, saying that your husband had worked with him, and that you would help me. Thank the Infinity, I reached safely, and I took the first ferry to Mann Island, where I set out in search of you.”

“The villains,” Anne said, indignantly. “Believe me, if they think they can treat an innocent woman in this way, they are very mistaken. I’ll send some wires to Lorean, and inform some people in the right places. In the meantime,” she said, with a gentle smile, “Sir Gerald Lancaster’s widow is pleased to extend her protection to the Honourable Julianne Tolor, for as long as she may require it.”

“Mrs. Lancaster, thank you,” Julianne said, embracing the older woman heartily. “You’ve – you’ve saved me, that’s all I can say.”

“Oh, think nothing of it, dear. Now why don’t you freshen up, and get that rest which you so sorely need?” Anne said, matter-of-factly. “In the meantime, I’ll cook up something for us for lunch, and then we can discuss what needs to be done. We of the old guard must stand up for each other, my dear.”

Julianne accepted this proposal gratefully, and in less than an hour, she was curled up on Anne’s old bed, sleeping soundly. Anne, sitting by her bedside, looked at her protectively.

Poor child, she thought. This world of ours is changing beyond recognition, and many of the old things – even those that were good and true – are dying. But there is always hope – hope that children like Lavie, and the Princess, and young Eramond will never quite let them die. In the meantime, I must make efforts to find out who her husband is, because I’m sure she won’t tell me.

Her expression turned dark, thinking of the woman’s tale. *And when I find that fine gentleman, I’m going to tell him exactly what I think of him.*

“Forward!” Lieutenant Shin called out, as the Varald line broke in two places. “For the people of Greater Cornelia, and to the glory of Zion!”

The 45th Varald Division, beleaguered by the sudden Zion assault, began to draw back. “Now, gunners, aim straight for the front line! No mercy, and no quarter!” A volley of cannonballs sailed through the air, throwing up thick clouds of smoke and dust. Several of the Varald fell, and the rest were thrown into confusion.

“Now, occupy the positions, men,” Shin called out, as the men of the 20th Imperial Battalion began to move towards the temporary posts of occupation that the Varald had set up. The sounds of rifles filled the air, as Zion and Varald sniped at each other, wrestling for control of the town.

“Lieutenant, the Varald are beating a retreat,” the men on the front line called out.

“Don’t let them escape. Fire at will!” Shin said, firmly. The Zion rifles on the front line fired rapidly, and the Varald, already confused, fell to a man, except for a scattered few who managed to flee.

“Lieutenant! Lieutenant!” the men at the front cried out, in alarm. “There are more of them, deploying on the flank!”

“I was expecting that,” Shin said, with a smile. “It’s time to use the heavy artillery.”

“But Lieutenant,” his second-in-command, Sergeant Harmon, protested. “Our cannon are all over on the other side.”

“I wasn’t referring to them, Sergeant. Bring the cannon over if you want, but we won’t require them. Men of the 105th, your hour has come! To the Glory of Zion!” Shin called out, looking to his rear

“The 105th?” Harmon said, utterly bewildered.

A group of fifty men, all uniformed but carrying no arms except a staff each, stepped forward, marching in a line.

“My God, Lieutenant....a mage battalion?” Harmon exclaimed.

“You catch on quick, Harmon,” Shin said, with a crooked smile. “Now, men. Thunder away, and let the Varald learn that they cannot outstrip us!”

The mages aimed their wands, and flashes of lightning rained down on the advancing Varald regiment. Many of them fell, some stunned, some killed outright.

“Now, let them feel the wind of retribution. Hold on, Harmon,” Shin said, and Harmon noted to his surprise that he was wielding a staff, too. The air around them grew turbulent, and suddenly, a whirlwind appeared in the midst of the Varald, throwing several of them to the ground, and casting others helplessly into the air. Sensing their utter disarray, the Zion rifles continued to fire, and what was left of the Varald – perhaps ten or twelve of a regiment of hundreds – began to beat a hasty and inglorious retreat.

“Men of the 105th, hold the line! Men of the 20th, occupy the border and secure it!” Shin cried out, as the Zion infantry occupied the border, advancing steadily behind the shattered remains of what was the 45th Varald Division. The sound of gunfire slowly died away, until even its last echoes could no longer be heard, and there was an eerie stillness.

“Good work, men,” Shin said. “Gunners, remain in position, just in case those Varald dogs try any more funny business. Now comes the hard part. Light Healers, step forward. We have to clean up now.”

A small group of men and women from the mage battalion, whose helmets bore a white stripe on them, came forward.

“This village has been held by the Varald for almost two days,” Shin explained, “and before they were cut down, the 17th said that they were attacking civilians and taking them prisoner. I want you to comb the area carefully, separate the wounded, and assemble them in the town church. Pay special attention to women and children, as well as the sick and the aged. Now that we’ve chased them off, we have to take care of our own. Take some of the men with you, in case there are any Varald soldiers still remaining, and if they are, dispose of them. Our orders are clear.”

“Yes, sir,” the mages said, and began to go through the streets of the town, dispersing into small groups, the Zion soldiers following close behind.

The border post had been utterly devastated, and there were no survivors. Moving a little forward, two of the mages, an older man and a red-haired woman, stepped towards a small cottage, and heard voices behind the door.

“It sounds like something’s wrong in there,” the woman said. “We’re going in!”

“Be careful, Freya,” the man said, sternly. “There could be more than one person in there.”

“Be careful, my boots,” she said, drawing a sword from her belt, which was one of a matching pair, and slicing through the lock with it, the edge of the blade melting the bolt.

Within the home was a Varald soldier, wounded in one arm, threatening a couple who were cowering in a corner. The woman was holding on to a small child, barely a year old.

“You Zion scum,” the soldier growled. “You may have taken my men, but I’ll take as many of you as I can with me.”

“Not so fast!” the man shouted, raising his staff and firing. A bolt of light shot out, but the soldier ducked, and the light bounced harmlessly off a wall of the house.”

The man turned around, and raised his pistol menacingly. “Sorcerers! I’ve heard of you, you don’t scare me!” He fired, but the bullet stopped short of the man and fell to the ground, as the woman raised her staff and cast a shield around him.

“Good work, Freya,” the man said, gratefully.

“That’s not all,” Freya said, drawing her second sword and slashing at the man’s arm, wounding him again. Caught unawares by the blow, he left himself exposed, and a second bolt of light shot forth from the man’s staff, striking him in the face and stunning him.

“Shall I finish him?” a Zion soldier said, running inside and drawing his rifle.

“No, Lieutenant Shin told us to capture them alive,” said the woman, returning her twin swords to her belt, and walking over to the couple, who were still petrified.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said, and her voice was surprisingly gentle. “You’re safe now. We’ve run off the Varald for the moment, and we’ve set up a guard at the border. Your town is safe.”

“Thank you,” the man said, holding out a trembling hand, which she shook firmly. “Thank the Infinity for all of you. I thought I was going to be with the Infinity today, and my luck had finally run out.”

“There were already two of them who came by,” his wife said, closing her eyes, and holding her child close to her, “but they didn’t look in here. Then, as the smoke was clearing, he came...” She sat down on a stool, looking as if she might faint.

“Don’t worry, for now,” the woman named Freya said, taking the child from her arms. “As long as the Zion Army remains standing, we will not let this happen again. The Emperor has now deployed us in full force.”

“But the Varald are strong,” the woman said, shaking her head. “They said they would burn our village, and take us all prisoner....”

“They won’t do it,” her mage counterpart replied, her eyes flashing with anger. “By the glory of the Empire, that will not happen, as surely as my name is Freya Raienji.” The baby in her arms nestled contentedly against the breastplate of her armour, smiling at her, presumably in approval, but certainly with hope.

The Cosmopolitan Republic, as it is popularly known, is the part of the Fulton Republic separated from the mainland of Ghetz by the narrow Sea of Serenity. More temperate in climate than the Ghetz mainland, and more moderate in its religious and cultural practices, it is sometimes divided into two portions; the true “Cosmopolitan” towns of the coast, which speak the Cosmopolitan dialects, and the northern portion, known as San Delas, whose tongue is more closely related to the Itarian language.

The aforementioned coast, left alone even under the Commonwealth, is renowned as a haven for smugglers, who have their own peculiar code of honour. They will lie, cheat, and steal as long as it suits them; but they have a long-standing and bloody feud with the slave-traders of the mainland, and they – more than the Republican police or the Commonwealth – are responsible for the fact that human slavery, that blot on the history of Commonwealth-era Terra, has never gained a footing in the Cosmopolitan area. Of course, this is never acknowledged by the Cosmopolitans themselves, who attribute their freedom from such evils to their greater culture and refinement, as well as to the civilizing influence of the “Republican Church of the Infinity”, a peaceful and stately religion that is quite at odds with the frenzied desert cults of the Ghetz tribes, or the harsh laws of the Cult of the Deity.

Whatever the true explanation, a small group of boats, bearing a tired and disgruntled group of Galvenian sailors and Marines, had good cause to thank the smugglers as they approached that same coast one fine morning. By one of those strange coincidences that the Infinity seems to love, it was the day Anne Lancaster met Princess Carranya at the Royal Palace.

“Imps of Terra, Sergeant Burns,” Chief Broyude said, “I must confess that I’m glad you’re here with us. If I ever get back to Galvenia some day, though, I wouldn’t mind ripping that landlubber’s throat out with my bare hands. What sort of a game is he playing?”

“Fortunately, we didn’t have too many men with us,” Burns replied, wiping the perspiration off her brow. “These four lifeboats were enough for all of us, and thank the Infinity, they’re strong enough. We were fortunate that we could steer the *Alexandra* quite far towards the coast before putting out; we couldn’t possibly have rowed all the way!”

“You have that right, Sergeant,” Captain Baker said, calmly. “Now, if I understand you correctly, your relatives have a home and a farmhouse quite close to the coast. But can they accommodate all of us? There are fifteen of us in the crew, and twenty of your men. Hardly a small number.”

“Captain,” Burns said, smiling despite the exhaustion she was feeling, “my uncle and aunt have eight children, and they employ a large number of men on their farm, including several temporary workers. There will be room enough for us, at least in the short term. Right now, we are *persona non grata* in Galvenia, for mysterious reasons best known to that miserable War Office, though I have my suspicions.”

“That still leaves us with one big problem, Sergeant,” one of the Marines commented. “How do we get back home?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, soldier,” Chief Broyude said drily. “For now, let’s find a safe harbour on that coast. We’re almost there.”

“We’re reaching the coast now, Sir,” the navigator with Captain Baker said, as they rowed the first of the boats into a small cove, safe from the few rocks that littered the shoreline. The remaining three boats also came ashore, and the small Galvenian contingent disembarked, looking back at their vessels.

“We’ll see if they’re still here after we’ve reached that homestead of yours,” Captain Baker said. “All right, men. Fall into line, and march ahead, until we reach our destination.”

“I’ll also try to contact my uncle once we reach, Sir,” Sergeant Burns said, as she organized her Marines into an orderly grouping as well. “If anyone can help us now, it’s the Commonwealth.”

“Somehow, I don’t share your faith in the Commonwealth,” Broyude said darkly.

After a march of about a mile and a half – not the most enjoyable of propositions in the midday sun - they found themselves within reach of a large house of white stone, whose front wall was studded with stones of various shapes and sizes, creating a pleasing if slightly chaotic appearance.

“Captain Baker, come with me. I think we should introduce ourselves together,” Sergeant Burns said. “The Commander’s not here, but my Aunt Penelope’s always around.”

Walking up to the front door, she picked up the gargoyle-shaped knocker and brought it down sharply, twice, in rapid succession. There was a sound of rushing footsteps within the house, a call of “Go see who that is, dear”, and the door was opened by a young girl of about ten, with dark-brown hair and an engagingly one-sided smile. Her smile turned to a wide open mouth when she saw the two people standing there.

“Hello, little girl. We haven’t met for more than a year, but it’s nice to see you again!” Sergeant Burns said affectionately, holding out her gloved hand.

The child raised her hand to her mouth. “Oh, my goddess, is that *you*, Cousin Stasia? What are you doing here?”

“Oh, my *goddess*?” Captain Baker chuckled. “Now that’s a new one for the dictionary of common phrases.”

“Yes, Phemie, it’s me,” Sergeant Burns said, lifting her up. “My, how you’ve grown. I won’t be able to do that soon, anymore. Captain Baker, this is my young cousin Euphemia, though she answers to Phemie.”

“How do you do, Phemie?” Captain Baker said, making a bow that amused her to no end. “Could we speak to your mother, please? We’ve had a bit of an accident with our ship, and we need some help.”

“An accident?” The child’s eyes widened. “Just wait here, Cousin Stasia. I’ll get Mama at once!” Running into the house excitedly, she called out to her mother, and within minutes, she returned with a short, dark-haired woman, with a plump face, who smiled broadly as she held out her hand.

“By the Five Angels, Anastasia, what are you doing here?” she exclaimed. “I won’t say it’s not nice to see you, but are you supposed to be here?”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Penelope,” the Sergeant replied, “but we have a bit of a problem here, and you’re the best person to help out. This is Captain Baker, of the Galvenian Royal Navy.”

“Captain Baker? Why, do come in,” Penelope Arnoldus replied, shaking his hand as she led them inside. “Hieronymus has mentioned you more than a few times. It’s a pleasure. Now, tell me, my brave soldiers. What can I do for you?”

“Mama,” Phemie called out, excitedly, “there are many more soldiers waiting outside!”

“What *is* going on, Anastasia?” Penelope exclaimed.

“Well, Aunt Penelope, it’s rather a long story,” Sergeant Burns began....

“What news of Sir Prescott, Lieutenant?” Sheffield said, amiably, as he spotted Felix Gessler, in dress uniform, move into the stand reserved for the military.

“All is well, Minister,” Gessler said, beaming. “The Rough Riders will soon reach Caledonia, from where they will be deployed on the border to aid the Zion in regaining control of their territories. In the meantime, we have no further news of the *Alexandra* or the battleship that is accompanying her, but we have deployed a further fleet of ten ships, which will hold the line in Republican waters and protect against further Varald incursions. We await the arrival of the Commonwealth fleet, which will hopefully relieve our men from this duty, and restore peace on the waters.”

“The news from the front is encouraging as well, Lieutenant,” Sheffield replied. “The Zion have repelled the initial thrust of the Varald Divisions, and have regained control of Cornelia; the siege at Meldor has been lifted, and the 20th and 21st Imperial Battalions have pushed forward, securing the Varald town of Ryvenka, as well as two of their border posts. Unless the Varald wish to suffer further losses, they must accept a cease-fire soon.”

“The fortunes of war are uncertain, sir,” Gessler said ominously. “Who knows what the Varald may be planning next? We must not make the error of underestimating them, as Charlemagne did.”

“We will do no such thing, Gessler,” Sheffield said, with a grin. “You can rest assured that we are taking things very seriously indeed, and you can reassure Sir Prescott on that count. In fact, you may be pleasantly surprised to hear what we have planned today. I wish you a pleasant outing, and may the best team win!”

Is that so, you old goat? Gessler thought, shaking the War Minister’s hand firmly. “Thank you, Sir,” he said, as he headed to his seat. *Not only will the Royal Infantry Blues wipe the floor with your Palace Guards’ XI,* he thought, *but we hold the cards in this war, not you. You will learn this the hard way.*

In another part of the Lorean Oval, which was buzzing with life and colour, a young man we have often met before was experiencing some momentary confusion.

“The Royal Box?” Ryan said, shaking his head. “There must be some mistake, soldier. We have tickets as guests of honour, but not with the King!”

“I’m afraid there’s been a last-minute change of plans, young man,” the Royal Guard replied. “I was specifically told by Her Royal Highness that you and your parents would be joining the Royal Family today. Orders are orders.”

“Why, Ryan,” Sheila exclaimed – looking flushed and proud in a long blue gown, “it looks like the Princess hasn’t forgotten you at all! My darling boy, what an honour!”

“Aw, shuckleberries, Mum, let it go,” Ryan said, embarrassed, as he and his parents ascended the ornate stairs that led to the Royal Box. The Royal Family had not yet arrived, but some of the other guests had, and he recognized two of them with a start.

“Mr. Eramond!” Agent Striker called out, extending his hand. “What a pleasant surprise. It’s just like old times, isn’t it? I was just telling Miss Regale, here, about your theatrical skills. She was quite amused.”

“Miss....” Ryan began, feeling an uncomfortable warmth creep into his cheeks.

“Ryan!” Lavie called out, rising from her seat and waving happily. “Over here! The Princess said you could come and sit here with us, along with Hocha and Mr. Striker! Isn’t that cool?”

“I guess it is,” he said, hesitantly, catching his breath as he looked at her. *Sweet Infinity, what is she wearing? I never thought I’d use the words “Lavie” and “stunning” in the same sentence, but that golden dress of hers – there ought to be laws against that!*

“Why, Lavie dear!” Sheila exclaimed. “My goodness, did the Princess abdicate and appoint you as her successor? Just look at that dress!”

“The Princess had it made for me, when I went to visit her, Auntie Sheila!” Lavie said, beaming and pirouetting slowly, to let her – or perhaps Ryan - admire it all the more. “Do you like it, Ryan?”

“I see the Princess has been having a good influence on you, too,” Ryan said, kindly. “I don’t ordinarily approve of fishing for compliments, but that is quite a garment, Lavie.”

“Thank you, kind sir,” Lavie said, curtsying and blushing most becomingly. “I see acting as Prince Derren has had a good influence on *you*, Ryan! Mr. Striker was just telling me all about your moonlighting on that ship, and I must say, I’m quite impressed!” She laughed and pointed a finger at him, playfully.

Oh, geez, Ryan thought, giving Striker an annoyed look. I hope he didn’t tell her about that scene with Lady Penelope, or else she’s going to lose it completely.

“And for your information, Mr. Eramond,” Lavie went on, archly, “I’ve read the play myself! It was in Daddy’s library, and it was quite fun!” She winked at him, as if in reassurance, and then picked up her fan, which was falling out of her chair.

“Well, I’m the understated one in the family,” Theodore said, “but you do look very nice, Lavie. Where are your parents, by the way?”

“Oh, the Prime Minister wanted to speak to Daddy, so they’ve gone down to the board room for a while, and Mom is having a chat with the Countess of Delanor, there!” She pointed to the nobles’ box, where

Emily, wearing in a simple but elegant green dress, was talking animatedly to a noblewoman in a large hat. "Come, let's all sit down, shall we?"

"That would be an agreeable proposition," Agent Striker said, "since we've still got some time to go before the match starts." They all sat down together; Ryan noted, with gratitude, that Striker was interposed between Lavie and his family.

"So, Agent Striker," Ryan said, politely, "what brings you here? Are you a cricket fan?"

"Duty, I'm afraid," the Zionese agent said, calmly. "I represent the interests of the Emperor here, and since today's event has everything to do with our alliance, the Princess felt that it would be fitting for me to attend it."

"Agent Striker told me," Lavie said, excitedly, "that the Prime Minister would be asking for people to sign up, both for the Army and for the intelligence services! I asked him if they wanted archers, but he said he wasn't sure."

"Good heavens, Lavie," Ryan said, smiling despite himself, "are you planning to join the Army now?"

"Oh, that depends, Mr. Eramond, that depends," she said, lightly. "Are you?"

"I – don't know about that, really," Ryan replied, quite truthfully. *Actually, I wouldn't mind the Army, or even the Intelligence bit. It'd be rather interesting work – like when we went searching for Kodenai, but minus that idiot Juno. But Marianne wouldn't hear of it, I'm sure. "I'd need to think about it."*

"Think about what, my young friend?" A stout figure appeared at the top of the steps, wearing the ceremonial uniform of the Galvenian Royal Army, and removing his helmet. "Cricket, or war?"

"Hi, Hocha," Ryan said, greeting the Colonel's faithful companion as he sat down next to them. "Are you with the Royals, too?"

"Surprisingly, yes," Hocha said, with mock gravity, then turned to look at Lavie, grinning. "Miss Regale, has the Princess appointed you as her maid of honour?"

"Oh, no, Hocha," Lavie replied, with a laugh. "Her friend, yes, but not a maid of honour."

"That is quite remarkable," Hocha said, and then began discussing cricket with Theodore.

"Ah, Theodore, Sheila, and Ryan! There you are," said Sigmund Regale, as he entered the enclosure, wearing a new tuxedo. "Socius was asking me if Regale Enterprises would help him out with a thing or two, and I'm afraid he can be rather long-winded at times."

"Hmm, politicians are like that, Mr. Regale," Ryan said. "Though Socius can make nice speeches when he wants to."

“He should be here any – Oh, there he is,” Striker said, as the Prime Minister, accompanied by the First Lady, entered the box. The occupants rose to greet him, and he introduced himself to all of them, speaking slowly and kindly.

“Mr. and Mrs. Eramond,” he said, “it’s always a pleasure to meet the parents of one of our bravest young citizens. Mr. Ryan Eramond, we’re very pleased to have you here with us, indeed. You’ve done us a great service.”

“Thank you very much, Sir,” Ryan said, politely. *Henrik ought to have been here, he thought. He’s the biggest fan of Socius in Davenport. I wonder if his girlfriend shares his political views? And speaking of girlfriends, I almost didn’t come today, thanks to mine. Women and politics don’t mix too well!*

“Why, Martell,” First Lady Jeannelle Socius – dressed in an impeccable suit and skirt, and wearing a small hat tilted to one side – exclaimed as she noticed Lavie. “I didn’t know Galvenia had *two* Princesses! Good morning, Your Highness – or do you have another title I can use?” She shook Lavie’s hand, and looked at her with approval.

“Oh dear, I’m no princess, ma’am,” she replied. “I’m Lavender Regale, from Davenport. I’m just here because the Princess was kind enough to invite us all!”

“Oh, look, dear,” she said, turning to her husband. “Here’s Mr Regale’s daughter, all in gold. With both her and the Princess to feast our eyes on, I’d say the audience here will have quite a treat, even if the teams play badly! You see” – she lowered her voice confidentially and smiled at Lavie – “I’m not really a sporting fan! Does that make me a bad Galvenian?”

“Certainly not, and thank you, ma’am!” Lavie said, blushing as the Prime Minister shook her hand as well. “How do you do, Miss Regale?” he enquired. “Her Majesty has spoken very highly of you.”

“C – I mean, the Queen is too kind,” Lavie replied, with a slight bow. The greetings all exchanged, the Prime Minister and his wife sat down in their allotted seats, to the right of the Royal Family.

“So, Ryan,” Lavie said, in a friendly tone, “what have you been doing these days? I’m sorry we couldn’t meet this week, because I was away.”

“Oh, nothing much,” Ryan said, casually. “Just meeting up with Henrik and his new friend. They seem to be quite engrossed in their studies, though. And if you ever meet them, you might want to give her some fashion tips about hats. That thing she wears is pretty silly, in my opinion.”

“Very funny, buster,” Lavie said, mockingly. “Actually, Bernadette’s a friend of mine! We had her over for the night when she was travelling, and Mom and Dad liked her a lot, too! Maybe it’s because she liked some of Daddy’s boring books.”

“Ah, you will have your little joke, won’t you, Lavie?” Sigmund laughed. “She’s a very nice young lady, though, and Lavie said she had a good singing voice.”

“Did you know that her dad once cured me when I was ill, Ryan?” Lavie said, happily. “I didn’t even know it, until Gran told me about it recently!”

“I don’t remember you being ill, Lavie, unless – Was this the time you made us all eat your cooking, and when we protested, you tasted it yourself and felt sick?” Ryan said, laughing.

“Ryan! Not funny!” Lavie protested, though there was no red glint in her eyes as she said it. “Anyway, it was when I was little, when Grandpa was still alive.”

“Sorry, Lavie,” Ryan replied. “Look, the Royal Trumpeteers are coming out! We’d better stand up for the national anthem, and all that.”

“Oh, goodness,” Emily said, climbing up the stairs hurriedly to join Lavie and Sigmund. “Sorry I’m so late, dear. That Countess is quite loquacious!”

Dressed in red and black uniforms, the Royal Army’s band came out onto the pitch in full strength, and began to play a lively instrumental version of the Galvenian national anthem. As the entire audience rose, the Royal Family – accompanied by the King’s guards – began to ascend the auditorium’s main stairway and make their way towards their enclosure, to the sound of applause and cheers.

“Who’s that clergyman with them, dear?” Jeannelle Socius asked her husband.

“Hmm, I don’t really know him, Jan,” the Prime Minister replied. “Apparently he came over from Caledonia a little after the King, and he’s going to teach in King’s College for a while. Diplomacy at its finest. He’ll probably pray that the Infinity should guide the bats and balls of our players, or something.”

Jeannelle laughed. “Oh, leave him alone, Martell! After all, we must observe the forms, whatever *you* may choose to believe.”

“You and the Princess are going to make quite a pair, Lavie,” Emily said, cheerfully, as the Princess, walking just behind her parents, approached the box, turning every now and then to greet a member of the audience. “Silver and gold, the treasures of Galvenia on display!”

“Aww, Mom!” Lavie said, blushing. “You’re just going to embarrass both Carranya and I, if you say things like that?”

Carranya? I didn’t know they were on such good terms, Ryan said, rolling his eyes. And that silver dress – am I mistaken, or does it look rather like that Prince Derren costume I had to wear? Looks like we’ll never hear the end of that play, war or not!

I know you are in two minds. But there are some things you cannot change.

Juno, standing just outside the gates of Lorean, paused and turned around, but there was no one. In fact, there was an almost unnatural stillness, punctuated only by the rustling of leaves in the summer wind. The voice was the same one he had heard the day he had first taken the sword from Fossen; it was gentle and friendly, and sounded more like a woman's than a man's.

Don't be afraid. I can understand you, because I was once like you, and sought the same things that you do. But the life you seek to protect is already forfeited; that much has been given to me to see.

"Who are you?" Juno said, in a low tone.

I once was young, as you are, she – if indeed it was "she" – replied. I once dreamed of wonderful things, as you do. I chose my Way and followed it, as you do. I lived and died, as we all do. But that was long ago. So long ago, that there is none left who remembers my name.

"Enough of this," he said impatiently. "What is your name? Perhaps you will find me less ignorant than the rest of the world."

My name would mean nothing to you, she said, kindly. For the moment, all you need to know is that I am here to guide you, as I have guided others. From the first generation, when my soul left this earth, it was given to me, by the mercy of the Purpose, to guide those who sought the truth. And I know that you seek the two Ways – justice and love.

Juno flushed. "What do you know about that?" he said; though "said" was perhaps the wrong word. He found that he had only to think the words, and his companion – whoever she was – would reply.

I know what is in your heart, she said, almost as if she were trying to console him. And despite everything else, I know that you are faithful. That is why I remain with you.

"Very well," he said, cautiously, as he entered the gates of Lorean and headed north. "But what do you know about – him?"

Only that at this very moment, his soul has departed this world, to join those more fortunate than me, in good time. His loved ones will mourn him, as will many others, but you can do nothing to help him now. Pursue your other goal, and I will be with you.

Juno shook his head. "That is regrettable. Though I certainly did not appreciate some of his deeds, he was an honourable man at heart, or so I believe. But tell me" – and now, his voice took on a more steely tone – "why do you advise me in this way? We are hardly acquainted, and you could know nothing of my true purpose."

There was a pause, and it seemed that when the voice spoke again, it sounded almost embarrassed, like a young girl who had received her first compliment. *Because I – I admire you, Juno.*

“What?” Juno exclaimed aloud, causing several passers-by to look at him curiously.

Once, long ago, I dreamt that there were men like you in this world. I sought one of them as my companion, and I lost my life in my misguided search. But the Purpose was merciful, and allowed me to continue my quest, so that my soul would find peace.

Juno was silent as he turned down a road, heading to the eastern part of northern Lorean.

Have I offended you? the voice said, regretfully.

“Hardly,” Juno replied, confused. “I do not know who you are, my lady – if that is what you are, indeed – but I will be pleased to accept any assistance you may offer. I do not know what to make of your – ‘admiration’, but we can always remain allies. Indeed, given the scope of the trials we face, it is expedient that we do so.”

‘My lady?’ the voice replied, and again Juno had the impression that if he could see his mysterious interlocutor, she would be blushing. *How – strange. When I was young, I dreamed of hearing those words, but it was not to be. But – enough about me. It does not matter, now. Make haste, Juno, for the man you seek may not remain in his refuge for much longer.*

“Indeed,” Juno replied, a look of determination on his face, as his hand went to his sword, and he arrived in front of a nondescript building. “We shall soon see if he can escape justice any longer.”

“Mrs. Lancaster,” the Honourable Julianne said, as they were both seated in a small, comfortable, darkened room, “I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

“Oh, hush, child,” Anne said kindly, still holding the younger woman’s hand. “It’s my duty to look after you, all things considered. Besides, I’ve always believed that if you truly needed to repay me, the Infinity would show you how, in good time. I’m only sorry that I can’t keep you with me longer, but this is what the Princess advised me to do, and I think her idea was a wise one.”

“I wasn’t even aware that such a place still existed,” Julianne said, looking at the wall opposite her. There was an old painting on it, showing a young woman, richly dressed, who was distributing food to a group of older women in shabby clothing. Above this was a plaque that read, simply, *“The Alton Refuge for Distressed Gentlewomen. For those who serve the poor, also serve the Infinity and His saints. Saint Pauline, pray for us.”*

“The old faith has always been rather strong in Alton, my dear,” Anne explained, “largely because Nealus Hessen is a sort of local hero and saint, even to those who don’t follow the Church of Infinity. In fact, there’s an old tradition that Saint Pauline, the patroness of women in need, was his daughter, and that her mother was a noblewoman in trouble, whom Nealus helped and married.”

"I thought the Journeymen were celibate," Julianne said, recalling the few history lessons she had had, before her aunt had decided that a governess would be too expensive a proposition, "just as the Italian priests are."

"Some of them were, my dear, but not all. In fact, Gerald told me that both Nealus and Kaleb, the greatest of the Journeymen, were married, though the details of their families are lost to history. It was Horamin, Nealus' successor, who insisted that the Journeymen stay single; he also closed the order to women, and was quite contemptuous of other guilds that Kaleb had been friendly with, such as the Healers. But I mustn't bore you with a lecture here, dear. The Sisters should be here soon, and we can explain the situation to them."

"I would have liked to know him," Julianne said, admiring the portrait, and feeling strangely calm despite the gloom of her surroundings. "He was always known as a wise and honourable man."

"Oh, he was, my dear Julianne," Anne said. As she said this, two women, one younger and one older, wearing the black habits of the Sisters of Goodwill, entered the room and greeted their guests warmly.

"We apologize for having kept you waiting, ma'am," the elder of the two said politely, bowing before Anne. "And we must thank you for calling on us for help in this difficult matter."

"My daughter and son-in-law have always spoken well of your Brothers," Anne said, holding a letter, "and we also have an introduction from a priest who was staying at Lorean Castle. He wanted to accompany us, but His Majesty has asked him to deliver a prayer at the fund-raising event today. He was quite apologetic about it, actually, and said he'd rather be praying for souls than for bats and pads!"

"Oh, Father Terence is quite a card, sometimes," the younger nun said, laughing. "Do you remember the time he made us study a report on the debate between Saint Nealus and Saint Herman on the virtue of poverty, which he wrote as if it were the commentary for a football match, Sister Augusta?"

"Indeed I do, Sister Rosemary," the older woman said, suppressing a smile and trying to look stern, "though I'm not sure if our guests would be interested in that." She went through the letter carefully, her expression softening to one of concern.

"My dear sister," she said to the Honourable Julianne, "please do not be afraid. Any friend of the Princess is a friend of ours, and you will find that our little home, though modest, is a sanctuary indeed." And saying this, she gave her guest a fraternal embrace, causing her to weep, though it was with relief rather than sorrow.

"Thank you so much," Julianne said, brokenly. "Please forgive me for this....display of feeling; it's just that the last week has seemed almost miraculous to me. When I had to leave Trinden, I felt that I was without a hope in the world, but Mrs. Lancaster has been so generous, and you've been so welcoming...."

“Don’t apologize,” Sister Augusta said, calmly. “Just remember that you’re safe with us, no matter what. And come along, I’ll show you your new home, and tell you how things run around here. You may find things a little quiet here, my sister, but you may learn to appreciate that in time.”

“A little quiet and a little rest are all I seek,” Julianne said, gratefully.

“There, there,” the younger nun named Rosemary said, patting her on the shoulder. “Don’t cry now, and be a brave girl. Besides, Father Terence will be here tomorrow to give you good counsel, and if he can’t cheer you up, no one can!”

“I see that you will be in good hands,” Anne said, laughing as she nodded her approval, and embracing Julianne as she left. “I’ll come by and see you when I can.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Lancaster,” Julianne said, simply. “I will not forget you.”

As Anne turned to leave, her smile turned into a more sober expression. *And I think I know where to find that handsome husband of yours, Julianne. You’re discreet, and you’re not telling me everything out of pride or loyalty. I can appreciate that, even if I don’t condone it. But when I find him – and I shall not go alone – he will regret what he has done.*

“My dear Robert,” Lugner said, coldly, “you are a fool. Truly, if I were ever tempted to write an encyclopedia, like the scholars at Zion University do, I would choose your photograph as the illustration for the article on Fools and Folly.”

“Sir Lugner...” the cloaked man began, swallowing nervously.

“Be silent. Is there a single task, my foolish friend, that you have managed to complete even partially? The package has reached Caledonia. The Memory Crystal has crossed Zionese lines. That brown-haired wench reached Lorean Castle quite safely. And even when I entrust you with business of a more personal nature....”

“Sir Lugner, we could not...”

“Could not carry out instructions? Could not find a single scoundrel, in the whole of Galvenia, who would not run like a coward when shot by a child’s arrows, or a young man with a little sword?”

“Sir Lugner, th - that man wields a sword with tremendous power,” the man known as Robert protested, weakly. “He must be....a Zionese mage or agent of some sort. We were not prepared for a man of that sort....”

“Are you an expert on Zionese mages, my good man?” Lugner said, icily. “I know what a Zionese mage is, and your young man certainly does not sound like one. You know our philosophy, I hope. The philosophy

of the Way. Those who can, do. Those who cannot, make feeble excuses. And those who fail, are doomed. Are you a man, or a little boy playing with things you do not understand? By the Lord of the Reaches, I do not know why I even bother with you!”

“Sir Lugner....” The cloaked man’s head was bowed in submission, and he was pleading, perhaps for his very life.

“Robert, rest assured that I will not let you go free. There are only two ways left for you, considering all that you know. First, I could simply kill you. It would be poetic justice, considering the nature of your failures. And it would be a fitting end to this day, a day when some of our other allies – who are certainly not as manly as you” – he laughed, cruelly – “have carried out their task much better than you could ever hope to.”

“Consider our situation, Sir Lugner.....and remember that I hold that man’s purest hope in my hands....”

Lugner, who was slicing through the air with his sword casually, suddenly laid it down on the table. “Ah, yes. Your famous plan. The oldest story in the world, is it not, my man? But even there, I see a distressing lack of results. What exactly have you done?”

“Sir, I....”

But he could say no more, as the door suddenly fell off its hinges, revealing another man in a cloak.

“Sir Lugner!” Robert screamed. “It’s him! The mage! May the Beast protect us all!”

“Silence, you fool,” Juno said, raising his blade and firing a stunning bolt at Robert, who fell and crashed against a wall of the room, staring stupidly into space. “I have pursued you for months, Lugner, and my journey is finally at an end.”

“Aren’t you that foolish boy to whom I already taught a lesson?” Lugner said, looking dismissively at the unfortunate Robert. “Are you so eager to disgrace yourself again?”

“The disgrace will be yours, you renegade,” Juno said, aiming his sword at Lugner and closing his eyes. Blue light issued forth from both edges of the blade, and Lugner staggered back, surprised by the impact.

“I must say,” he said, trying to recover his composure, “that actually did tickle me a little. You’ve gotten better, boy, but you’re still no match for me.”

“Prove it, then,” Juno said, boldly. “Prove it with your weapons, and not with your boastful, lying tongue.”

“You’re provoking me, boy,” Lugner said, anger creeping into his voice. “Leave, and I will be merciful. In fact, I would thank you before leaving, for that imbecile lying there” – he pointed to the cloaked man – “truly deserved a little punishment. But that is all I can do for you.”

“I provoke you?” Juno said with a laugh. “You have been an enemy to Galvenia, Lugner. Your hired wretches and scoundrels have betrayed you, and I know you for the villain you are. This country will sleep peacefully once you have departed from it.”

“A villain? Me? Boy, you’re even more foolish than I thought. If I am a villain, what does that make you? A hero? Do you realize that you are intruding here illegally? If I were to call the Galvenian police, or the army, it would be you, and not me, that they would detain.”

“Do not be so confident about that, Lugner,” Juno shot back. “You see, I know more about you than you suspect. I know about the Memory Crystal. I know about that desperate woman from Trinden, whom your hirelings were hounding. I even know about Davenport...”

Lugner was listening to this tirade with a small smile, but he started at the mention of Davenport. “You amuse me, boy,” he said, masking his surprise with a scowl. “I know nothing about you, except that you weave a pretty tissue of fantasy. Where are your witnesses? What can you prove against me?”

“I suspect the answer to that question lies in Davenport,” Juno said calmly. “Now, Lugner, as a follower of the Way, I give you a choice. My code of honour forbids me to take your life, except in fair combat. If you surrender, you will be tried fairly, by the laws of this fair country. But if you refuse” – he pointed his sword at Lugner’s wrist – “it will be a contest to the death.”

“You follow the Way?” Lugner said, with contempt. “Boy, you know *nothing* about the Way, no matter what some bard or romancer may have taught you. There is only one Way; the way of power. There are no heroes or villains; just one Lord, and those who either serve or rebel against him. You still have much to learn.”

“If that was meant to impress me,” Juno said, angrily, taking a further stride forward, “you have failed. Let us not bandy words any longer!” With a swift motion, he cast his cloak away. “Come, now. Your Way of Power, and my Way of Justice. Let us put them to the test.”

“You fool,” Lugner said, drawing his sword at full length, “so be it! You will regret the day you ever dreamed you would cross me.” He launched a forward thrust, but Juno parried, and fired a stunning beam that struck Lugner in the face.

“Very clever, boy,” Lugner said, dodging Juno’s triple attack with little effort. Launching forward, he slashed wildly at Juno, cutting his cheek.

“Is that all you can do?” Juno said, with seeming unconcern. Dodging Lugner’s next lunge, he closed his eyes, and blue light issued from both edges of the sword. The beams struck Lugner in the chest, and he winced with pain.

“You.....you wretched boy!” he cursed, as he aimed a thrust at Juno’s chest. Juno avoided it with ease, then thrust forward at Lugner, wounding his wrist.

“Are you tiring yet, Lugner?” Juno taunted. “Call upon your Power and your Lord now. Fall on your knees and pray, if you wish. Perhaps they will hear you, if they are not busy tending to your fellow fools.”

“You insolent –...” Lugner said, in a hoarse voice, as he raised his sword. Juno thrust forward, but found his blow deflected, as if by an invisible barrier.

“Damnation,” Juno said, aiming another double slash at him, which also failed to find its mark. “I see you have learned your little wizarding tricks well.”

“Call them what you will, boy, but now I hold the cards!” He raised his sword and aimed a thrust at Juno’s leg, wounding his knee. Taken unawares, Juno fell to one side, bleeding.

“You aren’t singing your proud song now, are you?” Lugner said mockingly. “I think the time has come to end this. Goodbye, boy.”

With these words, he aimed a direct thrust at Juno’s heart, but Juno brought the flat of his sword up with remarkable agility. As Lugner’s sword struck his, an orange light issued from Juno’s sword, and Lugner recoiled.

“What – what is this?” Lugner said, showing fear for the first time since Juno had entered the room.

“You were not expecting this, I see,” Juno said with a smile. “Now, let us show him which is the true Way.”

He deserves his sentence. Those who prey on the innocent, on the widow and the orphan, must be punished.

Juno slashed across, causing Lugner to attempt a lower strike – then fainted and thrust forward, deflecting his opponent’s blow in the process. It seemed to him that his blade was going through something soft and insubstantial, like a knife through butter. There was a strange sound, almost like that of glass shattering, and a blur of blue and orange light surrounded the two swordsmen.

“Damnation!” Lugner screamed. “By the Beast, you will – you will pay!” He thrust forward wildly, desperately, but Juno easily avoided the blow, and closed his eyes.

Now, Juno! My heart quivers with the suspense...

What? Juno thought, taken aback at the turn of phrase. Fortunately for him, Lugner was too stunned to react, and within a split second, he regained his concentration and aimed another beam, from both edges of his sword, at Lugner’s chest. This time, the beams were of different colours – blue and orange – and Lugner was thrown against the table, his expression contorting into one of agony.

“Now, Lugner,” Juno said, pointing his sword at his fallen opponent’s throat, “what do you have to say for yourself?”

“You – you...” Lugner said, desperately, as his hand reached for something in his tunic.

Remember the mine, Juno! Do not let him deceive you!

In a flash, Juno lowered his sword and thrust at Lugner’s hand, and he drew it back, looking at the blood streaming from his palm with a numb expression on his face.

“Childish, my friend. Did you really think you could launch your foolish grenade in time?” With the calmest of expressions, he placed his own hand into Lugner’s pocket, and withdrew a small green object, which he tossed in the air and caught as if it were a cricket ball. “Perhaps I should place it back in your pocket, and then let my sword detonate it for you. But that would be futile, and worse, it would be unartistic.”

“Damn you! Burn you for all time, boy!” Lugner shouted, raging at his helplessness. “You may think you have defeated me, but you will never defeat us! You deal with forces beyond your comprehension.”

“Be quiet, Lugner,” Juno said, and a blue beam flashed through the air, stunning though not silencing him. “Now, let us have a friendly little interview. Do you recognize this?” He drew a small object from his pocket, waving it in front of the fallen man’s eyes. “A little crude, but it is rich in symbolism.”

“Where did you get that?” Lugner said, sullenly.

“From two of your minions in Trinden, my good Lugner,” Juno said, in a placid tone that made Lugner wish that the earth would open and swallow them both up. “You really should tell them to guard their possessions more carefully. Now, I am not as wise as you, but I know ways of loosening your tongue. Just half will do, now.” He placed his sword close to Lugner’s ear, and an orange beam flashed forward, filling the room with an unearthly ringing sound.

He would not listen to you. Let him listen to the Purpose, instead.

“Enough!” Lugner screamed, shaking his head wildly. “Enough! Kill me if you wish to, but stop this...”

“Did you stop to think of what that woman in Trinden went through, Lugner?” Juno said. “Did you see the fear in her eyes? Or that innocent merchant, who was just following his feeble master’s instructions? Did they know of your vile machinations? Do not presume on my mercy, for I have none where you are concerned.” He fired another orange wave at Lugner’s throat, choking off his reply.

“My death.....will change nothing...” Lugner said, after a long silence, drawing his breaths with great effort. “The Sword.....shall triumph over the spirit....Let me see Janwen, Master....”

“Enough of your raving. Tell me the truth,” Juno said coldly, kneeling down to catch Lugner’s words, which were now growing indistinct. “Tell me about this master of yours....”

“....never....find.....” Lugner said, gasping as he tried to turn away from Juno’s stare.

He is dying, Juno. Listen to him.

“.....Lorea.....Mine.....cannot.....third.....descendant.....way.....”

“Speak clearly, I am unable to hear,” Juno said, glaring at him.

“.....in Davenport.....never.....Itaria.....sword.....”

There was a rattle in his throat, and Lugner’s head fell to one side. He was no longer breathing.

May the Purpose have pity on him, as He pitied me.

“Good riddance,” Juno said coldly, as he slowly and methodically searched through Lugner’s possessions. However, he found nothing except a small book, which he took. It was bound in leather, but had no legend on the cover, and the language inside was one which he was not familiar with.

“Now, your turn, my fine friend,” Juno said, turning to the cloaked man, who was now able to move, but was petrified with fear.

“Don’t hurt me!” the man pleaded. “I’m.....”

“Be still, unless you wish to suffer and die as he did,” Juno said, pointing at the remains of the unfortunate Lugner. “Remove that hood, and reveal yourself.”

The man lowered his hood with trembling hands, and Juno raised his eyebrows.

“You?” he said. “I think I am beginning to understand certain things.”

“Please,” the man said. “I’ll tell you everything I know, but spare me!”

Juno, do not be misled. This man knows one of your secrets, and he will use it to your ruin.

“I shall be the judge of that,” he replied, silently, then took the man by the hand and raised him, roughly. “Now tell me. What is it that you know?”

“L-Lugner was headed for the mine at Mount Lorea,” he stammered, “where two of his allies were waiting for him. You will find them there.”

“My good – Robert, I think it was? I shall continue to call you that, though it sounds ridiculous. Did you think I was an utter fool, like your friend Lugner? You will come with me into that mine, and we shall meet your allies together.”

"I dare not," he said, with a terrified expression on his face. "They would kill me...."

"I think not," Juno said, "not if I have anything to do with it. Now, lead the way."

A little earlier at the Lorean Oval, the match had come to an end. The Royal Guards, thanks to a century from the burly Geoffrey Taylor, had easily overtaken the Royal Infantry Blues' score of 278, in the forty-eighth of their allotted fifty overs. Prizes had been distributed, and the Prime Minister had left the Royal box to make his address, leaving the other guests together with the Royal Family.

"I must say, if I were in charge of the Blues' bowlers, I would have some rather strong things to say to them," the Reverend Terence Marlborough observed, turning to Lavie.

"Oh, dear," Lavie said, laughing. "It did get rather exciting towards the end, didn't it?"

"Indeed it did," Hocha said. "When Patterson took that miraculous catch on the boundary to dismiss North, I wondered if the Blues were going to fight back. Unfortunately, they did not capitalize on it."

"Sorry about that, Hocha," Theodore Eramond said, sympathetically. "I know you wanted your boys to win, but it was not to be."

"This game does have its own quaint charm," Agent Striker conceded, "though it is far slower in pace than our own Zionese game of baseball. A few more months in Galvenia, and I might actually grow to tolerate it."

"Well, ask the Emperor to keep you here for that time, and we'll buy you a cricket bat!" Lavie said, laughing.

Lavie and Wolfman certainly seem to be getting on quite well, Ryan observed, with some surprise. I wonder if they'll end up acting in a play of their own together!

"I thought Mr. Tucker bowled quite intelligently," the Princess said to her father, "but he wasn't well supported by his team-mates. Still, he did ensure that the Blues did not score three hundred runs, or even more!"

"Indeed, my daughter," Arlbert said benevolently, stroking his beard, quite pleased at how the day had gone. "Fortunately Trask doesn't play for the Guards, or they'd have lost for sure!"

Queen Katarina laughed. "Trask? Does he even play the game, my King? He never struck me as a sportsman, either in physique or in personality."

"My husband would agree with you, Your Majesty," Jeannelle Socius said, laughing. There was little love lost between Trask, who resented Socius' influence on the King, and the Prime Minister. "Look, he's about to speak now."

“Wonder what he’s going to spring on us,” Ryan said, grinning at Hocha, who was looking at Socius with a rather critical eye.

“My fellow Galvenians,” Socius said, in the firm, deep voice that had won him hearts and votes throughout his career. “I thank each and every one of you for your presence here today. On behalf of the Government and the Royal Family, I offer you my sincere gratitude for your time, your donations, and your support for our cause.”

“As you are aware, today, Galvenia finds herself embroiled in an armed conflict, one that spans nations and continents, and threatens to involve the whole of Terra. No nation has been spared; the waters of the Republic have witnessed a brutal naval battle, and even the peaceful land of Itaria is now riven by unrest. At such moments, it is easy for us to despair, and to ask ourselves what the world is coming to.”

“However, my friends, this must not be. Remember that we are all Galvenians. Remember that Galvenia has always stood for freedom and justice, even in the face of superior numbers. We must not allow fear to overwhelm us, though the adversaries we face today are numerous and strong. We and our allies, the Empire of Zion, will not yield in the face of unprovoked aggression and territorial ambition. Should it take a month, or a year, we will prove to them that, though we love peace, we will defend our lands, whatever the cost.”

“At this moment, I speak to you, not as the Prime Minister, but as one of you – a fellow soldier, a fellow husband and father, a fellow Galvenian. And I ask you, not to submit to me in servile fear as the Varald serve their Director, but to prove your patriotism in deeds and not merely in words. Our choice today is between self-defence and submission to the law of might, the law of the Varald and their dictator.”

“And it is for this reason that I stand before you today, my fellow Galvenians. I call upon all of you who already feel the call, who wish to defend a free Galvenia and a united and peaceful Terra. I do not command you to report at a recruiting office; rather, I call upon you as volunteers, as my companions in this struggle. Today, Galvenia and Terra need you. If you wish to serve on the battlefield, the doors of the Galvenian Army are open to you. If you wish to serve us in another capacity, there are many ways in which you can assist us. Men and women of Terra, we stand at the crossroads today. It is you, the ordinary people, who make this country what it is; we need no dictator, no Directorate, to take pride in being Galvenians. For our King, and for our country, let us not hesitate to offer our services, in whatever capacity. Let it be truly said, as Sir Raymond Chester did, that we never gave up, and that we never surrendered. Let it be truly said that we love freedom, and that we love our country. Thank you.”

There was loud applause as the Prime Minister bowed and turned to leave, and War Minister Sheffield, who took his place, began to explain the recruitment incentives and procedures to his audience.

“It wasn’t bad,” Lavie observed, “but I’m sure you would have spoken much better, Princess!”

“Oh, Lavie,” Carranya said, with a laugh, “that’s kind of you, and I shall say a few words at the end, of course. But when it comes to rhetoric, Socius has few equals, does he, Father?”

"I'm afraid so, my child," King Arlbert said.

"Where's he going?" Jeannelle Socius observed, noting that the Prime Minister had been accosted by an armed guard, and was heading down the steps away from the stadium, rather than returning to the box. "It looks like someone has summoned him."

"Oh, I was afraid that might happen," the King replied. "Some local organization that represents Varald refugees has been trying to meet him, and he promised he would give them a slot today. I know he's already busy, but he felt it would be a good gesture, and a way to further condemn the Varald for atrocities against their own citizens."

"I didn't know we had Varald refugees in Galvenia," Jeannelle said, surprised.

"We don't, Mrs. Socius," the Queen said, kindly. "Apparently they've sought refuge in Zion, and only some of them have travelled to Galvenia, to meet with your husband. Others have apparently sought an audience with the Chamberlain of the Zion."

"Poor souls," Hocha said, gravely. "To live under the Varald is no laughing matter."

Prime Minister Socius, sitting in the members' room that had temporarily been converted into his office for the day, bowed respectfully towards the three women who entered it. They were all dressed in full-length black robes, and their faces were veiled.

"Greetings, my friends," he said, affably. "How may I help you?"

"We have come seeking sanctuary for our fellow citizens," one of them said, "and we believe you can help us."

"I shall indeed try," Socius replied. "Please, be seated, for a discussion of this sort is bound to take some time."

"That would not be fitting," the second woman said. "We ought not sit, especially in the presence of a man such as you."

"Oh, I quite understand," Socius said breezily. "Local customs must be respected. Very well, remain as you are. Now, tell me, what is the exact nature of your trouble?"

The third woman raised her hand, and as if in a single gesture, the three women cast their robes and veils aside, revealing stylish and even modern Galvenian clothing, of the kind that Socius' own daughters might have worn.

"Well, I see you have lost no time in adopting *our* customs," Socius said, surprised. "But believe me, we Galvenians are a tolerant people. If you wish to preserve your own usages..."

"We certainly wish to preserve our usages, Prime Minister," the second woman said, "and that is why your life is forfeit today."

Socius stared at her, wondering if he had heard or understood her correctly. "I beg your pardon?" he said.

"Rest assured, my dear Minister, that you heard me correctly," she said, implacably. "Truly, your openness shall be the death of you."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," the Prime Minister replied, trying hard to maintain his composure. "While I sympathize with your distress, there is no need to use extreme language...."

"Oh, language is not all we shall use, Mr. Socius. You see, you thought we were speaking of citizens of the Varald Directorate, did you not?"

"Of course," Socius said, wondering if he should cry out and raise the alarm. "Now," he said firmly, "will you explain yourselves?"

"Certainly," the third woman said, drawing a pistol from within the folds of her skirt, and firing it at point-blank range into the chest of the Prime Minister. The shots rang out like the peals of a bell, and Socius, collapsing onto his chair, felt everything move around him in slow motion, before slowly fading to black.

"Jeannelle...." he said, his hands reaching for the table, trying desperately to lift himself up.

"Galvenia....shall never surrender...."

"Dixit insipiens: Non est Deus. Corrupti sunt," the first woman intoned, as if she were chanting Socius' funeral dirge. "Return to your master, Socius."

But Socius was now beyond her reproaches.

Alerted by the shots, two guards entered the room, rifles drawn, and looked with horror at the bleeding Prime Minister. The women made no attempt to escape. One of the guards fired, almost as a reflex, at the woman holding the pistol, and she fell to the ground, a smile on her face; her two companions, looking at her, bowed low as the guards seized them and led them away. Indeed, their expressions were serene, in stark contrast to the shocked expressions of those who now held them in custody.

"What have you done, you murderess?" one of the guards screamed, as he pushed the second woman forward, roughly.

"Nothing but my duty," she replied, her head remaining bowed.

“Good heavens, Katarina,” the King said with visible annoyance, as Sheffield had left the podium to moderate acclaim, “where is that man? This is hardly the time for him to have a lengthy diplomatic discussion. Doesn’t he know he ought to return promptly, so that we can conclude this ceremony?”

“Perhaps the Varaldian refugees have a tale of woe, my King,” the Queen said, indulgently. “Socius is known for being a good listener.”

“I’ll have to concede that, despite being his wife,” Jeannelle said, light-heartedly. “Whether it’s his own child or the chauffeur, if someone has a tale of woe, Martell will hear them out.”

Suddenly, Officer Jeffries – commander of the Royal Guard – came rushing up the steps to the Royal enclosure, accompanied by two men, both of whom were visibly agitated.

“What seems to be the matter, Father?” Princess Carranya said, noticing the men. “Shouldn’t the Guards resume their position only when escorting us from the stadium?”

“This doesn’t look good,” Ryan said, darkly, noticing the way the men were whispering among themselves.

“Ohmygosh, what’s happening?” Lavie exclaimed, pointing to the large Galvenian flag which flurred above the stadium, atop the large stand opposite them. “They’re lowering the flag to half-mast!”

“Perhaps there is bad news from Zion, Miss Regale,” Striker said, in his usual calm tone. “Sometimes, the flag is flown that way in war, to show solidarity with one’s allies.”

“I hope that’s all it is,” Sigmund said, darkly.

The guards had reached the enclosure now, and were greeted by a rather irritated Arlbert.

“What is the meaning of this, men?” he said, tugging at his beard and giving Jeffries a look of disapproval. “Who authorized the lowering of the flag without my consent?”

“Sire,” Jeffries stammered, “it is standard protocol for....” He stopped short, unable to continue, as if in the grip of a great sorrow.

“Speak up, man,” the King commanded him. “Have the Varald repelled the Zion thrust?”

“The Varald have.....have murdered the Prime Minister, Sire,” Jeffries said, spewing out the words without a pause, then hanging his head in regret and shame. “Those three women were.....assassins, and one of them has shot Mr. Socius.....”

“Nonsense, soldier!” Sigmund exclaimed, looking sympathetically at Jeannelle, who had turned pale, and was staring at Jeffries with incredulity. “Who would dare to do such a thing?”

"I'm afraid it's true, Sir," Jeffries replied, his expression numb, as the Princess rose from her seat to support the faltering First Lady. "We heard the sound of gunfire from the Members' Room, and rushed in. One of the women was carrying a pistol, which she must have concealed in her clothing, and had shot the Prime Minister. They just stood there, not even trying to run. The assassin was shot by one of our men, and the other two are in our custody, in the police enclosure...."

"Martell, no.....Martell.....they've killed my husband," Jeannelle said, closing her eyes and leaning against the Princess for support. "Let me see him..."

"I'm so sorry, ma'am," Lavie said, in a gentle tone. "I....I don't know what to say..."

"Thank you, child," Jeannelle whispered.

"I will take you to him, Mrs. Socius," Carranya said, suddenly.

"Your Highness, you can't...." Jeffries protested.

"Carranya! Calm yourself, child!" the King said, still unable to fully accept what he had just heard.

"Mr. Jeffries," Carranya said, firmly, "the First Lady has a right to see her husband, more than anyone else in this stadium. She will not take much time."

"But what if...." one of the guards began, hesitantly.

"I doubt very much that there are more assassins lurking in the shadows," the Princess replied, tossing her head back. "Besides, you have not exactly succeeded in protecting our Prime Minister from them. Ryan, come with us."

Jeffries shook his head, and remained silent.

Ryan, feeling as if he was in a dream, rose from his seat. "Princess, I didn't bring my weapons," he said, bewildered. "Poor Socius..."

"Take one of mine," Agent Striker said, handing him an old-fashioned Zionese pistol. "I will come too, if you wish, Your Highness."

"Thank you, Agent. Ryan, help me," she said, as she continued to support the First Lady, who was making a brave effort to stand.

Ryan, stepping forward, lent his other arm to Jeannelle, and the four of them, followed at a respectful distance by the Royal Guards, slowly descended the steps to the Members' Room.

"Well, I never..." Arlbert said, staring at the receding figures of his daughter and her companions in dismay. "Socius....what is Galvenia coming to?"

“Galvenia must never surrender,” Lavie said, softly, looking at the flag, which hung on its mast in the stillness of the afternoon. “We mustn’t give up. That’s....that’s what Mr. Socius said.” Her voice failed, and she covered her face with one hand, as her mother took hold of the other, which lay loosely in her lap.

The Trumpeteers appeared, and began to play the March for the Dead, as War Minister Sheffield announced the news to a crowd that was watching the Royal Box with mounting unease. A silence fell over the crowd as he ended his terse message, punctuated only by occasional sounds of sobbing and wailing.

“And this is why I say...” the voice broke, then went on bravely, as the small crowd in Saint Hilda’s Chapel strained to listen to the wireless, which sounded strangely distant to them, *“...that what we need today, in this darkest hour, is courage. May the Infinity give us all....the courage to go on. May we never be half-hearted in our loyalty to Galvenia. May justice be done, and may all of us, especially the First Lady, find solace from our affliction in knowing that we did our best.”*

There was a pause, and Father Joaquim shook his head, sadly, his hands still folded in prayer.

“My friends, I can say nothing that will lighten your burden. Indeed, I can scarcely say anything to lighten my own heavy heart, or that of the brave woman beside me. I can only repeat the words that Prince Derren spoke, when his own life, and the future of the Kingdom, both hung in the balance. I will never surrender. Lorean will never surrender. Galvenia will never surrender. God bless Galvenia, and may Martell Socius rest in peace, knowing that his people will carry on his legacy.”

There was a sigh and a pause, accompanied by the sound of papers being shuffled, as the GBC’s newsreader began to speak again. “Ladies and gentlemen, we will continue to broadcast the Princess’ message on the hour, as requested by the King of Galvenia, that those of you who hear may pay heed to what she says. Prime Minister Socius’ funeral will take place tomorrow at 9 a.m., beginning with a procession from Lorean Castle, followed by a service at King’s College Chapel, which was his *alma mater*. Finally, he will be laid to rest, in state, in the military cemetery at Lorean, at the request of the First Lady. Our hearts go out to the Prime Minister’s family at this moment, and we shall suspend all regular programming in his honour. Rule Galvenia.”

The Galvenian national anthem played, and the men and women within stood at attention. Finally, Henrik Spenson, wiping his eyes, switched off the wireless as its last strains died out, echoing within the stone walls of the chapel.

“God rest his soul,” Father Joaquim said. “He was no friend of the Church, my brothers and sisters, but he was a good man despite that. He stood for peace, diplomacy, and understanding between nations, and I would never dare fault him for that.”

“The Prime Minister...” Henrik said, brokenly, as Bernadette took his hand, trying hard to smile. “I can’t believe it. This will mean ruin for Galvenia....”

“Galvenia will never be ruined, Henrik,” Father Joaquim said, softly, “as long as we, the faithful, continue to offer our prayers for its protection, and its deliverance from the scourges of war and terror.”

“You’re right, Father,” Henrik said, shaking his head. “It’s just that.....this is beyond comprehension. We thought this was between the Varald and the Zion, but now it seems that....”

“It is true that we deal with a great evil,” the priest replied, “but evil can overcome us only if we despair. We are followers of the Infinity, but we also love Galvenia, our motherland. Socius has fallen, but, Infinity willing, we will not fall. Henrik, will you read for us, now?”

“Yes, Father,” Henrik said, walking up to the simple lectern slowly, and opening the Holy Book, finding the passage that he knew and loved.

“A reading from the last chapter of the Book of Origins,” he announced, as his little audience bowed their heads and folded their hands, listening as he read the age-old story to them.

‘You must understand now,’ the angel said, ‘the true depths of your sin. You have descended to the Pits, but you did not find her there. Now, you must return there, as your just punishment.’

‘I shall not,’ the man replied. ‘My end shall not come, until the Infinity decrees it. May He have mercy upon me.’

As he spoke these words, the Infinity raised him to a high place, higher than the heavens, above the clouds and the stars. He found himself in a room, in a home, almost like the one he had grown up in. Seated there, waiting for him, was the Law, the one he had killed, appearing to him in a white robe, like an angel of the Infinity Himself.

‘What is this place?’ he asked.

‘This is our home and our refuge, man of regret,’ she said, and as she turned, he was nearly blinded by the light that shone from her face. ‘This is the end of the way, the destination, where there shall be no more regret, no more evil, and no more suffering. You shall fear no more, for you have been forgiven.’

‘Forgiveness? How could I be forgiven?’ the man asked.

‘It is not you or I who forgives, man of regret,’ she replied. ‘It is given to the Infinity alone to forgive, and to lead us to this place. But though he has given you a foretaste, the doors of Paradise are not yet open to you. Your journey is not complete.’

‘I understand,’ the man said, kneeling. ‘I must return and make amends.’

'You are truly worthy, O man,' the Law replied. 'Continue to prove yourself so. But now you must leave, for there is another who needs the comfort that only you can give. Neither the fires of the Pits, nor the waters of the flood, shall harm you both. Return in peace, man of regret, and live. Begin the world.'

"Here ends the lesson of the Infinity," Henrik said, in a tremulous voice, bowing low and kissing the Book.

"So let it be," the crowd – many of whom were on the verge of tears – said in unison. As Henrik returned to his pew, Sister Miriam lit a candle for the Prime Minister, illuminating the little chapel. Father Joaquim, walking up to the altar, switched off the electric light, and murmured the Italian Prayers for the Dead softly. As he stood there silently, Bernadette led some of the women in song, their voices rising from a near-whisper to a hopeful harmony...

*"When the day is done,
when darkness falls,
as it must on every soul*

*Open the doors,
merciful Father,
receive us, one and all..*

*For those that doubt
And those that grieve
And those who still believe*

*That the light which flickers
Is the light which still burns
To receive us into your home...."*

God, Henrik thought, looking at Bernadette's face in the light of the single candle, *I've never heard her sing before, but she has a beautiful voice. If I listened to her a little more, I could almost believe that, despite Socius' death, things will be all right. Thank you, Heavenly Father, for this hope...*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE CALL AND THE ANSWER

“Has anyone contracted to marry a girl and not yet married her?

Let him go home, in case he dies in battle and someone else marries her.

Finally, the scribes will say to the people:

Is anyone frightened or faint hearted?

Let him go home, in case he makes his brothers faint hearted too!”

(Deuteronomy, ch. 20, v. 7-8.)

We must, in discreet and dignified silence, pass over the funeral of Martell Socius, and the reactions that his death inspired all over Galvenia. For all his faults, Socius – like the King – had been a national institution, a familiar figure who was Government personified, and there were few who wanted to particularly recall his failures; even the word “Darington” was scarcely mentioned. The leader of the Opposition, Gavin Breckenridge, summed up the general sentiment in the concluding sentence of his address to Parliament, on the day when they passed a resolution declaring the 19th of July as a memorial for his late adversary:

“Today, we do not seek to hold on to our party spirit. Whatever differences we may have had, they are buried today, and we must unite in the face of the enemy we have to confront. Today, we are not Conservatives, or Unionists; we are all Galvenians.”

If there was one image that summed up the remarkable unity that prevailed in those days, it was a quite unique photograph. Taken using a long-distance camera, it portrayed the Princess, accompanied by a commoner and a Zionesse agent, supporting the First Lady as they led her to the Members’ Room, while members of Royalty, the military, and the Galvenian middle class all looked on in horror and in sympathy. It was, in short, a picture of the Royal Box taken shortly after Officer Jeffries had broken the news to them all; and like every such picture, there was a story behind it.

“A few seconds,” Armin Tamas gloated, “and I had the shot of a lifetime. It may’ve been satisfying to sock it to Saunders, but this was the opportunity of a lifetime.” They were sitting in Davenport Park, and Armin was waving a copy of his iconic picture in triumph.

“Will you give it up already, Armin?” an exasperated Ryan said. “Only you could think of taking pictures at a moment like that, and then selling them to every newspaper in Galvenia. Even the Zion papers are printing it now. I knew the word ‘morals’ didn’t mean much to you, but....”

“Hey, hey, Compadre, what’s with the sermon?” Armin said, mockingly. “Next I hear, you’ll be joining the Church of the Goofy Robes, and heading to their country to quell their revolt. Is that your next act of heroism, Mr. Eramond?”

“Don’t remind me of that,” Ryan said, darkly. “I hear enough about that from Henrik and his friend already. Who would have thought that civil war would break out in Itaria of all places? Attacks on

churches and nunneries, burning the Pontiff's effigy, and now the siege of the cathedral at Lorenza. I can't, for the life of me, understand how that could have happened."

"Heh, Compadre, maybe the Itarians just got *bored* with that 'peaceful religion' of theirs! Let's face it, the history of the world teaches us one thing: that any so-called pacifists either turn violent someday, or become....roadkill!" He laughed.

Ryan shook his head. "Not funny, Armin. What's worse is that the Commonwealth refuses to intervene. And who died and made you a history professor, anyway?"

"*Henrik* did, that's who," Armin replied, still laughing. "Seriously, I don't see him around anymore. I know he's probably sitting behind his books and staying in that chapel of his, but you could make a good case that he's presumed dead by now!"

"You're incorrigible," Ryan said, smiling despite himself. "I knew Hipper would be like Miller, but he still makes me sick. It took him ages to deploy troops to the Ghetz border, and within a week, he pulled them out, saying that it was too dangerous to leave them there! Weren't *they* supposed to be ensuring the safety of the people, and not the other way around?"

"Saint Geraud, pray for us, huh?" Armin said, looking up to the skies and raising his hands in a parody of an Itarian preacher's mannerisms. "What I say is, let the Zion and the Varald duke things out, Compadre. And in the meantime, let's help them out, especially since the Varald have started this nasty little habit of assassinating our politicians! I mean, I hate Socius as much as the next man, but I didn't want him *dead*, and certainly not shot by three crazy Varaldian dames!"

"'Crazy' is the right word," Ryan said, annoyed. "They haven't said a word at their trial, except to keep insisting that they're good Varaldian patriots, and that they acted on their own. Lucan has asked for an enquiry, of course, but Hipper just seems to know two words these days: 'Not possible!' The Varald war, the Itarians....what's the use of having a Commonwealth if it can't protect us?"

"The Commonwealth? What's it good for? Absolutely nothin' I say!" Armin said, emphatically. "So anyway, as much as you may dislike my little photo, it's put me in the black for quite a while! I don't think Mom will need to worry about the family finances for a while, and she's even been able to hire some folks to help her out with her business! That's a good thing, for sure, especially since I'm going to be signing up soon."

Ryan stared at him. "Signing up? You're kidding, right? If you couldn't take a day of Colonel Whitworth, what makes you think you'll survive basic training?"

"Oh, I'm not signing up to be a *grunt*, Ryan," Armin said airily. "I'm going to be a *secret agent*, like that new boyfriend of Lavie's!"

"He isn't her 'boyfriend', they're barely acquainted," Ryan protested.

“Oh my, Ryan, do I detect something green-eyed in those blue eyes of yours? Could it be – King Richard forbid – *jealousy*? As far as I’m concerned, anyone who takes Lavie off our hands is a savior of humanity, even if he’s a Zion hireling. I may even nominate him for the sainthood, when I become Pontiff!” He laughed, and Ryan found himself flushing, though he could not understand why exactly.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Armin,” Ryan said. “From what her parents told me, Lavie’s met the man exactly three times: once when she was with the Princess, once on the day Socius died, and once to visit Mr. Regale and borrow some books from him. Aren’t you jumping the gun here? Or maybe” – he paused meaningfully and smiled – “you’re the one who’s jealous, not me! Armin and Lavie, sitting in a tree...”

“Shut up, dude!” Armin said, hotly. “That’s not funny at all. I ought to make you eat some of her brownies, just for suggesting that!”

“Or does the mention of the Zions remind you of that blue-haired Sergeant of theirs?” Ryan went on, pitilessly. “I’m sorry, Armin, I don’t think she’d be your type, especially judging by that right hand of hers. It might come in contact with *your* jaw if you get too fresh with her!”

“Hmm, just how I like them, Ryan,” Armin said, grinning. “You know what they say, Compadre, some of us like it *hot!*”

“Well, if that’s your design, I wish you well, and I’ll come and visit you in hospital when it all goes wrong,” Ryan said, sympathetically. “But seriously, are you signing up for the Intelligence Service, or is that just another of your Arminian jokes?”

“‘Arminian’? I like that, Compadre. Maybe I should start my own religion. The Church of Arminius, with Miss Zion Army as our patron saint. Sounds a lot more fun than Henrik’s religion anyway!”

“It might just work,” Ryan replied, “but let’s get serious here.”

“Well, it so happens that I *am* serious, Compadre,” Armin said, his expression growing hard. “I mean, it’s personal now. The Varald have taken their war onto our territory now, and you know how I feel about that. Perhaps I’m not cut out for the drills of Army life, but I’d certainly like to do my part! I met old Fairfax a couple of days ago, and he was quite impressed, both by my photographic skills and by my ‘Silent Slash’! He said he could use me for a few simple missions, working with some senior agents to get experience, and that if I did okay, he’d sign me up. Sounds good to me.”

“Wow, Armin, I’ve got to say I’m impressed,” Ryan said. “I didn’t know Sir Cornelius Fairfax would be so taken by your forays into yellow journalism, but if it means that you get to serve Galvenia, more power to you.”

“So what are you signing up for, Ryan?” Armin asked, curiously. “Army? Royal Marines? Or will you be joining me in Intelligence, as my loyal sidekick?”

“Sidekick? Hmph!” Ryan said, with mock indignation. “Actually, I haven’t yet made up my mind. The Army would be the obvious choice, and it’d be what Grandpa would have wanted. On the other hand, when I think of those five ships of ours that were lost, I wonder....”

“So toss a coin, Compadre,” Armin suggested. “I mean, either way, you’ll have to do a little training first, and you’ll be doing your part!”

“Very helpful, Armin,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “It’s just that.....I’m not sure if I should volunteer at all, in the first place.”

Armin stared at him. “Did I just hear you correctly, Eramond?”

“Yes, you did,” Ryan replied. “I know that if it was up to me, I’d do it in a flash, but it’s just...”

“Geez, don’t tell me your *parents* won’t let you join,” Armin said, teasingly. “I mean, you didn’t exactly ask for permission before taking those pirates out, did ya?”

“No, it’s not my parents; in fact, Dad has been quite supportive, and Mum’s – just been Mum, I guess. Keeps calling me her brave boy. No, it’s....someone else.”

“Aha! Professor Henrik must have been preaching to you, with that ‘peaceful religion’ bit of his!” Armin said, comprehension dawning on his face. “Lord Geraud, war is evil, and all that stuff, right? Don’t listen to him, Compadre. Henrik would actually sign up if he had the chance, it’s just that his dad is being a crank about it. Poor guy.”

“Nope, it’s not Henrik either,” Ryan said, looking embarrassed. “It’s....something a little more personal than that.”

“Don’t tell me *Lavie* turned on the water-works, and begged you to stay and marry her, or something,” Armin said contemptuously. “Or.....Oh. My. God. Ryan Eramond, you are a *dope*. The most dopey dope in Davenport.”

“What do you mean, Armin?” Ryan said, suspiciously.

“It’s that blue-haired beauty of yours, isn’t it?” Armin said, pointing an accusing finger at his friend.

“Your precious Marianne. Is *she* trying to talk you out of joining up? I ought to have warned you about that long ago,” he went on, shaking his head.

“How did you even guess that?” Ryan said, looking away for a moment, then turning back to face him. “Is it that obvious?”

“Ryan, face it, that is one messed-up kid you’re dealing with,” Armin said. “Her home’s broken up, her granny’s one of the biggest dragons in the Universe, and she sees you as her only way out. Let me guess, is she pressuring you into a wedding right out of high school, or something?”

“Not exactly,” Ryan confessed, “but she has, ahem, hinted at it. Poor Marianne. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Ryan,” Armin said, looking at him seriously, “stop staring at that stupid pendant of yours, and listen to me. You and Marianne are both Galvenians. The Zion border has been pushed back too far now, after those ‘mage squadrons’, or whoever they are, found out that their magical powers couldn’t block *shells*! Unless old Charlemagne does something soon, the Varald could be in Issachar in a few more months. Then Darington, and then Galvenia! I’m no fan of the Zions, but let’s face it – in war, the enemy of my enemy is my ally! We’ve got to repel them and keep them out of Galvenian soil, and if that means signing up, go for it! Are you going to wait for Breckenridge to *draft* you, or what?”

“I know,” Ryan said, nodding in agreement. “Believe me, I’ve thought of this every day, ever since Socius died. It’s just that....at this point, I’m all she has in the world, and...”

“Listen, Ryan, you’re the guy who keeps telling all of us to ‘do the right thing’, aren’t you? You can’t give that up for a sob story! If Marianne really cared for you, or for Galvenia, she’d understand that!”

“So what does Rachel think about your signing up?” Ryan asked, in a feeble attempt at counter-attack.

“That doesn’t matter,” Armin replied, firmly. “What matters is what *you* and *I* think.” He paused, hesitating for a moment, and then played his trump card. “What would your Grandpa say, if he knew you had a chance to follow in his path, and gave it up for your dopey *girlfriend*, who cheated on you in the first place?”

Ryan was silent.

“What would he say, Ryan?” Armin insisted.

“Armin,” Ryan said, hesitantly, “I don’t quite know how to say this, but thank you for....for bringing me back to my senses. I can’t afford to think of myself at a time like this. I think I ought to....discuss this with her, and tell her where I ought to stand.”

“Want me to help you with it?”

Ryan laughed. “I don’t think that will be necessary, Compadre. Anyway, I have a date to meet her at the beach today afternoon, so I guess I’d better....break it to her then. I’ve got to go andprepare myself, I guess. Thanks again.”

The two friends shook hands, and Ryan got up and left, heading home. As Armin sat on his log alone, a pleased smile on his face, another man – who was hidden behind a clump of trees to the east – walked up to him and joined him, extending his hand.

“Did I lay it on too thick, Wolfie?” Armin asked, as they shook hands.

“Not at all, Armin. You did an excellent job, though you did have the benefit of my coaching,” Agent Striker said. “I believe three thousand Commonwealth dollars is the sum we agreed on.”

“Hey, shouldn’t you wait till he signs up, first? For all you know, the fair Marianne may still talk him out of it,” Armin replied.

“Consider it a gift from a present to a future intelligence agent, Armin,” Striker said, with a laugh. “I think you’ve given him plenty to think about. We may have high ideals, but sometimes, appealing to a baser motive – in this case, his pride as a man and as an Eramond – is more effective.” He handed Armin six five-hundred-dollar notes, which he pocketed eagerly.

“Tell me, Wolfie,” Armin said, seriously. “I know I agreed to do this because of the money, and also because I honestly think Ryan should stop being so henpecked. But what’s in it for you, dude? Are you seriously trying to get him out of the way so that you can have a shot at Lavie Regale? Because, if that’s the case, she ain’t worth the effort. Take it from me, man to man.”

Striker tossed his head back and laughed. “I fail to understand why Miss Regale should inspire such antipathy in you. She seems a charming young lady. But I can assure you that my intentions are pure, and in fact, my affections are engaged elsewhere, closer to home. My reasons are quite different.”

“So what would your girl back home think of your courting Lavie?” Armin joked. “Would she write you a ‘Dear Wolfgang’ letter once she found out?”

“Hardly,” Agent Striker said. “She’s never written me a letter yet, but if she did, it wouldn’t be one of those. However, let me be honest with you, Armin – ‘man to man’, as you so aptly put it. Mr. Eramond did the Zion Empire a great service by keeping Princess Carranya alive, and strengthening our alliance. I am grateful to that young man, and want to keep him out of danger.”

“Danger?” Armin’s eyes widened. “Look here, Wolfie, are you....”

“I am,” Striker replied. “Believe me, Armin, Ryan would be far safer on the border of Ghetz, or even on the high seas, than in Davenport. There are some who seek to have him silenced, and remaining here would simply make him an easy target. I am sorry I cannot be more explicit, and perhaps I have already said too much, but now you know.”

Armin stared at him in horror, not knowing what to say.

The guard entered the Pontiff’s quarters, perspiring profusely, his dome-shaped cap almost falling off his head. “Your Holiness!” he exclaimed. “I bring the latest news from Lorenza.”

“Peace be with you, messenger,” the Pontiff said, gesturing to him to be seated. There was no one else in the room except Archbishop Elias, his faithful watchdog. “Is the situation still tenable?”

“The Guard are holding their position valiantly, Your Holiness,” the guard replied, dejectedly, “but we fear that it may not be enough. The rebels grow in numbers every day.”

“From whence do these rebels come, soldier?” Elias said sharply.

“From the city of Lorenza herself, and from neighbouring villages, especially in the valley of Mariello, Your Grace,” he answered. “They are both laymen and priests, armed and unarmed...”

“Armed?” Elias interjected.

“Yes, Your Grace; some of them bear swords, and not a few bear firearms, all the while carrying the Old Itarian flag and claiming to serve the Infinity.” He closed his eyes, as if ashamed of what he had just said.

“But this is blasphemy, Carlo,” Elias said, rising from his chair. “To bear arms, and attack churches, in the name of the Infinity? I say enough with gentleness. This is surely the work of the Lord of the Pits, and his servants, whom I have often urged you to repress more sternly.”

“My dear Clement,” the Pontiff replied. “I am fully aware that this is blasphemy. These men bear Old Itarian flags, do they?”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” the guard said, almost sobbing. “They – they insult your name, and say that you are weak and cowardly. They speak of their deeds as a ‘just rebellion’. They say that your – weakness has endangered the souls of millions, and that they intend to reclaim the true Faith, as it was before we fell into h – heresy....”

If glares could have killed, Elias could easily have killed an entire army of rebels at the moment.

“What of the citizens of Lorenza? How do they bear with this trial?” the Pontiff asked, gently.

“Your Holiness, many of them are too frightened to react. Lorenza is a quiet town. Some members of the population have been forced to march with the rebels at gunpoint. Others, who refused to comply, have been shot or beheaded. And there are tales told of atrocities being committed on tourists, Galvenians and Zionese, including women and children...” He covered his face with his hands.

“Carlo, we must react!” Elias thundered. “If this rebellion spreads across the Claudia, and reaches us, Itaria could be ruined! Even the Pontifical Guards would be powerless against an armed mob of this kind!”

“Clement, we have already petitioned the Commonwealth,” the Pontiff replied, calmly. “Unfortunately, President Hipper is unwilling to deploy any men to come to our aid, given the gravity of the situation on the Zionese front. The Council is scheduled to vote on the matter today, and we will receive help only if a majority approves. Guard, return to the front line, and instruct Captain Novelli to meet me this afternoon. This is a sad time.”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” the guard replied obediently, kneeling and kissing the Pontiff’s ring before he left.

“Is there no other way, Carlo?” Elias said, angrily. “I speak to you not as a subordinate but as a faithful friend, one who has been with you since seminary. I have always admired and respected you, but there are times when kindness and gentleness simply do not work. The Commonwealth cannot be trusted – we can only count on our vote and that of the Zion. The Republic, despite Legrand’s faith in them, are economically beholden to the Varald. And Galvenia has troubles of its own. Let us call the men from Zion and San Delas, I beg you.”

“Mercenaries? Clement, would you have me stoop to the level of the rebels? Should you and I bear rifles, with the New Itarian flag flying from them?” the Pontiff said, in a tone which was a gentle rebuke. “Tribulations and ordeals are all ordained by the Infinity. If it is His decree that we suffer, I would rather you and I be led captive, in chains, than that we violated His law.”

“But our law does permit a just defense, against an unjust rebellion of this sort,” Elias argued. “Give Marchmont more powers against the prisoners we have. Find out who are the traitors in our midst, and extirpate them. Arrest the men of infamy who have stoked these fires – Kartner, Bastow, Davis...”

“I have already given Marchmont powers to bring those men and women to their knees, and to exhort them to repentance, Clement,” the Pontiff argued. “As for the men you mention, Davis is in Zion, and Gray in Galvenia, as far as I know. Kartner is in his home parish, close to Lorenza itself; moving against him would be difficult. And Bastow has made an act of submission and retraction before me...”

“He lies, Carlo. Would you trust a man who says that the Zion Emperor, and not you, ought to rule Itaria? That the Galvenians ought to be brought into the true faith at gunpoint? That men like Socius, who promote religious toleration, are worse than the Lord of Darkness himself? We should be grateful that the Galvenians are not accusing him of complicity in Socius’ murder! We must find the truth, extract it if necessary?”

“Clement!” The Pontiff rarely raised his voice, but when he did, people – even Elias, his most intimate friend – stopped to listen. “Repent, my brother. Would you have me use not only mercenaries, but torture, against my fallen brethren? Reflect on what you are saying, and how sinful it is.”

“We must defend ourselves...” Elias began, though not with much conviction, but he was mercifully protected from another rebuke by the entry of Bishop Marchmont, accompanied by a man and woman. They were middle-aged, and wore the gray garb of prisoners doing penance.

“Marchmont!” the Pontiff exclaimed, smiling and rising from his throne. “And who are these children with you?”

“Your Holiness,” Marchmont replied, as the three of them knelt and then kissed the floor before the Pontiff, “I bring you some hope. With me are Franco and Giulia Baroni, who have repented of their sins, and have confessed them to me. They come to you now with their full consent, eager to make reparation. I have asked them to tell you what they know.”

“Welcome, my children,” the Pontiff said, smiling at them as if they had been his own grandchildren. “Please, rise and be seated. Thank the Infinity that he has given you the grace to repent. And now, tell me what it is that you have to say.”

“Your Holiness,” the woman said, with a trembling voice, “my eldest son, my Pietro, was a Brother of Saint Nealus working among the poor in San Delas. He was captured by Varald guards while preaching to a group of people in the harbour, and....” She began to weep.

“We have not heard of our son ever since, Your Holiness,” her husband went on, holding her hand. “It was out of this despair, when we felt that even you could not defend us – forgive us, your Holiness...”

“We are all in need of forgiveness, my brother,” the Pontiff said, looking compassionately at the woman. “And we shall find it, if we truly seek it. I do not sit here as a judge, but as a father concerned for his children. Speak bravely, and tell me the truth.”

“T - Thank you, your Holiness,” the man stammered. “It was in this dark time that we met a priest, a young man who was an assistant in our parish. His name was Father Gruber, and he was from Galvenio, but he spoke our language well. He had two young people with him, a boy and a girl. They were very kind to us, and gave us comfort.”

The Pontiff nodded, as if he was already familiar with some of the details of this story, but said nothing.

“Don Gruber told us that there were – important changes happening in the Church,” the woman said, suddenly. “He gave us some books by Monsignor Kartner to read.”

“Kartner! May he be forever separated from the Infinity!” Elias began, but the Pontiff motioned to him to remain silent.

“He told us that Monsignor Kartner would soon be an important leader of the Church,” Franco Baroni went on, “but there were some who opposed him, because they were afraid. At that moment, he said, he needed us to help him, even if it meant breaking the law. We were frightened, but Don Gruber convinced us, and said that we would be serving the Infinity.”

“Breaking the law?” Elias said, sharply.

“Hold your peace, Clement,” the Pontiff said, gently. “What did he want you to do?”

“It was quite foolish, actually,” the man confessed. “I was working as a security guard in the Museum of Saint Guibert, and he wanted me to remove three objects from there, all of which were very old. I was scared, because I told him I would lose my job if they were missing, but he showed me duplicates of them, which looked just like the real thing. The boy and girl said that they were master craftsmen, and they had made them.”

“We are in deep waters, my good Franco,” the Pontiff said, closing his eyes. “I assume that you did take the three objects. What were they?”

“A sword, a shield, and a flag, your Holiness,” Franco replied, trembling.

“We are sorry, Your Holiness,” Giulia said, falling at his feet. “Don Gruber – he lied to us, and said that they would be used to ransom our Pietro, that the Varald wanted them for their own museum.”

“Can you be more specific? What sword, shield and flag?” Elias asked.

“Monsignor, the flag was the ancient flag of Itaria, made of silk,” Franco replied. “The label next to it said it was a gift from the Emperor Frederico of Zion.”

“Hmm. And the other two items, my friend?” the Pontiff said, casually.

“Your Holiness, the shield was the one I did not want to take; it was the Holy Shield of Santo Franco, my own patron, the warrior of San Delas,” Franco said, tears coming to his eyes. “But I wished to save my son...”

“*Ego te absolvo*, Franco,” the Pontiff said, “if my good Marchmont has not done so already. But continue. What about the sword?”

“Ah, the sword, Your Holiness – it was an old sword of iron, with a blunt blade. The label only said it was called the sword of repentance....sorry, Your Holiness, not repentance. Regret. The sword of regret. I do not know why it was important, but Don Gruber explained that the bloodthirsty Varald love all weapons, and wanted to boast that they had Itarian weapons in their museum. I took the three one night, about four months ago, and the boy replaced them with his copies. Nothing was discovered.”

He bowed his head.

“Then, some time later, the boy with Don Gruber met us again, along with another priest. He told us that Don Gruber had been killed by the Varald, and that we needed to follow the vendetta, to avenge him,” his wife continued. “He said Don Gruber had been betrayed by religious from the Home of Santa Annetta, and that we had to help in punishing them. I am a milkmaid, Your Holiness, and every day, it is my duty to deliver the milk from the farms of San Luigi to the houses in my neighbourhood. He gave me a bottle, like an ordinary bottle of milk, and asked me to give it to the Home of Santa Annetta.”

“I was frightened, and asked them if it was something evil, like poison. They told me not to ask questions, but I asked them again, because I felt they were planning something wrong. The priest became furious and started cursing in a foreign tongue – I think he was also Galvenio – then he showed me a photograph of a young boy who had been hanged. He was about the same age as my daughter, my Palmira. He told me that this boy had disobeyed the instructions of their leader, and had been killed for this. He threatened to kill my child...”

“There is nothing in this world as ugly as the plots of the evil, my daughter,” the Pontiff replied, placing a consoling hand on her shoulder. “Marchmont, is the child safe?”

“I have taken the liberty of moving the child to the Palace itself, where she is being looked after by your housekeeper and the Pontifical seamstresses, Your Holiness,” Marchmont replied. “She is as safe as you are.”

“Excellent,” Pious XXI said, nodding in approval. “Giulia, my child, do not be afraid. I, the Pontiff, will ensure your little one’s safety. Now tell me what happened next.”

“Your Holiness – oh, forgive me, your Holiness, for ever having doubted you,” the woman sobbed.

“We were both frightened,” Franco went on, “and we agreed to do it. The next day, Giulia delivered the milk to the convent of Santa Annetta, and the fire started soon after. It was terrible...”

“I was going to confess to the good Sisters then and there,” Giulia wailed, “but the same priest who was with the boy grabbed me, and threatened me with a gun...”

“I tried to save her, but he had two other men with him, and they struck me,” Franco said, despairingly. “The next thing I remember, we were in the crowd outside the Embassy of the Zion, and the guards arrested us. We hesitated a long time when in prison before confessing. We were afraid of being punished severely, Your Holiness...”

“You have been punished enough, I think,” the Pontiff said, and though his tone was stern, his expression was gentle. “Is there anything else you have to tell me, my children?”

The couple shook their heads, which were still bowed in penitence.

“Very well. It is always better to repent late than not to repent at all, my children, and as long as you remain faithful to the Church, I shall endeavor to protect you. Marchmont, take them to Sister Moretta, and let them see their child; they can be accommodated in the workmen’s wing of my quarters. Then return to the prison, and let us hope that we may learn more than these brave souls have already told us. Peace be with you all.”

“Thank you, your Holiness,” the couple said, in choked voices, bowing and kissing the ground again, before the Bishop led them away.

“It seems Joaquim was right, Elias,” the Pontiff said, frowning. “I was a fool to have doubted him.”

“The villains! The scoundrels!” Elias said, adding a few more choice Italian terms which I shall not endeavor to reproduce or translate. “That Don Gruber ought to burn at the stake today, and as for Kartner...”

“Don Gruber, or to give him his proper name, Father Athanasius Gruber, is already dead, Elias,” the Pontiff said, sadly. “I entrust him to the mercy of the Infinity, for I have little for him myself. It was Joaquim and a sister from Davenport who nursed him at his final hour, and learned some of the details of this infamous plot.”

“May his soul rot in the Pits, Carlo,” Elias replied, raising his hand in protest. “You may have a little mercy for him, but I have none. Threatening children, enticing others to steal relics, murdering the brave sisters of Saint Annette’s – that is beyond the pale, my friend. As for Kartner, he must be arrested.”

“I think we are on shaky ground with Kartner, Clement,” the Pontiff replied. “I regret to say it, but there is nothing that implicates him directly. He could honestly claim that Gruber misrepresented his views, and was never an associate. We shall have him watched, but that is all.”

Elias grunted, and then an idea occurred to him. “But what would they want with relics? Sweet Infinity, is this group dealing in demonic conjurations, Carlo? If that is the case...”

“I don’t think so, Clement. I think they wanted something in particular, and stole more than they needed, as a blind. Besides, demonic conjurations usually require first-degree relics, the actual bones of a Saint. A second-degree relic, such as a sword or a flag, would not do. What a pity Marlborough is in Galvenia, and the Archbishop of Caledonia is, well, in Caledonia. They are our best minds as far as historical artefacts are concerned.”

“Shall I recall Marlborough, Your Holiness?” Elias suggested. “We need loyal men with us now.”

“No, Clement. Marlborough has his own work to do in Galvenia. I shall wire him and ask him for information. In the meantime, please summon the Zion Ambassador in the evening, and let us see how much of the old forms Charlemagne still retains.”

“Your Holiness!” Elias exclaimed. “Do you mean to say that...”

“Yes, my good Clement, your pleas for defence have not fallen on deaf ears. While I abhor using mercenaries, we are still the state religion of the Empire, and we have the right to ask our spiritual subjects for temporal protection, according to the Concordat of 17 C.E. Let us hope that Charlemagne can spare some of his men, and quell this rebellion. Now speak to the Ambassador, Elias, and let us set the process in motion. Hopefully, we will not be too late.”

“Of course, your Holiness,” Elias said, bowing and kissing the Pontiff’s ring, as he left the chamber with a lighter heart.

“Why, Master Ryan, I didn’t expect to see you here!” Carmen said happily, as she spotted Ryan – arm in arm with Marianne – walking away from Davenport Beach. “Are you having a nice time?”

“Er, I guess we are, right, Marianne?” Ryan said, a little embarrassed. *I hope she doesn’t go and tell Lavie about this, or we’ll have another war on our hands, right here in Davenport!* “And who’s the handsome bloke with you?”

“*Buenos dias*, and thank you, Senor Ryan,” the tall, dark-skinned man holding Carmen’s hand replied. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Juan Casales, and my Carmen has already told me much about you.”

“Why, thanks, Mr. Casales,” Ryan said, shaking hands with him. “You’re a swordsmith, right?”

“Ryan,” Marianne said, meaningfully. “Weren’t we going to the park right now?”

“Er, yes, we are, Marianne, just give me a minute,” Ryan replied. Marianne released his arm, and made a small sound of annoyance.

“So how come you’re out here, Carmen?” Ryan said. “I thought you only got the day off on Wednesdays.”

“Oh, Mr. and Mrs. Regale are being very kind, Master Ryan,” Carmen said, beaming. “And Miss Lavie, too! You see, Juan has signed up for the Galvenian Marines, and he will be making swords for the men who are going to Zion. When I told them about it, they both agreed to give me another day off every week, until Juan had to leave.”

“We’ll be moving out at the end of September, Senor,” Juan explained. “I still have to learn some things about the swords which the Marines use, and how to make them rust-proof. After I finish this training, I must go.”

“Oh, I see,” Ryan said, looking uncomfortably at Marianne. “Tough luck on you, Carmen, right?”

“It is, Master Ryan,” Carmen admitted, “but Juan is proud to be a citizen of Galvenia, and when he said he wanted to serve, I didn’t have the heart to stop him. And he knows I’ll be waiting for him right here, when he comes back.” Her voice trembled a little, and Juan drew closer to her.

“How nice,” Marianne said, rather flatly. “Ryan, can we...”

“Just a minute, dear,” Ryan said, a little annoyed at the interruption. “Well, Senor Casales, I wish you all the very best, and I thank you for your service. I hope you and Carmen will be very happy some day.”

“Oh, he’s already happy today, Master Ryan,” Carmen said, pointing to the picnic basket she held in her other hand. “Juan may be raring to fight the Varald, but he’s powerless where my sandwiches are concerned!”

“You have me there, *mi amor*,” Juan said, squeezing her hand affectionately. “But I’m sure you and your *senorita* have your own plans for today, Senor Ryan! Please, amuse yourselves, my friends.”

“Hey, thanks, Senor Casales, and have a nice time, Carmen!” Ryan said, waving as they headed towards the beach.

“How silly,” Marianne said, with a sniff. “She sounds like she memorized that from one of Roxanne Winters’ novels. But then, what else would you expect from a housemaid?”

“Marianne!” Ryan said, softly, trying not to show his displeasure at this unexpected statement. “That’s not a very nice thing to say, you know. Carmen’s a nice lady, and I’ve known her since I was a boy.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Ryan,” Marianne said, contritely. “It’s just that Gran’s been pretty difficult today, and she keeps going on at me for being a barmaid.....I didn’t choose to be one, okay? I can’t help it if we’ve got troubles at home, let her blame Mother and Father instead!”

“I’m sorry too, Marianne,” Ryan said, taking her arm again. “So what did you think of that guy? He is quite an impressive specimen. I can understand why the Navy wants him. Plus, he speaks Republican, I’m sure.”

“Oh, who cares about Miss Regale’s maid and her silly beau?” Marianne said dismissively. “I’m only glad that the Navy doesn’t want *you*, Ryan.”

“Look, Marianne,” Ryan said, as they headed towards the park. “We’ve already talked about it, and there’s no need to take that tone. A lot of good men feel that Galvenia must defend herself and stand by the Zion, and you know what, I agree with them.” He paused, uncertain of the effect his words would have.

“Oh, the Zion! I hear enough about the Zion from Father,” Marianne said, unhappily, “and how they’re bad for trade. But I don’t care about them, Ryan – I care about you. About us. About our future together, after this war is over...”

“We can’t say when it will end, Marianne. Last week, the Varald...” Ryan began.

“Ryan Eramond, if you say one more word about the war, the Varald, or the Zion, I am going home!” Marianne said angrily. “We’ve just gotten back together. Why are you in a hurry to leave? Are you – tired of me already?”

“It’s not that, Marianne,” Ryan said gently. *Bother, she sounds just like Lavie now. I’d better not provoke her any further.* “You know I’m certainly not tired of you. I never will be. It’s just that...oh, I’m preoccupied with this. I was at that match when the Prime Minister died, and...”

“I told you going there would be a bad idea,” Marianne said, bitterly. “Just look at what’s happened to you after that.”

“Huh? What’s happened to me?” Ryan asked, perplexed.

"All this....all this silly talk about war, and signing up, and battles! Ryan, you're eighteen! You're too young to understand what war really is..." Marianne protested, as they entered Davenport Park.

"If it comes to age, we're both eighteen, dear," Ryan said, in a conciliatory tone, "and you're right, I don't know much about it. But Grandpa was a veteran, and so was the Colonel..."

"And they're both dead! So..." Marianne said, but stopped when she saw the hurt expression on Ryan's face. "Ryan, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that..."

"Of course you didn't, my Marianne," Ryan said kindly, as they sat down on the log close to each other, and she leaned against him. "Poor dear, we're just all confused about what's happening around us. Now tell me all about that awful Gran of yours, and then we can move on to something more pleasant..."

"Ooh, I like the sound of that, Mr. Eramond," Marianne said. "As long as Lavie Regale doesn't interrupt us!"

"Lavie? Why would she come here?" Ryan asked, sitting upright, puzzled by the reference.

"Oh, never mind, my sweet," Marianne said, affectionately. "So, anyway, the other day Gran was being silly, and she said..."

"Gran," Emily said, making a face, "are these parts of your story really important?"

"Don't you like Carmen, sweetie?" Lavie said, innocently. "She was always loyal to our family, and she was Maria's mother, you know. Besides which, her young man was very brave, and very handsome. Do you wish I'd married him, dear?"

"Gran!" Emily said, laughing at her. "I didn't mean Carmen and Juan, I mean.... Grandpa and Marianne acting silly! They're so annoying!"

"Well, I did think so when I was seventeen myself, darling," Lavie agreed, "but think for a moment. If you were a little girl whose father wanted to go to war and leave you alone, wouldn't you be unhappy too, Emily?"

"I – I guess I would, Gran," Emily said, leaning against her grandmother contentedly. "But even if Daddy went away, I'd still have you, right?"

"Of course you would, darling," Lavie replied, wrapping her arms around her. "But you see, poor Marianne's Daddy was – a very busy man, and her Gran wasn't a nice lady, so she felt quite alone without Grandpa. She was quite a child in many ways, really."

"Did you feel sorry for her, Gran?" Emily asked, in a serious tone.

“Oh, goodness, not at the time, Emily,” Lavie replied, with an embarrassed laugh. “In fact, though I’m ashamed to say it now, there were times when I hated her. I was rather a child myself, too, you know.”

“Gran!” Emily said, laughing. “I can’t believe you hated anyone! What made you change your mind?”

“Well, there was the fact that she was rather unhappy, Emily dear,” Lavie explained. “Sometimes, when people act unpleasant or strange, it’s because they’re going through a hard time. Look at poor Julianne, for example.”

“Was she all right in the end, Gran?” Emily asked. “I liked the way your Gran helped her out.”

“She was, and in fact, she did get to be with her daughter again!” Lavie said, with a mischievous expression. “But I mustn’t jump ahead. Now, while this was happening, college was about to begin, and two of our friends had to study hard...”

“I can’t believe I’m finally here,” Henrik said, as he laid down his suitcase and stood at the entrance to King’s College. “It’s – quite unreal, somehow.”

“Aye, lad, that’s quite common. You’ll be coming down to register and get the dorms, isn’t it?” the gatekeeper – whom Henrik recognized as Merrick the gardener – replied, pleasantly. “I remember ye from the time you and the young lady went to listen to that Italian professor, there. Poor fool, I don’t think anyone wanted to listen to him.” He laughed.

“Indeed, sir,” Henrik said, laughing as he recalled the Reverend Gray’s flights of fancy. “Well, I’d best head down to the Students’ Centre, and....”

“No, I think *we’d* best head down to the Centre together! Many hands make light work!” a voice said, brightly, behind him, and Henrik turned around, a broad smile on his face. “See, I even dressed up for the occasion. What do you think, Henrik?”

“You look....well, just like the First Lady of Galvenia!” Henrik said, a little surprised, and even allowing for a certain natural partiality, his assessment of her was quite accurate. Though her black skirt and jacket were longer and looser than what Jeannelle Socius had worn at her husband’s funeral, they suited her well, and her blue cap was replaced by a broad-brimmed black hat, on one side of which was an embroidered white flower. “Goodness, Bernadette, you’re a woman of many talents.”

“I made it myself,” she said, proudly, “though I did have a little help from our house mother at Saint Nealus’. She felt I ought to have something nice to wear to King’s College, when I joined, and for other formal occasions. Father bought me the material, and even offered to pay for the tailor, but I needed something to occupy myself after the Prime Minister’s death...” Her voice trailed off.

"I know how you feel," Henrik said, kindly, taking her hand. "Come, now, let me help you with that trunk of yours. It looks quite heavy!"

"I had to bring quite a few books along," Bernadette replied, with some embarrassment, as Henrik picked up the trunk with an effort, "because of that course on Religious Literature. I hope it all fits into my room!"

"I think freshmen get to share a room, two to one," Henrik said. "So as long as your room-mate's not a big reader, you should be all right!"

"I hope I get on well with her," Bernadette said, a little apprehensively. "Sometimes, city girls can be a little unnerving, and they in turn might find me queer and quaint!"

"Don't worry, there'll always be someone who likes you just the way you are," Henrik replied, causing her to cheer up a little.

"Arr, let me help you children," Merrick said, pushing a simple trolley in front of him. "Ye can't be holding hands and talking friendly-like if you have to carry those big suitcases. And I be – a suitcase lifter!" He laughed. "Ah, all things said, it's nice to see you both back."

"That's very kind of you, sir," Bernadette said, blushing and laughing.

"Arr, don't mention it, Miss Aquary," Merrick replied. It was a short walk, and they both contented themselves with admiring the scenery as they proceeded, hand in hand, still trying to come to terms with the fact that this was their new home. "I take it ye have scholarships, so your office is just ahead. There's a bit of a wait, the Bursar's got to come round, so just find yourselves a nice seat, and settle down! Call me if ye need anything."

"Thank you, Mr. Merrick," Henrik said, handing him a fifty-dollar note as he unloaded their suitcases.

"Goodness, lad, are ye a millionaire's son, like that Regale bloke from your town?" Merrick said, accepting the tip gratefully. "You've got to watch your savings here, son."

"You sound just like Henrik's father," Bernadette said, laughing. "Is that Mr. Sigmund Regale you're talking about, Mr. Merrick? I've been to his home! He and his family are very kind."

"Arr, that's the one. A fine man, indeed, never let anything get him down. Not loss, not naysayers, not death – he's the one who made Davenport what it is today. Pity we can't all be like him. Well, I'd best be going. Good luck to ye, and peace be with you young folks."

"Peace be with you too," they both replied, as he turned his trolley around and returned down the path, in search of other students.

"Loss and death?" Bernadette said, confused, as they sat down. "What was he talking about?"

"I have no idea," Henrik admitted. "Actually, I don't know the Regales that well. Ryan's the expert on them, though he's a little biased against Lavie."

Bernadette laughed. "I wonder why! Lavie's a perfectly nice girl, though we're as different as can be. Do you know, my father once told me something unusual about her. He said that when she was a little girl, he happened to look after her when she was sick, and he said she would grow up to be a very important person. I think there was more to it, but Father's always reticent when it comes to his patients."

"Well, she will inherit the Regale fortune, so that's no surprise," Henrik pointed out. "Or did your father mean something else?"

"I think he did, Henrik. It wasn't just about being wealthy, it was about – having an important task to complete, or even a mission from the Infinity. He told Mother and I when he came home, but I was just eight or nine at the time, I think," she replied.

A tall man with a loud voice stood up near the front of the room, and raised his hand, as if requesting the students' attention.

"Students with scholarships from His Majesty, and from His Holiness the Pontiff of Itaria, are requested to assemble in front of Counter B," he announced. "Please keep your original letters ready."

"That's us," Henrik said, standing up and raising his hand. "Well, my letter's here."

"Goodness, Henrik, where *did* I keep that thing?" Bernadette said, searching nervously through the pockets of her suit, while Henrik helped her by inspecting the contents of her handbag.

"There it is! It looks a lot more impressive than mine, for sure," Henrik said, handing it to her.

"Why, thank you, Mr. Spenson," Bernadette said, smiling as she took it. "We're all set, now! Come, let's join the line."

"After you, Miss Aquary," Henrik said, helping her rise from her chair, which was rather low.

There were only four other people with them at the counter – three men and one woman.

"Hey there!" one of the men called out to Bernadette. He seemed older than the rest of them, with closely cropped hair, and was wearing an Army jacket. "Miss, do you remember me?"

"I'm afraid I don't quite, sir," Bernadette said politely. "Have we met before?"

"Oh, long, long ago – Miss.....Aquaro, wasn't it?" the man said, hesitantly.

"Aquary, actually – Oh goodness, were you the guitar player for the Infinite Revival?" Bernadette said, a little cautiously. "Pleased to meet you. But – weren't you already in college at that time?"

“The pleasure’s mine, Miss. And you, Sir? Are you a member of the Church, too?”

“Yes, I am,” Henrik replied. “I’m Henrik Spenson from Davenport.”

“Robert Holder,” the man replied. “Actually,” he said, introducing a girl with strikingly black hair, who was looking ill at ease, “I was done with college long ago. I’m in the Royal Infantry, and my regiment has to leave for Darington in a week’s time, so I thought I’d help my wife settle in here. She’s from Itaria, and things are still a little strange for her.”

“How do you do?” the girl said cautiously, holding out her hand to Bernadette, who shook it. “My name is Simone – Simone Holder.”

Bernadette laughed and shook her hand warmly, sensing her discomfort. “Are you newlyweds, Mrs. Holder? It’s nice to meet you both. My name is Bernadette, and I’m here on a scholarship from the Pontiff.”

“Oh, me too!” Simone replied, looking pleasantly surprised.

“That makes us classmates, then,” Bernadette said, smiling at her. “And Henrik will probably be taking some of the same courses as us, won’t you, Henrik?”

“Sure!” Henrik said, grinning.

“That’s nice of you both,” Simone said, relaxing visibly. “I’m just – a little afraid, because Robert has to leave now. We were just married a little over a month ago, you see. But I hope he comes back soon.”

“If the Zion do their job, I will, darling,” Robert said, placing his arm around her. “Now keep your letter ready, I think they’re about to call us.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Holder,” Bernadette said kindly. “We’ll look after you while your husband’s away. Why, they may even put us in the same block, or something!”

“And I’m sure the Infinity will protect your husband, too,” Henrik said, gently. “So are you still into the Revival group, Mr. Holder?”

“Please call me Robert. Actually, I sort of fell away from the church a while ago,” he replied, apologetically, “because Father Gruber wanted me to join him in some political work, and I wasn’t comfortable with the idea. So I signed up for the Army, was deployed with the Commonwealth forces, and met Simone in Itaria. She was the one who led me back home, so as to speak.”

“That’s wonderful, Simone,” Bernadette said, encouragingly. “I’m sure your husband must be very proud of you!”

“Indeed, I am,” Robert said, causing her to blush.

The formalities did not take long, and soon all of them were headed to another counter in the next room, after receiving a notice dealing with the entrance test that they all had to take.

"It seems simple enough, doesn't it?" Henrik joked, though he was secretly feeling a little nervous himself as he went through the syllabus.

"Ignore him, Simone," Bernadette said, with a laugh. "Henrik's the hidden genius of Davenport, and he's always saying things like that."

"Very funny, Bernadette," Henrik retorted, chuckling. "What about that theological essay of yours? I may be able to memorize stuff from books, but you're the one the Church will be quoting in future!"

"You haven't even read it, Henrik!" Bernadette said, raising a finger in mock admonishment.

"Well, I shall make it a point to do so, once I've got a room of my own, and once the author deigns to provide me with a copy," he answered, winking at her.

"You two are funny," Simone said, smiling at her husband. "Aren't they, dear?"

"Well, I see you'll have good company here, my Simone," Robert replied, affectionately.

"Here are our room allotments," Henrik said, returning from the counter with three sheets of paper, stamped and signed by the Dean of Student Affairs, and reading them out. "I'm in the men's dormitory, on the ground floor, room 118. Not sure whom I'll be sharing with. Bernadette, you're in the women's block, on the ground floor too, in room 20. And Mrs. Holder, you'll be sharing a room with her. Hope you two girls will get along well!"

"Oh, how delightful," Bernadette said, slipping her hand into Simone's. "Don't worry, Mr. Holder. I'll take good care of her."

"That takes a load off my mind, Henrik," Robert said, looking relieved. "Darling, I've just got to go and clock in at the Military Academy now. I'll be back in a couple of hours. Can you manage things here?"

"I'll try, Robert," his wife replied, bravely. "And if..."

"Oh, don't worry about her; we can always help out – by the way, what's your rank, Mr. Holder?" Henrik asked.

"I was promoted to Corporal in March," Robert replied. "That's how I was able to afford the wedding, actually."

"Well, Corporal, thank you very much for your service," Bernadette said, bowing. "Peace be with you."

"Take care, Simone," Robert said, embracing her before turning to leave. "And peace be with you all."

“Well, let’s go check out our rooms, now,” Henrik suggested. “We have to leave our luggage here for now, until we move in, and we only have to report to college for the opening ceremonies tomorrow morning. We’re quite free for the moment.”

“Could we have something to eat, first?” Simone said, hesitantly. “I’m rather hungry.”

“Of course we can, Simone,” Bernadette said, kindly. “Come along, Henrik. We might as well experiment with the cafeteria while we’re here!”

“Lead on, Miss Aquary, lead on,” Henrik said with a laugh, as the three of them walked towards the cafeteria. They found their way without much difficulty, and Henrik went off to order their meals, while Bernadette and Simone used the time to get better acquainted. They were discussing the rebellion at Lorenza, which was apparently quite close to Simone’s home town, when a voice broke in on them.

“Pardon me, young ladies, but would you mind if this old man joined you? It’s always a pleasure to be in the company of other Church members, especially here in Galvenia.”

Bernadette looked up at the newcomer and smiled. “Father Marlborough!” she exclaimed. “What a pleasure! Henrik and I just came down today to register, and this is Simone Holder, who’s on a scholarship from Itaria. Her husband’s a soldier in the Galvenian army.”

“How do you do,” the elderly priest said, politely shaking hands with both of them. “Ah, Mr. Spenson, too. What a pleasure. I was going to meet you tomorrow after class, but the Infinity has delivered you into my hands a little earlier.” He laughed.

“It would appear so,” Henrik said, placing their trays on the table. “Can I get you anything, Father?”

“Oh no, thank you, my son. I’ve already eaten, and I was just waiting for a cup of coffee.” One of the few servers in the hall walked up to their table, and placed a steaming cup before him. “Thank you, Doris,” he said, sniffing at it appreciatively. “Quite satisfactory.”

“Thank you, Father,” the rotund server replied, beaming at him as she moved on to her next task.

“So what did you want to meet us for, Father?” Henrik asked.

“Hmm, that’s a long story, Mr. Spenson,” Father Marlborough replied. “Let me start with a little conundrum. Imagine, for a moment, that you were a thief, intent on stealing valuables from a museum in Itaria. What would fetch you the most value for money?”

“A thief?” Simone’s eyes widened. “Are the rebels in Itaria attacking museums, now?”

“Thankfully, they are not, Mrs. Holder,” Marlborough said, with a chuckle. “I am merely asking the question to obtain a fresh perspective from young minds.”

“That’s easy, Father,” Henrik said. “Jewels or valuables. Golden crowns, like the ones the Pontiffs used to wear when they had a summer palace in Caledonia, before the Maximillian affair. You are talking about monetary value, aren’t you?”

“Let us assume so for the moment,” Marlborough said, nodding his head. “Miss Aquary, allow me to compliment you on a very elegant outfit, but let me ask you the same question. What would you choose?”

“Thank you, Father,” Bernadette replied, beaming. “Well, I’d go for paintings, because they have value for private owners. Some collectors, Father told me, will go to any length to obtain an item that would complete their collection; at times, it would appear that they were fascinated by it, as one is fascinated by the demonic.”

“An excellent observation, Miss Aquary; I would award you ten points if this were a classroom. Mrs. Holder, what would you say?”

“I’d agree with Mr. Spenson, because my own father is a jeweller, I suppose,” Simone said, getting into the spirit of the game. “Gold, perhaps a golden reliquary, or one with precious stones.”

“Ah, democracy at its finest,” Father Marlborough said, calmly. “Now what would you make of someone who would lie, cheat, or steal simply to steal an old flag, a shield with sentimental value, and a rusty sword from a museum, when all the things you mentioned were at hand?”

“A rusty sword?” Simone chuckled. “I know Robert likes old weapons, but even he’d draw the line at a rusty sword.”

“I’d go with Bernadette,” Henrik said. “You’re probably dealing with a crazed collector, someone to whom these objects have a special meaning. If you don’t mind my asking, Father, could we have more specific details on the objects?”

“I see no reason why not, Mr. Spenson,” Father Marlborough answered. “I must ‘play fair’, after all. The flag is an old Itarian flag, woven out of Zionese silk, and gifted by Emperor Friederich as a placatory gesture after the carnage of Inderness. The shield reputedly belongs to Saint Franco of San Delas, a famous warrior monk who founded the Order of Refuge. And the sword is known as the Sword of Regret. Now, rack your brains, Mr. Spenson. These things were stolen from Saint Guibert’s Museum some time ago, and they were apparently important enough for someone to lie, cheat and threaten his fellow men. What do you say?”

“Perhaps the Itarian rebels want to use them as standards or symbols of a glorious past,” Bernadette suggested. “I’ve had friends at Saint Nealus’ who were quite nostalgic about the old order, when Itaria had a standing army, and the Zion Emperor was crowned by the Pontiff. But none of them would have gone so far as to steal artifacts from a museum in the Holy City!”

"I'm not so sure about that," Henrik replied. "The rebels aren't reactionaries, from all that I've read; they're revolutionaries, who want Itaria to arm herself, and who want Charlemagne excommunicated for failing to protect the Church. They wouldn't really want a flag belonging to Friederich."

"Those revolutionaries are evil!" Simone said, passionately. "They would do anything, I am sure. My own uncle, Don Fonteo, was threatened by them because he would not join them!"

"The line between being misguided and being evil is a thin one, Mrs. Holder," Father Marlborough said, sympathetically. "Now, let me ask you another question, my young friends. Is it possible – as a very wise man suggested to me – that the thieves were only after one of the objects, and stole the others as a blind?"

"Hey, that makes sense," Henrik said. "They'd take a lot of what seemed to be junk, but one of the objects could actually be valuable – to a collector, maybe. But if that's the case, which one?"

"The flag," Simone said, closing her eyes. "Mamma wrote to me a week ago, and she said the rebels were using the old flag. They want it as a standard, as a symbol."

"The shield seems more likely," Henrik replied. "If it belonged to an old warrior saint, it could have magical properties, but – no, scratch that, it isn't a likely reason. What about that sword? Just because it's old and rusty doesn't mean it's worthless."

"The sword of regret," Bernadette said, frowning with concentration. "That sounds like something out of the Book of Origins - the 'man of regret', from whom we're all descended. But that was tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of years ago. It couldn't be *his* sword, could it?"

"No, I don't think Saint Guibert's holds anything that ancient, Miss Aquary, though you've made an interesting connection. Besides, the Book does say that even though the 'man of regret' had a sword, one of his friends destroyed it in an attempt to save him from the wrath of the Angel. If that is his sword, the Book is lying, and the Book cannot lie. It may tell the truth in a veiled manner, but it does not lie outright," Father Marlborough replied. "In fact, all old artefacts, including those which traditionally belong to that period, are in the Museum of Saint Pious II, close to the Palace. Saint Guibert goes back to the Age of Empires, but no further."

"I still think there's some connection," Henrik said. "Perhaps we should go back and study the Book of Origins more closely. Are you trying to get us to sign up for your class? Is that why you told us this story, Father?" He laughed.

"My dear boy," Father Marlborough said, laughing into his sleeve, "I would not be so obvious. I look forward to having all of you as my students, but I would not go about, ahem, 'recruiting' you in such a roundabout way. I tell you this story because it is possible that we may have to look for those items and retrieve them, and they may not be very far away."

"Why do you say that, Father?" Simone asked.

“Oh, that would be telling, Mrs. Holder,” he replied, with a twinkle in his eye. “If you wish to learn more about this, please meet me the day after tomorrow, when we have our introductory class. But be warned, if you do choose to assist me, it may not be the safest of tasks.”

Simone shivered. “I think I’ll pass,” she said. “Robert’s life may already be in danger, and I promised him I would stay safe for his sake.”

“Oh come on, Simone, I’m sure Father Marlborough is just teasing us. Aren’t you, Father?” Bernadette said, patting her hand.

“Perhaps,” Marlborough replied, with something inscrutable in his expression. “And now I must leave you to discover King’s College on your own, my friends. *Sayonara*, as the Old Zionese would say.”

“Peace be with you, Father,” Bernadette replied, and the three of them bowed in farewell as he walked away.

“That man is interesting,” Henrik said. “I wouldn’t mind working under him, if I had the chance. Of course, that would be on the understanding that you’d join up too. Would you?”

“Perhaps, Henrik,” Bernadette said, narrowing her eyes to give them a ‘mysterious’ appearance, and causing them to both burst out laughing. “Come on, let’s have a look at our rooms.”

“That sounds quite reasonable,” Simone replied.

“A good blow, Ryan,” Hocha said, nodding and smiling as Ryan’s forward thrust transfixed the dummy through and through. “The Colonel would have admired that last sweep of yours. So when will you decide to put those skills to the service of Galvenia, my friend?”

“Sooner or later, Hocha,” Ryan said with a grin. “When even *Armin* tells me that I ought to, I have no excuse.”

Hocha laughed. “Mr. Tamas is an outspoken young man. But I doubt he has the discipline and the dedication you have, to train in this way with both the sword and the pistol. After the Colonel, basic training should hold no terrors for you, Ryan.”

“Heh, I hope so. Except those hundred-mile marches,” Ryan said, dodging the dummy’s machine-driven forward swing, and hitting it neatly with a double slash. “I’ve done a lot of walking when I was working for Dad, but at least I wasn’t carrying a bag full of rocks, or anything!”

“Oh, is that old legend still popular?” Hocha said, shaking his head. “Even when I was a recruit, we only had to carry our possessions, not rocks. That is the kind of story that trainers use to instill a healthy respect in their trainees, but it is not historical.”

“Sounds like the Itarians and their Holy Book,” Ryan said, striking home with another forward thrust. “They used to claim it was all true, but now they say a lot of it is legendary, or something. I think Henrik will be studying the issue at King’s College; I can ask him about it.”

“Henrik certainly has fallen behind in his training, though he still visits when he has the time. But I cannot fault him,” Hocha said, sympathetically. “Between his Garaknod of a father, his studies, and that charming girl from Zion, he cannot spare much time.”

“Zion? I thought she was from Alton,” Ryan said, shaking his head, and evading the mannequin’s flank attack as he parried its movement, then thrust at its throat. “Fortunately for me, I’m not studying for any entrance test.”

“And what about your own young lady, my young friend?” Hocha asked, slyly.

Ryan scowled. “Don’t ask, and I won’t tell, Hocha. She’s still dead against my signing up, but I’ve decided to take the plunge in September, telling her that it’s just basic training, and that it’s my duty as a Galvenian. She still isn’t happy, but I’m sure Grandpa would approve.”

“Ah, young love,” Hocha said indulgently. “She must be very attached to you, young Eramond. But it’s entirely possible that you may see very little action, if you should join the Infantry. The latest news is that the Zion battalions have recaptured several villages on the western frontier, and their artillery has now crossed over the lines on the East, strengthened by Sir Prescott’s men. By the way, I have heard a pretty story about Sir Prescott from a young lady in the Marines, some time ago – how he challenged three boys to a fight at the Academy, but could not prevail. Have you heard it, too?”

Ryan laughed. “You could say that again, Hocha. I was one of those boys, and the others were Henrik and Armin. Poor Prescott was so annoyed that he stormed off, and even his men were laughing at him. But I can’t take the guy seriously. Do you know he wants to marry *Lavie*, of all people?”

“Miss Regale?” Hocha shook his head in disapproval. “That would be most inappropriate.”

“But it’s true,” Ryan said, laughing. “I was even there when he came to speak to her parents, though I don’t know what they were discussing. I know Lavie can be annoying, but even *she* doesn’t deserve someone like Prescott! She might be able to tame that arrogance and temper of his, though.”

“I am afraid that his faults extend far beyond arrogance or temper, Ryan,” Hocha said. “My own cousin Horace was in the employ of Sir Prescott’s father, before leaving to start his own business. I do not wish to betray confidences, but he would not be a good husband or father. I would never wish to see a daughter of mine wed a man like him. He is probably pursuing Miss Regale for her fortune, and nothing else.”

“Ugh,” Ryan said, making a face, and aiming a slash that would have decapitated the dummy if its head had not been made of thick wood. “But isn’t he a pretty rich guy himself? I mean, he’s a noble and all that.”

“Nobles may inherit fortunes, but they can also be foolish in spending them,” Hocha replied. “Perhaps you should warn Miss Regale about him. She is at the age when young women can be swayed by glamour, or by physical appearance.”

“Me?” Ryan said, making two quick thrusts at the dummy’s heart – or, rather, where its heart would have been. “No way, Hocha, she’d probably think I was jealous of him, or worse, that I was actually interested in her.”

“And are you?” Hocha said, with a wide grin.

Ryan, taken aback by this statement, had taken his eyes off the dummy, and it struck him on the side of the head, knocking him to the ground and stunning him for a moment.

“Oof!” he said, getting up slowly and feeling rather dazed. “Very funny, Hocha, but you shouldn’t make a joke like that when I’m practicing!”

“It was a question, but not necessarily a joke, young Ryan,” Hocha replied, suppressing a laugh, and switching off the machine that controlled the mannequin’s movements. “Come, now, let me put our mechanical friend to rest, while you think of a suitable answer.”

“I don’t need to think, Hocha,” Ryan said indignantly. “The answer, of course, is no!” He looked at his wristwatch. “Goodness, it’s four o’clock, and I have a date with Marianne at five; we were going to watch the pantomime at Glendale. I’d better get ready now!”

“Indeed, you do,” Hocha replied, as Ryan sheathed his sword. “I trust you will have a pleasant evening. Till the next time, Ryan.”

“Thanks, Hocha,” Ryan said, waving goodbye and leaving the Colonel’s gymnasium. “I’ll come by tomorrow; I’ve got to get into shape if I want to try out in September!”

“You will certainly learn enough of the sword by September,” Hocha said to himself, as he watched Ryan walk away. “But there are other things that you need to learn in time.”

“Good evening, ma’am,” Warren Bosley said politely. “How may I help you?”

“Good evening, Inspector. My name is Anne Lancaster, and I have come here from Mann Island because I believe you can help me with a personal matter,” Anne said, removing her bonnet and sitting down opposite the Inspector.

“Sir Gerald’s widow?” Bosley said, with a note of awe in his voice. “This is quite an honour, ma’am. I would be glad to render you any assistance possible, as long as it is within my means.”

“You are, I understand, the Mayor of this town?” Anne asked, extending her hand.

“Why, yes, Mrs. Lancaster,” Bosley said, shaking her hand warmly. “After Talmadge, our previous Mayor, was arrested for theft and treason, I was voted in during the interim elections. I’m currently both Mayor and Chief of Police, and I’m waiting for a replacement here at the station.”

“Inspector,” Anne replied, “it is precisely because of what I have heard about Samuel Talmadge that I am here today. You remember, of course, that two children helped you find evidence to convict him.”

“Why yes,” he replied. “Ryan Eramond and Lavie Regale. They managed to find a letter discussing his plans for a theft, and I was able to find more evidence based on that. You wouldn’t happen to know them, would you?”

“Lavie is my granddaughter, Mr. Bosley,” Anne said, with a smile. “Now, I understand that you must be trying to clear things up, as the new Mayor, but I want to know something about a man who may have worked for Talmadge. Lavie told me that he had accomplices in this very town, and I may have a serious accusation to bring against one of them.”

“You surprise me, Mrs. Lancaster,” Bosley replied, taken aback. “But, out of respect for Sir Gerald and your granddaughter, who is a very bright girl, I’ll do what I can. Could you be more specific?”

“Mr. Bosley,” Anne said, with a sad, grave look on her face, “I was recently fortunate enough to come to the help of a woman who may have lived in your town. She was systematically ill-treated by her husband and his allies, and when she could take no more, she fled to Trinden. However, when she faced further persecution there, she came to Mann Island, and found shelter in my home. Thanks to the timely help of the Princess, she is now safe in a convent in Alton.”

“This is most distressing, but why would you seek her husband here?” Bosley asked, puzzled.

“Mr. Bosley,” Anne replied, patiently, “the woman I speak of is a noble, and the daughter of nobles. Given her natural reticence, she was reluctant to divulge any details about that monstrous husband of hers. However, I deduced, from what Lavie told me, that there were probably secret ties between merchants, criminals, and the last Mayor of Glendale. She did say her husband was a merchant or a trader of some sort, perhaps a jeweller. Now, Inspector, is there anyone in this town who would conform to this description? He would probably be in his early to mid-forties.”

“There’s no jeweller in town, Mrs. Lancaster,” Bosley said, shaking his head. “Anyone who wants jewelry, even the Mayor, has to head over to Hartridge, where there are members of the Jewellers’ Guild.”

“Perhaps he has another trade,” Anne replied. “Is there anyone here who was recently separated or divorced from his wife?”

“If it comes to that, I am, ma’am,” Bosley said with a grin. “My wife and I separated quite a while ago, though. She now lives with her parents in the Royal Mining Corporation quarters, at Lorean. But

Miranda certainly isn't a noble! We'd probably still be together if it wasn't for that interfering father of hers, and he's as middle-class as you can get."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bosley," Anne said sympathetically. "But is there no one apart from you?"

"No one, Mrs. Lancaster. People here are almost painfully respectable, except for the lowlifes whom Slick Sammy – beg your pardon, ma'am, I mean Mayor Talmadge – used to employ, and they were mostly itinerants. None of them stayed here long, and none of them had wives; they were all younger men, attracted by a life of thievery."

"Very well, then," Anne said, pensively. "What about couples with a single daughter – a daughter old enough to go dancing with young men?"

"Well, there are the Burtons down on Glendale Lane," Bosley replied. "Fred and Sally Burton. They have a girl of sixteen. Her name's Kathryn, but we all call her Katie. She's a nice girl, but I don't know about any young men, not that it would surprise me." He chuckled. "But they've been together for twenty years, and I've never heard of them having any trouble myself, except one time when an intruder broke into their home and stole seven hundred dollars. That was just after Talmadge went to jail."

"Is Mrs. Burton of noble descent?"

"Oh, no, Sally's father was the innkeeper here. He died a while ago, and his widow still runs the place. She's no more a noble than I am."

"This is discouraging," Anne said, drawing her shawl more closely around her. "Well, is there anyone here who handles shipments, such as jewellery or other valuable goods?"

"Ah, yes, there is. Old Jason Elin, who runs the EDS office here. He's a bachelor, though he has a lady working for him as secretary. She's single too, though."

"EDS?" Anne asked.

"Eramond Delivery Services, ma'am," Bosley explained. "Based in Davenport, handle cargo from all over Terra. They're a pretty big company, with branches in Lorean and Darington as well. Wait a minute, isn't the Eramond boy friends with your grandchild?"

"Yes, he is," Anne said, laughing. "Goodness, I am getting old; I ought to have remembered that abbreviation. I suppose we old women are used to saying things out in full. Was Mr. Elin – how do I put this nicely – involved in any of Mr. Talmadge's defalcations?"

"No, Jason's as straight as an arrow, Mrs. Lancaster. I'm sorry, but it looks like the man you're seeking isn't here."

“Oh, it isn’t your fault, Inspector,” Anne said kindly. “Is there anything else you know that might help me in my search?”

Bosley thought for a moment. “You did say the man was a trader, didn’t you?”

“That’s what my friend said. She said her husband belonged to a merchant’s guild,” Anne said, recalling Julianne’s description.

“The only merchant’s guild I know is in.....Wait a minute,” Bosley said, slamming his fist into his palm. “Kava kura, I think I may know the man you speak of. He was born in Lorean, and did his apprenticeship under another unpleasant character. He’s had dealings with Slimy Sammy, and with other unsavoury elements in Galvenia, but he’s notoriously hard to pin down. But if it’s *him*...”

“Can you tell me something about him?” Anne said, insistently.

“Mrs. Lancaster, with all due respect, if it’s the same man I’m thinking of, I probably shouldn’t. That kind of man wouldn’t think twice of hurting or even killing others, if it endangered his dealings. You ought to hand this over to the police.”

“Inspector Bosley,” Anne said firmly. “A woman has been harmed and almost killed by this man’s minions. I know as well as you what we are dealing with; my husband was a magistrate, after all. But I want him brought to justice, for I fear that he is dealing in far more than stolen goods.” Sensing Bosley’s incredulity, she narrated what Julianne had told her about the military-looking men and the map.

“That’s him,” Bosley said, darkly. “No one really knows who he is. He’s a moving target, never settles down in one place. Informers have said that he has a home in Hartridge, in Westchester, or in Davenport, but we’ve never been able to run him aground. The same informers have said that he’s married, and has one child, but could never agree on the details. He is almost certainly involved in treason; in fact, it’s been rumoured that he played a small role in the loss of Darington, years ago, and made his fortune that way.”

“Do you know anything that could help me?” Anne asked. “A name, a nickname, a description?”

“We have a photograph of him as a young man, in the ‘Unsolved Cases’ folder,” Bosley said, walking over to a filing cabinet and rummaging through it. “Ah, here it is. We’ve never got his full name – he was going by the name of Albert Farley when he was in Lorean, but he’s probably changed it now. His accomplices, or at least those we’ve been able to apprehend, have said that he uses a variety of pseudonyms; sometimes he calls himself Robert, and at other times, he calls himself the Prince.” He handed Anne the photograph, which was of a cold-looking young man, clean-shaven, with a large shock of dark hair and angular features.

“The Prince?” Anne said, with an expression of disgust. “How impertinent.”

“That’s the bravado of the criminal mind for you, Mrs. Lancaster,” Bosley said. “Or perhaps he gets his name from the Baron Prince, which is a venomous snake. If your friend is married to the Prince, then even a convent in Alton may not be completely safe. I urge you, ask your friend to tell the truth to the police at Lorean. That man is dangerous – he has never been known to kill anyone himself, but like Sammy, he has plenty of rough men to do his dirty work.”

“What you have told me is very worrying, Inspector,” Anne replied. “I shall speak to my friend, and see if she can assist us any further, if this man is as dangerous as you say.”

“He is, ma’am. If there’s dirty work in Galvenia – heck, I wouldn’t put even Socius’ death beyond him – that man has got his fingers in it. Good luck to you ma’am, and please be careful.”

“Oh, I will, Inspector,” Anne said, putting on her bonnet as Bosley bowed formally. “And if I find this handsome Prince of yours, he will pay.”

“Like grandmother, like granddaughter,” Bosley said with a laugh. “You’re as plucky as her, ma’am, if you don’t mind my saying it.”

“Oh, you,” Anne replied, and despite the gravity of their discussion, she could not help laughing too.

“What’s this you’ve brought me, my boy?” Fossen said, reaching within the pockets of his robe for a pair of glasses. “I didn’t know you’d taken up reading.”

“I found this on the body of that traitor, Lugner,” Juno said, calmly. “I suppose it must be important, but I am not familiar with the language used.”

Fossen flipped through the pages, slowly and painstakingly. “By the Purpose, boy, this is a find indeed. This is written in Old Itarian, which uses its own alphabet, not the Common one. It must be quite ancient.”

“Can you read it?” Juno asked.

“It’s been a long time, but I think I can,” Fossen replied. “By the way, Juno, how are you getting on with that sword of yours?”

Juno flushed. “I was not aware that it would prove such a loquacious companion,” he said, “but I think we understand each other.”

“Do you?” Fossen said, looking amused. “She’s never spoken to me much, except at one time, when my daughter-in-law died, and my son resigned his commission and left for the Republic. I’ve often wondered if she only seeks out those who are lonely or bereaved.”

“Preposterous,” Juno replied.

“Oh, I don’t think so, boy. The years I had with the two of them were the happiest in my life; my son was in the army, and would come and visit often, and that child – she could light up a room just by entering it, boy. She was one of the kindest persons I’ve ever known. We both adored her. Unfortunately, she fell ill, and despite my best efforts, I couldn’t save her. My boy took it harder than I did, and left the country altogether. I just stay behind here and make my soup. She always did like my soup, even when she was on her death-bed. Poor little girl.”

“Enough of this sentimental blather, old man,” Juno said, pointing at the book. “What subject does that book treat of?”

“The title is: *On Magical Artefacts of the First Generations*. There is no author’s name. Would that interest you, boy, or would that simply be more blather to you?” Fossen said, gently.

“I apologize for my infelicitious choice of words, Fossen,” Juno said, in a less annoyed voice. “What artefacts does the writer speak of?”

“Hmm, let me look at the Index: *Swords, Shields, Armour, Masks, Clothing, Replicas*. Take your pick, boy.”

“As Lugner drew his final breaths, he mumbled something about a sword,” Juno said. “Let us see if the author can shed some light on this matter.”

“As you wish, boy,” Fossen said amiably, turning the pages and reading the words softly, under his breath. “It talks about swords that confer various magical abilities on their bearers: attack and defence skills, the ability to travel instantaneously over short distances, and even the ability to cover a large area with a shield. I can easily believe the first of those, but the last two certainly sound like blather to me. The bulk of the chapter is about the minerals and alloys used to make such swords, and the incantations or conjurations needed to imbue them with such abilities. It’s quite nonsensical, really.”

“Why do you say that?” Juno asked.

“You’re a clever boy, Juno,” Fossen replied. “Figure it out yourself.”

“Hmm,” Juno said, closing his eyes and thinking. “Because the book is in Itarian, and probably deals with legendary matters, rather than true ones. Simple, really.”

“Tsk, ts, I expected better from you,” Fossen said, shaking his head. “Itarian is not just a Church language. Long ago, when Itaria was a kingdom like any other, it was a centre of scholarship and learning. Itarian is the language of poets and wise men, Juno. Clear your mind of its prejudices, and try again.”

“Bah,” Juno replied. “Very well, how about this? If such formidable weapons were available, they would not be put on display in a book like this, for all men to see. The details may have a kernel of truth, but they have been exaggerated.”

“Much better,” Fossen replied, nodding in approval. “I’m not saying that the First Generations didn’t have weapons or use magic. Perhaps what this book says about offensive and defensive skills is true. But being able to travel using a sword is a little too fantastic, even for one who has led a life like mine; and being able to cast a shield over an entire island is a child’s fairy tale. Still, there may be much worth learning in this tome, if one separates the wheat from the chaff.”

“What does it say about the making of such swords?” Juno asked.

“My, you do like to cut to the chase, boy. It speaks of the usual alloys, in terms of their weight and agility, but it does include some old wives’ tales as well, including the usual legend of a metal minded by half-humans.”

“Half-humans?” Juno said, dubiously.

“Oh, that’s the literal meaning of the Itarian, but there are many other translations. Dwarves. Elves. Magical beings who are half the size of men, but live longer. Hasn’t your mother ever told you stories of that kind?”

“Perhaps she has,” Juno replied. “But what do these half-humans have to do with swords?”

“Listen to this: ‘Legend has it,’” Fossen said, translating as he read, “‘that there exists an extremely rare mineral, found only in certain mines in the depths of the earth, whose secret is guarded jealously by the half-humans of the haunted forests.’”

“Haunted forests?” Juno’s expression was contemptuous. “Even old wives would balk at a tale of this sort.”

“‘This mineral is rumoured to be guarded by gigantic serpents, and can be used to build weapons and ships of extraordinary lightness and power. In his memoirs, Prince Ryle of Factoria...’”

“Who might he be?” Juno asked, mockingly. “Another hero of legend?”

“You could call him that,” Fossen said, “though I have heard wise men say that he existed. Anyway, the quote from Prince Ryle’s memoirs speaks of building a ship with the metal, from which the author concludes that the metal exists, and can be found somewhere in Factoria. Quite ingenious, though probably false.”

Juno rose from his seat with a start. “Old man,” he said, sharply, “is Mount Lorea Mine within the boundaries of ancient Factoria?”

“Oh, yes, it is, Juno. But haven’t you spent enough time searching around there? You ought to be looking for something more substantial, you know,” Fossen replied. “Didn’t you say it was a damp squib when that man, Robert, took you there?”

“Do not mention it,” Juno said, annoyed. “That mewling, cowardly fool must have found some way to alert his allies, for when I took him there, the place was deserted. But I still suspect that the mine contains something of importance, for Lugner and his minions were seeking it the first time I went there. They were even utilizing a detector of some sort. I thought they were seeking a beast of some sort, but a mineral”

“What did you do with him?” Fossen asked, mildly. “The cowardly Robert, I mean.”

“I left him with the police at Lorean, who seemed completely uninterested. A typical attitude for functionaries of an ineffectual government, which cannot protect its own people.” Juno snorted. “Tell me, what else does the book say about this miraculous metal?”

“Let us hope that they can deal with him – and remember, Juno, outward appearance is not the best of guides to a man’s true intent. After all, Robert is still alive, while you have slain Lugner. Do not let him out of your sight.”

“I have no intention of doing so,” Juno said, with an ironic bow. “But let us return to our metal.”

“According to the legendary Prince Ryle,” Fossen replied, his brow furrowed with the effort of translation, “the metal was know as ‘El Metal’, from which he deduced that it belonged to mythical elves.”

“Hmph,” Juno replied. “So we are back to fairy tales.”

“Hardly, Juno. You see, Prince Ryle may have been a warrior, but he was not a scholar. The word ‘El’, in the Old Republican tongue, simply means ‘powerful’, ‘mighty’ or ‘Godly’. Your metal may have come from the Republic, or been familiar to their traders, and obtained its name from them.”

“The Republic,” Juno said. “The Republic interests me, for they – of all the nations on Terra alone – have been left untouched by the troubles of our times. The Varald and the Zion are at war. Galvenia is tied to the Zion. Itaria continues to burn, and yet the Republic stands strong. Is there a connection?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t bother my head with that now, boy,” Fossen said, disapprovingly. “You ought rather to see what becomes of that man Robert. Something’s not right about him, I can feel it in my bones.”

“He is a minion, old man. Minions are of no importance. Instead, we ought to wonder about what is the driving force behind this conspiracy. I shall return to the mine myself, and this time, I shall not return empty-handed.”

“Well, if that’s what you want, good luck to you,” Fossen replied. “You’re ready enough to make your own decisions. But I still think the two are connected, and someday, I hope you will agree with me.”

“Let us reason together, Fossen,” Juno said. “Why do you feel this Robert is important?”

“Because he is the kind of man who survives by his tongue and his wits, rather than by bravery, as you yourself realize,” Fossen said, with a smile. “It is entirely possible that he knows a lot about these attacks, and the motives behind them. It is also possible” – he paused, and looked intently at his young follower – “that he may use honeyed words with you, too.”

“Preposterous,” Juno said. “Do you take me for a naïve fool, old master? Do you not know me better than that?”

“I know you well, boy,” Fossen said, “well enough to know that you are not a legendary hero. Like myself, you have your weaknesses, and a man like him would know how to exploit them all too well. Explore the mines if you must, but do not trust him.”

“Very well, then,” Juno said, as he wrapped his cloak around him, and strode out of their small hut. “I shall listen to you, but if that man thinks he can deceive me, he is sadly mistaken.”

Wars may come, and wars may go, but for most people, unless they are in the eye of the storm, life has a way of continuing. It was the second of September, and history would record that, on that day, the Zion forces – reinforced by further mage battalions and cannons – had managed to repulse the Varald thrust on the eastern front. However, the once-stout lines of defence on the west had fallen, and the Directorate’s divisions had now marched inland as far as Lesser Kanschloss. Sir Prescott’s men had distinguished themselves on the eastern frontier, and a flotilla of Galvenian ships had joined the Commonwealth Navy in ensuring peace in the Ocean of Ghetz, with only two abortive engagements with Varaldian ships. The Commonwealth remained deadlocked, with Hipper refusing to commit any further peacekeeping regiments on the western frontier. In Itaria, an uneasy peace prevailed – the rebels had failed to cross the Claudia, being repelled by the small ships of the Pontifical Guard, and were now regrouping in San Luigi and Lorenza, which they had now captured. Charlemagne had sent a courteous letter to the Pontiff, expressing his sympathy, and promising to send reinforcements to his “most ancient and venerable friend”, but depending on “the issue their own conflict with the Varald.”

But for Sigmund and Emily Regale, the second of September of the year 300 meant none of these things. Instead, it was simply a reminder that eighteen years ago, a young lady had come to stay with them – one who had certainly given them their anxious moments, but many more of joy and pride. It was, to put things simply, Lavie Regale’s eighteenth birthday, and for one day, most of Davenport’s youth were able to even forget the war, and join their friend in celebrating the occasion.

“Miss Bernadette! How nice of you to come by,” Carmen said, opening the door and looking pleased, though flustered. “Miss Lavie will be delighted to see you, I’m sure! And what a lovely outfit!”

“We were given a day off today, in order to prepare for the entrance tests,” Bernadette replied, pulling her hat on securely. “I was in two minds whether to spend the day just studying a little more, but Father Marlborough told me that I ought not miss this occasion. I even persuaded Henrik to come along, by

promising to coach him a little on the Galvenian Literature paper. He's visiting his father now, but should be along in the afternoon."

"That's very nice," Carmen said, running a hand through her rather dishevelled hair. "Please do have a seat, and do excuse me. We're so busy making preparations here, that I'm completely confused!"

"Oh, please don't mind me," Bernadette replied, laughing as she sat down on one of the sofas.

In other corners of Davenport, preparations were being made in a similarly breathless fashion...

"So what are you getting for our brave troops, Cathy?" Jaina Vellin, the bartender's daughter, asked, with a smile. "It's lucky that Lavie suddenly went on a patriotic kick, and asked us all to donate money or things that the Galvenian army could use instead!"

"Talk about luck, Jaye," Cathy said, nodding her head vigorously. "I wonder where she got the idea from. Mum says it's because her dad and the Prime Minister were friends, but I've heard a more interesting explanation! Apparently she and the Princess are pals, and the Princess asked her to do it as a favour."

"I've always known Lavie was a good sort," Jaina said, with approval, "even if she can get on our nerves sometimes. I'd certainly rather have her around than a certain blue-haired hussy, to whom Daddy would be all too glad to give the boot, if labour wasn't so hard to come by! But I agree it's fortunate – I mean, Cathy, what do you get for a girl who has *everything*?"

"Everything except *Sir Cool!*" Cathy replied, with a wink. "I thought of getting her a copy of Roxanne Winters' latest novel, *Beyond the Valley of Love*, though I don't think any of the soldiers would like it much! Have you read it, Jaye?"

"Oh, I have," said Jaina, "but I found it rather disappointing, especially the ending. It seemed like a retread of *Heart of the Mountain*. And honestly, what's so original about the hero choosing the exotic mountain maiden over his childhood sweetheart? It's such a cliché..."

"Well, stranger things have happened, Jaye. I mean, look at our local hero, Ryan, and..." Cathy began, then stopped, embarrassed. She knew that Jaina had a soft corner for Ryan, had been sympathetic when he had broken up with Marianne, and – like Lavie – harboured the hope that he might, in time, seek consolation elsewhere. "Oh, I'm sorry, Jaye....I didn't quite mean that."

"Never mind, Cathy," Jaina said, gently. "Did you like the book?"

"Heck, no!" Cathy replied, shaking her head vigorously. "That mountain princess and her 'breathing exercises' were so annoying, I felt like slapping her silly! In fact, she was such a bore, and she reminded me of *Marianne*.....So anyway, I dropped the book, and I made her a pair of mittens! I'm sure soldiers

could use mittens, especially if the war drags on till winter. Dad says it won't, but Mum says Dad is just being optimistic."

"Hmm, that's a pretty cool idea, Cathy. I was going to give her a new pair of wrist-bands, since she really seems to be on the archery kick! But when I heard she wanted something for the soldiers, I decided to put in some of my savings instead. Daddy's uncle was in the army, and he thought it'd be a good idea, too."

"So is Ryan signing up for the Army or the Navy, Jaye? His grandpa was in the army, so he'd prefer that, right?"

"I don't really know," Jaina said, shaking her head. "I met him the other day, but he was rather busy, and he didn't seem to want to talk about it. I'm sure he'd go in a flash if it were up to him, but *someone* thinks he ought to be taking her on a picnic every day, instead!" She looked darkly at Cathy, who nodded in silent understanding.

"Speaking of signing up, did you hear about Henrik?" Cathy said, leaning forward and whispering in her most 'confidential' tone. "Apparently he wanted to sign up too, but his father wouldn't let him. He's one of those 'anti-war' cranks, you know, and keeps talking about how evil the Army is!"

"He ought to be complaining about the Varald, *they're* the ones who started this!" Jaina said stoutly. "Henrik's a good fighter, at least that's what Ryan always told me. His dad shouldn't be preventing him, if he wants to fight for Galvenia."

"That's not *all* he's preventing him from doing," Cathy said, ominously. "Apparently he's not too happy with Henrik's new girlfriend either! I heard from a reliable source that he was chewing out Henrik the other day, saying that he had no business wasting his time on a homely girl who didn't have any fortune of her own! I thought that was rather mean – I mean, who buys Henrik's dad's novels anyway? I tried reading one for an assignment in Common class, when I was in the eleventh grade, but I had to give up and ask Mr. Anderson for another topic."

"Poor Henrik," Jaina said, sympathetically. "I don't know that girl too well, but she seems quite nice; she once came to the Queen's Head, and she was telling me about the orphanage at Lorean. She's terribly earnest and religious, of course, but so's Henrik. His dad should just leave him alone, I say; Henrik's nineteen, and..."

A voice broke in on them. "Well, good morning, ladies. May I interrupt you for a while?"

"Gosh, I know you," Jaina said, recognizing the newcomer and beaming at him. "You're that Zionese policeman, aren't you? Dad told me you'd stopped by the other day for a drink. Nice to meet you, sir."

"Oh, I'm hardly a policeman," Agent Striker replied, "though I am, like them, looking for someone today, to pass a message on to them. Could you tell me where I could find Ryan Eramond? I looked in at his home, but his parents said he'd just gone out."

“You could try Davenport Park,” Cathy suggested, slyly, “though he might not be very pleased if you, ahem, interrupted him in the middle of, shall we say, something *important!*”

“Cathy!” Jaina said, with a giggle. “I don’t think Mr. Striker is really interested in listening to the Rumour Mill today. Anyway, he might be over at the Regales’ place if he isn’t in the park, sir. Is anything the matter?”

“Oh, not at all,” Striker replied, pleasantly. “I just heard that he was enlisting, so I thought that he might be interested in the latest news from the war front, which isn’t too bad. I had a wire from Caledonia today, and I might have to go back soon myself, if things go on this way.”

“Ryan’s *what?*” Cathy exclaimed. “But I – er, I mean, rumour has it that his, er, sweetheart didn’t want him to go...”

“Oh, give us a break, Cathy,” Jaina protested. “Ryan’s not that sort of guy. If he feels something is right, he’ll do it. Anyway, if I see him, I’ll tell him you wanted to see him, sir.”

“That would be most kind, Miss Vellin,” Agent Striker replied, shaking hands with both the girls. “Well, I’m sure you must be getting ready for today’s celebration, so enjoy yourselves, and don’t worry your young heads too much about the war. Things may look up quite soon.”

“Thank you,” they replied, as Striker began to walk away purposefully, in the direction of Davenport Park.

“He’s pretty cool for a Zion,” Cathy said, admiring the agent’s broad shoulders and military bearing. “I’ve heard he and Lavie’s dad get on quite well, and he spends quite some time in the Regale library. I wonder why?” She grinned.

“Hey, girlfriend, you’re taking the ideas right out of my mind!” Jaina said with a laugh and a wink. “I know I shouldn’t be gossiping here, but maybe the library isn’t the only thing he goes there to see...”

“Now *that’s* an idea for a good novel,” Cathy said, dreamily. “The handsome hero from Davenport, and the mysterious stranger from Zion, competing for the hand of the town’s first and most fortunate daughter. Ryan versus the Man of Mystery, with Lavie as the prize! Move over, Roxanne, here comes Catherine Z. Weseluc!”

“You’re incorrigible, Cathy,” Jaina said, laughing and holding her sides. “Though I’m sure it would be quite fun to read, if you ever did get down to writing it!”

It was unfortunate that Agent Striker had missed Ryan, for that young gentleman had left his home just moments before he had called at their home, and what transpired there is not without interest to our chronicle.

“Now, Ryan, dear,” Sheila Eramond said, adjusting his tie for him, “have a nice time at Lavie’s birthday party, do you hear? And I do hope she likes those special pastries I made today! When you go there in the afternoon, don’t forget to take them with you, do you hear?”

“Sheesh, Mum, I won’t forget, okay?” Ryan said, loosening his collar a little. “Anyway, the party’s only at three o’clock! I’m just heading down to Serin’s Peak to hand in these forms, and...”

“Oh, yes, indeed!” Sheila replied, with a smile that. “My brave boy, off to fight for his country! I am so proud of you, Ryan....though I do wish it didn’t have to be so soon, I am so proud of you! And I know your Grandpa would’ve been happy to see this day, too.”

“Aw, come on, Mum,” Ryan said, blushing. “It’s just training, at this point. Everyone is saying the Zion will put things to an end quite soon, and we’re just trying to show our solidarity with them here.”

“I know, Ryan,” his father interrupted, “but remember, the fortunes of war are uncertain, as Father always told me. Think of Chespa Bay, where the Commonwealth was almost destroyed, and was then saved by the bravery of Walter and a few others like him. You’re taking on a great responsibility, my boy, and I hope you realize that.”

“I do, Dad,” Ryan said, with a look of determination. “I understand what we’re up against. Sometimes, we need to fight to ensure peace, and this is one of those times. If I’m called to fight, I’ll do my part.”

“Excellent, my boy,” Theodore replied. “Now, there’s one more thing I ought to say, since you’ll be leaving tomorrow morning. I’m not too worried about your surviving basic training, especially since you’ve been Walter’s student; in fact, I’ve heard that things have slackened a little since his time! Don’t let your guard down. But more to the point, remember that you’ll be going in there with a bit of a reputation, after your escapades on the *Paradiso*...”

“Dad! That’s all over and done with now,” Ryan replied, with a laugh. “I don’t think anyone really remembers that, what with the war and Socius’ death, not to mention the civil war in Itaria. Well, maybe the Princess remembers, but that’s it, I guess. I did my job, I got my medal, and tomorrow’s another story. Right?”

“Right you are, Ryan. Now run along, I’m sure that Major down at the yard will be there by now, and good luck!”

“Don’t forget to comb your hair before you speak to him, dear,” Sheila added. “I’m sure those Army and Navy men are particular about that sort of thing!”

Ryan chuckled. “They’ll probably shave most of my hair off, if I’m joining the Infantry,” he replied. “Solves the problem, I guess.”

“Ryan!” Sheila’s eyes widened. “Please don’t let them do *that*...”

“Now, Sheila, rules are rules,” Theodore said, calmly, “but I’m sure they’ll do that only if you’re actually deployed. I think Juan Casales is also heading down there today. Give him my regards if you see him. His father was one of my best workers, actually.”

“Carmen’s swordsmith? Sure I will, Dad,” Ryan said, buckling his sword belt. “All right, I’d best be along now.”

“Come back safely, dear,” Sheila replied, grinning. “I’m sure Lavie must be waiting for you too!”

“Hmph,” was Ryan’s only reply, as he left home. *I hope Lavie doesn’t hit the ceiling when she hears I’m joining up*, he thought. *If Marianne took it so hard, I’d hate to think of how clingy **she** could get! And I hope she likes the present I got her. What do you get for the richest girl in town, anyway?*

“Marianne!” The voice was plaintive, almost whining, but surprisingly strong for all that. “Where’s my tea, girl? It’s already eleven o’clock!”

Marianne, wearing an out-sized apron that had clearly seen better days, came running into the drawing-room, a little out of breath, bearing a tray with a cup of weak tea and a plate of digestive biscuits. “I’m sorry, Grandma, the milk came a little late today. Here you are!”

Antonia Robertson, leaning up from under the frilly cap she always wore, glared at the plate. “Stupid girl,” she replied. “Didn’t your father tell you that I can’t stand those biscuits? Throw them out, or eat them yourself, and bring me a nice ham sandwich.”

“But Grandma,” Marianne pleaded, “Father said that wouldn’t be good for your blood pressure!”

“Blood pressure, hmph. Who died and made *him* a doctor, I’d like to know? Ah, it’s a hard life when your own children begrudge you the things you enjoy, just because some foolish doctor tells them to.”

“I’m sorry, Grandma,” Marianne said, lowering her head. “I’ll fix you a sandwich, if...”

“Oh, never mind that,” Mrs. Robertson said, impatiently. “And don’t forget to see to lunch, too. Your father should be home any moment soon. He works hard for both of us, Marianne. Don’t you forget that. Don’t be like your hussy of a mother, who’s probably gadding about with some soldier even as I speak.”

Marianne closed her eyes. *She’s in a worse mood than usual today*, she thought. *Father must’ve had words with her before he left, that’s how it always is.* “I won’t, Grandma,” she replied.

“Life is hard, girl, don’t forget that. I’m glad that you’re not like half the silly girls in Davenport, who think working is somehow beneath them. Never forget where we came from, child. Do you understand?”

"I do, Grandma," Marianne said, repeating the words as if they were parts of the Itarian Catechism. *Does she ever get tired of repeating the same things, over and over again? It's so frustrating! I wish Ryan was here. I haven't seen him for the last couple of days. Ryan....*

"Good, good," Antonia Robertson replied, sipping her tea. "This isn't bad. It's certainly better than what my no-good daughter-in-law used to offer me. She never was our kind, Marianne, never understood us. Mark my words, when you decide to marry, don't marry outside your station in life."

"I – I won't, Grandma," Marianne replied, jolted out of more pleasant thoughts.

"By the way, what happened to that young man of yours, the one who carried a toy pistol with him all the time? Brian, wasn't he?" Antonia said, sharply.

"Ryan, Grandma. We're – still together," Marianne replied, defensively, her hands going to the pendant around her neck. "In fact, I was going to see him today evening, after Father came back..."

"Make sure you do, girl. Otherwise, he'll go running off to join the Navy or something. Boys with swords and guns always do silly things like that. Tell him to work at an honest trade, instead. D'you hear?"

"Yes, Grandma," Marianne replied. "His father owns a business, so I don't think he'll want to leave home, anyway."

"Hold on to your young man, girl," Antonia said, roughly but kindly, as she laid her teacup down. "Young men have a nasty habit of flying away, unless you're careful. Now, I hope you aren't planning to go to that ridiculous party in the afternoon, are you? Not that you'd be invited."

"I wasn't, Grandma, and I wouldn't want to, anyway," Marianne said, flushing and turning away. "As you said, we must know our place in life."

"Clever girl," Antoina replied, nodding her head. "Ah, Marianne, there's hope for you yet. You're certainly worth a thousand of that painted doll of a Regale girl, even if it's your old grandmother who says so."

Juno, Fossen is right. Be careful of that man, Robert. I cannot see everything about him, but I know that the police will not detain him long.

"You seem remarkably well-informed," Juno replied, quietly, as he crossed the bridge that would take him into the lowest depths of Mount Lorea Mine. "What is your reason for holding that opinion?"

I cannot look into men's hearts, Juno. Only the Purpose can. But in his mercy, he has given me an occasional vision, a portent of things to come. And though I see dimly, I know that the man has friends in high places. He will elude justice for long, but it will come to him at last.

“Perhaps I should just dispatch him the next time we meet,” Juno said, casually. “It would save us all a good deal of trouble. But since you seem to know a good deal about him, answer this question for me: Why was he pursuing that woman in Trinden? I can understand him stealing packages, or even trying to abduct a wealthy young woman for ransom. But why torment those who are already downtrodden?”

It seemed to Juno that if his speaker were to appear before him, she would have smiled – a sad, weary smile. *Where one loves, one can also hate, Juno. That is all I can tell you on the matter.*

“Very clever, my friend,” Juno replied, looking down at the ground, and discerning the imprints of two trails of footsteps – small, delicate feet, like those of a woman or a child. “Are you suggesting that our mysterious Robert is in love with that woman?”

Perhaps, Juno. You and I both know that love does not always bring joy; it can bring bitterness and coldness as well. You loved your father, and for his sake, you have become an instrument of vengeance. And there is another....

“I request you,” Juno said angrily, “to leave my personal affairs out of the matter. They are none of your concern.”

I apologize, the voice replied, gently. Look at those crystals on that cave, Juno. Simple minerals, and yet so beautiful. In days gone by, before this kingdom even existed, I would have leaped for joy if the one I loved had given me even a simple necklace, or a pendant, made from them. But he hungered for the glory of this world, and was willing to sacrifice me for its sake. Perhaps on this day, of all others, you also dream of gifting one to....

“Kindly desist from this conversation.” Juno replied, in a harsh tone, flushing. “It is entirely unprofitable. I regret that you have had to suffer in your time, but there is no reason why I should follow the same path.”

I pray you never have to, Juno, she replied, in a tone that was almost motherly. But let us speak of other things. What is it that you seek today?

“Answers,” Juno said, briefly. “And if my eyes do not lie, I shall find some at the end of this trail.....”

Suddenly, he found a door set into the wall of the cave, painted the same dull grey colour as the overhanging rocks. So well-concealed was it that, if a lesser man had been following the same path, he would certainly have walked into it and collided with it, injuring both his head and his pride.

“Well, well. How remarkable.” He smiled and drew his sword. “Let us see what lies behind this portal.”

Wait, Juno. Why not listen at the door first? It may not be what you suspect.

“I see your own mother was not too particular about manners, my lady,” Juno replied, with a short laugh. “However, there is merit in your suggestion.”

He leaned closer to the door, straining to hear, but could only make out the voices of women, speaking animatedly.

“Mages, perhaps?” Juno said, under his breath. “Anyway, we shall soon have answers! Reveal yourself!”

Aiming his sword at the door, he slashed forward, and a thin line of orange light gleamed from both edges of the blade. The door fell away, as easily as if he had been cutting a slice of bread, and revealed two women within, seated at a table, a steaming bowl of some sort in between them.

“Mr. Juno!” one of the women said, excitedly, rising and waving at him in glee. “Goodness gracious, what a lovely surprise! Rosemary, my sister, this is the man I was telling you about, who saved my life when I was on my way to Darington! He’s so brave, and so kind! I’ve always told you to include him in your prayers every night, and now you can see him for yourself! Well, Mr. Juno, please make yourself at home! You can have some of my Itarian stew, if you’re feeling hungry. Two old maids like us could always do with a little company, that’s for sure!”

Juno groaned. “You?” he exclaimed.

The other woman, who was wearing the head-covering of an Itarian nun, rose from the table as well. “Oh, I’m sorry! Were you looking for someone else? You seem disappointed. But perhaps we can help you. Now don’t groan, Mr. Juno, that’s a brave boy. A nice bit of bread and stew will do you good.”

“I’ve also brought a little fruit-cake along with me!” the first woman said, cheerfully. “Why, it’ll almost be like a little tea-party of our own, except that it’s still morning!”

It looks like you’ve found some of your admirers, the voice added, mischievously.

Resignedly, Juno sat down at the table. “What are you doing here, Miss Sheldon?” he asked, with as much politeness as he could muster.

“We were looking for an unusual mineral, Mr. Juno,” Aline Sheldon replied, animatedly, “and it’s all connected to that Memory Crystal we found! You see, after I got back from Darington, some of the Zion scientists came over and said that there was some of it hidden in Mount Lorea Mine, and that they wanted us to look for it as soon as possible! I’m a little scared of caves, though, Mr. Juno, and since I didn’t have you to protect me, I was quite nervous! But I’ve always been a lucky girl, you know. My sister Rosemary, who lives in Lorean, has a little chamber of silence here that she comes to every now and then, to meditate and pray in. And she told me that she’d seen something that looked like the mineral I was looking for! Apparently it had some sort of religious significance, and it was called ‘God’s Metal’, so it’s never really been mined by the Galvenian companies! Silly superstition, I say.”

“A chamber of silence in Mount Lorea Mine?” Juno said, his eyebrows rising.

“Yes, Mr. Juno, that’s right,” Sister Rosemary replied. “In ancient times, Itarian priests who lived in Factoria, before it was conquered by the Zionese, were persecuted by the last kings, and hid in these

caves. Legend has it that they used the Divine Metal to protect themselves, though my chaplain and Aline both say that those are just silly stories. I live in a convent in Lorean, and some of us come down to this chamber once or twice a week, to observe our Rule, which prescribes a day of silence every week.”

It looks like it isn't today, though, the voice interjected, and Juno had the disconcerting impression that it was laughing at him.

“And the metal?” Juno asked, his interest renewed. “What can you tell me about it? I am on an errand myself, in search of a material with unusual properties. The book I consulted refers to an ‘El Metal’. Could we be speaking of the same thing?”

“Why, of course, Mr. Juno!” Aline said, matter-of-factly. “‘El’ is just an old name for one of the gods, isn’t it?”

“Aline,” Rosemary admonished her gently, “there is only one God, remember.”

“Oh, I was talking about *legends*, Sister Rosemary,” Aline replied, with a giggle. “You don’t have to start giving me a sermon now, especially in front of Mr. Juno! I’m sure he’d be terribly bored, wouldn’t you, Mr. Juno? You’d better show him some of the metal, instead of chattering away like a silly nun.”

“Aline, my sister,” Rosemary replied, “it’s not polite to quarrel in front of Mr. Juno. Be a good girl, now.”

“Ooh, I’m so sorry, *grande soeur*,” Aline replied, with a laugh. “But enough about us, I’m sure! Try some of this stew, Mr. Juno. I’ve seasoned it with just a pinch of Garaknod Claw Powder, so it should make you even bigger and stronger than you are now!”

Juno tasted the stew cautiously, but found it surprisingly good. “This is quite agreeable, Miss Sheldon,” he replied. “Thank you.”

“Oh, you’re our guest,” Sister Rosemary said, warmly. “But if it’s the Divine Metal you’re looking for, look no further!” Her hand went to a lever on the wooden wall behind her, and as she pushed it down, a portion of the wall slid back, revealing a shelf crudely carved in the rock of the cave itself. Despite the dim lighting of the room, Juno was dazzled by the brilliance of its contents.

“Remarkable,” he said, reaching out his hand and picking up a large, crystalline sphere, which was remarkably light for its size. It gleamed a bright blue, but its edges shone with all the colours of the rainbow, and it felt surprisingly warm, even through his gloves. “Does the Galvenian Royal Mining Corporation know about this?”

“Oh, you know how it is, Mr. Juno,” Sister Rosemary said, with a wink. “Ask me no questions, and I’ll tell you no lies. The Church has charged us to keep these in our chambers down here, where no one would interfere with them, because they can be used for evil as well as for good.”

“For evil?” Juno said, softly.

“Why yes, Mr. Juno,” she replied. “The old history books say that this material, if used with the wrong conjurations, can be used to serve the Lord of the Pits! It can be used to create shields, to summon demons, and even to transform forest animals into dangerous beasts....”

“Rosemary!” Aline said, impatiently. “Don’t be an old Itarian fussbudget! Those are old wives’ tales! Dangerous beasts and demons, indeed! Mr. Juno, don’t listen to her. That material can probably be used to make weapons and ships, which are supposed to be very strong and resistant. That’s all! Don’t...”

“One minute, Miss Sheldon,” Juno said, “Sister Rosemary, you mentioned dangerous beasts. Could you tell me more about them?”

“The *Legends of Silver and Gold*, which are a collection of lives of the Saints...”

“They’re *legends*!” Aline said, chuckling.

“...speak about Saint Franco, a warrior from San Delas. When he grew up, the cities of San Delas were suddenly overrun by hordes of wild beasts, which resembled no creature on earth. They would attack at night, and would maul their victims beyond recognition. Some of them were winged creatures, and other resembled wolves, or...”

“Dragons,” Aline said, in a mock “ominous” tone. “And vampires. And Itarian nuns dressed up as clowns, who sang the Galvenian national anthem while standing on their heads, and...”

“Aline, my sister,” Sister Rosemary said, patiently, “I will overlook that disrespectful statement, but do be quiet. Mr. Juno asked me a question, and I wish to answer it.”

“Oh, very well,” Aline said, with a grin.

“Anyway, these creatures had been unleashed by a warlord named Von Schickel, who had smuggled the Divine Metal from here, in Factoria, and had used it to transform ordinary dogs and birds into predators. Saint Franco and his two companions set out to defeat them, but one of them was killed in a pitched battle with three of the winged creatures, and one of them betrayed him and went over to Von Schickel. Saint Franco finally defeated the largest of the beasts, which was like a wolf, and it turned into powder as he slew it. He retrieved the Divine Metal, and brought it in triumph to Itaria, where it was handed over to the Pontiff. As for Von Schickel, once the metal was gone, his powers faded, and the people of San Delas rose against him and hanged him.”

“Interesting,” Juno replied. “Tell me, Sister, where is the rest of this metal now?”

“Some of it is still in Itaria, where it is used to adorn the tombs of the Pontiffs,” she replied. “The rest is here, in four chambers of silence like this one. Two of them are here in the mines, and two of them are in Straukpass. The two here are guarded by us nuns, and the two in Straukpass by monks. But why do you wish to know?”

“Because there are evil men in the kingdom,” Juno replied, softly. “Some of them may be seeking this material, to use it to their own benefit.”

Sister Rosemary laughed. “Oh, that would be very, very hard for them to do, Mr. Juno,” she replied. “Even if they were to break down that door as you just did, and steal every last bit of it, they couldn’t use it, because....” She flushed, and suddenly stopped speaking.

“Continue, Sister,” Juno urged her. “This may be of the greatest importance.”

“I’m afraid I can’t, Mr. Juno. There are things that it is not lawful for me to reveal, even to a brave man like you. If you wish to know, you may find answers in some of the old books, at the Royal Library at Lorean. That is all I can say.”

“Is there anyone else who would be at greater liberty to speak, Sister?” Juno said, firmly. “I must apologize for the question, but the safety of Galvenia may be at stake.”

Sister Rosemary gasped. “The safety of Galvenia? What do you mean?”

“Let me be honest with you, Sister,” Juno said, closing his eyes and travelling back, in memory, to that night on Davenport Peak. “Several months ago, I learned – through my friends in the Army – that our country was being betrayed by an official from Glendale. I traced him and executed justice upon him, but among the few papers that he left was a coded message – a message that spoke of obtaining samples from Lorea Mine, and then sabotaging it in some way. More recently, I came upon the man who was paying him, and we engaged in combat. I emerged victorious, but as he died, he, too, spoke of the mines.”

Aline shivered. “A traitor, Mr. Juno? You mean....those men who attacked me, and wanted the Crystal, were in league with him? They wanted to destroy Galvenia? Oh no, oh no...”

Sister Rosemary wrapped a protective arm around her. “Now, now. Don’t cry, Aline, there’s a good girl. Mr. Juno, I will – under these exceptional circumstances – tell you something that you must keep secret. First, visit King’s College, and ask to speak to the Professor of Religious Literature there. If he asks who sent you, mention my name.”

“That is easily done,” Juno replied. “And the next thing?”

“There is a woman, currently seeking shelter at our convent, who was also a victim of bandits as my poor sister was,” she replied, patting Aline on the head. “She may not be willing to speak to you, but it is my strong belief that she knows something of the matter. And that is all I can say to you now, Mr. Juno. On your honour as a gentleman, please keep these confidences sacred.”

“I will,” Juno said, bowing and sheathing his sword. “I thank you for your hospitality, and for an uncommonly fruitful conversation. I hope I can repay my debt to you some day, Sister.”

"If the Infinity wills it, you will," Sister Rosemary said, as she and Aline waved him goodbye.

"Ryan! Wait for me, silly!"

Ryan Eramond, walking back slowly from Serin's Peak and thinking about a number of things, looked up and smiled, in a rather embarrassed manner. "Uh, hi Lavie," he said. "Happy birthday, and all that."

"Why thank you, Mr. Eramond," Lavie replied. "I was just catching a breath of fresh air, after spending a lot of time in the kitchen! Gosh, it's still pretty warm for September, don't you think?"

"It sure is," Ryan said, folding the papers in his hand and stuffing them into his pocket surreptitiously. "Are *you* baking us a cake, or something?"

"Oh no, I'm just helping Carmen out with some of the snacks," Lavie said, beaming at him. "Gran says I ought to learn some cooking from her, so that's what I'm doing!"

Thank the Infinity, Ryan thought, with immense relief. *Lavie's cakes can be quite a dangerous proposition!* "Well, that's nice. Is your grandmother coming down, too?"

"Of course she is, Ryan," Lavie replied, smoothing down her hair. "After all, you only turn eighteen once, don't you?"

"Captain Obvious to the rescue," Ryan said, with a grin.

"Ryan!" Lavie said, with feigned annoyance. "That's not what I meant, and you know it. You *are* coming too, aren't you?"

Of course, who'd pass up a chance at Carmen's pastries? Ryan thought, with a smile. Aloud, he replied, "Of course, Lavie. But I must warn you, Mum's sending along a pie as well. Palberry surprise, she said. It's – rather interesting."

Lavie giggled. "Oh, poor Auntie Sheila. She tries so hard, doesn't she?"

Ryan laughed. "She sure does. Well, I've just got to get back home, now, and smarten up a little..."

"Is that a bow-tie you're wearing, Ryan?" Lavie said, surprised. "What are you dressing up for *now*? The party's still some time off!"

"Er, nothing," Ryan said, with a frown. *God, the last thing I need is Lavie giving me the same lecture as Marianne.* "Just, um, took a walk to Serin's Peak, and all that. Nothing special. It's an old tie, you know."

"Serin's Peak?" Lavie said, teasingly. "Is *that* where you boys go for dates these days? Or....." She paused, and her expression suddenly grew serious.

Oh, bother, Ryan thought. Why on earth didn't I just say Davenport Beach, or something?

"Ryan," she said, in a small voice, "are you.....volunteering for the Army, or something?"

In for a cent, in for a dollar, he thought, and sighed, conscious of her gaze fixed rather firmly on him.

"Well, to tell you the truth, yes," he said. "I decided to a couple of days ago, but I haven't told too many people, except Mum and Dad, Hocha, and Henrik, of course. Now please don't..."

Whatever he was expecting – tears, protests, dramatic pleas – nothing could have prepared Ryan for Lavie's response: she was looking at him with an admiring gaze that he found extremely disconcerting, and her finger dabbed lightly at one eye, but nothing more. "Ryan! Are you serious?" she said, in a tone that expressed the deepest surprise.

"Well, I *am*, Lavie," Ryan said, patting his pocket. "Just got my papers. I'll be leaving tomorrow morning for the Academy, and they'll put us through a physical, then decide whether we get to go to the Army, the Marines or the Navy. It's just training, though..."

Lavie held out her hand. "Ryan, I am *so proud* of you!" she said, and it was evident from the tone of her voice that she was quite sincere. "Why, it's just like your grandfather! You're following the same path, and..."

Is this Lavie I'm speaking to, or do I need to pinch myself? Ryan thought, incredulously. *She sounds just like Mum and Dad rolled into one!* Still in a daze, he extended his hand as well, and they shook hands firmly. "Now, Lavie, I don't want you to go telling everyone about this, okay? Your folks will probably want to know, but do *not* tell the Rumour Mill, otherwise Cathy will start telling everyone I'm the new commander of the Rough Riders, or something! Do you understand?"

"Ryan," Lavie said, hesitantly, "I know I'm going to miss you, as we all will. But I'm – I'm happy you've made your choice, Ryan, I really am." She smiled at him, a little tentatively, then turned away. "Well, I must be going, now! See you in the afternoon, Ryan, and good luck!"

"Lavie..." Ryan began, but Lavie was already hurrying back to Casa Regale, at a surprisingly high velocity.

What's gotten into her? he wondered, as he stood in the same spot, watching her disappear. *Silly Lavie, trying to figure her out makes calculus seem like child's play. Though I must say, I'm glad she's not making a fuss. Now if some of that attitude could rub off on Marianne, I'd be...*

"*Quo vadis, Compadre?*" Henrik said, walking up to him and slapping him on the shoulder. "You look like you've just had a surprise, or something."

"I have, sort of," Ryan admitted. "I sort of accidentally told Lavie that I was signing up, and wonder of wonders, she *didn't* go into conniptions. Is that girl attending one of those select academies where young ladies learn how to behave, or something?"

Henrik grinned. "I ought to send my dad to one of those places," he replied. "You should have seen *him* this morning. I just mentioned that the Marines could use good swordsmen, and he gave me one of his anti-war lectures! I mean, I'm a Church member, and I'm committed to peace, but we can't take everything lying down! Even the Itarians have asked the Zion Empire for help in putting down the rebellion. There's a lot of difference between being a warmonger like Johan, and self-defence, which is what we and the Zion are doing now!"

"Hey, you don't need to convince *me*, Compadre," Ryan replied. "You ought to give your dad that lecture."

"Dad's in a difficult mood. His latest novel, *The Unholy Book*, has run into a plot hole, and he doesn't want to admit it."

"*The Unholy Book*?" Ryan said. "What kind of silliness is that?"

"Silliness? You speak of fine literature, Mr. Eramond," Henrik said, chuckling. "Anyway, it's supposed to be a veiled metaphor for the Zion Code of Law, and how it makes men evil, somehow. Dad ought to stay away from politics, his political tracts – er, I mean books – are the worst of them all!"

"Did I just hear you criticizing your father, Mr. Spenson?" Ryan said, with assumed indignation. "What would Sister Miriam say about that?"

Henrik scowled. "I'm in a pretty critical mood today, Ryan. I mean, I can just about understand Dad's anti-military stuff; it's part of being a highbrow intellectual. But he really shouldn't interfere in my personal life," he said, darkly.

"Your personal life? You mean Bernadette? Goodness, what could he have against *her*?" Ryan said, shocked. "I mean, she's not my type or anything, but she's a nice girl from a good family, isn't she?"

"Try telling that to Mr. Alphonse Spenson," Henrik said, hotly. "He said that, considering my own position as a student on a scholarship, I had no right spending time on a girl who was 'as plain and penniless' as she was! He even seemed to think his lame alliteration was so clever. It took me a good deal of effort – and the fact that Bernadette was waiting for me outside – to prevent me from giving him what for, right then and there!"

"That would have been a sight," Ryan admitted, then went on with concern. "She didn't hear him, did she?"

"Fortunately not," Henrik said, with an expression of relief. "But enough about *my* personal life, what's new with *yours*? Still choosing between Marianne, Lavie, and Princess Carranya Lionheart?" He laughed.

"Princess C – Oh, give it a break, Henrik," Ryan said, annoyed. "Don't tell me Armin's still spreading that silly story about the Princess!"

"If you insist," Henrik said, laughing. "Anyway, I'd best go home and throw on a dress shirt, or something."

"A dress shirt?" Ryan grinned. "Don't tell me *you've* been invited to Miss Regale's eighteenth birthday celebration..."

"Blame it on Bernadette," he replied, stifling a laugh. "She and Lavie seem to have hit it off *very* well for some reason – some story about her dad having cured Lavie of a fever when she was a kid, or something. And where she leads, I must follow, at least within the bounds of reason."

"Good boy," Ryan said, approvingly. "So what are you getting her?"

"Ah, that would be telling," Henrik replied. "Though I could give you a clue, if you wanted. Think of Straukpass."

"Straukpass? Nope, doesn't ring a bell," Ryan said, shaking his head. "Anyway, good luck with the party, and with your dad, Compadre. I'll see you there."

"*Au revoir*, Ryan," Henrik replied with a wink, as he turned to leave.

"Mom, I'm home!" Lavie said, as she flung the doors to her home open. "Sorry I'm a little late, I, er, sort of bumped into Ryan on the way..."

"Did you, dear?" Emily said, smiling. "Well, we've still got plenty of time, so that's no problem at all. Anyway, the reason I asked to you come back early is that your father and I still haven't given you *our* presents, Lavie. Your father's waiting for you in the library. Run along and meet him first, and then come up to your room. I think you'll like what I have in store!"

"Thanks, Mom!" Lavie said warmly, as she headed for the library. Her father was seated behind one of the desks, flipping through a thick book whose pages seemed to be written by hand, rather than printed. As he saw her enter, he closed the book with a rather guilty expression. "Lavie, dearest!" he said, rising to his feet and holding out his hand. "Many happy returns of the day, once again. So how does it feel to be two-fifths as old as I am?"

Lavie giggled. "Hmm, not much different, I'd say, Daddy! Mom asked me to come by and say hello, so I..."

"Ah, yes," Sigmund said, looking rather serious, and taking a maroon velvet case out of the pocket of his coat. "Please have a seat, Lavie. There's something I want to tell you, and I won't take too long."

"Aw, there's no need to be so serious, Daddy. Let me guess," she replied, patting his hand, "you're going to give me one of your *exciting* books as a birthday present, aren't you?"

Sigmund laughed, and took a thick book out of a shelf at random, handing it to her. "Not quite, my daughter. I'll save that for when you come of age, next year. Just look at this: *The Collected Writings of Aramondrius, With Annotations from the School of Philosophy at Zion University*. One day, Lavie, this treasure will be yours!"

"Very funny, Daddy!" Lavie replied. "So if it isn't a book, let me guess – it's a typewriter, like Auntie Sheila has, so that I can write my *own* book! Did I guess right?"

Sigmund, still laughing, replaced the collected writings of Aramondrius in their rightful place, and handed her the case. "Sorry, Lavie. I must give you full points for intelligent guessing, but you're wrong again. You see, ever since you told me about your grandfather's heirlooms, I was thinking that I also had some of my own, which belong to you by right. This was my own mother's, Lavie. I'm sorry you never had the chance to know her, because I'm sure the two of you would have got along quite famously."

"Your *mom's*?" Lavie said, surprised, as she took the case from her father. "Ohmygosh, I...." She opened the case, revealing a gold necklace with a diamond pendant, which sparkled under the library's bright lights, dazzling her. "Ohmygosh, Daddy, is this really...."

"Yes, it is, Lavie," Sigmund replied. "It's all yours. Mother was always particular that it should go to her own daughter, or – failing that – to one of our daughters, if we had one. I think the time has come, Lavie. Treasure it, as I have all these years, waiting for the right moment."

Lavie held it against her throat, tentatively, then flew at her father, almost knocking him off his feet. "Daddy, it's....it's lovely! I...just don't know what to say, really! Thank you, *thank you!*"

"Lavie!" Sigmund said, with mock sternness, holding her close to him. "Calm down, child. Remember, you're a young lady, now. What would your grandmother say if she saw you behaving this way?"

"Aw, I'm sure Gran wouldn't mind!" Lavie replied, happily and rather breathlessly. "Thank you, Daddy.....You're the best!"

"Hmm, I'm sure some would disagree with that," Sigmund said, shaking his head. "Now you'd best go meet your mother, I'm sure you'll be pleasantly surprised there, too! May you have a wonderful year, Lavie, and may what you wish for come true."

"Oh, I hope so, too!" she replied, stepping away and fastening the necklace securely, then holding it between her fingers. "Ohmygosh, I still can't *believe* this!"

"Now, now, Lavie, there's no need to get so excited," Sigmund said, patting her on the head. "And happy birthday, dearest. Don't keep Emily waiting, she's been working hard on your present."

"Thank you so much, Daddy!" Lavie said, as she rushed out of the library door, calling out as she went. "Mom! Carmen! Just *look* at what Daddy gave me!"

Sigmund smiled indulgently, looking at the open door, then noting with some amusement that Lavie had left the case behind in her hurry. *I hope this year is happier than the last one was for you, Lavie, he thought, closing his eyes. And I shall try harder to ensure that it is, I promise. May you always be as joyful as she was, but may that necklace bring you better fortune than it brought her. May you live long and flourish, my child. That's all I ask.*

"Thank you for remaining here until I arrived, Agent Striker," Princess Carranya said, smoothing down the simple grey dress she wore, as she descended from her carriage, followed by two other women. "It was most kind of you, especially given the circumstances."

"My return to Caledonia can afford to wait a little, Your Highness," Striker replied, with a bow. "At any rate, I have an errand of my own in Davenport, so assisting you was no trouble. But, in all honesty, is it wise for you to leave the capital at this point in time?"

"Father wasn't too pleased," she said, adjusting her black hat, as Naomi and Charlotte, helped by the coachman, unloaded the two trunks that formed the entirety of their luggage. "But, knowing what I know now, I had to meet Lavie – not just to greet her on this occasion, but to give her a word to the wise in person."

"You are quite certain, then, that such a mission will be attempted?" Striker said, momentarily surprised. "Surely, it would be premature to do so, given the safety of the Eastern front."

"I'm afraid Minister Sheffield left us with little choice," the Princess replied, gravely, then turned to her driver. "Thank you, Daniels. Please wait at the Davenport Inn, for we shall travel back tonight."

"As you wish, Your Highness," Henry Daniels replied, as he set the horses moving again. The Princess watched him leave, then turned to face Striker once more. "Naomi, Charlotte," she called out, "please precede me to Miss Regale's house, and tell them that I shall be there soon."

"Most certainly, Your Highness!" Naomi said, curtsying before she turned and led her granddaughter away.

"So Sheffield is determined to try and cut the Varald's supply lines, is he?" Striker said, placing one hand beneath his jaw. "I guessed something like that was on the cards, but both the Emperor and Admiral Yatsu feel that it is too soon."

"He is willing to wait till December, but no more," Princess Carranya replied. "Both he and Prime Minister Bainbridge feel that both fronts are balanced too precariously. The Rough Riders have already suffered casualties, though Sir Prescott wishes to keep quiet about them for reasons of morale. I disapprove, but Sir Prescott has his command, and because of his sphere of influence, Sheffield is willing to give him a very wide berth."

“As we must, when dealing with our best officers,” Striker said, shaking his head. “Especially when his men have played a crucial role in the defence of the villages around Kannschloss. I was present when Minister Sheffield discussed his plan, which was to interrupt land traffic between the Republic and the Varald, by making use of pro-Galvenia elements in the Republic. But why is this important now? Such supplies would take weeks, or even months, to reach the war front.”

“It is not only a question of supplies, or so I have learned,” Carranya replied. “Apparently, much of the Varald’s superior firepower – which has accounted for most of their victories so far – is being manufactured clandestinely, in factories that lie in no man’s land at the Ghetz border. Using motorized vehicles, they can transport their supplies to the war front in much less time than one would expect. Our plan is to launch a raid on these factories, using a combination of Special Services officers and the Royal Marines. These raids would be carried out in assistance with Republican tribal leaders, who have historical reasons for taking our side. If this can be done, the Varald would lack ammunition, and be forced to surrender most of their gains on the Western front, especially if we send further reinforcements.”

Striker whistled. “Princess, I didn’t know you had taken up military strategy as your latest accomplishment, but I must say I’m impressed. Old Sheffield took about two hours to explain what you just did, and with far less lucidity. But why tell me this?”

“Because,” the Princess replied, with a sombre look on her face, “I am not certain of the wisdom of this plan. First of all, word has come to my ears that the same factories are also supplying arms to rebels in Itaria, which introduces another complication. Second, there are tales that some of those factories are held in joint ownership by Zionese and Galvenian magnates; if that is the case, would we not suffer too by attacking them? Third, though it is a matter of expediency, I cannot approve an alliance with the Republican tribes, whose ways are brutal and who may use the situation to create unrest to their own advantage. And third, the intelligence that we have received is – I don’t know how best to put it, but it seems too obvious, too pat. It is almost as if someone *wanted* us to embark on this operation, perhaps to divert our attention from something closer to home.”

“I see what you mean,” Striker replied. “Particularly the use of the Republican chieftains, whom I have good reason to mistrust myself. And life has taught me to be wary of easy intelligence. Do you wish me to inform the Emperor of this?”

“I do,” she said, simply. “Father has always been easily swayed by men like Sheffield and Socius, and with Socius gone, Sheffield wields considerable influence. Only someone like the Emperor could convince him to stay his hand, and to defer this operation until we have learnt more about the true forces behind this war. It is my firm conviction that unless they are found and dealt with, our war with the Varald may be a fight with a shadow.”

“Ah, I thought we would come to that,” the Agent said, lowering his tone.

“Indeed, Agent Striker,” Carranya said, looking at him intently. “Have you pursued the – research I suggested to you?”

“I have, both here and at Lorean,” Striker replied. “I have also been in touch with some rather interesting people from Itaria, who have provided me with further useful information. And I have no doubt that things are very much as you say. The question of Inderness is crucial, and it is one of the reasons why I have to speak to my Director, or even to the Emperor Charlemagne, in person.”

“Inderness...” Carranya shuddered. “Little did I know that what my teachers told me would prove to be so important. And yet, while I can understand some things, the whole eludes me. Itaria, perhaps; the Empire, certainly. But why the Varald?”

“There is much we have to learn, Your Highness,” Striker said, shaking his head. “And there is hope that we may do so in time. Not long ago, one of our best scientists obtained two artefacts, which apparently came from Galvenia, and which may throw some light on why our Varaldian friends are implicated in this tragedy. It is a tangled web, Princess, one that even an Intelligence man such as myself finds quite intimidating. A religious movement here, mysterious weapons there, assassins in various places, and shadowy figures behind it all.....or, perhaps, illusory figures who serve to distract us. Enough to keep even the most fevered writer of adventure tales occupied for several generations.” He laughed.

“And, drawn into this web, all of us,” Carranya said, softly. “You and your Empire. My parents and I. Ordinary men and women, such as Ryan Eramond, Lavie Regale, and her grandmother. I wonder where it will all end. I truly wonder *if* it will end.”

“Hope springs eternal, even if it is a foolish hope, Your Highness,” Striker replied, with a bow. “Your Aramondrius said that, and I believe him. But now I must complete my second task, and that entails taking my leave of you. Farewell, Princess. Hopefully the next time we meet, it will be in more fortunate circumstances.”

“I hope so too, Agent Striker,” the Princess replied, shaking hands with him. “Good day to you.”

And with an expression that was half frightened and half determined, she turned to follow her companions to Casa Regale.

“Caris! Over here!” the red-haired mage called out, raising her staff. “You Special Forces slackers have finally arrived, thank the Four Spirits!”

“Freya! By Johan’s bones, I didn’t know *your* battalion was here,” Sergeant Burnfist exclaimed, waving and smiling as she – followed by twenty privates – charged down the hill and towards the watchtower outside Kannschloss. “So what’s the plan?”

“Haha, that would be telling,” Freya Raienji replied, with a broad smile of her own. “It’s high time the Emperor approved our request for an additional fire mage, but I didn’t know they would send *you*, Caris.”

“Rebecca, not Caris,” Sergeant Burnfist said, her hand going to her sword. “So what can this fire mage do for you?”

“Simple. These Varald wretches don’t know how to fight, march, or use magic, so they’ve resorted to trying to shell us into oblivion. The Mage Battalions so far have had some trouble in repelling them, simply because there are too few of us. Then I remembered our old family legends, and our battalion sent a message to old Rohmer” – thus did Freya refer to the Commander-in-Chief of the Zion War Office, who was not a particular favourite of hers – “for one or two more of you, to try and repel them with the Omega Wave. If we can push them out of Kanschloss, we have troops stationed at both the eastern and western borders of Acemel, who will drive them all the way back to the border like the weaklings they are.” She snorted. “An army that relies on technology to make up for its lack of skill is no army at all.”

“The Omega Wave?” Rebecca stared at her old friend. “Freya, I’ve seen you pull all kinds of crazy stunts in your day, but isn’t this going just a *little* too far?”

“It’s the only way, Caris,” Freya said, sternly. “If Kanschloss falls, the Varald divisions can march directly on to Kaiseria, and then to the capital. We cannot wait any longer. Even with the reinforcements from Galvenia, we cannot hold the entire border.”

“Who died and made *you* our strategist in chief?” Sergeant Burnfist exclaimed.

“Strategist, by the Pits! This is common knowledge, Rebecca, and you’d know it all by now, if you hadn’t been busy pulling babysitting duty at Darington. Welcome to the war front.”

“Always gentle, aren’t you, Freya?” Sergeant Burnfist replied, with a chuckle. “Anyway, let’s....”

“Captain Raienji!” a voice called out from the lookout post. “A Varald regiment is approaching, and will be here in an hour! I can count two....no, three cannons! Every man and woman to their position!”

“Damnation,” Sergeant Burnfist said, drawing her sword. “Never a dull moment here, is there?”

“Keep calm, Caris,” Freya replied, then began issuing orders, as she lowered the visor of her helmet.

“Men of the 26th, assume the defensive position! At the signal from the watchtower, open fire! Do not fall back until the cannons are in position. I repeat, *do not* fall back! Caris, that means your men, too. Rifles at the ready, and look smart!”

“Yes, Captain,” the soldiers replied in unison, as they raced out of the makeshift barracks behind the watchtower, and formed an orderly line before the town of Greater Kanschloss.

“Captain, they’re charging!” the sentry cried out in alarm. “Full assault formation!”

“Don’t panic, men. Fire two rounds. Wind mages, at the ready!”

“Yes, ma’am,” ten of the mages replied. A series of shots rang out, and the Varald soldiers – despite the fall of some of their comrades – began to race forward with renewed energy, in a formation that was as aggressive as it was disorderly, and firing their own weapons. Several of the Zion soldiers fell, and the Varald cannons slowly began to move into position.

“Winds of Caledonia, their range is out of this world!” Sergeant Burnfist exclaimed. “Men, hold the line!”

“Relax, Caris,” Freya replied. “Wind mages, deflection shields at full power!”

“Full power!” the ten replied in unison, and raised their wands. The Varald continued to fire, but most of their shots were scattered wildly, as if blown away by a fierce gale.

“Good work. Caris, look,” Freya said, with a steely look appearing on her face, as she looked into her binoculars. It was a look that even the fiery Sergeant, and many of her superiors, had learned to dread. “The famous Varald cannons. This calls for something special, wouldn’t you say, old friend?”

“Freya, be careful,” Sergeant Burnfist replied, swallowing nervously. “I haven’t used an Omega Wave since we were in the Academy, and...”

Suddenly, the sound of a cannon rang out, blowing away a large portion of the Zion battle-line. “Fires of Janwen!” Freya thundered. “How on Terra did they get there so fast? Wind mages, full power! And when I say full, I mean full! Repel the charge!”

A second shot rang out, striking the watchtower and causing it to collapse. The sentry, hardly realizing what had happened, crashed to the ground, and the men watched him fall as if in slow motion, with the wind mages’ waves breaking his fall.

“They’re....they’re using chariots without horses!” Sergeant Burnfist said, her mouth hanging open. “How can that even be?”

“I believe they’re called motor vehicles, Caris,” Freya said, placidly. “Only the Republic has them, and it looks like they’ve decided to deal with the Varald. Typical Republican opportunism.”

“Enough of the running commentary, Freya!” Sergeant Burnfist called out, as a third shot went wide, missing the eastern edge of the Zion line. “They may be lousy shots, but they could literally be upon us any moment now!” She raised her sword. “Fires of Terra, listen to me!”

“Ah, that’s the sp...” Freya began, then fell to the ground, as a shot from a Varald sniper – who was riding pillion on one of the vehicles – struck her on the shoulder. Retaliating quickly, Sergeant Burnfist’s riflemen shot the sniper several times, and he fell under the wheels of his own mount.

“Freya!” Sergeant Burnfist screamed. “Freya, answer me!”

“Oh,” she replied, gritting her teeth, “I can still hold a wand with my other arm, you know, Caris. Enough wasted time. Mages of the 107th, are you ready?”

A chorus of hearty replies and raised wands assured her that they were.

“Very well. Caris, stand here, in front of me. Quickly, now, they’re almost here! Launch the Omega Wave!”

And, perfectly on cue, a dome of red light surrounded the entire Zion army, creating a translucent yet impenetrable barrier. The Varald cannons continued to fire, but their projectiles recoiled, as if they had struck an immensely powerful shield.

“Now, Caris!” Freya said, slowly raising herself to her former upright position. “Let it rain!”

Sergeant Burnfist nodded, closed her eyes, and the cannonballs that lay on the ground suddenly began to rise in the air, defying gravity.

“Bombs away,” she said, and lowered her sword. The floating cannonballs fell swiftly on the advancing Varald divisions, crushing several of them and throwing the rest into a panic.

“Now, fire!” she commanded. The Zion soldiers needed no further encouragement, and fired salvo after salvo at the ragged Varald line, which was now beating a hasty retreat.

“Secure the positions,” Freya went on, in a voice that was still calm, as the Zion soldiers, accompanied by their own cannons, moved forward, in pursuit of the fleeing Varald. In less than two hours, their rout was complete, and the Zion flag flew over the citadel at Lesser Kannschloss.

“Good work, men,” Freya Raienji said, as her mage battalion slowly retreated. “They obviously don’t have too many of the vehicles, or they could have given us serious trouble. They’ll have a nice surprise waiting for them at Acemel, when they try to regroup.”

“Confound it, Freya,” Sergeant Burnfist said, hotly, “how can you be so calm about this? They almost killed you!”

“Oh, did they?” Freya looked at the tear in one sleeve of her uniform ruefully. “More to the point, they’ve gone and ruined a perfectly good tunic. New uniforms are hard to come by these days.”

“But you’re hurt,” Burnfist protested. “Let me call in the Healers, now. You can barely raise your arm.”

“Hmph, Caris, are *you* trying to teach *me* about wounds?” Freya replied, smiling and patting the Sergeant on the shoulder with her other arm. “It’s just a scratch; it was the recoil that knocked me off my feet.”

"If you say so," Sergeant Burnfist said, looking at her friend with a mixture of admiration and annoyance. "Well, we've certainly given the Varald what for, I'd say. Men, evacuate the wounded and the fallen to the barracks. We must report back to the authorities at Kaiseria, so get the wireless ready as well."

"Hopefully they'll learn their lesson," Freya replied, shrugging her good shoulder and leaning on her wand. "To think that, at this very moment, girls our age in Galvenia are busy having War Parties and dances for the brave troops, or so my Intelligence friends tell me. Life is strange, isn't it?"

"They ought to join the army," Sergeant Burnfist said, with a wink. "Plenty of parties and dances here, that's for sure."

"Why, Miss Lavie," Carmen said, admiringly, "you look ready to make your *debut* at one of those Palace balls! Wouldn't you agree, Miss Bernadette?"

"I most certainly would," Bernadette replied, looking admiringly at Lavie's first Court dress – her birthday gift from her mother, which she and Carmen had spent long hours making themselves, unwilling to entrust the task to even the best tailors of Davenport. "Lavie, my sister, you look absolutely sumptuous."

"Do you like it, dear?" Emily said, simply, as she made a few final adjustments, then studied her daughter's reflection in the mirror. "I thought it was high time you had one, especially since the King has invited us to celebrate Saint Mikhail's Day with him at the Palace this December."

"Of course I do, Mom!" Lavie said, beaming. "I just can't believe this! Daddy's necklace, and this lovely dress that you made all by yourself....I'm just so lucky!"

"Not as lucky as dear Henrik," Bernadette said, with a laugh. "He and Mr. Regale were having quite a discussion on Italian literature downstairs, with asides on the politics of Galvenia."

"Is that so, Miss?" Carmen said, chuckling. "Dear me, boys will be boys, won't they, Mrs. Regale?"

"Even *grown-up* ones, it seems!" Lavie added. "Now, Bernadette, let me fix that hat of yours just right. The latest fashion says that it has to be tilted just a little to the left, you know?"

"Really?" Bernadette replied, her hands hurriedly adjusting it herself. "I'm afraid I don't keep up with such things, Lavie. It's sort of frowned upon, when you're in a college like Saint Nealus', you know. Not that I object to fashion myself, at least in moderation."

We shall never know what turn this very feminine discussion would have taken next, for a young housemaid, aged about sixteen, burst into Lavie's room looking very disconcerted, and holding a note.

"Miss Carmen!" she exclaimed. "There's someone here with a package for Miss Lavie!"

“Really, Sarah,” Carmen said, sharply, “there’s no need to get flustered. Just bring it up here, and don’t be a silly girl.”

“Sorry, miss,” Sarah said, apologetically, “but the delivery man also asked me to hand this note to Miss Lavender.” She handed the note to Lavie, then hurried away, anxious to avoid further rebukes from Carmen, who ruled over the under-house staff with an iron first, though it was gloved in velvet.

“A note?” Lavie said, surprised. “I wonder who it could be from.” Taking the note from the maid, she broke the seal and began to read it, her face flushing and a red glint appearing in her eyes as she did so. Finally, she tossed it on her bed, and glared at no one in particular.

“What’s the matter, dear?” Emily asked.

“Hmph! It’s from Sir Chucklehead!” she said. “Does he never give up, the jerk? Just look at this, Mom!” She pointed an accusing finger at the note.

“Sir Chucklehead?” Bernadette asked, with a puzzled expression on her face.

“A noble who’s been, um, bothering Miss Lavie with his unwanted attentions,” Carmen explained, in an undertone. “His real name is Sir Prescott Chuselwock, and he’s from Lorean.”

“How terrible!” Bernadette said, indignantly; as the daughter of a convinced pacifist, she was quite ignorant of Galvenia’s military heroes. “Such things ought not to be permitted, Lavie. You ought to complain to the police, if he continues.”

“I must say his ability to write in verse is deplorable,” Emily said, shaking her head and stifling a laugh. “I mean, even Father in his youth would never have tried to rhyme ‘decline’, ‘carbine’ and ‘thine’.”

“Just throw it away, Mom,” Lavie said, irritated. “Does he have to annoy me even on this day?”

“Why not keep it instead, dear?” Emily said, with a smile.

“Mom!” Lavie protested. “Don’t tell me you think I ought to *encourage* him, or something!”

“Not at all, dear. I would never ask you to do anything as foolish as that. But look at it this way, Lavie. One day, you and your husband – or you and your grandchild, for that matter, might like to sit down and have a good laugh at it. Just read it, Bernadette. It’s quite hilarious.”

Bernadette took the poem from Emily, read it quickly, and burst into laughter. “Dear me, how dreadful!” she said, between peals. “Even I could write better than that, and I’m a terrible writer!”

“Hmm, maybe that’s a good idea, Mom,” Lavie said, calming down a little on seeing the others’ reactions. “Though I wonder who....”

“Beg pardon, Mrs Regale, ma’am!” the hapless Sarah said, bursting into the room once more, her voice now shrill with what bordered on panic. “There’s...someone to see Miss Lavender, and...”

“Sarah!” Carmen said, in an accusatory tone. “You are acting remarkably foolish today. If I did not know you better, I would suspect that you had been helping yourself to some of Mr. Regale’s wine.”

“I swear I haven’t, Miss Carmen,” Sarah replied, almost in tears. “But she’s come in with two other women, and she’s telling such tall tales...”

“Who on Terra are you talking about?” Carmen replied, now genuinely puzzled.

“I hope this isn’t one of Sir Prescott’s friends,” Bernadette said gravely. “Perhaps we should go down and see for ourselves.”

“Wait a minute, Bernadette,” Lavie said. “Sarah, what sort of tall tales do you mean?”

“Oh, Miss Lavender, you wouldn’t believe it! She’s just a young girl in a plain grey dress, but she says she’s the Princess of Galvenia, and she’s Miss Regale’s friend.....”

“Good heavens!” Emily exclaimed. “The Princess?”

At that moment, the door to Lavie’s room swung open, and there stood Carranya, accompanied by a beaming Naomi and Charlotte, who followed her grandmother rather shyly.

“Happy birthday, Lavie,” the Princess said. “I hope I’m not too late!”

“Princess!” Lavie said, happily, running towards her. “I *knew* you’d come by, somehow.”

“Your Highness!” Bernadette said, with a reverent bow. “What an honour!”

“Blimey, Miss Carmen, is that the *real* Princess?” Sarah said, incredulously.

Carmen did not reply, as she was kneeling down and looking with awe at the newcomer. “Your Highness, please accept my apologies...” she began.

“Oh, please stand up and calm yourself, Miss,” Carranya replied. “I suppose it’s my fault, turning up uninvited and in plain clothes, but I thought this would be simpler, especially since Father told me not to make any undue displays of pomp at this time. I’m sorry if you or your staff have been inconvenienced, but I had to be present today, or I would not have been able to forgive myself.” She embraced Lavie, and held out a friendly hand to Bernadette, who shook it warmly.

“Coo! A real live Princess!” Sarah said, exultantly, as she copied her superior’s example and knelt down obediently. “And dressed just like my mum, of all things!”

“What an accurate, if quaint, description,” Carranya said, amused. “Stand up, child. There is no need to be afraid.”

When the momentary excitement had subsided, and Sarah – who was now the proud recipient of a gold ten-dollar coin given her by the Princess herself – had returned to more mundane duties, Carranya sat down on the chair behind Lavie’s desk, with a small sigh. “Mrs. Regale, I trust I am not intruding.”

“It is our honour to receive you, Your Highness,” Emily replied, calmly. “But, if I may be indiscreet, may I ask why you have chosen to visit us in this way?”

“Certainly, Mrs. Regale,” Carranya replied. “Lavie, my friend, I am afraid I am the bearer of bad news on this joyful day, and I would rather you learned it from my lips than from another’s.”

“Bad news?” Lavie frowned. “What do you mean, Princess?”

“Simply this. The war with the Varald is now balanced very evenly, and our new Prime Minister, Lionel Bainbridge, has decided to try and turn things our way. He has recently learned that the Varald are being supplied with ammunition and weapons, probably illegally, by factories in the Fulton Republic.”

“The Fulton Republic?” Emily said, sharply. “That doesn’t surprise me, Your Highness. Father told me that they played a dishonourable role even in the uprising at Chespa Bay, supplying arms to the rebels there. It’s one of the reasons why I’ve always cautioned Sigmund against dealing with them.”

“You’re quite right, Mrs. Regale,” Bernadette said, softly. “Many of those munitions factories are run using slaves and bonded labourers, something that our Church has fought against for centuries.”

“Slaves?” Lavie shuddered. “How terrible. I’ve read about them in novels, and I’m sure the reality is much worse...”

“Quite so, Lavie,” Carranya replied. “Anyway, after discussions with my father and the War Minister, the Galvenian Government has decided to try and cut those supply lines.”

“But isn’t that a good thing?” Lavie said, surprised. “It would mean a quicker end to the war, right?”

“Hear me out, Lavie,” Carranya said, soberly. “Unfortunately, the sea routes to the Republic are being patrolled by the Commonwealth, after the battle between our ships and the Varald fleet in which the HMS *Alexandra* went down. Because of this, Sheffield doesn’t want to use the Navy. Instead, he will use a combination of Special Services officers, Marine riflemen, and new recruits, who will be used for the more dangerous tasks, such as scouting and covert work.” She paused meaningfully after the last sentence.

“New recruits?” Bernadette said. “Surely, that is most imprudent, Your Highness. Most of them are young men, who have barely completed their training. My own dear friend, Henrik, would have signed

up if his father had permitted him to. Using them in an affair of this kind is foolish. Why doesn't the War Minister realize that?"

"New recruits.." Carmen's hands trembled, and she looked at Mrs. Regale with a stony expression. "Oh, my God. Juan...and Ryan..."

"Oh no!" Lavie exclaimed, suddenly understanding Carranya's unease. Heedless of her costume, she sat down heavily on a chair, hiding her face with her hands. "Ryan....no, not Ryan...."

"My goodness!" Emily Regale said. "This is most unfortunate, Your Highness."

"Ryan Eramond?" said Bernadette in a surprised tone, suddenly understanding the meaning of certain hints that Henrik had dropped during their earlier conversations. "Do you – care for him, Lavie?"

"Perhaps more than we could ever know, Miss Aquary," Carranya said, gently, looking at Lavie's disconsolate expression. "Come, perhaps you should leave her alone now. I will stay, since I was the one who brought bad tidings."

"But doesn't Ryan....Oh, I understand," Bernadette said, sadly, shaking her head and sitting down beside Lavie. "Courage, dear Lavie, my sister. If he must go, the Infinity will protect him."

"There is still hope," Princess Carranya said, slowly, "that we may be able to dissuade Sheffield and Bainbridge from the attempt. I have since learned that such an operation may be counterproductive, and fortunately, Agent Striker from Zion has reached similar conclusions. He is leaving for Caledonia today, and will speak to the Emperor and try to convince him to veto such a plan. If he succeeds, and if the Zion mage battalions can still hold the western frontier, then there may be no cause for alarm at all."

"Thank you," Lavie said, dully. "But somehow, I've....just felt in my heart for a long time, that this war would take him far from home, and....I don't know what will happen, then....Carranya, I just don't know what I would do, if anything happened to Ryan..."

"I know what you mean," Carranya began, moving closer to Lavie. "That day in Caledonia...." Her voice faltered.

"Caledonia?" Bernadette asked, confused. Emily, taking her aside, whispered a brief explanation that caused a tear to appear in one of her eyes.

"Hope and pray, my sisters," Bernadette said, rising from her seat and walking towards both of them, then trying – not very successfully, it must be said – to embrace both Lavie and Carranya at the same time. It was the sort of clumsy, ineffectual gesture that is common in times of sorrow, and would hardly be worth mentioning were it not for the fact that the attempt caused her hat to fly off her head, and land at Carmen's feet.

“Bernadette!” Lavie exclaimed, horrified, looking at her friend’s forehead, and shocked out of her gloomy thoughts. “W – What on Terra happened to you?” Dazed, she raised her hand and placed it over the scar. “Princess, look! She – she’s been wounded!”

“Goodness!” Emily Regale exclaimed, wishing she could use a stronger term, and placing a hand on the girl’s shoulder, creating a rather awkward if touching tableau, which was completed by Naomi’s sighs, Charlotte’s open mouth and Carmen’s own cap being perched rather precariously on her own head. “Young lady, who did this to you?”

Bernadette was naturally shy, though not excessively so, and all this attention made her feel embarrassed rather than pleased or distressed. “It’s nothing, Lavie,” she stammered, trying to gather her courage. “There was a fire in our dormitory some time ago, and I was....” But the memory, if not the scar, was still too painful, and now it was Lavie and the Princess who were supporting her, while Carmen – eager to help in some way – helpfully retrieved Bernadette’s hat, and held it in one hand.

Bernadette was about to speak again, but was interrupted by the sudden entry – her third in this short span of time – of Sarah, the maid, who this time appeared very happy indeed.

“Miss Lavie!” she exclaimed, holding the door open. “It’s your grandmother to see you! Now isn’t that nice?”

“Sarah,” Carmen said, haplessly, “*must* you burst in on us in this absurd way every time you enter? Has your mother never explained the concept of knocking on doors to you, at least once?”

“Cor, I’m sorry, Miss Carmen,” Sarah said, irrepressibly. “But they’re about to serve the cake downstairs, and Mrs. Lancaster wanted to come in herself and remind you all!”

“You still ought to have knocked, you absurd girl,” Carmen said, suddenly conscious of the fact that she was holding a stylish black hat, with a pink flower in it, in her hands. “Why, if....”

Fortunately for Sarah, this lecture was interrupted by the subject of her last sentence, who entered carrying a large bouquet of flowers.

“Lavie, my dear!” Anne Lancaster exclaimed, then stopped suddenly as she looked at the sober faces of the three girls in front of her. “Your Highness? Merciful heavens, what *is* going on here? Are you taking someone’s temperature, Lavie?”

“Gran?” Lavie said, surprised once more.

“Yes, of course! Now why are three perfectly charming young ladies looking so glum, I wonder? If you keep this up, I’m afraid you’ll resemble the legendary Sob Sisterhood! You wouldn’t like that, would you?” Anne said, with a laugh, though her expression was gentle.

“The Sob Sisterhood?” Emily said, with a laugh. “Oh, dear, I remember *them*, Mother. Well, I’m afraid a lot of things have been happening here. Let me explain.”

And she did, to the best of her ability, assisted by Bernadette, who was the calmest of the three friends. Anne listened to the story with a deepening frown, then took the hat from Carmen’s hands and replaced it on Bernadette’s head.

“Good heavens, you girls do seem to be having a tough time,” she said, sitting down on a chair opposite Lavie and holding her hand. “Let me see what I can do.”

“Mrs. Lancaster,” the Princess said, regaining her composure, “if I may be curious, who were the ‘Sob Sisterhood’, and how do we resemble them?”

“Oh, dear me, Your Highness, your own mother would probably have heard of them,” Anne said, smiling. “Now, sit down, girls. I can’t tell a story when you’re all standing around me like that, you know.”

The ‘sisterhood’ obediently sat down, while Carmen, eager to continue her task of imparting domestic wisdom, took Sarah outside and gave her a comprehensive lecture on the proper methods of announcing a visitor – which, unfortunately for this chronicler, has been lost to posterity.

“It was about forty years ago, Lavie,” Anne Lancaster began, in a hushed voice. “The battle of Chespa Bay had just been fought, and the Commonwealth had survived by the narrowest of margins, and at a terrible cost. I’m sure you must’ve learned about that in school, though.”

“Yes, Gran,” Lavie said. “Bernadette’s father was a boy at that time, and he remembers it.”

“Does he? I must meet that remarkable man someday, and thank him myself, my child,” Anne replied, helping Bernadette adjust her hat. “Anyway, the general mood in the Zion Empire was quite gloomy. The Emperor there was getting old, and his son – our current Emperor Charlemagne – didn’t get on with him too well. King George of Galvenia was going overboard with punishing the nobles in our country who’d collaborated with the rebels, and the Varald were having a field day mocking us both. In short, Arlia was feeling rather sorry for itself, as you are today.”

“Father often grumbles about that,” Carranya said, surprised to find herself smiling. “He says the main reason he’s always so cautious is that he doesn’t want to repeat his father’s mistakes.”

“Oh, King George wasn’t as bad as that, Princess,” Anne said, kindly. “Anyway, to cut a long story short, people here were unhappy. It was at that time that three sisters began to publish a series of poems and novels which were remarkably sad and serious. They called themselves Elizabeth, Maureen and Alice Castle, but those were quite obviously pseudonyms. They were very reclusive, and gave no interviews – this was before the days of wireless, you know, and we didn’t have that many newspapers at the time, either.”

“Dear me, ma’am,” Bernadette said, with a surprised look, “I think we actually had to read one of Elizabeth Castle’s novels when I was at school in Alton. It was a very melodramatic ghost story, but I didn’t care much for it,” she concluded, politely.

“That would be *The Grange of Tears*, if I’m not mistaken, dear,” Anne replied. “Quite horrid.”

“Indeed, ma’am, though I didn’t dare say so at the time,” Bernadette confessed.

“That was quite a dreadful book, Mother,” Emily added, recalling an incident from her childhood. “I remember you threatening me with it as a punishment once, when I wasn’t doing my piano lessons properly! I thought you were in jest, but when you read out a passage from it, I cringed!”

“Oh, dear,” Lavie said, the smile on her face slowly returning. “Perhaps I should read it one day, just for fun.”

“Anyway, they wrote a good deal in this vein,” Anne went on, “and though they were all tales of woe, they were remarkably popular, and earned their authors a pretty penny. Critics hated them, and dubbed them the Sob Sisterhood. But thousands of people bought them, young men and women would recite their poems to each other when courting...”

“Don’t remind me,” Emily said, chuckling. “I remember Sigmund once sent me a parody of one of their poems, *The God of Great Griefs*, which he wrote when he was at University. It was quite amusing.”

“Daddy did that?” Lavie said, amazed.

“I would very much like to read that,” the Princess said, with a smile.

“At one point, even the Zion Emperor wanted to meet the sisters, but they declined, saying that it would make them too sad to see him.”

“Whatever on earth for?” asked Bernadette. “Were they truly grieving some sort of loss?”

“Wait a little, dear,” Anne said, with a twinkle in her eye. “This went on for almost five years, until the inevitable happened. One of them – Maureen, to be precise – was nominated for a Commonwealth Literary Award, for a quite dreadful book of poems entitled *The Legacy of Loss*.”

“Ugh,” Lavie said. “With that title, I can only imagine what it would’ve been like!”

“Indeed,” the Princess added. “I remember Mother reading that book once, and telling me it was quite silly.”

“Speculation mounted on whether the Castle sisters would actually make a public appearance,” Anne went on, with a grin. “The newspapers printed alleged pictures of them from their childhood, or from their teens, but they proved remarkably hard to trace. Finally, the day of the Commonwealth Literary

Awards arrived. Everyone who'd been invited to Unity Isle was waiting to see if at least one of them would turn up, including Gerald, my husband, who hated their works with a passion."

"And did they finally appear?" Carranya asked.

"They did, Princess, but not quite in the way you'd expect. You see, they never really existed."

"*What?*" Lavie exclaimed. "What do you mean, Gran?"

"On the day of the awards, three young men – who were all members of the Department of Philosophy at King's College – turned up uninvited, to everyone's consternation. They announced that they'd conceived the idea of the Sob Sisterhood themselves, as a parody and a satire on the depressing fiction of their times, and that the Castle sisters were just figments of their imagination. They'd never expected what they called the 'Cult of Chagrin' to prove so popular, and were quite appalled at how the whole thing had taken off. The pictures of the girls were of their own sisters or lovers, who were in on the plot. They were quite apologetic, really, though also proud of having pulled the wool over all our eyes. To this day, though, there are some who insist that the three men were pretending, in order to protect the privacy of the *true* Sob Sisterhood. Miss Aquary's schoolteacher must have been one of them, which is why she was made to study the novel as a child, though it was actually an elaborate joke."

"What a bunch of goofs!" Lavie said, laughing out loud.

"Dear me, this is quite remarkable!" the Princess said, her good cheer quite recovered.

"I think there's a moral somewhere there," Bernadette observed, with a pensive look, "but I shall refrain from drawing it."

"Let me draw it for you, then," Anne Lancaster said, with a determined look on her face. "I think those young men taught us all a lesson – that it is easy, all too easy, to wallow in our own sorrow. People suffer and grieve, all over Terra, for a variety of reasons. And often, those who choose to dwell on their sorrows for too long forget to count their blessings. Self-pity is a luxury that few of us can afford, dear," she concluded, gently, patting the girls on their backs. "I know you've all been through a lot, children, but you were never meant to be a sisterhood of tears, and Infinity willing, you never will be. Each of you has an important part to play, and to begin with" – she laughed – "why don't we all head down and join the celebrations, Lavie, dear? I'm sure all your friends are waiting, you know!"

"Ohmygosh! I – I just forgot about that!" Lavie said, apologetically, rising and giving her grandmother a hug. "Thanks so much, Gran! I wonder what we'd all do without you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lancaster," Carranya said, graciously. "I think we all needed a lesson."

"And a timely one, too, ma'am," Bernadette added, shaking Anne's hand firmly and bowing. "Lavie, my sister, let us proceed."

And proceed they did, to the sound of cheers and applause from their companions, who were awaiting their arrival eagerly. Left behind in the room, Emily looked at her mother appreciatively.

“Good heavens, Mother,” she said, “how *do* you manage those girls so well?”

“I’m afraid I’ve been getting involved in something more serious, Emily dear,” Anne replied, “something which would make those wonderful girls and their troubles seem quite ordinary, in comparison. And I’m afraid you and Sigmund will have to help me with it, too. But enough gloom for today. Let’s head downstairs, shall we? We can talk about it later, when they’ve all gone to bed.”

“Very well, Mother,” Emily said, intrigued, as they descended the stairs to join the youthful crowd below.

“Lucan,” Jedda said, his usually calm face betraying signs of anxiety, as the members of the Commonwealth Executive Council left their chamber and headed for the Members’ Mess, “I would like to have a word with you now.”

Lord Lucan frowned. He and Jedda did not have much more than a working relationship at the best of times, and their opposite positions on the Zion-Varald conflict had strained it to breaking point, especially when Jedda had chosen to sharpen his well-known wit at the expense of the Crown Princess, whom Lucan revered as a matter of loyalty, though he knew little of her. “Good heavens, Jedda, is this really urgent? Surely, if the matter is of importance, we can discuss it when we reconvene, after the luncheon.”

“I am afraid it cannot wait that long,” Jedda said, in a strangely subdued tone.

“Very well, then,” Lucan said, resignedly, with a shrug of his shoulders. The two men sat down side by side, in the corridor that led from the Council Chamber to the dining area and the living quarters. Archbishop Martin Schliemann, walking past them in his usual businesslike manner, glanced at them curiously before moving on. “So what seems to be the matter, Representative?”

“Lucan, I must ask you to get in touch with Sheffield and that new man of yours, Bainbridge. They are attempting something dangerous, and they must be stopped.”

“Minister Sheffield and the Prime Minister?” Lucan said, expansively. “Come now, Jedda, they are even more prudent than Socius was. They are the last two men on Terra who would attempt something dangerous.”

“Sometimes, danger arises when one embarks upon a plan without understanding the realities involved, Lucan. Your Princess should have told you that, after her maritime jaunt,” Jedda said, with a nervous smile.

“Jedda!” Lucan growled. “I am warning you, for the last time. If you continue to indulge in juvenile humour at the expense of the Crown Princess, this conversation is over.”

“My apologies, Lucan,” Jedda said, calmly. “Listen to me, now. It has come to the ears of Josen, our Prime Minister, that there are Galvenian soldiers residing illegally in the Cosmopolitan Republic. What are they doing there?”

“Galvenian soldiers?” Lucan exclaimed, with an expression of shock and disbelief. “Come now, Jedda, such a thing is impossible.”

“Hardly, my good Lucan,” Jedda replied, resting his hand on the arm of his chair to conceal a tremor thereof. “A day after the engagement between your ships and the Varald fleet, some of our men reported that lifeboats with Galvenian markings had been found ashore on the Cosmopolitan coast, not far from the city of Marcopolis. The boats were in good condition, and there is no reason to believe that they floated there on their own. Some of your Marines must have survived the attack, and rowed ashore.”

“What if they did?” Lucan replied. “If any of them still live, I thank the Infinity that they do.”

“Then why, Lucan,” Jedda countered, “did they not try to contact your authorities, or the Commonwealth at the very least? Why does Sheffield insist that all your men were lost, even when our Secret Services informed them of the ships we found? Something is afoot, Lucan, and I do not like the smell of it.”

“You’re being absurd, my good Jedda,” Lucan said, sarcastically. “I have heard nothing of the sort. Besides, the loss of the *Alexandra* is already old history. Do not stake your reputation on a rumour.”

“Very well,” Jedda said, shaking his head. “In that case, what am I to make of *this*?” He took a folded document from his pocket, unfolded it with a haste that was quite unlike his usual deliberate manner, and handed it to Lucan. Lucan went through it quickly, and his eyes widened.

“Good Lord, Jedda, is this true?” he said, slowly.

“You see, Lucan. On a matter like this, your interests and mine happen to coincide. Your soldiers go aground, apparently at Marcopolis. This – facility is also located in Marcopolis. And not far away from the city itself is a place you certainly know well...”

“Do not name it, Jedda,” Lucan said, trembling in turn. “Some things are best dealt with discreetly.”

“But you realize that this puts us both in a bind,” he said. “Oh, I am sure that your King knows little of this, and Bainbridge and Sheffield are just trying to be clever. But if they are planning something in that part of the world, we could both be in serious trouble.”

“Not only us,” Lucan said, with an anxiety that now matched Jedda’s. “There is a third – ahem - stakeholder involved, and we need to obtain his consent before we proceed.”

“He is young, and he is occupied elsewhere, Lucan,” Jedda said, impatiently. “How could he help us?”

“Somehow, my good Jedda,” Lucan said, with an ironic bow, “I have the impression that he may be ahead of us on this matter. I understand your concerns, but let me speak to him first.”

Jedda nodded. “Perhaps that would be prudent,” he replied. “In the meantime, try to dissuade Sheffield from his – er – plan of action. There is too much at stake here.”

It would be almost anti-climactic – after all that has been recorded above – to note that Miss Lavender Regale’s eighteenth birthday party was what is commonly termed “a smashing success”. A pantomime for all the young at heart, organized with the help of the omnipresent Conrad Tremfein, managed to restore good humour even among the older visitors, and even the most jaded palate could not fail to appreciate the wide array of delicacies – especially pastries – that the Regale household, ably headed by Emily and her faithful Carmen, had provided for the occasion. Only a few scenes from the celebration itself can be recorded for want of space and time, and the reason for preserving them here, if not apparent immediately, will become clear quite soon.

“I must say, these pastries are pretty good, Carmen,” Ryan said warmly, as he raised his spoon to his mouth, casting a glance at the trio of Bernadette, Carranya and Lavie out of the corner of his eye. *Miss Regale’s moving in pretty high circles, he thought. As long as they keep her occupied, and she doesn’t start giving me a double dose of what I’ve heard from Marianne, that’s good news!*

“Oh, you must thank Miss Lavie for that, Master Ryan,” Carmen said with a wink. “When she heard you and Juan would be coming, she insisted on helping me ‘give the troops a slap-up tea’, to use her own words!”

Ryan stared at her. “*Lavie* helped you make these?” he said, unbelief writ wide on his face. “Come on, Carmen, today isn’t the first of April.”

If Lavie had heard him, she would have felt obliged to make a sharp remark of her own, and the future course of events might have taken quite a different turn – or perhaps not, it is impossible to tell. However, her attention was entirely engaged at the moment by a small package, which Bernadette was proffering rather shyly.

“*Lavie*,” she said, holding out a simple, small box covered in blue cloth, “I know I’ve already given you a crate of healing potions, that Father and I brewed for our soldiers. But I thought you might like to have this.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have,” Lavie said, beaming, as she opened it. It was a simple silver ring, but bearing a most unusual crystal at its crest. Viewed directly, it was a rather unexciting shade of pink. However, if a beam of light – natural or artificial – happened to strike it at the right angle, as a ray from the main chandelier happened to at that very moment, it burst into a wide array of colours, far more numerous and subtle than those of the rainbow.

Carranya clapped her hands with pleasure. “Very pretty indeed, Bernadette,” she said. “You’re *almost* making me jealous of Lavie here. I suppose this is the shell of a double-shelled turtle. How on earth did you get hold of it?”

“Wow!” Lavie said, holding the ring at different angles and admiring the patterns it cast. “I’m – I don’t quite know what to say, really! Thank you, Bernadette!”

“I’m glad you like it, my sister,” Bernadette said, happily. “Henrik and I came upon a Tortystal when we took a walk to Straukpass last week, and Henrik managed to chip this off its shell as it ambled past. Father knows a good silversmith in Hartridge, and we managed to get it ready just in time for today!”

“It’s awesome,” Lavie said, giving her friend a warm hug, but being cautious about her hat this time around, with the consequence that Anne Lancaster’s story-telling skills were not required. “Between this and my necklace, this could be the best birthday of my life, at least as far as *presents* are concerned!”

“Your necklace?” Carranya looked at it curiously, then brought hers out, struck by the resemblance – or rather, the identity – between them. “Why, Lavie, it’s just like mine! How very curious.”

“Really?” Lavie said, comparing them and coming to the same conclusion. “That’s....cool! Where did you get yours from, Princess?”

“It was a birthday present, from the Director Kievan of the Varald of all people,” Carranya said. “I wonder if he regrets it now.”

“Oh, dear,” Lavie said, with a nervous giggle. “What a difference a few months make, I guess. It sounds like a good question for a history essay, though. ‘Explore the relationship between jewellery and Galvenian politics, in no more than five hundred words, with specific reference to the Varald-Zion conflict.’ Mr. Anderson used to love topics like that, unfortunately!”

“That sounds rather interesting,” Bernadette said, absently, thinking of her entrance test and feeling slightly guilty about the good time she was having. “Is your necklace also from the Varald Directorate, Lavie?”

“Hmm, it’s a gift from Daddy, actually,” she explained. “Sort of a family heirloom. He said it belonged to his mom, and she wanted him to give it to his daughter if he had one!”

“That’s strange,” Bernadette said, admiring the pendant, with its sun-and-moon *motif*. “Mother once told me a similar story, about a girl who’d inherited a pendant from her mother, and which also depicted

the heavenly bodies. Perhaps there's some historical significance to it. I ought to ask Father Marlborough, when I see him next."

"Professor Marlborough?" Carranya asked, with a slight gasp. "Oh – oh, yes, I remember, he's teaching history at King's College now. I met him at Caledonia, during – Prince Wilhelm's funeral. He gave a most moving eulogy." She sighed.

"Courage, Princess," Bernadette said, kindly. "I am certain that you will – find happiness some day, even if your hopes have been dashed. Though I must express my condolences again. We always think our own troubles are the most serious in the world, until we hear those of our friends."

"Thank you," the Princess said, as a look of understanding passed between the two of them.

"Hi, Lavie," Ryan said, interrupting a little awkwardly. "Is now a good time to give you a present, or should I let you girls chatter away a little more?"

"A present? How sweet," Bernadette said, giving him a look that would have seemed innocent, were it not for the obvious twinkle in her eyes.

"Why, Lord Ryan," Princess Carranya said, teasingly, "you seem to be in a tearing hurry to hand over your gift. I wonder why that is."

"Hmph!" was Ryan's only retort. "Anyway, I've already put my two cents into the collection box, and I'm heading to Lorean tomorrow to be fitted for my goofy orange uniform..."

Lavie laughed. "Do they still make recruits wear those, Ryan?" she asked. "I thought you were going to petition Colonel Whitworth to change them, weren't you?"

"Hmm, I never got around to doing that," Ryan said, apologetically. "Maybe I should ask Sir Cornelius Fairfax when I meet him tomorrow. He's going to address all us rookies, or so it says on my letter."

"Sir Cornelius is a good man," Princess Carranya said, with a nod. "In fact, he's a cousin of my mother's; the Traznovs and the Fairfaxes are both old Ghetz families who migrated to Galvenia."

"Anyway, Lavie, here's something I picked up in the Army shop when I put in my papers," he said, handing over a small package, which was surprisingly well-wrapped in shiny paper, rather awkwardly. "Happy birthday, and all that."

I wonder what it is, Lavie thought, with a smile, as she unwrapped it carefully. *His mother must have packed it for him, I'm sure he wouldn't have the patience to do it himself!* As the last of the paper yielded to her fingers, she found that it was a small, silver-plated statue, depicting one of the Twin Huntresses of Malava, aiming her bow at some unknown target, and looking into the distance with a determined expression.

“The guy at the Academy said this was Iyana, because she was right-handed; legend has it that her twin, Eian, was left-handed. I thought you’d, um, like it, since you’re on the archery kick right now.”

“Ryan!” Lavie exclaimed, preventing herself with difficulty from flying at him, as she had at her father earlier in the day. “This – this is just great! Hey, did you know, Lina was telling me all about the Twin Huntresses at Mann Island some time ago! Thanks, Ryan!” She held out her hand, and they shook hands rather awkwardly, though he was obviously pleased at her reaction. “Now I’ll have something to remember you by, even when you head to boot camp!”

“Boot camp?” Ryan chuckled. “I guess you could call it that, though the Academy’s pretty low-key compared to the Varald Divisions. Glad you liked it.”

“Of course I do!” Lavie went on, enthusiastically. “Thank you so much, Ryan.”

“Aw, it’s nothing,” Ryan said, looking down and examining his boot rather carefully.

“Ryan, let me thank you too,” Bernadette said, holding out her hand in turn. “It’s an honour to meet someone who’s willing to serve his country, and I’m sure Henrik would have joined you too, if his father had consented.”

Ryan was now turning a deep red. “Thanks, Bernadette,” he said, and shook hands with her firmly. Or rather, he began to do so – but as their hands met, she suddenly started, then swayed to one side as if she was about to faint. Lavie, whose reflexes had been honed by weeks of archery, caught her.

“Wh – Hey, did I do something wrong?” Ryan asked, concerned. “Are you all right?”

“It’s nothing,” Bernadette replied, lowering her head a little. “I guess I must just be tired, and worried about that entrance test of mine. Thanks again, Ryan.”

“Take care, then,” Ryan said, not a little glad at having been given an opportunity to exit. “I’ve got to have a word with Henrik, Lavie. See you around, and have a nice day, all right?”

“I sure will!” Lavie said, waving as he disappeared among the crowd. *Bad timing*, she thought, as she turned her attention to her friend, who still looked pale and uneasy. *I wonder what happened to Bernadette, though?*

“What happened?” the Princess said, leading her to a chair. “Are you in pain?”

“No,” she said, resting her head in her hands, and looking anxious. “It’s – it’s nothing. I’ve probably been staying up too late studying, that’s all. A good night’s sleep is all I need, Your Highness.”

“If you say so,” Carranya said kindly. “Just sit here for a while, and rest. If you want, I’ll ask Mr. Spenson to come over.” And with these words, she headed to one corner of the hall, where Henrik was just being greeted by Ryan.

“Oh, that’s too kind,” Bernadette said, with a smile that seemed somewhat forced. “Just give me a minute or two, Lavie. I’ll be all right.”

“Miss Lavie!” Carmen called out. “Your aunt and uncle have just come down from Trinden!”

“Ohmygosh, Uncle Vincent and Aunt Agatha are here at last!” Lavie exclaimed, as she disappeared towards the entrance. Bernadette, left alone in her chair, looked around the room, confused, and her thoughts were far from pleasant.

Ryan? It can’t be. I must be mistaken. It must have come from someone or something else. Otherwise, it doesn’t make sense. It’s impossible...

Sitting alone in her small room, just as Lavie’s party was breaking up and the guests were all bidding her adieu, Julianne Tumor’s thoughts were fixed on far less exciting matters.

“We’ll just be gone for a while,” Sister Rosemary had said, as she and Sister Augusta had left the convent several hours ago. “If you need anything, just ask one of the novices; both Ellen and Jane are very obliging, and they’ll help you with anything you need.”

“I’m quite all right, Sister,” Julianne had replied. “I would like something to read, though. I haven’t seen a book in weeks, except for Mr. Vryce’s books on minerals.”

“A book?” Sister Augusta had smiled and pulled a thick book from her pocket. “Here’s something you might like, my dear. It’s a collection of essays from students all over Terra, who have contended for scholarships at King’s College. Our chaplain gave it to me. Most of the writers would be as old as your daughter. You might find it amusing, from a purely literary point of view, even if theology isn’t your field of interest.”

“Essays? That sounds quite interesting,” Julianne had said, politely; but in fact, as soon as the Sisters had left for their afternoon out, she had fallen asleep, exhausted by weeks of nightmares, mostly involving pursuit and capture. It was well into the evening before she awoke with a start, said her prayers, and began reading the book. The first few essays failed to capture her interest, but she came upon one that reminded her of her lessons as a child, and began to read it carefully.

“...Besides, traditional sources have generally described the three ordeals faced by the ‘man of regret’ – the legendary ancestor of mankind – as three demons whom he had to fight; a shadowy male, a female with a ghostly appearance, and a fierce beast. From here comes the concept – not clearly defined in the Holy Book, but elaborated upon in tradition – of both Janwen and Estrana being destroyed for the crime of worshipping these three demons. This idea recurs in the primitive religions of the continent of Zion, where this triad of creatures – man, woman and beast – were worshipped as deities, often assimilated with local cults. For example, the ghostly woman was sometimes identified with the Dragon Woman of the kingdom of Meldia, and revered as superior to the other two.

While history can only take us so far, it is almost certain that there is a historical core to the stories of Janwen and Estrana. This has been confirmed by archaeological findings, including the discovery of 'summoning pits', similar to those described in the Evangelium, found in the oldest strata at various places in Arlia. However, in this paper, I have chosen to explore the symbolic, rather than the literal significance of these three creatures, in the light of later tradition.

To begin with, I shall examine the concept of the Three Ways, which is frequently found in the classic literature of the Zion Empire. Broadly speaking..."

Suddenly, Julianne heard the sound of screams behind her, then a thud, as if someone was being roughly pushed aside and had fallen to the ground. Trembling, she walked towards the door of her room, and listened – then was flung to the floor herself, as the door was broken open violently.

"Well, what do we have here," a man's voice said, and she looked up into the eyes of a man in a long cloak, who was leaning down to examine her more closely. "You may have given us the slip in Trinden and on Mann Island, my fine lady, but you can't escape us now."

"Leave me alone," Julianne said, summoning all her courage. "What – what have I to do with you? Where I choose to find refuge is none of your concern. This is a sacred place, and I claim sanctuary. May Saint Pauline confound you."

The man laughed harshly. "Sanctuary?" he hissed, and Julianne noted with alarm that, unlike her previous assailants, the man's accent was surprisingly refined. "If this is a sanctuary, call upon your god. Call upon that Infinity whom weaklings and cowards all revere. Call upon him as I snuff out your life. Perhaps he will hear you and shed a tear, as he did at Lake Derren. But that is all he can do, for he is a false god, and has no power to protect you." The man drew a pistol, and aimed it at her forehead.

"P – Please..." she stammered, crawling towards a corner of the room, and trying to raise herself up. "Why must you do this?"

Before the man could answer, the entire room was awash in blue light. A beam of orange, arising from she knew not where, literally passed through the man's body, and struck the wall opposite her. The man let out a low moan, then collapsed, his pistol falling harmlessly to the ground.

"Fool," Juno said, as he replaced his sword in its sheath calmly. "Lugner and Robert were fools, but you outdo them all. Go and rejoin *your* god, now."

He knelt over the man's body, searching his possessions carefully, but finding nothing of interest except a compass, which he pocketed. It was only then that he looked at Julianne, who was crouching in a corner of the room.

"You?" he said, calmly. "I think I see how the cards fall. I take it you are fleeing him, madam."

"Him?" Julianne said, too low for anyone else to hear.

“Let us not play games, madam,” Juno said, coldly. “I refer to the man known as Robert. What can you tell me about him?”

Juno, be gentle, his companion said. *She has suffered much.*

“Who are you?” Julianne whispered. “I wanted to – to thank you the first time, but you were gone before I could say anything.”

“My name is Juno, and I was merely discharging my duties,” Juno said, with an indifferent expression. “I assume you are, as I suspect, Mrs. –”

“Do not use that name,” Julianne interrupted, in obvious distress. “It has brought me enough misery. If you must address me, I am Julianne Tolor now. Who – was that man?”

“A petty thug with delusions of grandeur,” Juno said, poking at the man’s prone form with his boot. “It is truly regrettable that my code forbids me from taking his life, but he will have something to think about for at least a day, by which time I will inform the Lorean police.”

“Thank the Infinity,” she replied. “Are...are the others in the convent safe?”

“There was a woman at the gate; she was shaken, but not injured. I have asked her to send for the police, and she ran as fast as I think she could,” Juno replied. “But let us not remain here. I must take you to a place of safety, if we are to get to the bottom of this sad affair.”

“A place of safety?” Julianne said, rising to her feet. Juno made no effort to help her, but looked at her with approval.

“It is perhaps not the most comfortable of places,” Juno said, “but it will serve its purpose. It is my master’s home, a small cottage in the mountains.”

Still feeling as if she was a character in a play, or in a dream, that might end at any moment, Julianne followed her mysterious companion out of the convent, and through the lanes that led to the entrance to King’s College. “It is safer this way,” he explained, tersely, as he drew his sword. “The kind of men that Lugner and Robert deal with are found on the eastern side of the city, in the Explorers’ Guild.”

“What do you know of – Lugner?” Julianne asked, hesitantly.

“Only that he is a traitor to Galvenia, and that once I find his masters, I will follow them to their nest, and make this country safe once more,” Juno said, harshly. “And you, madam, may be an important witness when the time comes.”

Julianne shuddered. “Will that truly be necessary?” she asked.

“Pray that it does not, madam,” Juno said.

It seemed to Julianne – who, fortunately, was fortified by her afternoon rest, as well as several days' care by the good Sisters – that they had been walking for hundreds of miles. Neither the setting sun nor the sounds of forest animals seemed to deter her companion, who urged her on more by his own example than by any actual instructions.

As they reached Straukpass, and the night wind began to make its way through her thin gown, Julianne paused. "Sir," she said, slowly, "we have travelled long, and the night grows cold. Could we – possibly stop for some warmth and refreshment?"

"It is only a little further, madam," Juno said, looking straight ahead at the well-worn path. "To stop now would involve an unnecessary delay."

"I once knew someone who lived here," Julianne said, more to herself than to Juno, "someone who was dear to me. But she is not here any longer."

Juno merely grunted at this, and pointed to a path leading east. "It is this way, madam. A few minutes more, and we will be secure."

She took a few steps forward, then stopped as if moved by a strong emotion, looking at a large tree trunk that lay nearby. "Where are you taking me?" she asked, trying to sound calm.

"I have already answered that question," Juno said, briefly.

Merciful Infinity, Julianne thought. *This is a cruel twist of fate, indeed. If we are headed where I think we are, I doubt very much this young man's master will be pleased to see him – or me, for that matter.*

Every step, bringing back old memories that she had allowed to gather dust for too long, confirmed her suspicion, and when she was before the door of Fossen's cottage, it turned to certainty.

This is the place, she thought, an uneasy feeling arising in her stomach that had less to do with hunger than with fear. *Heaven help me.*

"Old man," Juno was calling out, loudly, knocking on the door. "I have brought someone in need of refuge. She is being pursued by bandits. Now is the time to extend that famous hospitality of yours to someone other than myself."

Fossen opened the door, and looked at Juno with his habitual mild expression. "Goodness, boy, you're back late. More bandit-hunting, I presume?"

"Hunting for information, rather," Juno said, briefly. "Madam, please enter. Mr. Fossen does not like me to leave the door open too long."

"Don't mind him," Fossen said, turning to the woman, and then looking at her carefully. "By the Purpose! My eyes are not what they used to be, but – sweet lands, Julianne, is that you?"

“Indeed it is, Mr. Fowler,” Julianne said, sadly. “I did not know your friend was bringing me here, until it is too late. If you wish me to leave, I shall.”

“What is this foolery?” Juno said, impatiently.

“Leave? My dear girl, why should I do a thing like that?” Fossen said, taking her by the hand and leading her to one of the stools. “I quite understood that you had your own reasons for not coming when I called. Or perhaps you were prevented. Am I right?”

“I was,” she said, gratefully. “If I had been free...”

“Oh, think nothing of that, dear. We lead a lonely life here, Juno and I, and are always glad of company, particularly that of a woman of breeding. What do you say, Juno?”

Juno scowled and sliced at the air with his sword. “Kindly explain what is going on, Fossen,” he said. “Is this your long-lost daughter, that you should greet her thus?”

“Oh, it’s a long story, Juno,” Fossen said, looking at Julianne warmly. “Gather around the fire, and I’ll tell you all about it. But by the way, Julianne, I now go by Fossen, not Fowler. You look famished, child. Have a bowl of my famous soup, while we exchange stories, and welcome home.”

Home. Sitting in the small cottage, under the old man’s benevolent gaze, the Honourable Julianne felt safer than she had in months.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: UNEASY DISTANCES

*“Were it an enemy who insulted me,
that I could bear;
if an opponent pitted himself against me,
I could turn away from him.
But you, a person of my own rank,
a comrade and dear friend...”*
(Psalm 54, v. 12-13)

Perfect silence reigned in the Director’s own private chamber, which he used only to transact business of the most personal nature. The three men facing him were among the most powerful in the Varald Directorate – General Basil Lyzhnov, Commander of the Varald Divisions; Officer Leonid Bromfeld, head of the Gehemipol; and Chief Admiral Valentin Kholmov, Commander of the Varald Vanguard Fleet. However, none of them seemed particularly at ease. Being summoned for an audience with the Director is never cause for cheer, even at the best of times – but being summoned for a private audience with him, when one’s country is entangled in a messy and inconclusive conflict, surely bodes ill.

The silence lasted for a full fifteen minutes, before Director Kievan raised his hand and spoke.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I have called you here, not to express displeasure – as you may suspect – but to obtain answers to certain simple questions, which have been bothering me for a little while. You are well aware of our conflict with the Zion, and of the fact that so far, neither of us has been able to prevail for more than a few days or weeks on end; in fact, any step forwards is followed by a step backwards. I do not ask you why, because I have never made the error of underestimating the Zion. However, some of your decisions have left me puzzled” – he smiled at them with an expression that was almost benevolent – “and I must ask you to explain yourselves. I hope that you will do so truthfully, and to my satisfaction. Is this clear?”

The three men nodded and saluted, still hesitating to speak a word.

“Let us begin with you, Admiral Kholmov,” he said, calmly, moving a white knight on the large marble chessboard before him. “It was clever of you to intercept the Galvenian ships before they could secure our routes with the Fulton Republic. However, it was wasteful of you to engage them in full combat, when a lesser passage of arms would have served the purpose just as well. While our fleets are vast, we cannot afford to waste seven ships simply to prove a point. Moreover, I have been hearing stories – only rumours, you understand – about a flame-based weapon that some of your ships used, and that some of the ships were camouflaged as Itarian vessels. Pray tell me, Admiral, what is going on?”

The Admiral rose to attention, but Kievan raised his hand again, indicating that he wished to finish speaking first. *Mikhail help him, he doesn’t know what he’s put his hand into*, he thought.

“Next, you, Bromfeld. I charged you with handling the passage of arms and intelligence from the Republic to our country, as discreetly as possible. Instead, you have conducted this affair as publicly as it could have been done, and even the Galvenians have learned of it. Now, I understand that discretion in times of war is difficult, and that the Republic would sell a thousand official secrets if they thought there was a dollar in it for them. But, as the head of our Secret Service, why did you not try harder?”

Bromfeld swallowed nervously. *He'll have to be told*, he thought, *but I wish it wasn't this soon. I wish the fronts had been more secure before this had broken. But it can't be helped.*

“Finally, we come to you, Lyzhnov,” Kievan said, moving a black bishop on the board, in a position where the white knight could capture it. “You have commanded your troops bravely, and I commend you for that. But you have also been foolhardy. When you know that the Zion are still employing those absurd mage battalions, why did you not bring in the snipers on vehicles sooner? Or wait for reinforcements before attacking the path to Kannschloss? One need not be a strategist to realize that your attempt to capture it with your meager forces was stupid. Your failure to do so has meant a resounding victory for the Zion on the western front, shame for the Directorate, and the loss of hundreds of lives. It is because of you that I now have to ask Kholmov to mount an offensive by sea, striking at Zion and even Galvenia if necessary. Explain yourself, and do not lie to me.”

He is playing with fire, General Lyzhnov thought.

“Well, I have asked my questions,” Kievan said, capturing the bishop with the knight, and placing it neatly in a glass case that held several other pieces. “I await your answers. You have served the Directorate well, and you may serve it still, if you are forthright.”

“Director,” Admiral Kholmov said, “the questions you ask are difficult to answer. But we have all had good reasons for our actions, and we must ask you to trust us.”

“Kholmov, one does not ‘ask’ the Director for anything,” Kievan said, moving a black pawn forward. “One obeys him. Obey me, and oblige me with an answer.”

Lyzhnov reached inside the pocket of his Army coat. “Director,” he said, softly, “if you want an explanation, I am ready to provide one.”

Kievan turned away to look out of the window. “If it is my face which scares you, Lyzhnov, I have removed that impediment. Speak, and be brief.”

“I would prefer to tell you about it face to face,” Lyzhnov said. “As a soldier, I cannot shoot a man in the back, though he is my adversary and the enemy of the people.”

Kievan turned around abruptly, and found himself looking at the muzzle of a large revolver.

“What – what insanity is this, Lyzhnov?” Kievan said, his hands grasping the desk angrily. “Put that toy away.”

"I'm afraid you will have to obey us this time, Director," Bromfeld said, drawing a pistol of his own and aiming it at Kievan's head. "You have been misruling this country enough, and the time has come for a change."

Kievan swore under his breath. "Guards!" he shouted. "Rid me of these absurd men!"

Three armed guards, bearing rifles, entered promptly, and aimed their weapons at the Director as well.

"The Varaldian Armed Forces and the Geheimpol have conferred yesterday, Kievan," Bromfeld said, coldly, "and have pronounced sentence on you. The Varald Directorate will soon be free, and rid of a pest and a scourge who has made us a laughing-stock all over Terra."

"You dare to address me in this manner?" Kievan screamed. He reached for his own weapon, but a shot rang out, and he collapsed into a chair, looking incredulously at the bullet wound in his own hand.

Kholmov, with a satisfied smile, tipped over the black king on the board.

"Checkmate, my dear Director. Now," Lyzhnov said, as the three guards disarmed the hapless Director, "we leave you with two options. We have kindly arranged for a broadcast on the Voice of Varald, today at noon. If you cooperate with us, and read out the statement we have generously written for you, you will be allowed to live under house arrest, with your charming daughter for company. If you do not..."

"I refuse," Kievan said, sullenly.

"Then we will execute you right now, and the entire Directorate will know nothing except that you have been found guilty of treachery and dealing with the Zion and the Galvenians. You see, my man, the options are simple. Live humbly, or die in disgrace."

"You would not dare..." Kievan said, desperately. "The people..."

"The people have groaned under your yoke for too long, Kievan," Bromfeld replied. "The Varald must live free, and they have turned to us since you have failed them. Choose quickly, for Lyzhnov's guards have itching fingers. Resign quietly, and hand power over to us. Or enter the history books as a villain. Choose." He stared at the Director, holding the barrel of his gun just inches away from his face.

Kievan sighed, and his head sunk against his chest. "I accept," he said. "You miserable traitors..."

"Hush now, Kievan," Kholmov said. "You wouldn't want us to get angry, would you? Now come along, and be a good sport, as our Galvenian comrades would say. We have a car waiting to take you to Radio Varald."

"Henrik, may I speak to you for a moment, please?"

Henrik, looking up with relief from his copy of *Arithmetic, Algebra and Number Theory: Essentials for the Galvenia Aptitude Tests, Volume 1*, was nevertheless a little surprised; the serious tone in which the question had been asked was quite unlike Bernadette's usual cheerful manner. *In fact*, he thought, *she's been worried ever since we came back from Lavie's party. I wonder why.*

"Of course you may," he said, with a smile, pointing to an empty chair in the common room opposite his. They were the only two occupants of what was officially a space for study and serious work, for most of the other competitors for the entrance test had decided to retire to the quiet of the rooms. "What's the matter, Bernadette?"

"I'm asking you this because you and Ryan have been friends for a long time," she went on, earnestly. "First of all, if you don't mind my asking, what are his religious beliefs?"

"I don't think he has any, really," Henrik said, chuckling. "He's middle-of-the-road when it comes to most things: politics, the economy, and even faith. He usually describes himself as an agnostic when we discuss such things, which isn't too often."

"I see," Bernadette replied, a little relieved. "Does he carry a weapon, such as a sword or a dagger, which has a long history? An heirloom of some sort?"

"Well, there's that goofy gun of his which he bought when he turned seventeen, but that's a standard-issue revolver, that you can buy anywhere in Galvenia. Wait a minute – yes, there's his sword. It belonged to his grandfather, who was a war veteran. His father gave it to him as a sort of coming-of-age gift, soon after we finished school. He calls it Eramond's Legacy. Quite a nice sword, but a little light for the likes of me."

"Ah, you've got broad shoulders, Henrik," Bernadette said, appreciatively. "Finally, does he have any other sort of heirloom, such as a ring or a bracelet, which he wears all the time?"

"Very funny," Henrik replied. "Right now these broad shoulders are busy lifting mathematics books. But I don't think he has anything of that sort. He wears a pendant that his girlfriend gave him, but that's a very recent acquisition. The Eramonds aren't nobility, even if they're bigger fish than the Spensons."

"Then I must have been mistaken," Bernadette said, with a sigh of relief. "Perhaps I should tell you all about it, before you start wondering why I'm asking such weird questions."

Henrik looked at her with concern, and took her hand. "Is something the matter with Ryan? Has he said something that upset you, or something? I know he can sometimes make anti-Church jokes, like all teenage boys do, but he doesn't mean it seriously. Or has he been making comments about your hat?"

"No, it's not that," Bernadette said. "You see, when I met him at Lavie's birthday, I just wanted to shake hands with him, to thank him for signing up, and to explain why you couldn't join him."

“That’s sweet of you,” Henrik said, squeezing her hand. “But why should that bother you? Was he embarrassed by it? He’s not really the type to wear his heart on his sleeve, but surely you weren’t flying at him and hugging him, or something!”

“Henrik! The very idea!” Bernadette said, with something of her old laugh returning. “No, when I tried to take his hand, I felt light-headed, as if I was about to faint. That’s what disturbed me.”

“You’ve been burning the midnight oil for a week now,” Henrik said sympathetically. “Of course you’d feel tired at the end of a day.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” she explained. “You see, I’m not really the kind who swoons at the drop of a hat, even when I’m tired! This has only happened to me twice before, and Father explained that it would only happen to me under certain circumstances. The first was when I was seven, and Mother had taken me to a jeweller’s, to look at bracelets for Father’s birthday. The second was when Father took me to the library at Lorean, and we bumped into a mage who knew Father slightly.”

“But what does it mean?” Henrik asked, puzzled.

“Father explained that it would only happen if I came into contact with an object that was – cursed,” she said, rather embarrassed. “He said it was a common reaction among Healers, and that Mother also reacted the same way when she was a young girl.”

“Cursed?” Henrik’s eyes widened. “You mean, as in a magical curse?”

“Magical, perhaps, but certainly demonic,” Bernadette said, lowering her voice. “That’s why I asked about his sword. Such conjurations aren’t common these days; in fact, Father said that no man alive still knew how to carry them out. Only a very old object, one that had seen use hundreds of years ago, could have had that effect on me. In the first case, it was a silver bracelet that the jeweler had been wearing for years, which he had been given by a guild master from Zion. In the second, the mage was carrying a staff of doubtful provenance to the Museum of Science and Lore, to have it tested.”

“It still sounds a bit dodgy to me,” Henrik said, slowly. “Ryan’s sword is certainly old, but the Eramonds have always been a heroic family; his grandpa was a decorated veteran, as you know. Perhaps you were just ill.” He looked at her with a gentle expression. “Come, I’ll take you back to your room, and you can rest a little.”

“I – I suppose you’re right, Henrik,” Bernadette said, with a smile. “After all, Ryan is pretty heroic too! It was foolish of me to think he was dealing with any sort of cursed object. Maybe this ‘sense’ of mine stops working properly as I get older; I think that happened to Mother, eventually. Thank you for listening.”

“Oh, that’s the least I could do,” Henrik said, with a grin, gathering his book under his arm and leading her out of the room. “Come along, and let’s see if we can still get some coffee out of that old machine in the cafeteria.”

“That would be quite delightful,” she replied, leaning on his arm.

“And hey, if you’re still worried, I can talk to Ryan about it some time,” he went on. “He’s at the Military Academy now, so I can visit him during a break.”

“Could you?” she said, smiling. “Only if he doesn’t mind, Henrik. Don’t bother him if you think it would offend him, or anything.”

“Oh, Ryan’s life is an open book – *too* open, if you ask me,” Henrik said. “If he’s hiding a demonic secret, then I’m the King of Galvenia.”

“I wouldn’t mind being Queen if that was the case,” Bernadette said with a laugh, and they began to speak of more pleasant things.

Entire novels – and works of non-fiction as well – have been written about the rigours, joys and pains of military training, but this is not one of them. In the month that followed the overthrow of Russel Kievan as Director of the Varald, Ryan’s training – thanks to his prior experience with Colonel Whitworth – proceeded quite uneventfully, and he was beginning to feel that the Army might make a quite agreeable career once the Zion-Varald conflict had been brought to its natural conclusion.

And it’s not going well for them, he thought, as he stretched himself out on his bunk after a long march. The Varald army’s coup was quite unexpected, but considering the way the war was unfolding, they needed a scapegoat, and Kievan was never the sort of guy who was going to win a popularity contest. They’ve officially accused him of “dealing with the Zion”, but Charlemagne was quick to deny it. Not that it mattered; the military were just mad that they lost the battle for Kannschloss, and someone’s head had to roll. Not that General Lyzhnov will be any nicer than Kievan, I’m sure. They’ve been more aggressive ever since then, trying to recover lost ground by sending more troops on both fronts, and there have been rumours of a sea offensive as well. But the Zion continue to hold the line, and the Rough Riders are doing us all proud. Rule Galvenia!

He yawned. *All the same, I’m disappointed in the Commonwealth. None of them, not even Lucan, who was always a ‘dove’, are interested in a peaceful settlement any longer. Even after General Finkel, the Commander of the Commonwealth Special Forces, personally appealed to Terrin to let the CSF patrol the entire border and stop the bleeding, he demurred and asked the Council to vote. Of course, the proposal was voted down three to two: only the Itarians and the Varald voted in favour. That’s the first time they’ll ever vote the same way, I guess!* A small smile came to his lips. *Not that the Itarians are particularly peace-loving these days; that civil war between their ‘traditionals’ and the Pontificate is dragging on. I wouldn’t like to be an Itarian Guard right now, that’s certain!*

“Private Eramond,” a voice called out, and Ryan sprang up from his bunk to look at the pleasantly ugly face of Corporal Hubert Mills, his immediate superior. “I know that you’re technically off-duty, but could you follow me for a moment?”

“Yes, sir,” Ryan said, pulling on his boots and reaching for his sword-belt and helmet. “Full uniform, I presume?”

“That won’t be necessary, Private,” Corporal Mills said, with a wink. “Follow me, please. Sir Cornelius will be able to answer your questions better than I can. I’m just the messenger here.”

“Indeed, sir,” Ryan said, as he followed the Corporal through the training grounds, into the Military Academy itself, and finally to the chambers of the Minister of the Interior, Cornelius Fairfax. *I wonder what this is all about? Perhaps they want to ‘stream’ me into the Royal Marines, but surely the Minister doesn’t need to ask me about that!*

“Please step this way, Private,” Mills said, and Ryan held the door open as they both strode in. To his surprise, the room was already occupied by several other people who seemed to be awaiting his arrival, some of whom he already knew – Lieutenant John Reckland of the Royal Marines, Officer Trask from the Palace, and his own platoon-mate, Private Juan Casales, who grinned on seeing him. The other two were in the uniform of the Special Services, and looked at Ryan as if appraising his capacities.

“Ah, Mr. Eramond,” Cornelius Fairfax said, with a pleased expression. “Please have a seat. Corporal Mills, you may return to your duties.”

“Yes, sir,” the Corporal said, saluting. “Now behave yourself, Private. You’re in exalted company.” He laughed.

“I will, sir,” Ryan said, sitting on the nearest chair, as the Corporal left quickly and quietly.

“Mr. Eramond, your superiors inform me that your performance so far has been quite satisfactory,” Fairfax said, resting his hands on his desk. “And I may say the same about you, Mr. Casales.”

“Thank you, *senor*,” Juan said, politely.

“Now, I understand that the matter we are about to discuss is not quite run-of-the-mill,” he said, rubbing his hands together, “and therefore, I must ask you to maintain the utmost secrecy here. Do not discuss this with anyone – not an Army buddy, not a family member, not a loved one. Is that clear, gentlemen?”

“Yes, sir,” Ryan and Juan answered in chorus.

“Very well, then,” Fairfax went on. “Allow me to introduce the men you’ll be working with, first, and then I shall describe the task you shall be working on. If you have any queries, please keep them for the end, as I think you should hear me out first. Gentlemen, with me are Randall Trask, Deputy Chief of Palace Security; John Reckland, Lieutenant in His Majesty’s Marines, and Agents Devon Gerius and Guy Browning of the Galvenia Special Services.”

"I'm already acquainted with Private Eramond, Sir Cornelius," Lieutenant Reckland said, with a nod. "He wasn't in uniform when we met, but he's your man if I'm any judge."

"Thank you, Reckland," Fairfax said, rising from his chair suddenly, and pulling down a large map that hung above the wall behind him. He pointed to it with a casual gesture. "Gentlemen – I refer to you, Privates Eramond and Casales – I trust you recognize the country that is portrayed here."

"*Si, Senor,*" Juan said, with a grin. "I know it well, for it is my father's country, the Fulton Republic."

"Excellent, Private," Fairfax said. "Now, Mr. Eramond, since you're the one among us who's finished high school most recently" – the agent known as Browning giggled on hearing this – "could you identify the three areas here, that are marked in different colours?"

Darn, geography never was my strong point, Ryan thought, as he stood up and walked to the map. *But I must play the game.* "The large area to the south is Ghetz, the continent shared by the Varald and the Fulton Republic," he said, slowly, not wanting to give an impression of overconfidence. "Above that, separated by the Sea of Tranquility.."

"Serenity, son," Agent Gerius said. "The Sea of Tranquility is actually a lake in Itaria."

"I stand corrected, Sir," Ryan said, with a nervous smile. "North of the Sea of Serenity is the rest of the Republic – the continent of Fulton proper, which is further divided into the Southern or Cosmopolitan area, and the Northern area, which is often called San Delas."

Browning applauded, but was quickly silenced by a glare from Gerius. "Very good, Mr. Eramond," Fairfax said. "You may be seated. The reason I show you this map is that this is where you – and a few more of our men – will soon be deployed, on a mission that I will now explain."

"Let me take over here, Minister," Devon Gerius said, calmly. He was a man built much along the same lines as Agent Striker, except that his hair was brown instead of yellow, something that Ryan noted with some amusement. *Do they recruit these secret services guys for their looks, or what?* he wondered.

"Gentlemen, you are aware that the war between the Zion and the Varald is starting to turn in our favour, but it is far from over. Our strategists tell us that if we continue to fight a conventional war, on land and by sea, it could last for years, especially now that the military have seized power in Varald. As I speak, they are mobilizing the Varald Vanguard Fleet, and plan to sail down the Zion coast as far as Checkpoint Bravo, seizing control of it if necessary. *How* we have learned this is a question that you need not ask, and that we need not answer. It is enough for you, as Galvenian soldiers, to understand that a full war between us and them could cost thousands of lives, and even change the face of Terra. If the Varald, Infinity forbid, should be victorious..."

He paused, allowing his audience to complete the sentence using their own imaginations.

“For this reason, His Majesty and the Galvenian Government are keen that this war should end soon. We see but one way of doing this, and this is by removing the one advantage that the Varald land troops have: their superior firepower. Gentlemen, it is no secret that the only reason the Varald still hold the fronts on both wings, at Acemel on the west and at Sayaki on the east, is that they have enough ordnance to keep the Zion infantry and mages at bay. It is also increasingly obvious that the Varald are obtaining this ammunition from here.” His finger stabbed at the map, at a point where Fulton and Ghetz were joined by a thin isthmus, at the eastern corner of the Cosmopolitan Republic. “Here, in an illegal factory run by the Republic, which is supplying weapons and ammunition to them using motor vehicles. But of course, you must have heard of some of these things already.”

“*Si, senor,*” Juan said, nodding in agreement. “I still have family in the Republic, and they have told me rumours of such a thing.”

“It’s been mentioned in the papers, Sir,” Ryan added, “but never confirmed.”

“Well, we are confirming it now,” Browning said, with a laugh. “Unless you choose to doubt us, Private Eramond.”

“Browning, will you be serious?” Gerius said, though he was far from annoyed; he was used to such antics from Browning, who was the son of a Delanos and hence permitted his eccentricities. “At any rate, the Zion are completely engaged in repulsing the Varald’s land offensive, and that is why they have asked us to help in this matter.”

“How, precisely?” Lieutenant Reckland asked. “Pardon my interruption, it’s just that I’m curious.”

“And legitimately so, Lieutenant,” Fairfax said, with a laugh. “Please come to the point, Gerius.”

“As you wish, Minister,” Gerius said, stepping away from the map. “Now, the sea route to the Republic is already patrolled by Galvenian and Commonwealth ships, so your safe passage there is more or less assured; if the Varald should launch a naval attack, it would be in the opposite direction. Once you land at the Ghetz border, you will make contact with Republican forces – mercenaries, of course – who are firmly on our side, for reasons of history and ancestry. Reckland, your role will be to transport them safely there, and to wait for them off the coast of Marcopolis, where they will rejoin you should they successfully complete their mission.”

Ryan winced inwardly at the “should”, but tried not to show it outwardly. *They’re testing us*, he thought. *They want to know if we have it in us, it’s as simple as that.*

“Now, this is where you come in, Privates. You will form part of a land force, made up of a combination of fresh Army and Marine recruits, whose job is quite simply to attack the factory and all its branches. If you should encounter any motor vehicles on the way, transporting weapons towards the Ghetz border, you are also required to disable them. Finally, you must make your way to this location” – he pointed to a spot near the Cosmopolitan border – “which, according to our best reports, is a meeting place for Varald agents and the Republican arms traders. If circumstances are unfavourable, and the place is

highly guarded in response to your activities, you will be taken aboard by Lieutenant Reckland, and return home. If they are more auspicious, your final mission will be to raid this post, and collect whatever material you may find there – documents, maps, codes, plans – for immediate transmission to the War Office.”

“How soon do you plan to leave?” Reckland said, pointedly. “We need time to prepare for a journey of that length.”

“Oh, we’ll give you plenty of time,” Fairfax said, anxious to pacify Reckland, who was the most senior of the officers present. “We still need official clearance from the Foreign Office in Zion, and Durer is quite a slow-poke. We also need confirmation of troop strengths among the Republican mercenaries. I’d say you still have about three weeks.”

“Three *weeks*?” Reckland said, shaking his head. “That’s going to be cutting it quite close, Sir Cornelius.”

“In times of war, we must work with the time that is given us, Lieutenant,” Gerius said, sternly. “Now, leaving aside your questions, is there anything you gentlemen wish to know?”

“How large a force will we be using, Sir?” Ryan asked.

“A good question, Private,” Browning said. “This operation is meant to be carried out as quietly as possible; we do not want to trigger off a series of feuds or tribal wars in Fulton, which is never the most peaceful of regions. There will be about twenty of you, supplemented by about forty or fifty men from the Republican towns along the way. You have been selected because of your high marksmanship ratings, as this task involves a lot of shooting at moving targets; Casales has been chosen because he knows the languages and the areas involved, and can act as a scout and local liaison. Anything else?” He beamed at Ryan as if coaching him for a cricket match, and not a covert and potentially dangerous military operation.

“Mr. Eramond has already been recommended to us by a colleague of the highest quality,” Trask said, speaking for the first time, and looking rather sad. “Unfortunately, he could not be with us today.”

The Prime Minister, Ryan thought. *He was the one who sent Henrik and I on Kodenai’s trail. It figures he would have spoken well of us. I wish Henrik was here too, he’d have been invaluable in a situation like this.*

“*Senor*,” Juan said, slowly, “how sure can we be about the loyalty of the Republican mercenaries? My people are volatile at the best of times. What if some of them choose to betray us?”

“That is a risk we have to take, Private Casales,” Gerius said, looking at him directly. “But rest assured that we have bought them at quite a price, and it would be hard for anyone, even Lyzhnov of the Varald, to outbid us. Charlemagne has been generous, and so has His Majesty.”

“Very good,” Fairfax said, rising from his chair. “I thank you, gentlemen, for making things very clear. Privates, return to your quarters, and I repeat, do *not* discuss this at table-time, no matter how exciting it may sound. We hope to deploy by the 5th of November, which is precisely the time when the rest of our forces will reach the Western front and try to recapture Acemel. You will receive further briefings in the days to come, which will make certain aspects of your mission clearer. Good day to you.”

And with this, Ryan and Juan returned to their quarters, accompanied by the Lieutenant, who was looking far from content.

“I don’t like this,” he said, turning suddenly and standing in front of Ryan. “The entire story smells of stale fish, from start to finish.”

“Why do you say that, *senor*?” Juan asked, curiously.

“It’s – it’s just not the way we Galvenians work, Private Casales,” Reckland replied, looking angry. “Ever since the days of King Richard Lionheart, our armed forces *and* our secret services have taken pride in never interfering in another country’s affairs, much less conducting a covert operation on their territory. When the head of Secret Services during the War of Independence, Sir Peter Bardley, suggested fomenting a *coup d’etat* in Zion after hearing of anti-Johan riots in Issachar, Prince Derren was so incensed that he had him removed and fined. We have always fought with honour. I don’t know who these ‘Republican mercenaries’ are, but they sound like convenient fictions to me. And I have reasons of my own, serious reasons, for questioning the way our intelligence agents work these days.”

“Do you want to talk about it, sir?” Ryan said, kindly.

“Come with me for a moment,” Reckland said, as he led them to a deserted corner of one of the training rooms. They sat down quietly, and Reckland leaned closer to the two younger soldiers, resting his helmet on the table.

“Now, what I’m going to tell you does not reflect well on myself, men,” he said, soberly, “but it reflects even worse on others. And I must remind you that in the Army, you must follow instructions, regardless of what I – or any other friend of yours – may choose to say. I only tell you this to warn you that Gerius and Browning will not hesitate to sacrifice you, if they feel it is important.”

“But isn’t that part of being a soldier, Lieutenant?” Ryan asked.

“I don’t mean your life, Ryan,” Reckland replied, softly. “I mean worse things than that.”

“How worse, *senor*?” Juan asked.

“Listen to me,” Reckland said. “Ryan, do you remember what I told you about being in the Territorial Army, back there in Davenport?”

“I do, sir,” Ryan said.

“Well, that is where my story begins. As I told you then, our troop had to defend the town from a bandit attack, but when I heard them attack, I – lost my nerve, and turned to run. Most of us did; we were toy soldiers, playing with our weapons, and not ready to face a true challenge,” he said, bitterly. “My commanding officer, whom I revered like an elder brother, fought on alone and was overpowered and killed by them. But he managed to take three of them with him, and the bandits failed to achieve their objective, which was a fresh shipment of goods that had reached the town that night.”

Ryan and Juan were silent.

“The next day, we reported back to headquarters, and I made a clean breast of things to our platoon leader, Colonel Mayhew. He ordered us all confined to barracks for two weeks, and was about to order a stricter punishment – not discharge, but certainly imprisonment – when he was visited by an Intelligence man, a clerk named Kodenai.”

“Kodenai?” Ryan exclaimed. “Him?”

“The same,” Reckland said, darkly. “He told Colonel Mayhew that he had received orders from the Government to cover up the entire affair, as news of bandits in Davenport would seriously affect trade relations with other countries. This was the time when the Davenport boom was in full swing, thanks to industrialists and investors like that Regale chap.”

Ryan smiled, despite himself. *I wouldn't like to be Lieutenant Reckland if he called Mr. Regale 'that Regale chap' in front of Lavie!* Quickly, he resumed his serious expression. “And what happened next, Sir?”

“Kodenai ordered that a story be circulated – a story that the men of our troop had got into a drunken brawl, and had ended up killing our commanding officer. We refused to fall in with his plans, and were called before a military court because of this. Despite testifying that Lieutenant Juno...”

“Lieutenant *who?*” Ryan said, feeling a little dazed at this avalanche of strange facts.

“Franz Juno,” Reckland said, his voice faltering slightly. “My superior, my mentor, and my best friend. The only one who stood firm against those bandits. All of us respected him, even if we were cowards on that fatal night. We refused to testify against them. That didn't stop Kodenai or his superiors; they circulated the story that he died drunk and disorderly. His family – his wife, Constance, and their little boy – were forced to live in seclusion and poverty, with an ugly black mark against their name, and only a half-pension to keep them clothed and fed. The rest of us were given the choice of a good conduct discharge or a redeployment, and I opted for the Royal Marines – as I told you – to punish myself. Those are the sort of men who ran the Intelligence services in my day, Ryan. They may be worse now. If one of their schemes goes wrong, they will throw you to the dogs – as they threw Lieutenant Juno, the bravest and best man I have ever known.” His head sank slightly. “And those are the sort of men we are serving now. If there is an Infinity, may he help us, for they certainly will not help us.”

“Even if what you say is true, *senor* – and my Carmen knows Senora Constance, so she knows this ugly story as well – we must obey orders,” Juan said, simply. “Let us try to serve with honour, as you have served Galvenia for so many years.”

“You’re right, bless your soul, Private,” Reckland said, slowly. “Don’t mind me too much; it’s just that yesterday was the day Franz died, and I tend to get gloomy at these times. I think I need a drink now. Good day, Privates. Hopefully, we will be true, even if our wise superiors play us false.” He rose from the table suddenly, and walked away, presumably towards the Army tavern.

“Senor Ryan,” Juan said, rather helplessly. “I do not know about you, but I think he speaks the truth. We should be very careful, especially once we reach the Republic.”

Ryan’s head was still spinning. *Kodenai was doing the Government’s dirty work? Was he still working for the Government when he and Talmadge were selling military plans to the enemy? But if he was a double agent, why did Trask and Socius want him captured? Had he gone rogue? And – Juno’s dad was a hero? I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it. Reckland’s done what I could never have thought possible – he’s almost made me feel sorry for that jackass, Juno. Poor guy.*

“Senor?” Juan asked, quizzically.

“Oh, you’re probably right, Juan,” Ryan said. “I’m just – I mean, this is just a bit heavy. Come, let’s get back to our quarters.”

“Marianne!” The voice rang out insistently, and echoed from the walls of the Robertsons’ cottage. “Where are you, you foolish girl?”

Marianne, still in her barmaid’s apron, came in through the kitchen door rather breathlessly. “I’m right here, Grandma,” she said, softly. “I just came in from work, and I was fixing your cup of tea.”

“I don’t want any silly tea!” Antonia Robertson screeched. “You’re all the same, you and your father. Have you forgotten my blood pressure, Marianne?”

“Grandma, I...”

“Of course you have, otherwise you’d have brought me my medicine, instead of fooling around with the young men at the Queen’s Head! You’re all selfish, all of you. You don’t care if I live or die...”

“That’s not true, Grandma,” Marianne protested. “Here’s your medicine, and here’s a nice cup of tea.” She placed both of them on the tiny tea-table in front of Antonia’s rocking-chair, and braced herself for further explosions.

"Tea? Much good that is to me," Antonia began, but thankfully for her granddaughter, her jeremiad was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Go see who that is," Antonia said, irritably. "Probably your father."

Marianne rushed to the door and, as she opened it, gave a small start as she recognized the young man standing there. "Oh, God," she exclaimed. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Looking for answers, sweetie," Armin Tamas said, with a wink. "Answers that can be found only in the Robertson household."

"Don't call me that," Marianne said, annoyed. "Honestly, I don't know how Ryan can put up with a goofball like you!"

"Hey, hey, lady, that's no way to treat a member of His Majesty's Secret Service!" Armin said, proudly pointing to the badge pinned to one side of his blazer. "Now are you going to open the door, or do you want me to bring a warrant or something?"

"Oh, come in," Marianne said, glad of a diversion from one of Antonia Robertson's disagreeable moods, even if that diversion was a young man with a swollen head and a taste for raccoon masks. "Grandma, here's someone who wants to ask you some questions."

"Hey, I'm not here to talk to your gran, *chica*," Armin said hotly. "I want to talk to your daddy. Got that, little Mary?"

"My name isn't Mary!" Marianne said, regretting her decision almost instantly. "And Father's not here. He's on a business trip to Glendale, and he'll only be back late tonight. Come back tomorrow, Armin."

"Well, that's just sweet, I guess I'll have to question *you* instead!" Armin said, looking at the books on the shelves. "Hey, 'The Song of the East Wind'! I didn't know your daddy liked poetry!"

"Leave those books alone!" Antonia Lancaster said, peevisly, spotting the newcomer. "Those are valuable books that belong to my son."

"Valuable? Maybe for termites and worms, that's right," Armin said, with a laugh, causing Marianne to giggle despite herself. "And what's this? 'The Gospel of the Infinity'? Are you developing religion in your old age, Gran?"

"I'm not your Gran," Antonia said, giving him a venomous look. "Kindly leave this house and stop fooling around here, if you have nothing useful to do."

"Oh, useful, you say?" Armin said. "I've just come to ask you a few questions, courtesy of Sir Cornelius Fairfax. Mind cooperating?"

“Sir Cornelius?” Antonia paused. Despite her life-long loathing for all things aristocratic, the sound of a name like Fairfax’s – especially when he was a Minister – made her slightly more circumspect in her replies. “Don’t tell me you’re working for *him*, you young whipper-snapper.”

Armin was now admiring a row of curious on a small display case, just next to the rocking-chair. “Of course I am, toots,” he said, eliciting a further giggle from Marianne, and a look from her grandmother that lesser men would have quailed before. “My, my, you’ve got a nice set of knick-knacks here, Marianne. Or are these all gifts from my good amigo, Ryan Eramond?”

“You’re a friend of that boy Ryan?” Antonia asked.

“Hey, look at it this way,” Armin said, sitting at the table opposite her. “Whatever Ryan knows, he learned from me.”

“That’s all very well,” Antonia said, impatiently, pointing a finger at him. “Now, will you kindly finish whatever it is you’re doing, and go home?”

“Oh, just a minute. You see, we’ve been having some bandit attacks in Galvenia, and we know that they target traders. My head honcho...”

“Your *what?*” the old lady said, wondering what she had done to deserve this. “Speak in Common, boy.”

“Not my fault if you don’t know the lingo of San Delas, *mama*,” Armin said, lifting her teacup and sniffing it, then wrinkling his nose in disapproval. “Ugh, weak tea. You’ll have to do a lot better than that to please Ryan, Miss Robertson.”

“Armin,” Marianne pleaded, “Grandma’s tired, and....”

“We all feel tired sometimes, baby,” Armin said. “Anyway, my superiors want to know if Mr. Robertson has been harassed, or otherwise bothered, by bandits during any of his business trips. Yes or no, ma’am?”

“Of course not,” Antonia said, looking disconsolately at her tea. “The very idea is preposterous.”

“But maybe he doesn’t confide in *you*,” Armin said, whirling around and beaming at Marianne. “Tell me, young lady, what did *your* daddy do in the war? Any bandit attacks?”

“Not that I remember, Armin,” Marianne said, throwing up her hands in resignation. “Is that all?”

“Of course, sweet ladies, of course,” Armin said, with an elaborate bow. “Now here’s a carnation for you, Miss Senior Davenport of C.Y. 300. If you’re a good girl, Marianne, you’ll grow up to be just like your grandma. Toodles!”

And before either of them could respond, he had disappeared out of the front door.

“What an impertinent young man,” Antonia said, sipping her tea with a stony look on her face, and wishing she could use stronger language.

“He’s always been a bit of a clown, Grandma,” Marianne said, rearranging the books that Armin had disturbed, but grateful for the momentary diversion.

Outside, Armin, walking towards his home, was greeted by another man. He was dressed in a simple holidaymaker’s loose shirt, a floppy hat and a pair of loose trousers. To any casual passer-by, he would have looked like a tourist, spending a few days by the seaside at Davenport.

“Success, Tamas?” he said, grinning.

“Hey, success is my middle name, Agent Bowes,” Armin said, grinning in turn. “Went off like clockwork. I didn’t count on that old hag of a grandmother being there, but I managed to keep her entertained.”

“Don’t tell me you actually called her ‘toots’,” Bowes said, with a chuckle. “I know you threatened to, but...”

“That’s a trade secret, *Supremo*, but the answer is in the affirmative,” Armin replied. “Here’s what you asked for. Took some rooting around, but I don’t think they suspected a thing.” He held out a slim book, with yellowing pages, whose cover was missing. On the fly-leaf was a short inscription: *To my wife, with affection. A.*

“Good work, my boy,” Agent Bowes said, pocketing the book. “We had our suspicions, but this clinches it. Poor man.”

“Geez, it looks ready for the trash can,” Armin said. “What is it, anyway?”

“That’s a trade secret, *amigo*,” Bowes replied with a wink. “Someday, I’ll tell you all about it, but for now, hurry back to Lorean. There’s a contact waiting for you at the Explorers’ Guild. Chop-chop.”

“I hear, and I obey,” Armin said, as he quietly followed the path towards Lorean. Bowes, for his own part, made a quiet return to the Davenport Inn, where he, his wife and his two young children were enjoying what was, otherwise, quite an unremarkable end-of-term vacation.

“Naomi,” Princess Carranya said, with a smile, as she leaned back in her chair, “what are you doing, bustling around my wardrobe like that?”

“Oh, I’m just making sure things are in order, Princess,” Naomi said, happily. “After all, if I’m going to leave you – and some of my finest work – in the hands of lesser people, I’d better do that!”

“Tell me again about this pilgrimage of yours,” Carranya said. “I’m sure the Professor knows all about it, but your version would probably be more interesting.”

"It's an obligation for all of us who follow the Old Republican faith, Your Highness," Naomi explained. "We must visit the Temple at least once in seven years, with our spouses and children if they're still alive. It's been donkey's years since I've actually lived *in* the Republic, but my sister still lives there. Perhaps she's the reason I'm here. Chalk and cheese, that's what we are. Or oil and water."

"Oh, dear," Carranya replied, with a laugh. "So where exactly is this temple? Is it in the Cosmopolitan area?"

"I wish it were, dearie," Naomi said. "That's pretty peaceful territory compared to Ghetz, especially these days. Not to mention those Deity-worshippers, who were the ones who razed our Temple centuries ago in the first place. Of course, we're all supposed to get along these days, thanks to the Commonwealth, but don't let that fool you. They still dislike us, and we still dislike them, even if we're not going to go to war about it."

"I've never really studied the Old Republican faith, to be honest," Carranya said apologetically. "Professor, could you give me a crash course?"

"It would be my pleasure to do so," Father Marlborough replied. "According to the most reliable histories, soon after the fall of the Kingdoms, the Infinity revealed himself to a group of semi-civilized nomads in Ghetz, and taught them his laws. They built a temple in the northern part of the mainland, near the eastern coast of the Sea of Serenity, and were supposed to make regular pilgrimages there, offering the sacrifice of a young goat during the annual festival. Of course, they ate the goat after it had been ritually sacrificed. I've had the chance to partake of it as a young man, when I was studying in the Republic."

"How interesting," Carranya remarked. "Do they still do that?"

"Not really, Princess. These people soon settled in the land, and even had a small kingdom that centred around their temple, and which extended both to the north and to the south. However, in the face of invasions from tribes who followed the Cult of the Deity, many of them migrated north to Itaria, where they were among the founding fathers of the Church. It was at that time that they received further apparitions from the Infinity and their forefathers, telling them that the goat-eating wheeze wasn't necessary any more, and that what He wanted from them was good and honourable conduct."

"I think they may have preferred the goat, Professor," Naomi said, with a chuckle. "Good and honourable conduct is mighty hard to keep up all the time."

"Quite right, Mrs. Festa," the Professor said. "Ten points to you."

Naomi, tittered. "Oh, you're terrible, Professor. Princess, will you want this dress out for Saint Mikhail's Day?" She held out the golden robe that Carranya had worn at Davenport, and that Lavie now owned a younger sister of. "It seems a pity to use it just once, and you *will* be addressing the troops, won't you?"

“Dear me,” the Princess replied, “that brings back pleasant memories.” She walked up to Naomi, took the dress from her, and after a moment’s hesitation, could not resist the urge to hold it against her and admire it (or herself, let us be honest) in the mirror. “What do you think, Professor? Would this send the wrong message to our brave army, or would it encourage them?”

“Judging by my own reaction,” Marlborough said gallantly, “it would distract them, but I think our brave men deserve some distraction. Fighting the Varald is no joke. I only wish your august father could spare some of them for my adopted country. Charlemagne has been generous enough, considering the circumstances, but it is still not enough to keep the rebels from eventually crossing the Claudia.”

“I shall speak to my father if you wish,” Carranya said, graciously, “and I thank you for your compliment. Perhaps I shall use this once more, Naomi.” She ran her fingers along the large collar appreciatively, then paused, surprised to feel something hard beneath it.

I wonder what this is, she thought, slowly turning the collar over as Naomi and the Professor continued speaking.

“Tell me, Mrs. Festa, to which branch of the Old Republicans do you belong – the Temple faction, or the Liberal faction?” he asked, politely.

“Oh, I see you’re quite well-informed, Professor. I’m a liberal myself – no goats for me, and though I’m old, I do try to be good and honourable in my own way. I still have to make the pilgrimage to the Temple when I can, though; that’s something we can all agree on. This time, there’s another reason, too; my sister’s son is getting married. Though Mara and I can’t stay in the same room for long without bickering, family is family, and I agreed to come and help her out. She’s a fairly good planner, but a terrible skinflint, Professor. You can’t be that way and arrange an Old Republican wedding, even if you sacrifice a goat every month!”

“Ah, sisterly love,” Marlborough said with a wink. “I have observed the phenomenon enough in my own aunts, who took care of me during my vacations as a boy. They can’t live together, and they can’t live apart.”

“How right you are,” Naomi replied, grinning.

“Naomi!” Carranya suddenly exclaimed. “Was it you who sewed this medallion into my dress? How kind.”

Naomi looked up, surprised. “A medallion, Your Highness? Only the Itarians do things like that. We Old Republicans are forbidden to use amulets, charms, or medallions, even if they do look pretty. The last time I visited the Temple, I even had to leave my bracelet outside, the one Tremfein gave me for my birthday.”

“Then what’s this?” Carranya said, pointing to a shiny object that seemed to have been woven under the surface of the gold lace on the collar. It was silver in colour, and criss-crossed with numerous fine lines,

except at its lower end where there were two red dots, resembling precious stones. "It didn't get there by itself, I'm sure! Is this one of Tremfein's jokes?" She laughed.

Naomi stepped forward, held the dress in her hands, and shook her head. "I've never even seen a thing like this, Princess," she admitted. "And I don't know how on Terra it even got there."

"May I have a look?" Marlborough said. "I'm afraid my knowledge of feminine ornaments is rather limited, but I did have to learn a thing or two about medallions when I was at our embassy in the Varald." He looked closely at the object, then smiled. "Ah, very ingenious, Mrs. Festa. A prompting device of some sort, I see."

"Prompting device, Professor?" Naomi said, wondering what on earth Father Marlborough was talking about.

"This thing, here," he replied. "I presume this was originally meant as a stage costume. It's a little receiver for sound, the inverse of a microphone; I'm not a physicist, but we use such things when training missionaries to give a good sermon, to prompt them. It's fairly standard technology. You probably forgot to remove this when you modified it for the Princess's use."

"I've heard of such things, Professor," Naomi said, with dignity, "but Tremfein would never use them. He even dislikes using prompters during a rehearsal, because he believes actors should have their lines word-perfect. That thing didn't come from our troupe or its players, and I can swear on that."

"How curious," Marlborough said, studying the device with admiration. "Princess, I—"

Carranya had suddenly turned pale. "Professor," she said, in an unsteady voice, "do you mean that that is a device for transmitting sound, in the fashion of a loudspeaker?"

"That's right, Your Highness," he replied. "Are you all right?"

"Quite well, Professor," Carranya said, sitting down and leaning forward, with a look that he found quite disconcerting. "How – how far would sound carry, with a device like this?"

"Not far at all," Marlborough said, once again unaware that he was twisting the knife in an old wound. "It's a tiny thing, as you can see, Princess. The person wearing it would hear, but no one else could, unless they were very close. It helps to maintain privacy, and to save face; after all, the whole cast of a play wouldn't want to know if you'd forgotten your lines!" He chuckled. "Why, when I was in Itaria in '95..."

But Carranya had risen from her seat. "I beg your pardon, Professor," she said, hurriedly, "but there is something I need to think about, on my own. Please excuse me. I will return as soon as I can, Naomi." And before he could reply, she had walked quickly out of the dressing-room. It seemed to Marlborough, though he could not swear to it, that he heard a sob escape her.

“Dear me,” he said, shaking his head and looking downcast. “I hope it wasn’t something I said again!”

“Oh, the poor girl’s just straining too hard, Professor,” Naomi said, sympathetically. “Come, now, give me back that dress before you drop it.”

If it has occurred to the gentle reader that there is little regard being given to dates at this point in the story, let me hasten to remedy my deficiency. Lavie’s birthday was the second of September; Russel Kievan’s inglorious exit from the post of Director was the fourth; and the two scenes we have recorded above – Ryan’s assignment, and Carranya’s discovery – took place about a month later, on the third of October, C.Y. 300. I mention this mainly because we now need to take a leap back in time – to the sixth of September, the day before the entrance test for scholarship recipients at King’s College – to understand the next part of our tale. Let us return, then, to King’s College, to the evening of the sixth, and to one of the common-rooms on the ground floor that are generally used by freshmen. Bernadette and Henrik had spent much of the afternoon there studying, and the latter had decided to take a little nap before rejoining the fray. Though nervous, he was reasonably confident of the outcome that would greet him tomorrow, and could allow himself this luxury.

Nothing like some shut-eye to feel refreshed, he thought, as he stretched himself out on his bunk and yawned, in response to the unwelcome sounds of his little alarm clock. His two roommates, who (fortunately for them) did not have to take the entrance test, were outdoors playing cricket – it was a cool Sunday evening – and he felt quite ready to return to his books.

I’ve already been to the chapel today morning. Father Dionysius gives quite a good sermon for a Republican, I must say; even Bernadette was impressed! Maybe I’ll take a quiet trip there before lights-out, but for now, let’s see how she’s coming along. I wish I had some of her dedication.

Walking quietly to the room they had recently occupied, he found it quite deserted.

“Bernadette?” he called out, but there was no reply, and in a moment, as he explored the room further, he understood why. She had moved to one of the smaller alcoves, to the left, and while working, had succumbed to exhaustion after several nights of arduous study. Or, to put it simply, she had fallen asleep over her book.

Poor sweetheart, Henrik thought, then censored himself mentally – *Infinity knows I care about her, more than I’d care to admit to anyone else, but I shouldn’t start thinking along those lines! Especially after what Father said. Bother him.*

He took a step closer. *Let me see what she’s working on,* he thought, mischievously. *I’ll pull her leg a bit when she wakes up, and try to cheer her up a little.*

As he walked closer, he saw that the pile of textbooks she had brought had been closed and put away to one side neatly. She was resting on her right arm, her left hand hanging loosely beside her, and on the

table was an envelope, neatly addressed in her small hand: *Jonas Aquary, 14, Lionheart's Walk, Hartridge.*

Nice of her to write to her dad, he thought. At least she's able to do that. I haven't written to Mr. Alphonse Spenson even once since coming here, not that he'll really read anything I write.

Perhaps Henrik ought to have stepped away, but curiosity – and, let us be honest, a touch of quiet admiration as well – drew him a little closer, until he was literally standing just inches behind her, looking over her shoulder. Beneath her head was an open book, and lying on the table above it was a fountain-pen, still uncapped. One side of the book was serving as a makeshift pillow, but the other had been written on fairly recently.

She's often told me she keeps a journal, though she said it's full of boring stuff, Henrik thought, with a chuckle. I asked her to show it to me once, but she just laughed and said she'd do it after we got to college. Well, it's time! He leaned a little closer, read the few lines that were written on the page, then stepped back, reddening to his very hairline...

If the reader is curious, this was what Bernadette had written...

...it's a bit strange, considering that when I usually wake up these days, my first thought is "O Infinity, grant that I may not fall asleep while preparing for that blessed entrance test!" But today, as I woke up, these words came to my mind. I didn't want to write them down in my room, because Simone, though she's a dear thing, can be very curious. So I write them here, knowing that only the Infinity and I can see them. For now, that is!

*"The words linger at the edge of my pen,
'Why do you stay with me?'
But I hesitate to write them, because I will hope, and not doubt,
not doubt you, who have brought me so much joy,
nor doubt the Infinity, who, for his own mysterious purposes,
blessed us by bringing us together.*

*And if He were to ask me
if I should want one thing, and one alone, in this world,
I would ask that you stay with me, over the years...."*

Here the last letter had trailed off, as if Bernadette had fallen asleep in the very act of composition.

Sweet Infinity! Henrik thought. *If I'd only known...*

For Henrik, like many modest people, and unlike his friend Armin, did not possess too high an opinion of his own personal charms, and Bernadette's valuation – though he had half hoped for it – surprised him, in a not unpleasant way.

He turned to leave, as quietly as he could, but his intentions were foiled by the fact that Bernadette stirred, and woke, at precisely that moment. Mysterious indeed, as she had wisely written, are the machinations of Providence.

“Sweet Saint Integra, I’ve fallen asleep right here!” she said, softly. “How embarrassing! I only hope none of our upperclassmen or professors have seen me....” She turned around, and came face to face with Henrik.

Ouch, Henrik thought. *Think fast, Spenson!*

“Henrik?” Bernadette smiled sleepily at him. “How nice! Did you have a pleasant nap? I’m afraid my resolve was stronger than my body was, though; I ended up taking an involuntary nap here!”

“Hey, it happens to the best of us,” Henrik said, kindly. “Come, why don’t I see you back to your room? You’ll be more comfortable resting there.”

“Good idea,” she said, standing up and straightening her hat, which was slightly askew. “You’re always practical, Henrik. How do you feel about tomorrow?”

“Not too good, not too bad, Bernadette,” Henrik replied, honestly. “I think my chances are decent, but the rest is up to the Infinity, I guess.”

Bernadette laughed. “The Infinity, refuge of nervous college students. That’s a nice topic for my next essay, if I do get a good enough mark to take Theology in my second year. Come, let’s go!” Gathering her books, she suddenly remembered the journal lying on her table, and flushed deeply, looking down at her Sunday shoes. “Goodness, I shouldn’t....” A suspicion suddenly came to her, which was confirmed when she noticed that Henrik was quite red himself. “Henrik! Have you been reading my journal?”

“It was an accident!” Henrik said, defensively, “I thought you’d fallen asleep studying, so I just came a little closer to see what you were studying?”

Still studying the buckle on her left shoe, she smiled nervously. “It’s all right, Henrik,” she said, slowly. “Accidents will happen, I guess. I was just....putting down some of my thoughts, as well.”

Say something, you dope! Henrik thought, as he helped her pick up her textbooks. “Um, Bernadette...” he began.

With a sudden resolve, of the sort that Sister Miriam or her father could have warned him about, she suddenly lifted her head, and looked him straight in the eye. “Yes, Henrik?” she asked, a little hesitantly.

“Er...” Henrik swallowed, and wished with all his heart that he had his friend Ryan’s skill at finding the right words. “You know what they say in the Catechism, how most things happen for a purpose, even if we don’t....hmm....understand it immediately all the time?”

“Yes, I do,” she replied, clutching the journal tightly to her chest.

“Well, er....” *Why can’t I talk like Ryan at times like this! Confound it!* “What I meant to say was, er....though I read your journal by accident, maybe it was...ahem....meant to happen.”

“Henrik!” Bernadette exclaimed, though she was still smiling. “What *are* you trying to say? You’re normally so....articulate, even when our professors are involved.”

“I – I guess what I’m trying to say is that....er.....I was, well, sort of thinking the same thing too, even if I can’t write it down as nicely as you did.” *That was really slick, Spenson. I can just imagine Armin chuckling his head off, if he could see me now.*

Bernadette looked up at him, gaily and expectantly. “Really?” she said. “Henrik, do you mean....”

Gathering his breath and his courage, Henrik placed an arm around her, and drew her closer to him.

“Yes, darling Bernadette,” he said, feeling his temperature rise several degrees despite the cool winds of autumn that swept the room. “What I mean, quite simply, is that I feel the same way about you. I...”

But Bernadette cut him short. “Oh, Henrik,” she said, simply, nestling against him. “You don’t know how happy this makes me.”

In all this excitement, it was inevitable that the mushroom hat should slip, and Henrik took advantage of this to give her a bashful kiss on the brow, which she did not object to in the least, even if – being a rather old-fashioned girl – she did blush again. And if some of the churchmen of Itaria protest that this sort of display is quite unacceptable, and irrelevant to the tale that is being told, I will merely request them not to be too censorious with the young, especially where no fault of any sort has been committed. (And so let it be.)

In the meantime – for we must not intrude upon our friends for too long, and because there is a story to tell – two men – both elderly, and wearing the long ceremonial robes of professors from King’s College – were walking through the corridors outside the common-room, talking to themselves.

“You see, my dear Towers,” the first man said, “even today, there are people who still believe that your little prank was nothing of the sort, and that Elizabeth Castle truly existed. I’ve even heard of a schoolmistress in Alton, who teaches her students to revere that dreadful ghost story you wrote. This intrigues me, especially when it comes to disentangling fact and legend as a textual scholar. If you could create a legend so easily in our modern and civilized age, what are we to make of the multitude of legends that our forefathers had? How did the inspired authors of the Holy Book – granted, as I must, that they were inspired – choose what to retain, and what to discard? How did they join the sources at the seams, and cut out the excess cloth, so as to speak?”

“An interesting question, my dear Marlborough,” the other man replied, laughing. “From a philosopher’s point of view, I’d say that each age views reality through its own lenses, and constructs a narrative that is shaped by those lenses – that is, by the dominant culture and traditions of the time. Of course, the room

for inspiration or guidance by the Infinity, in such a view, is limited, but it is not negligible. We ought to discuss this further some day, after the entrance tests are done.”

“Ah, the entrance tests,” Marlborough said, brightly. “I’ve had my eyes on a couple of the students, here. Partly for my own reasons, but partly because they’re both intelligent, and the Church of Infinity needs good minds now. Church scholarship, like the economy, goes in cycles of boom and bust, to use the vulgar idiom. In between the contributions of brilliant minds, we have politically and ideologically-driven works of the lowest sort. We are in a trough now, which means the next peak cannot be too far off.”

“You refer to that man Bastow,” Towers said. “I taught him philosophy quite a while ago, and I must say I never cared for him even in those days. Excessive certainty, in a scholar, is a fatal disease. Especially when the certainty takes the form of a dogged belief in one’s infallibility.”

“Bastow is pompous, but quite harmless,” Marlborough said. “Kartner is the man I was referring to, quite honestly.”

“Come, Marlborough, let us sit down and discuss this,” Towers said, limping a little. “That common-room, there...”

“A capital idea, Towers,” Marlborough said, as he peeked into the room. Upon beholding the touching scene that was unfolding there, he quickly withdrew, looking rightly embarrassed, but quietly pleased as well.

“What’s up, Terry?” Towers said, with a laugh. “Seen a ghost?”

“Oh, no, Richard,” Marlborough replied. “Ghosts are *your* province, I’d say. No, it’s just a couple of young friends of mine, who seem to be taking delight in each other’s company. There is something rather sweet and old-fashioned about an autumn romance, old boy.”

“You’re getting sentimental in your old age, Marlborough,” Towers teased. “But then again, as one of the three Sisters of the Sob Sisterhood itself, I shouldn’t be too critical. Who, may I ask, are they? Anyone likely to take a freshman’s course in philosophy?”

“That young woman might,” Marlborough replied. “She’s already quite a perceptive theologian, though still quite naïve in many ways. I have followed her career with some interest, because she won a scholarship from Saint Nealus’ College.”

“That woman’s prison in Alton? Marlborough, my friend, ask your Pontiff to close it down, I beg you,” Towers said, wrinkling his nose. “It’s a scholarly embarrassment, especially with that old donkey, Riordan, running the show. If your prize pupil’s from there, all I can say is that sitting on that mouldy Council has lowered your standards.”

“Fine flowers sometimes grow in the soil of a humble village, Towers,” Marlborough replied, a little sternly. “I ought to show you some of her papers. But I have a more delicate mission in mind for her, and if that young man is as devoted to her as he appears to be, that is all for the better.”

“A delicate mission?” Towers snorted. “Terry, my friend, what mischief is that man Carolus involving you in, now?”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to discuss that more privately, my dear Richard,” Marlborough said, politely. “Matters of state, and all that.”

“Hmph,” Towers said. He was quite used to chaffing his friend in this manner, knowing full well that the old priest would always come up with worthy replies. “Even if you have a task for her, what of it? Your Pontifical Council would never accept her as a member. As for her becoming a Pontiff herself, that’s impossible, thanks to your retrograde laws. What’s left for her, Marlborough?”

“Well,” he replied, quietly, “she could always be the mother of a Pontiff.”

“Good one, Terry,” Towers said. “I’ve come to expect it from you, but that’s well answered.”

And now, after that pleasant interlude, let us return back to the present day; to the 5th of October, in the year 300 of the Commonwealth. Pious XXI, supreme leader of the Church of Infinity, was sitting in his study, trying to concentrate on an old manuscript he had unearthed from the Itarian Archives, and listening to the complaints of his housekeeper, Sister Moretta. A large, good-hearted, but temperamental woman at the best of times, she was now quite nonplussed by the task that her ruler had given her.

“Your Holiness,” she said, in animated tones, “whom can a poor woman trust, these days? Three of the seamstresses have turned out to have – ahem – men friends among the rebels, and they have resigned their posts. And you ask me to have new ceremonial robes ready for Saint Mikhail’s Day, for the entire Council? In a month? Please, your Holiness....”

“If I have asked you to do it, Moretta, it is because I have confidence in your ability, even if some of your younger colleagues have proved false. Whom else can I ask?” he said, gently.

“Ah, Your Holiness, let us call upon the Tailor’s Guild,” she suggested. “It would not be too expensive, and...”

“The Tailor’s Guild has troubles of its own,” Pious said, softly. “They have also been attacked by rebels. Seven of them were wounded in one of the villages on the banks of the river.”

“By all the Saints!” Sister Moretta exclaimed. “At least we are fortunate. The little girl helps me much, it is true, Your Holiness...”

“You mean young Palmira?” the Pontiff said, mockingly. “How like you to make her earn her keep, Moretta. You’ve missed your vocation. You ought to be running a dressmaker’s boutique in the Fulton Republic.”

“Your Holiness!” Moretta replied, indignantly. “I will do nothing of the sort. The child has a good heart, she wants to help....”

“I was merely jesting, Sister,” the Pontiff said. But whether his housekeeper saw the joke or not is unknown, as Archbishop Clement Elias burst into the room, perspiring profusely, his hood falling off his head.

“Carlo!” he cried. “Have you heard? The rebels have received ships – small boats, I mean. They will attempt to cross the Claudia again, and if the ships are armed....”

“Clement, my friend,” Pious said, calmly, “sit down, and explain this to me slowly and without excitement. I can only handle one Moretta at a time.”

“Very amusing, Carlo,” Elias said, darkly, though he could not contain a smile at noting Sister Moretta’s indignant reaction.

“Your Holiness....” she began.

“Forgive me, Moretta,” Pious XXI said kindly, with an expression to match. “I know you are trying to do your work as best as you can, as we are. We are all a little flustered today. Let us simply make allowances for each other. Now, Clement, what seems to be the matter?”

Elias was now back to his dignified self, with the manner that made him the terror of Council meetings. “The matter is simple, Carlo. For the past one weeks, we have received Intelligence reports, both from our own men and from the Zion, that the rebels were being supplied with illegal ammunition – either by the Varald, or by that portion of the Republic that is neighbour to them. We have asked the Guards, as well as the 8th Imperial Battalion – kindly loaned to us by Emperor Charlemagne – to try and trace them, but with little success. Today morning, they have finally succeeded in tracing them. They have made a landing on the eastern coast of Itaria, near the fishing town of Saint Bernard. As you know, the trade route from Saint Bernard to the border of the Claudia is a short one..”

“Seal it, Clement,” Pious said, sharply. “Post as many of the Imperial soldiers as you can there. They will certainly be more capable in guarding such a route than our own poor guards.”

“It is already done, Carlo,” Elias said, proudly. “However, these reprobate rebels, whose wicked sinfulness knows no bounds, have fought our men at every step. They are proceeding down the route, driving carts that, my men tell me, contain metal parts that can be assembled into light ships. If they reach the banks of the Claudia...”

“Then they would still need to assemble the ships, my dear Clement,” Pious said, closing his eyes. “By which time our own guards could deploy to the other side of the river, and try to disrupt this endeavor as much as they could.”

“Carlo, it is not enough!” Clement Elias said, angrily. “Half the Guards are already across the river, trying their best to quell the rebels’ barbaric acts in the villages and towns there. We cannot send more away, lest the rebels succeed in crossing the Claudia. Once they do, it is virtually certain – from what their impudent leaders have claimed in their dispatches – that they will march directly on Itaria City, and sack it, to use their own words. Sack it...” He trembled with fury. “Carlo, this is no time to try and emulate the late, unlamented Martell Socius. Ask the Emperor for more men. It is the only way.”

“Do you think I have not thought of these things myself, Clement?” Pious said, with a resigned look on his face. “I have petitioned Charlemagne again, more than twice; he replies graciously enough, but tells us that he cannot spare any more men given the current state of their own war. However, he promises to send more men once the reinforcements from Galvenia arrive in Zion.”

“Galvenia? This is a truly sad state of affairs, Carlo. We depend on Charlemagne, and they depend on *Galvenia*. Saint Geraud, pray for us all.”

“I’m certain Saint Geraud must be working overtime, Clement...” Pious began.

“Your Holiness! This is no laughing matter!” Moretta protested, with a laugh. She was used to Pious’ sometimes cavalier references to the Saints of the Itarian Missal, but felt obliged to remonstrate for form’s sake.

“...but, whatever he can do for us, we must also cooperate. Deploy the men as I speak, Clement. The sack of Itaria City is still only a possibility; but if we do not act soon, the crossing of the Claudia will soon become a matter of historical record.”

“I obey, Carlo,” Clement Elias said, not entirely satisfied, but forced to acknowledge the justice of the Pontiff’s words. “Only...”

A member of the Itarian Guard entered the room, kneeling before both men. “Your Holiness!” he said, quite brightly given the circumstances. “A telegram from the man you asked about.”

Pious, with a satisfied nod, took the telegram, opened it methodically, and read it through once, smiling as he did so. “Ah, this is excellent.”

“News from Zion, Carlo?” Elias said, expectantly. “Reinforcements, I hope.”

“Not from Zion, Clement,” Pious replied. “From Marlborough, late of the Pontifical Council.”

“*Marlborough?*” Elias sorted. “Carlo, this is not the time for a history lesson....”

“It is not the past he speaks of, Clement, but the present. He is sending us reinforcements from Galvenia.”

Elias’ jaw was one of the most notable features of his face, and it seldom dropped, but it did quite blatantly on this occasion. “From Galvenia?” he asked, shaking his head.

“Yes, my friend,” the Pontiff replied. “From Galvenia. Wait and see. You may scoff, but I believe that these reinforcements of his will be more effective at repelling the rebels than a platoon of Zion soldiers.”

The arrow flew through the air, bursting into flame as it did, and struck the lizard in one eye. The lizard’s skin – which, as any Galvenian biologist would inform you, was quite flammable due to the chemical properties of the poison that coated its scales – burst into flame, and soon, there was only a skeleton lying on the path in front of the small group of hunters.

“That’s the last one here. Great shot, Lavie,” Vincent Regale said, looking at the remnants of what was one of the commonest pests in the forest of Trinden. “She’s got your eye all right, Sigmund. What a pity you gave up sport and walled yourself up with those books of yours.”

“Thanks, Uncle Vincent,” Lavie said, warmly, as she hung her bow on a notch of the belt across her back. For those gentle readers who have become accustomed to seeing her dressed like a princess – or, at least, like a noblewoman, it must be noted that she was wearing her usual hunting garments on this occasion, with the addition of a brown fedora that Vincent had given her for her birthday. “Wind or shine, the hunter can’t abandon her trail,” he had said, “and this will protect that little head of yours from the elements, my niece.”

The women, who had remained in Sigmund’s carriage at a respectful distance, also applauded. “My word, Lavie, I’m amazed at the accuracy of your aim,” Emily said. “Perhaps you should try out for the Galvenian Games next year, in the archery division...”

“Or the Commonwealth Games,” Agatha said, proudly. “You wouldn’t believe it, Emily, but that daughter of yours...”

“Yes, I know,” Emily said, “Lavie told us about it when she came back from the Palace.”

“She saved my life, that’s all I can say,” Agatha said, patting Emily on the arm. “Emily, a talent like that shouldn’t be wasted.”

“Would you have her join the Army, then?” Emily teased. “The Galvenian Army still employs archers, and they now enroll women as well as men.”

“Oh, heavens, not the Army, especially now that we’re at war,” Agatha said, with alarm.

In the meantime, Lavie, her father and her uncle had all returned to the carriage. “Good sport today,” Sigmund said, adjusting his spectacles. “Almost makes me wish I’d brought my rifle, but I’m saving it for Sir Prescott, should that fine gentleman choose to appear again at my residence.”

Lavie giggled. “Why don’t we *both* shoot him, Daddy? You can fire first, and as he turns tail, I’ll shoot him with an arrow from behind!”

Sigmund tousled her hair. “My, my, aren’t we in an aggressive mood today, my daughter,” he said. “By the way, Lavie, what was in that package he sent you for your birthday?”

“Guess!” Lavie said, her eyes twinkling.

“A wedding ring?” Vincent said. Sir Prescott, now that he was safely away in Zion, had now become the butt of the family’s jokes.

“Wrong, Uncle Vincent,” Lavie said, with a wink.

“A copy of his autobiography, entitled *Why I’m the Infinity’s Gift to Women*, with a foreword by Alphonse Spenson,” Sigmund said, with a laugh. (He had his own personal reasons for taking a jab at Alphonse, which we will soon learn.)

“Getting warmer, Daddy!” Lavie replied.

“Can I try, dear?” Emily said. “A pin-up poster of him, carrying a sword and swaggering.”

“You’re burning!” Lavie said, clapping her hands. “Take a bash, Auntie!”

“Oh, dear, I don’t know much about nobility,” Agatha said, modestly. “But if he’s like the boys I knew when I was a girl, he must have given you a locket with a picture of his in it.”

“Oops! So far, yet so close!” Lavie said, patting Agatha on the shoulder as she sat down next to her. “But you’re not *quite* right, though.”

“We give up, Lavie,” Sigmund said, laughing. “What was it?”

“A framed photograph of himself riding a horse, and drawing his sword – and, wait for it, not just any photograph, but an autographed one!” Lavie said, bursting into laughter herself. “One of these days, I’m going to take it out of its frame, and use it for target practice.”

“Horses...” Sigmund’s expression clouded over momentarily, then brightened. “You know, my daughter, that isn’t half a bad idea. Though shooting a static target would hardly be a fair test of your skills.”

“I guess sport runs in the family, Sigmund, old boy,” Vincent said, affectionately. “I was the cricketer, you were the hunter, and....”

“Vincent,” Sigmund said, rather coldly, “I don’t think Lavie or our wives really want to listen to tales of our youthful prowess.”

Vincent looked as if he was about to reply, perhaps in protest, but something in Sigmund’s expression made him halt. “Of course, Sigmund,” he replied, calmly, “of course. So tell me, Lavie, apart from Sir Prescott’s rather original gift, what else did you get for your birthday?”

“Oh, heaps of things!” Lavie said, happily, as the coachman began to drive them back to the town of Trinden. “Apart from Mom’s beautiful Court dress and Dad’s necklace, there was your hat, Aunt Agatha’s shawl, and the Princess’ tiara, and there also was this lovely ring!” She held her hand out to display it better.

“A Tortystal ring? How quaint and how pretty,” Vincent said, appreciatively. “I used to think of selling things like that, but most girls don’t care for things of that sort nowadays. I remember giving Agatha one, back in the day...”

“As I well remember,” Agatha said, affectionately. “But I knew they were going out of fashion, so I convinced him to go into potions instead.”

“A wise choice, darling,” Vincent said, beaming at her. “So who gave you that original gift, Lavie?”

“Oh, a new friend of mine!” Lavie said. “Her dad looked after me when I was sick as a little girl, and we met when she was visiting Davenport with her, er, young man. Her name is Bernadette, and she’s very kind!”

“That’s a good Zionesse name,” Vincent observed. “Is she a student from overseas?”

“No, she’s studying at King’s College now, but her father and mother are from Hartridge. They’re both traditional healers, did you know?”

A sudden change came over Vincent’s face, though no one except Sigmund and Agatha noticed it; Emily was busy listening to Lavie’s chatter, and Lavie was making good-natured fun of Bernadette’s “young man” and his shyness. “Hartridge? Sigmund, do you think...”

“I know, Vincent,” Sigmund said, curtly. “And I don’t think...”

“What’s the matter, dear?” Agatha asked. “You look just like your elder brother now. What sombre topics are you dwelling on?”

“Er, nothing, dear,” Vincent said, with a smile that she knew – from many years of wifely experience – to be quite forced. “Just remembering a, er, bad investment Sigmund and I made, some years ago.”

“That’s right,” Sigmund said, emphatically. “Hard to believe, but even Regales can blunder in financial matters sometimes.”

“What sort of investment?” Emily asked, sympathetically.

“Er...” Vincent began.

“Athletic goods, Emily,” Sigmund said, in his most ‘pontifical’ tone. “We thought young people would go for them, but it worked out quite the opposite, I’m afraid. We had to just cut our losses and let it go, though we thought it would have worked out quite well. Just bad luck.”

Nicely played, old boy, Vincent thought with grudging appreciation. *You do have to make an allegory out of everything, do you? That’s what she always said. I thought she was joking. But now you’ve turned the two of them into an allegory as well.* “That’s right, Emily,” he said, shaking his head. “Really bad luck.”

“Poor Daddy,” Lavie said, patting him on the back. “I guess you can’t win them all, can you?”

“Certainly, Lavie,” Sigmund said, slowly.

“So what else did your friends give you?” Vincent said, eager to change the topic. “We were all very proud to hear that you’d asked for contributions to the troops, instead of gifts, but didn’t anyone else violate that rule?”

“Well,” Lavie replied, happily, a flush coming to her cheeks as she straightened her ribbon, “Ryan also came along – you know Ryan Eramond, right?”

“Theo’s son,” Vincent said, nodding. “Yes, I know the lad quite well. He was in Trinden a few months ago, and did something rather heroic involving a snake, though I’m afraid I slept through it and Agatha had to give me the dope on it afterwards.”

“Well, he’s signing up for the Army, and he’s in the Military Academy at Lorean, and he brought me a statue from the Army shop! It was a statue of one of the Twin Huntresses, and he picked it because I like archery. Isn’t that cool?” she went on, rather breathlessly.

“Quite a nice gesture, I agree,” Vincent said, with a smile. “What do you think, dear?”

“I think that young man is quite fond of Lavie, darling,” Agatha replied, giving Lavie a hug. “Oh, he affects to be indifferent and annoyed, as most young men do – as *you* used to do, *honey*.” She giggled. “But if you ask me....”

“Auntie, do you really think so?” Lavie said, blushing and beaming at the same time.

“Oh, we old women know a thing or two about men, and the big sillies that they can be,” Agatha said with a wink, causing everyone in the carriage to laugh, Sigmund included. “But does that bother you, dear? No, I don’t think so. Young girls today don’t blush that easily, and I’m afraid your face rather gives you away.”

“Indeed, dear,” Vincent said. “Sigmund, wouldn’t you say that she looks just like...”

"*Vincent*," Sigmund said, and again there was that note of warning in his voice, which only Vincent and Agatha detected; Emily was busy looking out of the window, and Lavie was thinking of a certain Private Eramond in the Galvenian Army.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sigmund," he said. "I guess I'm just..."

"What's the matter, Sigmund?" Agatha said. "You seem put out about something."

"Just tired, Agatha," Sigmund said, yawning. "I'm a bit too old for these long outings, I guess."

"Very funny, Daddy," Lavie said, as the carriage came to a halt. "Look, we're home already! Let me just run into the kitchen and whip up something for you all!"

"Lavie, if you don't mind, can I help you out a little?" Agatha said, diplomatically, recalling Lavie's last ventures in her kitchen, which had necessitated a thorough cleaning of the oven.

"Sure, Auntie!" Lavie said, brightly, and everyone laughed again, even Sigmund...

"Your Highness," Admiral Kiato Yatsu said, taking his naval cap off and resting it on a table – something which the Emperor would not have tolerated in anyone else, not even his late son – "there is little room for doubt any longer. They mean to sail down the east coast of Zion, attack strategic locations all along the way, and reach as far as Checkpoint Bravo. Once they capture Bravo, or even fight their way past it, then they can attack Galvenia directly, and we will have a global war both on land and on sea. The reports from our men in Fulton are quite conclusive. The question is simple: should we strike first?"

"A difficult question, Admiral," Emperor Charlemagne said, wearily. "On the one hand, I am responsible for the safety of the Zion Empire, and I would urge you to defend them against any threat of this sort. But on the other hand, this situation is a complex one. How certain is Naval Intelligence of its facts?"

"As certain as is humanly possible, Sire," Admiral Yatsu replied, with a courteous bow. "And we have further supplementary intelligence from the military wing, especially from that young man in Galvenia, Wolfgang Striker."

"Ah, him," Charlemagne said, with a dismissive gesture of his hand. "He is enthusiastic, but I think his enthusiasm has served us well enough in Galvenia, and I had him recalled here a month ago. Do you think you can make use of his services?"

"Certainly, if it please you to make us such a loan," Yatsu said, pleased. He was lukewarm on the true worth of Zion's vast Naval Intelligence Corps at the best of times, and welcomed any new addition, even if it was a rank land-lubber. "Do you have any specific reason for asking this, Sire?"

“He is capable,” Charlemagne replied, “and I know, from my dealings with your august predecessor, Eldon, that capable men are few in your division. Since his work in Galvenia is over, I can either send him to Itaria – Pontiff Pious is remarkably persistent in his demands for more forces – or to you. Given the volatile state of affairs in Itaria, I would prefer the latter.”

“I am grateful, Sire,” Yatsu replied, with another bow, which both pleased and annoyed Charlemagne – it was a mark of his Old Zionese descent, from the ancient lords of Meldia, but it also reminded him that, as a Valtemond, he was still a relative newcomer among the noble families of the continent. “But let us return to my original question. Eldon, of course, would have been all for caution. But I have the feeling, Sire – a sailor’s instinct, you might say – that when you appointed me to this command, it was perhaps because Eldon and I are quite dissimilar. You see, I am so bold as to speak in this way, not out of disrespect, but because the entire war could hinge on this decision, Sire. A naval victory would crush the Varald, cut off support for their troops, and strengthen our alliance with Galvenia. Sheffield has already promised us reinforcements if we act soon.”

“That was not part of our original treaty with Arlbert,” Charlemagne said, sharply. “Does Sheffield have his monarch’s approval when making such an offer, or is he just being optimistic?”

“Striker says he has the ear of both Arlbert and the Princess, who apparently counts for much in Galvenia’s war effort these days.”

“The Princess...” Charlemagne closed his eyes, and remained silent for several minutes, during which Yatsu maintained his attitude of studied calm. “Very well, Yatsu, let me tell you what we shall do now.” He rose from his throne, and walked slowly to the map of Terra that hung on one of the walls. “Take the best of the Navy – say about a hundred ships – yourself, and divide them into two portions. One will sail to Checkpoint Bravo and guard it against any foolish attempts at seizure. Another, larger one will move down the east coast, and secure it against the planned incursion.”

“Very well, Sire,” Yatsu said, nodding in approval. “It shall be as you say. I will instruct the Navy to be disposed in this way, and keep the rest of the fleet ready for action.”

“Wait a little, Admiral,” Charlemagne said, with a smile that seemed almost defiant. “That is not all.”

“Is it not, Sire?” Yatsu asked, with a look of faint surprise.

“Not quite. You see, Yatsu, Intelligence can have many uses. Send a smaller detachment – perhaps the 6th Imperial Fleet – to Itaria, as soon as possible. Have them occupy a position on the coast, off Itaria City.”

“Itaria?” Yatsu said, his wide eyes betraying his shock despite his attempts to preserve an unruffled exterior. “Whatever on Terra for, Your Highness?”

"*Noblesse oblige*, Yatsu," Charlemagne said, with a chuckle. "Besides, mark my words, interesting things are going to happen in Itaria. It would be best for all of us if we have a presence there, and the only way to achieve that is by sea. Take two platoons of the Assault Corps on board..."

"Sire!" Yatsu said, raising his voice only slightly, but with a clear intention of protesting.

"...with a capable man at their head, and ask them to report to Pontiff Pious as soon as they reach. Instruct them that they are to obey him as they would obey you or I. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sire," the Admiral said, stiffly. "Will that be all?"

"Quite, Yatsu," Charlemagne said. "And if you should, by any chance, be thinking that I have become sentimental in my old age, disillusion yourself. Remember Inderness, my good Yatsu."

"Inderness...." Yatsu stared at Charlemagne with renewed respect. "Do you really think..."

"Yatsu, I *know*," Charlemagne said, firmly. "The sins of our ancestors lie heavily upon us, and we must extricate ourselves as best as we can."

"Very well, Sire. Farewell," Yatsu said, as he saluted and left.

With the Admiral gone, Charlemagne returned to his throne, leaning back and wishing that he had time to sleep a little. There was still much to be done, and he was tired...

The sword and the spirit, he thought. *I ignored my son when he tried to warn me, and I paid for it – with his life. How many more will have to pay for my blunder? Infinity, forgive me.*

The tiny room that Ryan now found himself in, occupying an insignificant corner of the Military Academy at Lorean, was tucked away near the office of Alan Sheffield, the War Minister. On its door was an unassuming plaque which read, simply, *Military Strategy – Lecture Hall*. And, as is sometimes the case with these plaques, it told the truth at times. For a lecture on military strategy was certainly going on, though it was not the sort that would be found in – or approved by – the standard textbooks.

There were about fifty men in the room, including those we had met already – Ryan, Juan, Lieutenant Reckland, and the two Intelligence men, Browning and Gerius. The remainder were a mixture of hopeful young recruits and slightly older Royal Marines, as well as two surgeons attached to the Royal Army. They were all being addressed by Minister Sheffield, with Cornelius Fairfax – who had chaired the earlier meeting – confined to being a silent and smiling spectator.

"I'm sure Fairfax has already met many of you in small groups, and has briefed you about this mission," he said, in a kind tone. "We have already reviewed your travel route, and the plan of action, today; let me conclude by tying up some loose ends. Some of you who were originally posted to the Marines –

such as you, Mr. Casales – may be wondering why you were assigned to an Infantry platoon in the first place. The answer is that the current operation is a collaborative effort between the Army and the Navy. You will be under the joint command of Lieutenant Reckland and Captain Samuels of the Royal Army.” Captain Samuels, a thin, energetic officer, wearing a rather battle-worn uniform, nodded his agreement.

“Now I’m not going to repeat myself, men,” Sheffield went on, “but there are some things I want to ask you about. How many of you have seen action in the Republic before? Raise your hands.”

About four hands, all belonging to the Marines, went up.

“Ah, the vagaries of the Commonwealth rota,” he replied. “How many of you are familiar with the Republic in purely civilian terms?”

Three of the recruits, including Juan, raised their hands.

“That’s not too bad,” Sheffield said, cautiously. “Now, how many of you have heard of the Galvenian Republican Legion?”

I’ve read about them in comics, Ryan thought, but I’d better not say that!

A young Marine raised his hand. “Sir, I have, Sir.”

“Good, Private Howell. Please instruct us, then.”

Howell blushed. “Sir, they are a corps of men from the Galvenian Army, who have voluntarily requested to serve overseas, Sir. They work in alliance with Republican soldiers, and mainly function to keep the peace among desert tribes, as well as protect trade routes in accordance with the Galvenia-Fulton Treaty of 273, signed between Prime Minister Rasheed of the Republic, and King George of....”

“Very good, Howell,” Sheffield said, warmly. “I see we have well-educated men to deal with. Now, Howell, once you reach the Republic, you will have to work in collaboration with the Republican Legion. Let me tell you something about them myself. The men serving there are all brave men – they are legitimate Galvenian soldiers and citizens, and not mercenaries or outlaws. However, many of them have requested a tour of duty there for, shall we say, personal reasons. They may not be the most friendly of men, but they are worth their weight in Thorium in a fight. You may find them rather brusque, but try to maintain good relations with them.”

“Personal reasons, Sir?” Lieutenant Reckland said.

“Oh, you know the drill, Lieutenant,” Sheffield said, with a chuckle. “It’s sometimes said that one joins the Republican Legion to forget.”

“I see,” Reckland said, frowning.

“Anyway, these men will be your chief liaison with our Republican allies; they speak the local languages, and know the customs and culture of the Republic,” Sheffield said. “For the length of your mission, they will respond to you, Lieutenant, and to you, Captain Samuels, as they would to their own squadron leaders. I trust that this will be a satisfactory arrangement.”

“Suits me, Sir,” Samuels said, calmly.

“And last of all, I must give you all a piece of good news. Since you will all be away from home for an extended period, Prime Minister Bainbridge is of the opinion that you will all benefit from a little time to say your farewells, and set your homes in order. Beginning tomorrow – the twenty-fifth of October – you will all be granted a furlough of ten days, ending on the third of November, which is Saint Mikhail’s Day. On the morning of the fourth, you will all proceed to the military docks at Serin’s Peak Shipyard, for a final briefing by your commanding officers. And on the fifth, you will set sail. I trust that this is satisfactory, gentlemen.”

A hearty round of applause greeted this announcement. “Thank you, thank you,” Sheffield said, as he and Fairfax rose. “I wish you all an enjoyable vacation, and I hope that all of you will serve bravely, and do Galvenia proud. Good day to you all.”

The entire audience rose and stood to attention as the Galvenian national anthem was played, after which Sheffield and Fairfax, accompanied by Captain Samuels and Lieutenant Reckland, filed out of the room. The rest of the men left more slowly, talking animatedly among themselves.

“Ten days, *Senor*,” Juan said, gleefully. “How pleased my parents will be, not to forget Carmen! I must go and pack my bags now!”

“Bully for you, Juan,” Ryan said. “Are you planning to walk back? We can split the cost of a carriage, you know. Dad’s been quite liberal with his allowance.”

“Thank you, *Senor Ryan*,” Juan said, grateful for the offer – for he had come rather liberally loaded with luggage, most of it at the recommendation of his mother and Carmen. “We shall leave tomorrow morning, then.”

“I guess I’d better pack too, Juan,” Ryan replied. “See you in the Mess Hall.”

As he returned to his quarters, Ryan’s thoughts were not entirely pleasant.

This is it, he thought. I can’t say I’m not excited about it all! Grandpa. I wish you could see me now. Despite what the Lieutenant said, I feel this is something important. Something right. And I’m sure Dad, and even Mum, will agree when I explain it to them – the Minister even gave us permission to do so, as long as we didn’t discuss routes or publicize anything! I’ve got to avoid Armin, though; wonder what he’s doing these days, but he’ll probably try to weasel a ‘scoop’ out of me! As for Henrik, he wrote a rather mysterious letter last time, saying he wanted to discuss a ‘mission’ he’d been offered with me. If he’s managed to convince his dad to let him serve, that’s just great!

Thinking of his friends, he sighed. *And, of course, I'll have to convince Marianne that I need to leave. After all, it's only for a few months, if everything goes well.*

Somehow, the 'if' of his mission seemed to pale, in comparison to the task of convincing her.

If the reader will pardon a small leap back in time – for the nature of my sources, as well as the coherence of my tale, necessitate a rather topsy-turvy approach – we will now return for a little while to King's College, on the 28th of September, C.Y. 300.

Henrik Spenson, looking nervously at the corridor outside the women's rooms, sat down on a bench in the lobby, trying his best to look unobtrusive – which is a hard thing to do when one is six feet tall, and carrying a package in the bargain. Time seemed to pass maddeningly slowly until, finally, he saw Simone Holder, carrying a file under her arm, disappear in the direction of the School of Foreign Languages.

That's my cue, he thought. Walking as quietly as possible, he made a straight line for the door of room number 20, and knocked on the door, first hesitantly, then rather more confidently.

"Come in," a voice called out, kindly. "Did you forget your textbook *again*, Simone?"

"No, I didn't forget my textbook," Henrik called out, in a falsetto voice, "and I didn't forget what today was either." He pushed the door open, and laid the package on the nearest desk. "Happy birthday, Bernadette."

"Why Henrik, how nice of you!" she replied, clapping and laughing. "I was afraid no one would remember, except Father; he said he'd come by in the evening if he had the time. But how did you even find out?"

"You told me, long ago," Henrik said, truthfully. "When we came to sign up, remember?"

"Goodness, a girl has to watch what she says around you, Mr. Spenson," she said, with feigned caution. "And what's that huge pile of textbooks you're bringing me? The entrance tests are over!"

"As I well know," Henrik said, with a laugh, unwrapping the parcel to reveal a quite respectably-sized cake, with twenty-one tiny candles on top of it. "And don't think I've forgiven you for beating me by two points, either! That seems to be the story of my life; I ended up salutatorian at the Academy behind Ryan, and here I come second in the tests, behind you!" He pulled a matchbox from his pocket, and began to light the candles, one by one. Bernadette watched him admiringly, but said nothing.

"There, I'm done," Henrik said, tossing the burnt matches in the wastepaper basket. "Now blow out the candles, darling, and make a wish."

“Oh, I will!” Bernadette said, puffing up her cheeks in an exaggeratedly comical manner. “There she blows!” With a determined expression, she exhaled, and all but one of the candles was extinguished on the spot.

“Looks like you’re not quite ready to turn twenty-one yet,” Henrik said, with a chuckle. “Anyway, congratulations!”

“Or perhaps that one is for you, Henrik,” she replied, as they shook hands. “It’s strange that both Lavie and I have birthdays in the same month, though.”

“So what did you wish for, Bernadette?” Henrik said, with a wink.

“I think you already know the answer, dear Henrik,” she said, affectionately. “I’m afraid my feelings on the matter are an open book, or rather an open journal.” She laughed.

Henrik grinned. “*Touche*, love,” he said. “Well, that’s one wish we can both agree on, I guess! And speaking of Lavie, I thought you might like something less ephemeral than a cake, too,” Henrik said, pulling a small box out of his jacket. “Now hold out your fourth finger, and close your eyes.”

Bernadette duly complied. “There, it’s done, you can open your eyes.”

“Why, there’s nothing on my finger,” she said, surprised, then looked with amazement at a bracelet, whose rim was studded with crystals similar to the one on Lavie’s ring, that now encircled her left hand. “Henrik, *where* did you get this?” she exclaimed, beaming.

“Straukpass, actually,” Henrik said, pleased. “I took a walk there the other day, and I bumped into an old man, and a younger lady who must’ve been his daughter. He showed me how to immobilize a Tortystal by feeding it the right herbs, and I managed to reap quite the harvest! The jeweller’s an old friend of my mother’s, who lives here in Lorean. Do you like it?”

“Of course I do,” she replied, leaning contentedly against him. “Thank you so much, Henrik. This is – it’s simply wonderful!” She ran her finger around the rim of the bracelet, turning it slowly and enjoying the multitude of colours radiating from her wrist.

After partaking of the birthday cake, Henrik looked at his wrist-watch. “And now, I think we both have something important to do, Bernadette. Today’s the first of our classes on Religious Literature, so let’s see if we can book ourselves a nice set of front-row seats! What do you say?”

“I say it’s an excellent idea,” she said, joining her arm to his. “Come on, Henrik. Let’s not be late!”

Given the general standards of punctuality in King’s College – which, though an excellent institute, is far more laid-back than its Zionese counterparts – they were in no danger of being so, and were among the first to arrive. Professor Marlborough, who was making notes on the blackboard with a piece of orange

chalk, nodded at them approvingly. Over the next fifteen minutes, the classroom was slowly filled to capacity, and the Professor, adjusting his spectacles, walked up to the podium.

“Good morning, my dear freshmen – and freshwomen, if that term is still popular with you,” he said, eliciting a chuckle from some of the students. “Today will be the first of many classes in which we will explore the literature of different parts of Terra, and examine their relation to the various religions of the world. Now, it’s important to understand some things about religious literature before we start dissecting it. First of all, how many of you would count yourself followers of a particular religion?”

About twenty hands or so – out of the class of fifty – were raised.

“Not bad at all,” he said, nodding slowly. “How many of you, though not believers, have read religious books, such as the *Gospel of the Infinity*, or the *Writings of the Prophets of the Deity*?”

Almost everyone raised their hands.

“Now,” the Professor said, picking up a book from the table, “it’s sometimes been said that to really understand a religious text, you need to belong to the religion in question. If you mean understanding in a spiritual sense, I guess that’s correct. But though they have undeniable spiritual value, *all* such works of literature were written – or, if you believe in divine inspiration, written down – by humans, who belonged to a particular culture or civilization. Therefore, there’s nothing to really stop one from studying them in human terms, and understanding the meanings they may have had for people of a particular time and place. Such understanding is what we’ll be dealing with this semester, of course. But before reaching such an understanding, we need to talk about some of the things that all such texts – whether they come from Itaria, or Zion, or the Republic – have in common. Let me begin with a simple example. Miss Aquary,” he said, looking kindly at Bernadette, “have you heard of the legend of Prince Ryle of Factoria?”

“Not really,” Bernadette said, apologetically. “I know he was an ally of Lady Fina’s in her fight against the Lord of the Pits, but I haven’t read any other stories about him.”

“Excellent. Now *historicity* is something extremely important in studying a religious text, because many such texts begin with a historical document, and add layers of symbolism or allegory on top of it. One of the most challenging tasks of the scholar is to peel away these layers – so as to speak – and extract the historical core or kernel beneath it. Now – Ah, yes, Mr. Khaleel,” he said, looking down at a tanned young man who was taking notes attentively in the last row. “Perhaps you have heard more about Prince Ryle?”

“Well, I know from stories that he was a great warrior – and a great womanizer,” the man said, with a chuckle. “The *Book of the Legends of Factoria* talks about his six wives and their magical abilities, though I’ve only read passages from it, since I don’t know Old Republican myself.”

“Excellent, excellent,” the Professor said, with a chuckle of his own. “I was hoping that one of you could say that. Now, it is almost certain that Prince Ryle was a true historical figure – the Factorian annals and

the Gyruian archives are both quite decisive on this point. But what does it mean when the legends speak of him as, ahem, a ladies' man? Yes, Mrs. Holder."

"Perhaps it's meant to symbolize the decadence of the Factorian and Meldian aristocracy at the time, especially written from the more conservative viewpoint of a Zionese or Itarian writer," Simone said, slowly. "The same legends also portray Prince Ryle as being illegitimate, perhaps with the same motive."

"Quite adequate," Professor Marlborough replied. "Now, what was the historical core? Did Prince Ryle really have a harem? Was he really a legitimate prince? Now, if we examine the earliest texts – which we will do later, but I'm just providing an example – we can answer the first question in the negative. Prince Ryle did have three wives – one Meldian who was a commoner, one from Gyru who was in all probability a noble, and Lady Flare's daughter, Freya. However, he married them one after the other. Now, let us examine how, from this historical kernel, the legend of Prince Ryle as a larger-than-life warrior and lover came to be..."

The rest of the lecture continued in this vein, until the gentle sound of a bell warned the Professor that he had only minutes left to conclude. "Well, that's it, then," he said, closing his book and making his farewells. "Next time, we'll tackle someone considerably more challenging than Prince Ryle, because her story is far older – and has gathered more layers of superstructure – than the Prince's. Good day to you all."

"Good day, Professor," the students replied, not quite in chorus, as they filed out. The Professor waited till the room was quite empty, then slowly walked along with the students, unobtrusively making his way towards Henrik.

"Ah, Mr. Spenson," he said. "May I have a word with the two of you, if you please? It will only take a moment."

"Why, certainly, Father," Henrik said, respectfully. "Are you free too, Bernadette?"

"Of course," she replied, as Marlborough led the two of them into an empty Political Science classroom.

"My young friends," he began, as the three of them sat down around a large table that was used in mock Parliamentary sessions, "I trust you have been doing some reading about the matters we discussed last time."

"I have, though I can't say that what I read has made much sense," Henrik admitted.

"I have also done a little research," Bernadette said, "and I think I understand what might have happened, but I cannot be sure."

"Very well, then. Let me summarize things for you. As you well know – this is elementary history, and I hope I'm not boring you – the Zion Empire, for reasons best known to itself, disbanded its mage battalions soon after their great war with the Varald ended, and they lost the War for Galvenian

Independence. Of course, it's often claimed that Emperor Linois did this at the instigation of the Pontiff of Itaria, Benevolent XII, who thought all forms of magic were dangerous and tainted with an aura of evil. However, the truth is more simple. Magical ability is rare – in fact, some scientists believe it is genetic – and it was no longer profitable for the Zion, in an age of modern warfare, to depend on its rarity and its vagaries. Even more to the point, many of the mages were under the patronage of powerful nobles at the Imperial court, and Linois – still smarting from the loss of Galvenia – feared a further loss of prestige if any of these locals should rebel. There are well-known historical precedents, of course – think of the story of the Viceroy of Malava, now immortalized in legend as the tale of the Twin Huntresses.”

“So the mages backed the wrong horse in a power struggle,” Henrik said, “That makes sense. But why would Linois cut off his nose to spite his own face? The mages are still powerful – if we believe the reports from the war front that make it to the papers, they are still holding off the Varald in our own day and age.”

“Because, my dear Mr. Spenson, Linois’ hold on the throne was weak. The fiasco of Johan’s rule – in which he had pleased almost nobody, except the Itarian nobles – was not something that his dukes were going to forgive easily, and Linois was young and wanted security; note the alacrity with which he signed a peace treaty with King Arlbert the First and Queen Mother Penelope, even travelling to Darington to sign it in person. He had strong ministers, who were quite anti-mage, and he acted under their guidance.”

“What became of the mages, then?” Bernadette asked, softly.

“Oh, they got by, Miss Aquary. Mages aren’t delicate flowers, you know. They existed in loose groupings or guilds, and those who were healers were still much in demand among the people. However, they did lose their privileges in Zionese society, and most of their lands. Some of them, discouraged by the situation, emigrated to other countries, or became mercenaries. It wasn’t until Saint Nealus founded the Order of the Journeymen that this came to a halt. But then, you’re a Saint Nealus girl yourself, so you probably could tell us this part of the story better than I could.”

“That’s too kind of you, Father,” Bernadette said, smiling. “He was a great diplomat, besides being a great leader. He had the ear of the Pontiff, who was already a close friend of his after he’d healed him from a long illness, and he had friends in the Zion court through whom he was able to convince the Emperor that the mages would do him no harm. Of course, these were the early days of the Commonwealth, war was a thing of the past, and the Zion Emperor, Friederich, was more willing than Linois to rehabilitate his former friends and allies. That’s how the Order came to be.”

“And that’s how it would have continued,” Marlborough said, “if the cracks hadn’t begun to appear when Samath was chosen as Nealus’ successor-elect. I sometimes wonder if Nealus was trying to prove his sainthood, when he picked a bad egg like Samath over men like Kaleb and Kevin. But Nealus was a family man by then, and he could be excused an error or two, I guess. Nobody is perfect.”

“I’ve heard of Kaleb, but who was Kevin?” Henrik asked.

“Ah, that’s a story that few have heard, my friends,” Father Marlborough replied, “and I will tell it to you, someday soon. But let us go on. During his final, fatal confrontation with Kaleb, it is said that Samath, using methods that are still unclear, managed to send a message to those of the Journeymen who were his followers, telling them to avenge his memory.”

“How is that possible?” Bernadette asked.

“Well, I’m no magician, Miss Aquary,” Marlborough replied, “but it’s been said that both light and dark magicians, when faced with situations of extreme danger, are able to project images of themselves to those who are truly loyal to him. Samath was no exception, I would say. The offshoot of this was that, after Nealus’ death, the Journeymen began to fragment. Horamin led them down a mystical path, exploring the idea of panentheism, if you know what that means.”

Bernadette laughed. “That was one of the questions we had as freshwomen at Saint Nealus’ in the Theology paper: ‘Explain the differences between pantheism and panentheism.’ I think I scored a B on that paper.”

“That’s good enough for me,” the Professor said. “Others remained loyal to Nealus, rejected Horamin’s leadership, and appointed Kevin as their leader after Nealus died. Unfortunately, after Kevin was killed by a disgruntled disciple of Samath, his son – who had some magical abilities, but nothing extraordinary – resigned from the order, and became a soldier in the Zion army. The remaining followers of Nealus were scattered all over Terra, including the Republic and Itaria. Horamin’s disciples, like Samath’s, began their old trick of currying favour with the nobles, and finally both of them found a home in the county – or rather the Duchy – of Inderness, in the Western part of Zion. Perhaps you could continue the story from here, Mr. Spenson.”

“Let me try, Professor,” Henrik said, as Bernadette patted his shoulder encouragingly. “The ‘official’ story of Inderness is that the Duke of Inderness, Bertrand, and some of his men – feeling that Emperor Friederich of Zion was weakening – struck out for independence. Given their military strength, their fortresses, and the number of mages who had found refuge there, it seemed like it would be a simple affair to an ambitious man like Bertrand. However, events soon proved him wrong. The mages did not rise in his support, for reasons that are still unclear. Friederich, who was still smarting after a border skirmish at Darington had earned him Commonwealth censure and trade sanctions from Itaria, was in a bad mood. And Bertrand’s armies, though numerous, were poorly managed. Historians called it the perfect storm – Friederich’s battalions sacked Inderness, burned down its two main strongholds, massacred most of the mages, and took Bertrand away in chains to Caledonia. Because he was a distant cousin of the Valtemonds, Friederich did not have him executed, but had him blinded and imprisoned for life.”

“Do you have any reason for disbelieving this history, young man?” Marlborough said, kindly.

“After what I learned about Thomas Perrin, I began to study older sources, including some of the documents in Mr. Regale’s library. Bernadette obtained other scrolls from her father and other members of the Healers’ Guild, who also had oral traditions about what happened at Inderness. What emerged was a quite different picture. And, as with our present situation, there was a strange mirror image of the unrest in Zion which took place in Itaria; in C.Y. 154, the Lifter’s Guild was suppressed by Pontiff Pious XV, on charges of idol worship. In C.Y. 157 – a year after Inderness – Pious re-issued a condemnation of the Guild, accusing them of political conspiracy and demonic conjuration, among other things.”

“Ah, it’s clever of you to have noted that, Mr. Spenson,” Marlborough said with a nod. “Continue.”

“From what I’ve learned,” Henrik continued, “Inderness was not primarily instigated by Bertrand. Instead, the mages staying with him had split into two factions – Horamin’s disciples, who were pro-Emperor, and Samath’s disciples, who were pro-Bertrand. It was the latter who promised that they would use their powers to grant Bertrand victory. There are stories – legendary ones, I’m afraid, that even Mr. Aquary told me were probably fictions – that his disciples sought a magical object or artifact, belonging to the Old Zionese religion, that would unlock ‘a power beyond the Pool’. Once they had this object, they planned to seize power both in Zion and Itaria, starting from Inderness.”

“Powers beyond the Pool...” Bernadette’s expression was pensive. “You know, Henrik, that brings me to something I’ve often wondered about. But go on, please.”

“According to an old Lifters’ Guild Manifesto, dating to C.Y. 200, which Mr. Regale owns, a group of mages also made a pact with the Guild in Itaria, promising them political power. At that time, the Guild was agitating for a democratic government to complement the Pontiff’s spiritual powers, and they welcomed all sorts of support. This gives credence to the idea that a group of mages was involved in a plan or conspiracy in both those countries – using Bertrand in Zion and the Lifters in Itaria – even if the magical artifact is a later legendary addition.”

“Well reasoned, Mr. Spenson,” Marlborough said.

“But why didn’t the plan succeed?” Bernadette asked. “Why was Inderness destroyed, and how did the Pontiff managed to overcome the Guild’s intrigues, if these mages were so powerful?”

“It would be tempting to say that the Infinity willed otherwise, Miss Aquary,” Marlborough said, wiping his glasses on the front of his robe. “But if we must look for human causes, we find a more interesting answer. Suppose the story of a magical object or artifact is really true. Suppose these mages – whether they really were followers of Samath or not – were seeking it, more than anything else. And suppose they failed in their search. Without it, they might have lacked the powers that they claimed before Bertrand, and they may have then disappeared into obscurity, leaving their unhappy allies to face the music.”

“But what kind of object could – Oh, I see,” Bernadette said, covering her mouth with her hand to hide her surprise. “The objects stolen from Saint Guibert’s Museum!”

“Exactly, Miss Aquary. Soon after the Guild was suppressed in C.Y. 157, there are records of new objects being placed in Saint Guibert’s, including the three I told you about – the flag, the shield, and the sword. The flag was, of course, a gift from Friederich, and is unremarkable. The shield has a fascinating history of its own, but I believe it was the third object – the so-called ‘Sword of Regret’ – that these mages sought then, and that the enemies of peace – whoever they are now – seek today.”

“What’s so special about that sword?” Henrik asked.

“Oh, that’s a long story, and I know someone who can tell it better than I can,” Father Marlborough replied. “Suffice it to say that it has a long history of being coveted by those greedy for power, and that I fear it is surfacing again now. In fact, you could say that all the troubles of our world today – the conflict with the Varald, and the rebellions that the Church faces – are related to a person, or persons, who are making use of that sword.”

“But that’s....Do you mean that the entire Zion-Varald War, as well as the civil war in Itaria, are being engineered by a group of mage conspirators?” Henrik said, incredulously. “I find that a little hard to swallow, Father.”

“They need not necessarily be the same mages, Mr. Spenson,” Marlborough said, calmly. “They could merely be a group who followed the same reasoning that we have.”

“But how do we know that the disciples of Samath wanted that same sword, Father Marlborough?” Bernadette asked. “Even my father, who had heard of these things from his ancestors, felt that the story of a powerful artifact was probably a later romantic legend.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to take my word for it now, Miss Aquary, because there is an interesting task that needs to be completed, and the two of you seem ideally qualified to help me complete it.”

“More reading, Father?” Henrik said, amiably.

“Not quite, Mr. Spenson, not quite. You see, I need you to go to Itaria for me.”

Bernadette looked at him, wide-eyed with surprise. “To Itaria? But why, Father?”

“That’s quite simple, my dear young lady,” Marlborough replied, drawing an old scroll from within the folds of his robe. “I want you to find that sword.”

“What news, men?” Captain Raienji said, with a smile, as the third of her scout troops returned to the camp. Her arm was in a sling, but she seemed unperturbed by this fact.

“Not too good, Captain,” the troop leader said, as he saluted her. “A good number of the Varald were trapped by our men at Acemel, and they fought like demons. While our Divisions were able to defeat them decisively, it seems that their resistance was a diversion, for some of them managed to escape the battle and proceed further southwest.”

“Southwest?” Freya Raienji laughed. “There’s nothing for them there, son.”

“Except Inderness, Freya,” Sergeant Burnfist said, with a harsh laugh of her own. “Perhaps they intend hiding in the ruined fortresses there, or doing a Bertrand. Can’t see why. Ever since Friederich the Wise crushed the traitors there, Inderness is just a village like any others, growing its crops and paying its taxes in season. They might find food there, but nothing else.”

“And yet, these Varald usually have a method to their madness, Rebecca,” the Captain replied. “How many of them made it across the lines?”

“Not too many, Captain,” the scout replied. “Perhaps twenty or twenty-five; not more than thirty. We’ve wired Taufel, which is the nearest garrison, to keep an eye out for them just in case.”

“I have a better idea. Rebecca, why not follow them?”

“Follow them?” Sergeant Burnfist said, staring at her friend. “What *is* bubbling under that helmet of yours, Freya?”

“Think for yourself, Rebecca,” Freya Raienji said, with all the composure of an examiner testing a promising student.

“All right,” Sergeant Burnfist said, irritably. “They probably have reinforcements there.”

“But Inderness is peaceful, as you pointed out yourself, Rebecca,” Freya answered, closing her eyes. “After crushing the rebellion there, Friederich repopulated the area with farmers and tradesmen, and the area is not even ruled over by a Viceroy, to prevent another Bertrand from arising; they answer directly to the military garrison at Taufel, even after a hundred and forty-four years of peace.”

“Then it makes no sense, unless....No, it’s impossible. Though we’ve both heard rumours of the Varald sending reinforcements by sea, we’d know by now if they had really done it. And even if they set sail on the very first day those stories began, they’d take time to sail that far south, and even longer to march inland to Inderness. They couldn’t be heading to meet reinforcements *or* allies.”

“Rebecca, I’m disappointed in you,” Freya said, shaking her head in disapproval. “You’re a fire mage – a greater mage than me, frankly – and you still don’t see it.”

“See what?” Rebecca said, comprehension slowly dawning on her.

“Why, that those twenty men may not be ordinary soldiers at all, but mages.”

“The Varald have mages?” Rebecca snorted. “Freya, are you sure that sniper didn’t hit your head, rather than your shoulder?”

“Very amusing, Sergeant,” Freya said, laughing. “Granted that there are no mages born in the Directorate, why should they not make use of a few mercenaries? After all, even Friederich the Wise didn’t exterminate the entire Order of the....”

“Freya!” Rebecca’s eyes widened in horror. “Why on Terra are you even thinking about...” Her voice trailed off, as if the thought that had occurred to her was too dreadful to be put into words.

“Reason it out, Rebecca. That’s what I’ve been doing out here in between battles – thinking hard. Why should the Varald choose this particular moment to attack us, when it serves no positive purpose? Either they have a hidden purpose, or they are being influenced by someone else. Add the war in Itaria, and it all makes horrible sense. Besides, think of the assassinations of Koketsu, of Wilhelm, and even of that Varald idiot, Andreyev. Jansen stopped just short of accusing us – the Zion mages, that is – of that last murder. What if Jansen, donkey that he is, was right? Why is there so much secrecy about the exact manner of those deaths?”

“G – Granted that what you say is right, Freya,” Rebecca replied, still shaken, and stammering for the first time since she had been a child of six, “what would they w – want in Inderness? Friederich purged the place, and we mages know that anything of importance was sent away to Itaria...”

“Itaria is at war now, too.”

“Still, even if they want s – something from the ruins of Inderness, why seek it there? In Itaria, perhaps, but.....No! Oh, no, Freya....please tell me....”

“I’m afraid I can’t, Rebecca,” Freya said, placing an arm around her friend’s shoulders, and speaking more gently. “I’ve suspected this ever since they withdrew troops from the Eastern front and began pushing further on the west, but I couldn’t be *sure* until now. There’s only one thing they could possibly want in Inderness or its environs, and that is...”

“Don’t say it,” Rebecca pleaded. “If they could possess such a thing...”

“They do not yet, my friend, for you and I are still standing, as are the brave armies of Zion and Galvenia. Come, Rebecca. Remember that you are a Burnfist, and the daughter of a long line of brave and foolhardy Burnfists. Stop trying to imitate that nice Galvenian princess you met on your cruise, and think like a soldier. The men at Taufel may still stop them, especially if we give them a little help.”

“I’m coming with you, Freya,” Rebecca said, firmly, a little ashamed of her recent panic.

“Ah, my foolhardy friend,” Freya said, giving her an affectionate slap on the back. “You’re not coming with me, I’m afraid. I have to stay here, because a Captain cannot desert her troops. But you are under me, and I can command you – along with thirty of our mages, and say fifty men...”

“A hundred,” Rebecca said, with a grin slowly spreading over her face.

“Seventy-five.”

“Eighty, Freya,” Rebecca said, her grin widening.

“Lazy girl,” Freya chided her, in a maternal tone. “Have it your way. Take eighty men of the 16th Battallion, and thirty of our mages from the 103rd, and head straight for Inderness. Remain there until I send orders to Taufel for you to return. You know what you’re looking for, don’t you?”

Rebecca nodded.

“Find it, then, and guard it. If you cannot, destroy it. That should be easy for someone whose fire-wielding skills make even a Raienji nervous.”

“Destroy it!”

“There may be no alternative, Rebecca. If the traditions of our guild are weighed against the lives of thousands of our citizens, I would have to follow Horamin’s advice, and choose the latter good.”

“Horamin!” Rebecca said, contemptuously. “What does Horamin know of...”

“Far more than we both do,” Freya said, kindly. “Now take your eighty, and your thirty, and stop dithering. You’ve got a mission to complete, Sergeant. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Captain, ma’am,” Rebecca said, saluting and drawing her sword. “The hunt is on!”

“Sir Cornelius, may I have a word with you?”

Though he was at the end of a long day – a day spent painstakingly reviewing reports from his agents, discussing the fine details of the Republican mission with Sheffield, and attending to reports of suspected bandit activity from Lorean and Glendale – Cornelius Fairfax’s expression brightened as he beheld the newcomer at his door. Despite his forty-seven years, he still had an eye for a pretty girl, and he was in no way averse to having a word with one.

Especially, he thought, when this is the Crown Princess of Galvenia I’m dealing with. How a gnome like Arlbert managed to father someone like her is a miracle, even by the Infinity’s standards. It must be all those good Traznov genes of my cousin Katarina’s, bless her.

“Most certainly, Your Highness,” Fairfax replied, smiling as he studied her appearance carefully. She was dressed simply and tastefully in a purple gown, her red hair drawn back rather severely from her forehead, and she wore no ornament, except the sun-and-moon pendant that the ill-fated Kievan had sent her, months ago. “How can this poor subject help you? Please have a seat.”

“Thank you, Sir Cornelius,” Carranya replied. “I have some questions to ask of you, not only because you are a kinsman of mine, but because you are discreet.”

Fairfax leaned forward, an expression of curiosity on his face. “Discreet, Your Highness?”

“I mean, simply, that you know how to keep certain things to yourself, and not circulate them unless such circulation would be expedient.”

“If that is your definition, Princess, I am the very soul of discretion,” Fairfax said, a little pompously.

“Now, what questions do you speak of?”

“First things first, Sir Cornelius. You are, I understand, a scientist by training, and even worked at the Museum in Lorean before moving into the administration, am I right?”

“Indeed I am,” Fairfax said.

“Would you perhaps, then,” Carranya said, drawing an object from her handbag, and placing it in front of him, “tell me something about this device? A friend of mine from the Republic owns it, though she did not know what its function was.”

“You speak of that dressmaker of yours,” Fairfax said, kindly. “Now, a gadget like this is quite interesting, because we of Galvenia have not yet been able to duplicate it. It is, of course, a small sound transmitter, meant to be worn by someone who is receiving instructions or orders about a task. It works on the same principle as the loudspeaker, but it requires a miniaturization of the electric circuitry that is, at the moment, beyond our grasp.”

“And what sort of a device could transmit sound to it?” Carranya asked.

“Oh, a lot of things, Princess,” Fairfax said, in a lecturing tone. “An ordinary microphone, for one. But of course, our brethren in Zion and the Republic have figured out a way to create a smaller microphone, one that could receive even a whisper, amplify it, and send it to the device you have, using ordinary radio waves. Such a device would, of course, be useful if two people wanted to communicate in relative privacy or secrecy, or if the giving of loud instructions could be disruptive. Our Itarian friends buy a lot of these from Zion, to train themselves in becoming better preachers, not that it works too well.” He chuckled.

“How far away would such a device have to be, Sir Cornelius?” Carranya said, gently.

“Oh, that’s a good question, Princess. Whether you used an ordinary microphone, or the small ones that we don’t currently own, their range is limited by the low power of the receiver. At best, you could transmit from one end of a medium-sized town, and reach the other, provided there wasn’t an electrical storm going on.”

“A medium-sized town, such as Davenport?” The Princess smiled.

“Oh, Davenport’s quite large, Your Highness. Say half the size of Davenport – a large village like Trinden, or a town like Alton, for example. It wouldn’t work over any longer a range than that.”

“Thank you very much,” Carranya said, adopting her most formal tone. “Next, have you received any reports – intelligence reports, I mean – pertaining to the province of Inderness in Zion, or its whereabouts?”

Fairfax frowned. “Inderness? Not that I – wait a minute.” He shuffled through the papers on his desk and lifted one out of the pile, triumphantly. “Ah, here you are, Your Highness. We had reports from our men in Zion, two days ago, stating that a group of Varald soldiers had broken away from their division, and had headed towards Inderness. Finding this suspicious, the Zion officer – a Captain Raienji – sent some of the Zion infantry in pursuit. Their Intelligence service marked this report as high priority, but that’s probably because the Zionese are paranoid about Inderness, since that ruckus two centuries ago. Why do you ask, Princess?”

“Simply because I have reason to believe, Sir Cornelius,” Carranya said, firmly, “that anything involving that particular region could be important. I’m sorry if I cannot be more definite, but if you remember the Zion agent who was here...”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Wolfgang Striker – or William, as he preferred to call himself,” Fairfax said, approvingly. “Quite a nice young man.”

“Mr. Striker was also of the opinion that something was afoot in Inderness. Sir Cornelius, do we have any men there?”

“At Inderness? I’m afraid not, Your Highness. Our Rough Riders are still holding Kanschloss, under Sir Prescott; our new recruits are being deployed on a mission to the Republic, as you know, since your august father had an audience with Captain Samuels just before the men left on their furlough. The rest of our men have not yet been deployed. But surely, this is Sheffield’s province, not mine. I am merely assisting him.”

“Would it be possible, Sir Cornelius,” Carranya said, gently, “to deploy some of our own troops there, just in case the Zion are right? This may be important.”

“I’m afraid that will have to go through Sheffield, Your Highness,” Fairfax said, apologetically, “but I can always put in a word with him. However, Sheffield’s a cautious man, as you well know.”

Carranya laughed. “Indeed, Sir Cornelius.”

“Well, then, it would be – shall I say – easier for me to convince Sheffield if I had something more than a Zion report, and a tip from a Zion agent, to go on. If you could provide me with something of the sort, perhaps...”

“Perhaps I can, Sir Cornelius,” she said, lightly. “And now, I must return to the Palace before Mother starts worrying. Thank you for your time, and I hope we can resume this conversation someday.”

“That would be a delightful prospect, Princess,” Fairfax said, bowing respectfully as she left the room.

“Alphonse,” Sigmund Regale called out, as he observed the literary light of Davenport walking by, apparently studying the pavement with intense concentration, “a word with you if I may.”

Alphonse Spenson, hastily stuffing his notebook into a pocket of his shabby blazer, scowled. “Sigmund? What ho, indeed. What do you have to say to me?”

“Could we discuss this somewhere more privately?” Sigmund said, looking in the direction of Casa Regale.

“How about my place?” Alphonse said, briefly. “It’s not as grandiose as yours, but it’ll do.”

Sigmund nodded, and the two men walked together silently until they reached the Spenson residence. Unlocking the door, Alphonse sat down heavily on one of the chairs, and pointed out another one, which seemed rather dusty, to Sigmund.

“Now speak up, Sigmund,” Alphonse said. “You wealthy men may have all the leisure in the world to quarrel with your wives, but the real world gives us no pause. Be brief.”

Sigmund winced. He knew that Alphonse, through some mysterious process, kept himself well informed about all the local gossip in Davenport, but he had not expected him to be so offensive (or unjust, as even Emily would have conceded.) He began to speak, a little defensively. “Now, Alphonse, there’s no need to sharpen your wit at my expense. Save that for your next novel.”

“Ah, Mr. Regale wants to be immortalized in one of my works, I see,” Alphonse Spenson said, sarcastically. “No dice, I’m afraid.”

“That’s not quite it,” Sigmund said, striving hard to keep his tone polite. “Now, I know us old men shouldn’t interfere too much in the affairs of the young...”

“Speak for yourself, Sigmund,” Alphonse said, sharply. “You may be happy to let your child go gadding around, and making a spectacle of herself with that bow and arrow, but my boy listens to what I say. He knows he’s too old to go playing off in a sandbox any more.”

“Leave Lavie out of this, Alphonse,” Sigmund said, sternly – for he was more than a little proud, as we have already seen, of his daughter’s archery skills, and did not care to hear them dismissed in so cavalier a manner. “In fact, I’ve come to talk to you about your son.”

“Has he been bothering you with requests for library books, then?” Alphonse said, mildly surprised.

“He’s free to use my library as much as he wants to,” Sigmund said, “and he has been studying a lot of history.”

“History?” Alphonse made a gesture of contempt. “History, like Italian, is a dead subject. If Henrik intends to become a historian, despite my advice, the more fool him.”

“Alphonse, let me speak, please,” Sigmund said, impatience writ large on his face, though his tone was still courteous. “You and I have known each other for quite a while; in fact, it’s something of a tradition in Davenport that I’m the first to buy a copy of your novels, when they’re released here. When *The Discretion of Silence* was nominated for a Commonwealth Literary Award, I championed its cause, not out of local patriotism, but because I believed it was a good book.”

“A man cannot live on one copy, Sigmund,” Alphonse Spenson replied. “But I’m not blaming you, Sigmund. I know you’ve done your own bit as far as helping me is concerned, and you’re not to blame if most of our citizens have sadly plebeian minds. I am prepared to hear you out.”

Sigmund Regale heaved a sigh of relief. “Actually, it’s quite a simple matter. I’m not one to follow the antics of the young folks of Davenport, but I have a young daughter, as you pointed out yourself. I’m here to intercede, if that’s the correct term, on behalf of a friend of hers.”

“Ryan Eramond?” Alphonse said. “Look here, Sigmund, I know you’re a friend, in the broad sense of the term. But don’t presume to dictate terms to me where politics are concerned. If you’re going to ask me to let Henrik enlist, just because Ryan Eramond wants to be a failure like his grandfather....”

“A failure?” Sigmund looked shocked.

“Violence, especially legalized violence, is the ultimate failure of the human race, and all those who aid or abet it in some fashion are failures,” Alphonse said stubbornly. “An armed gang is an armed gang, even if it calls itself the Galvenian Royal Army.”

Sigmund did not care to debate the point, even if he had allowed Lavie to donate her birthday gifts to the Army, and had himself made a large donation in his name and Emily’s. “Let’s agree to disagree on that. Actually, I’m here to speak about someone quite different, someone whom you know, I’m sure. Bernadette Aquary.”

“B – Oh, that ridiculous girl,” Alphonse said, annoyed. “I knew she was trouble from the moment she came to my house asking for money. Just seeing that absurd hat of hers is enough to give me writer’s block for an hour.” He scowled. “It’s a pity I don’t write comedies, or she’d be a character in my next book.”

“Henrik doesn’t share your opinion,” Sigmund pointed out.

“The more fool him, again,” Alphonse said, slowly. “Look here, Sigmund, what business is this of yours?”

“Bernadette is a good friend of my daughter’s, Alphonse,” Sigmund said, trying to sound persuasive. “She’s an intelligent, good-natured, well-read young woman. I’ve had her as a guest at our home more than once, and I’ve been favourably impressed with her, too. You know I’m not an easy man to impress. Even if she isn’t your cup of tea, why cause her pain?”

“I cause her pain?” Alphonse said, with a look of surprise.

“Well, when you call her poor, plain and pedantic to her face, as well as to many of our fellow citizens, and then find it a laughing matter, I call it a deplorable lack of etiquette, as well as an execrable bit of alliteration,” Sigmund said, heatedly. “And when you write a letter to the editor of the *Davenport Herald* attacking King’s College for admitting ‘young women with limited intelligence and alien values’ through scholarships, you make yourself look like an idiot. Everyone in Davenport knows who you’re speaking about. This is childish, old fellow. You’re entitled to your views, but I’ll trouble you not to trumpet them all over Davenport, and to keep them to yourself, as a gentleman ought to. And if Henrik cares for her, so be it. He’s an intelligent young man, and he knows what he’s doing.”

“Those are not views, Sigmund,” Alphonse said, with something implacable in his expression. “Those are facts.”

“Sweet Infinity, Alphonse, spare me that,” Sigmund replied. “It’s not like you married money yourself, you know. And who died and made you a judge at the Miss Galvenia contest?”

Alphonse’s face seemed on the verge of falling for a moment, but he kept his composure, and spoke stiffly. “It looks like you’re getting sentimental in your old age, Sigmund,” he said, closing his eyes.

“Perhaps I am,” Sigmund said. “What of it?”

“Ah, but you Regales don’t go in for sentiment, Sigmund. Like father, like son, is it not, old bean?”

Sigmund flushed at the familiar address, but did not react. “Genetics is an inexact science, so they say,” he replied lightly. “Now, will you give me your word that you will leave that girl alone? Why kill a Spore with a hammer?”

“Sigmund, you’re a poor diplomat,” Alphonse said. “I could believe you could show such indignation over, say, your wife or your child, but why kill *me* with a hammer over a girl you hardly know? No, Sigmund, this isn’t moral indignation you’re showing – it’s guilt.”

“Guilt?” Sigmund spluttered. “Alphonse, you’re out of line here.”

“You’re out of line for asking me to curb my free speech in the first place, but let me finish. Galvenia is a free country, Sigmund. I am free to speak as I will, as long as no laws are broken. If you, or your young friend, are offended by what I say, hard luck. But let me return to what I was saying earlier. What are *you* trying to hide, Sigmund? By accusing *me* of attacking the innocent, what are *you* absolving yourself of? Have you, perhaps, harmed that girl’s mother or father through your business practices...”

“Ridiculous,” Sigmund said, recovering his temper. “The girl’s mother is dead, and her father is a traditional healer and herbalist. They have never had any business dealings with me. But if you wish to know the truth, her father once cured my child when she was very ill indeed. Is there no room in your world-view, my intellectual friend, for gratitude? For kindness?”

“Oh, this is ironic,” Alphonse said, with a harsh laugh. “The founder of Regale Enterprises, the son of Rudolph Regale, lecturing *me* on kindness?”

“Kindly leave my father out of this discussion,” Sigmund replied, calmly.

“I see no reason to,” Alphonse said, with equal calm. “You know, we writers take a number of odd jobs to supplement our incomes, especially when our rich patrons turn out to pay more in words than in dollars, and we have families to support.” Sigmund frowned, but said nothing. “Well, I’ve been a court reporter in my time, and I remember an interesting action, brought some years ago by a citizen of Hartridge, against your august father. If I remember correctly...”

“Flaming fires!” Sigmund’s glasses fell off his nose, and he hastened to replace them. “How did you...”

“Like my son, I do my homework, you see,” Alphonse said, unpleasantly. “Now, if you have nothing more to say, this conversation is over. Leave me free, and I will show you that I can be discreet. Or else...”

“You’ll regret this,” Sigmund said, angrily, as he stormed out of the Spenson residence. Alphonse waited till he was gone, locked his front door, and knocked on the door to his room. It opened, revealing a man in a cloak – a man we had met earlier, in the company of his late master, Lugner.

“Good work, Spenson,” he said, with a cold smile. “I had my suspicions, but you helped me confirm them. I think this has worked out quite satisfactorily for both of us.”

“Must you wear that ridiculous costume?” Alphonse said. “After all, we are here in Davenport.”

“I suppose I am merely attached to my travelling garments,” the man said, lowering his hood. “You see, Alphonse, I have reasons of my own for wanting those two kept apart, or at least kept in unhappy suspense. They are dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” Alphonse raised his eyebrows. “My son isn’t dangerous, and you know it, old chap. Don’t be absurd.”

“Even an innocent man can be dangerous when he blunders into something,” the cloaked man replied, with a smile. “If your son stays away from Bernadette Aquary, he stands to gain. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment in Lorean, so I must go.” He handed Alphonse an envelope, then left, silently and unobtrusively, disappearing down the path into the woods.

"I don't like this," Alphonse said to himself, opening the envelope and counting its contents carefully – there were seven thousand-dollar notes within – before tossing it casually on his table. "I promised Barbara that I'd take care of Henrik, and though I've been harsh with the boy, it's all been for his good. High grades, physical prowess, a place at King's College. I can't let him throw it away for the sake of calf love, but I wish it didn't have to be this way. Not through this man. And now I've gone and annoyed Sigmund, of all people."

He sat down at his desk, trying to resume Chapter Nineteen of *The Unholy Book*, but inspiration refused to come.

"And the damned man's given me writer's block, too," he said, ruefully. "I wonder what he knows about Sigmund. Maybe, once Henrik realizes that I've got his best interests at heart, I'll talk it over with both of them, and apologize. Maybe. I don't want his money, and I don't care about his cloak-and-dagger stuff. It's unbecoming, for a man of his age."

With a sigh, he took up his pen, and began to write again, though the words came only with difficulty.

It was the fifth day of Ryan's furlough – an unexpected bonus during which he felt obliged, both out of affection and out of a strange sense of guilt – to spend as much time as he could with Marianne. On this particular day, he had a perfectly valid third reason for doing so – the carnival had come to town, and this time, for a noble purpose. Half the proceeds, old Charney announced, would be donated to the Galvenian War Fund, and there was an automatic discount for all enlisted men, as well as fresh recruits. Strangely, when Marianne had heard of this, her first reaction had been a curious disdain.

"Let's not, Ryan," she had said, shaking her head in one of those gestures that Ryan found irresistibly attractive.

"Why not?" he had replied, confused.

"Too much war talk," she had said, regretfully. "Besides, we'll probably bump into that housekeeper of Lavie Regale's, and that bronze statue of hers..."

"Come on, Marianne," Ryan had replied. "What have you got against poor Carmen, anyway?"

"Poor Carmen?" She had turned on him, her eyes flashing. "What about *me*, Ryan? She has a home, a good income, and a job that involves helping a spoiled girl of seventeen to put her clothes on!"

And Ryan, in the interests of peace, had wisely decided to drop the topic. However, as the day of the Carnival drew near, he had been able to convince her that attending it might actually be pleasurable, and she had yielded. Ryan greeted her acquiescence with a mixture of relief and enthusiasm – relief that his persuasive powers had not waned completely, and enthusiasm at what would, presumably, be a most enjoyable day.

He'd worn his new jacket – a 'parting gift' from his mother, which was coming in increasingly handy given the coldness of the approaching winter – and had just finished purchasing what was, in his opinion, a very lovely bouquet indeed. Whistling to himself, he began to walk towards the open fields outside the city, where the tents had just been erected, thinking carefully about how he should answer any of Marianne's questions...

"Hey, Ryan! Taking advantage of a veteran's discount, huh?" a voice called out, cheerfully. Ryan sighed, and turned around.

"Hello, Lavie," he said, warily, trying unsuccessfully to conceal his bouquet behind him. However, he noted, with a sigh of relief, that Lavie wasn't alone.

"Oh, hi there, Bernadette," he said, with a grin. "So are you girls visiting the Carnival too?"

"No, silly," Lavie said, with an earnest look. "I'm just taking Bernadette shopping for some clothes. She has to go on a long journey, and she needs to get ready for it, so she's taken the afternoon off, with the permission of her professor. Besides, I promised I'd get her a new outfit for her birthday, but I sort of forgot, and she couldn't get away from college that day!"

"A long journey?" Ryan said, perplexed. "But you guys are at King's College, right? Is this some sort of field trip?"

"Not exactly, Ryan," Bernadette said, with a smile. "Professor Marlborough, who teaches us Religious Literature at college, has an assignment for a few of us in Itaria, including Henrik and I. It's not quite course work, though we will be given credit for completion." It seemed to Ryan that she was choosing her words carefully, as if anxious not to give away too much. "I wish I could tell you more, but Henrik wanted that privilege for himself. He'll be coming to town briefly tomorrow, and he asked me to give you this note." She took a small piece of paper from her handbag, and handed it to Ryan. "Dear Henrik. He worries too much, sometimes."

"You've got him right," Ryan replied. "Henrik's doubts have always been his major failing."

"And would yours be over-confidence, Mr. Eramond?" Lavie said, with a wink. "It's not like we haven't heard about your mission, you know."

Ryan groaned. "Lavie, that's supposed to be confidential information! Who on Terra could have..."

"Oh, the papers are full of it, Ryan," Lavie said, with a laugh. "'Galvenian Recruits Sent on Mission to Fulton', and stuff of that sort. Let's face it, you're a local hero once more!" The two girls beamed at him, something that Ryan found gratifying. *They may be silly at times, but their hearts are in the right place*, he thought.

"Oh, well," he said, with a grin, "we do have freedom of the Press in Galvenia, more's the pity."

“Besides,” Lavie went on, “the Princess told us about it, back on my birthday. We didn’t know you’d be one of the team, but she’d heard of the mission already.”

That makes sense, Ryan thought. After all, Lavie and Carranya get on surprisingly well. Perhaps Bernadette keeps the peace between them. He chuckled.

“Is there something you find amusing, Ryan?” Bernadette asked, innocently.

“Er, nothing,” Ryan said. “Just, um, preoccupied. It’s the first time I’m leaving Galvenia, after all. Though I’m sure it’ll be a piece of cake; otherwise, they wouldn’t be sending an inexperienced bunch like us out there! We’ll probably face more dangers from the desert than from any Varald soldiers, that’s for sure!”

“Be careful, all the same, Ryan,” Lavie said, looking at him intently. “From what Carranya told me, it’s still going to be....quite dangerous.” She stumbled over the last two words, and flushed. “Be careful, all right?”

“Oh, I’ll probably be one of the men carrying the Marines’ baggage and weapons, or something,” Ryan said, lightly. *Darn it, Carranya, why did you have to tell her that?* he thought. *Any moment now, she’ll be telling me not to go...*

Lavie laughed, and the tension that had slowly built up was dissipated. “Aw, come on, I’m sure it won’t be *that* bad!” she said. “I wonder what the Colonel would say, if they heard you were carrying baggage!”

“He’d probably tell me that it builds character, or something of that sort,” Ryan said, heaving a sigh of relief. “But actually, the Galvenian Army’s not a bad place to be, as long as you’re in training. After the Colonel’s gym, the Academy’s not that hard a place.”

“Henrik often speaks about the Colonel with admiration,” Bernadette said, approvingly. “He told me the two of you were his prize pupils.”

“Do you know we used to call Ryan ‘Sir Cool’ because of his exploits, Bernadette?” Lavie said, with a laugh.

“Oh, he’ll certainly pick up a knighthood one day, as long as he’s careful,” Bernadette replied.

“At least it’ll be a deserved title, and not one like Sir Chucklehead’s!” Lavie said, firmly.

“Sir Chucklehead?” Ryan said, amused.

“Sir Prescott T. Chuselwock, I believe, is his proper name,” Bernadette said, with mock respect, “but it soothes Lavie’s feelings to give him an alternate title, and I must say I approve.”

“Hmph!” Ryan said. “That guy’s a twit. How *he* ever got to command the Rough Riders, don’t ask me. In fact, there are rumours among us privates that he’s mismanaged his men, and has actually lost a few of them, but isn’t making it public because he knows that Minister Sheffield will have him for breakfast if

he does. Good one, Lavie.” *And it’s actually quite a funny title, even though Lavie came up with it! The next time I meet him, maybe I should try it out,* he thought. *It’ll be a hit with the boys back at the Academy!*

“I agree with you, Ryan,” Lavie said, nodding vigorously. “I’ve had the ‘fortune’ – if you could call it that – of meeting him once, and it’s *not* something I’m eager to repeat! Huh! He thinks he’s the Infinity’s gift to women, as Daddy said. I think Frumple the Scarecrow is more handsome than him, honestly.”

Ryan could not keep from bursting out with laughter at that comparison, and only stopped when Bernadette inquired who Frumple was; upon hearing the answer, she also joined in the merriment.

“Oh, dear,” Lavie said. “Poor Frumple. I think I may have hurt his feelings by saying that.”

“Maybe Frumple could beat Sir Prescott in a sword-fight,” Bernadette said, helpfully. “That would cheer him up.”

“You two are priceless, you know?” Ryan said, and at that moment – with his nerves having recently been on edge, between Marianne and his mission – he honestly meant it. “Well, let me go ahead to the Carnival and see if I can make the most of my furlough. Enjoy your shopping, girls.”

“Have fun, Ryan,” Lavie said, rather wistfully, then brightened. “We’re both very proud of you, you know. We believe in you. And when your ship leaves, we’ll both be there to see you off!”

“Make sure you wrap up warmly then, Lavie,” Ryan said. “No point catching a cold, you know.”

“Ah, you sound just like Mom!” Lavie said, as the two of them waved goodbye.

Feeling a little lighter for some reason, Ryan headed to the Carnival, where he was soon joined by Marianne, and with whom he had quite an enjoyable time...

“Aw, Gran, not again!” Emily said. “Just when it was getting really mysterious...”

“You’ve been silent for quite a while, darling,” Lavie said, patting her granddaughter on the head. “Am I boring you?”

“No way, Gran!” Emily said. “I want to know how it all ends! Who put the microphone on the Princess’ robe? And what did Grandpa do on his mission? What about your friend Bernadette? I want to hear about them, Gran, not about Marianne!”

“I wish I could do that, dear, but you see, it’s all connected,” Lavie explained. “At that time, Marianne was an important part of Grandpa’s life, and sadly, she also had to face her share of danger. So I’ll spare you the details of what they did at the Carnival, but on their way home....”

“It’s been quite a day, hasn’t it, my Marianne?” Ryan said, as they held hands and walked back towards Davenport.

“Ryan, could we stop at the park for a while?” Marianne said, with a wink. “There’s....something important I need to tell you.”

Argh, Ryan thought. *In for a cent, in for a dollar*. “Sure,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant. “We have all the time in the world, darling.”

A little later, they were at Davenport Park, sitting beside each other on the old log that held so many shared memories for them.

“So what’s up, Marianne?” Ryan said. “Anything in particular?”

Marianne’s expression suddenly grew grave. “Ryan....it is true, isn’t it? That you’re sailing out to the Republic with the Army?”

“Yes, Marianne,” Ryan replied, squeezing her hand. “I already told you about it, didn’t I? They want us to attack a group of factories in Fulton, where weapons are being made for the Varald. If we can destroy them, the war could be over in less than a year. Do you realize what that means?”

“If you succeed,” Marianne said, her voice trembling, “it means....it means we can spend the rest of our lives together, right? No more war?”

“No more,” Ryan said, emphatically. “It’s why I’m keen on going myself. People are dying every day in Zion...”

Marianne waved the Zion away with a dismissive gesture. “Ryan, don’t change the topic. I understand what it means. But what if....what if something goes wrong?”

“Look, we’ve been over this already,” Ryan said, patiently. “I’m a private. We wear goofy orange uniforms, and pick up the bags of the Marines and the non-commissioned officers. We’re not exactly front-line material, you know. I’m more likely to be mugged by a bandit here in Davenport than shot down in battle, if you judge by the kind of attacks we’ve been having lately.”

“Ryan! That’s not funny,” Marianne said, with a nervous expression on her face at the word ‘bandits’.

“Look, you’re a soldier. This is war. Won’t the Varald try to defend their factories?”

“If we time it right, they *won’t*,” Ryan said, firmly. “Now, neither you nor I is a military strategist, sweetheart, so let’s not worry about....”

“And think of me here alone, Ryan,” Marianne said. “What if Mother comes back? What if she gets custody of me, and I have to go live in Trinden?”

“Then I’ll come to Trinden and talk to your mother,” Ryan said, kindly. “If I’m signing up to fight the Varald, your mother can’t be such a terror.”

“Ryan, please...can’t you just ask for another mission?” she pleaded. “Tell them you’ll go for the next one. I can’t bear the thought of you going away to the Republic...”

Ryan’s fingers crept nervously around his pendant, and he placed an arm around her shoulders...

“Gran!” Emily protested.

“Well, that’s what he did, dear,” Lavie said, with a chuckle. “I’m not making it up.”

“Very funny, Gran,” Emily replied, making a face. “Are they going to kiss again?”

“Not quite, dear...”

“I’m sorry, Marianne,” he said, kindly. “I love you, truly. But I’m an Eramond, and when I signed up, I made a vow to serve Galvenia, and the Commonwealth.” *God, I sound as corny as that novel I wrote in the eleventh grade,* he thought. *Why do words sound so – so insufficient at a time like this?* “I can’t honourably back out now. I must....do my duty.”

“There *is* a way, Ryan,” Marianne said, wiping one eye surreptitiously with her handkerchief.

“I’m not a deserter, Marianne,” Ryan said. “Orders are orders, in the Army.”

“I’m not asking you to desert, Ryan,” Marianne said, softly.

“Then what do you mean?” Ryan said, bewildered.

“Ryan, marry me,” Marianne said, bowing her head.

“Gran!” Emily said, with a grimace that caused her grandmother to laugh heartily. “Are you making this up on purpose to tease me, or something?”

“Well, I know how you feel, Emily,” Lavie said, with another wink. “I felt exactly the same way at that time. But things didn’t quite go the way Marianne expected...”

Ryan stared at her, open-mouthed.

“What did you just say?” he exclaimed, his arm falling away from her and hanging limply at his side.

“If we were married...”

“Marianne, I’m not yet of age! And neither are you, for that matter. How could you even...”

“But don’t you want to, Ryan?” Marianne said, with a hurt expression on her face.

“Of course I do,” Ryan said, slowly and nervously. “Someday. Eventually. After this crazy war is over. When we’re both old enough. I mean, I don’t even have a job, Marianne! I live with my dad and mum! What do you think they’d say about it?”

“You could always get a job with Mr. Sloen, or with Hughburt,” Marianne said, softly. “Look, Ryan, I’ve thought about this seriously. If you’re married, the Army *can’t* send you overseas. You’d get a deferment.”

“I don’t *want* a deferment, Marianne,” Ryan said, looking at her intently. “I’m eighteen, I’m fit, and I’m ready to do what my country asks me to do, even if it’s dirty work. Could you please try to understand that?”

“But don’t you care about....about us?” Marianne said, looking shocked in turn.

Ryan took her hand in his. “Of course, Marianne,” he said, “of course. You know there’s nothing I’d love more than to be with you, for the rest of our lives. But there are some things that are more important.” An idea suddenly occurred to him. “Think of the future, Marianne. Do you want our children to live in a world that is at war, where the Varald are trying to invade us, and even step onto our soil to murder our leaders? We have to fight, to make the world safe for them....”

“Please, Ryan,” Marianne said, clinging to his arm. “We have so little time left, and I know this mission of yours will end badly – I feel it in my heart. Stay with me, Ryan, and forget this war. Marry me.”

For a long moment, looking into her eyes, Ryan hesitated.

Perhaps she’s right, Ryan said. After all, even Lavie said it would be dangerous, and she had it from the Princess. And even Lieutenant Reckland wasn’t happy about it. Heck, I’ve done enough. We captured Kodenai, I saved the Princess. Marianne needs me now, more than ever. Should I...

Unbidden, a voice seemed to come to his ears – a familiar, comforting voice.

Always do the right thing, boy.

G-Grandpa? Ryan thought, helplessly, as his hand remained joined to Marianne’s. Help me, Grandpa. I – I don’t know what to do. I want to serve. I’m not a coward. But she needs me...

And then, strangely, another voice – familiar, but unsettling – came to his memory.

Ryan, I believe in you!

Lavie? Ryan was suddenly angry. Go away, Lavie. When did you ever say that to me, anyway?

Then he remembered.

The duel with that idiot, Juno. She didn't want me to fight, but when I insisted, she stood in my corner all the way through, even when Juno wounded me. She could have walked away, but she stayed till the end. I guess she – really meant what she said. She's always – sort of hero-worshipped me, even as a kid...

“Ryan?” Marianne said, looking at his perplexed expression with a frown.

Some hero I am, he thought, disgustedly. Even Mum and Dad are willing to let me go and fight. Even Lavie, confound her, actually said she was proud of me. She probably holds her head high, when she talks to that nice friend of hers, just at the thought that I've enlisted, while Henrik can't. Can I really throw that away? Even for Marianne?

He drew his breath in, suddenly certain of his decision.

No, I can't.

“Marianne,” he said, firmly. “Listen to me. I understand what you're going through, and believe me, if things were different, I would say yes right away. But this is – the right thing to do, Marianne. I have to do this. Forgive me.”

“Ryan...” Her voice was soft, almost resigned.

“I'm sorry,” he said, gently, patting her on the back. “Someday, when I come back, you'll have your answer, my love. Someday, soon.”

For a moment, she stared at him, as if unable to believe what he had just said, then she slowly let go of his hand. “I...I understand, Ryan,” she said, slowly. “I just hoped...”

“Marianne,” Ryan began, but before he could think of anything further to say, she turned and ran, as fast as she could, away from Davenport Park, leaving him seated rather uncomfortably on the log, with his thoughts far from pleasant.

Hang it, he thought. What was I supposed to say? And...marry her? Sweet Infinity, I certainly want to, someday, but this....this just isn't the time!

He shook his head, sadly. *I just don't know what to say to her, the next time we meet. But I hope she really does understand. After all, that's what she said.*

Feeling a little comforted by this possibility, he began to walk home.

King Arlbert, for all his faults, was not without his good qualities – one of which was a passion for order. Today, that passion was being tested to the limit. It had begun early in the morning – indecently early, he thought – when Trask had entered his chambers, informing him that an envoy from the Zion had arrived.

“What nonsense is this, Trask?” he had grumbled. “It’s only eight o’clock, for Prince Derren’s sake! Tell him to call again at a more civilized hour.”

“I’m afraid the man is most insistent, Sire,” Trask said, apologetically. “He says he comes on behalf of Duke Renaud of Issachar.”

“Renaud? Isn’t that Charlemagne’s successor? Has that old dotard appointed him co-regent, or something?”

“Not quite, Sire. Renaud is one of the claimants to the throne, and the Emperor has recognized this – or, some say, appeased him – by putting him in charge of troops at the border, around Issachar and Darington. It is a purely ceremonial post, as there is no fighting taking place there.”

“Why, then, does he behave like he is the Emperor already?” Arlbert said, still irritated. “If he wants to discuss anything with me, he can do it in person, rather than through one of his lackeys.”

“My King,” Queen Katarina said, looking up from her book and smiling placidly at Trask – something that always annoyed the Head of Palace Security – “would it not be wise to hear this emissary first, and find out what the matter is? After all, the Zion are our allies.”

Arlbert shook his head. “Perhaps you’re right, but it’s bad form nonetheless, Katarina,” he observed. “Trask, tell him we will receive him in the Throne Room in half an hour. What is the man’s name, anyway?”

“His name is Klaus Engel, Sire,” Trask said, consulting his notepad. “He was the Emperor’s chamberlain, but has recently been assigned to help Renaud in the administration of the border towns. His current title is Viceroy of the Border Provinces.”

“Impressive,” Arlbert said, in a tone that suggested quite the opposite. “Well, tell the Viceroy that we shall see him at our own good pleasure.”

A little later, when Viceroy Engel was in the Throne Room speaking to them, Arlbert was still unhappy, though for a different reason.

“A summit? Whatever on Terra for, sir?” he said, impatiently.

“Sire, my master, Duke Renaud, has received direct instructions from the Emperor. There is a strong possibility that the Varald are organizing covert operations along the border – operations that could affect both our Empire, and your kingdom. It is the wish of the Emperor – conveyed to the Duke, and through me to you – that you meet him at Darington, to discuss the matter and to make arrangements for appropriate preventive measures. Should you be unable to do so, you may send a representative, such as the War Minister or Prime Minister Bainbridge, but they urged me strongly to request your presence.”

“Preposterous,” Arlbert said, fussily. “What good would sitting down with a lad like Renaud do? If there is trouble on the border – and we have no reason to believe that there is – that is a matter for our armies and our intelligence services. A summit would achieve nothing.”

“But you are the leader of your nation’s Army, Sire,” Engel said, with a frown on his large face, “and there are times when your decision is required. I would not have travelled from Issachar to here if the matter was not an important one. You have already lost your Prime Minister to a Varald operation, Your Majesty. It would be unwise to risk further losses. Suppose the attempt is on your own life – or, worse, that of your child. These Varald act with the utmost impunity, and even topple their own dictators for not being bloodthirsty enough.”

Queen Katarina frowned in turn, but said nothing.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Arlbert said, “but then, why not take the matter up with Sir Prescott? He was hand-picked by us to lead the Galvenian forces in this war, and he has my complete confidence, as an officer and a noble.”

“There are some things that you do not know yet, I see,” Engel said, with a small smile. “Perhaps you might care to read this.”

“What might that be?” Arlbert said, annoyed. He had a time and a place for everything, and did not like to read official correspondence in the middle of the morning, especially under the prying eyes of a Zion envoy whom he did not particularly like.

“A memorandum from Matthias Ferzen, Director of the Zion Intelligence and Tactics Division, addressed to only two people: Emperor Charlemagne, and Duke Renaud. I was instructed to hand it over to you if you proved unwilling to attend the summit.”

“Hmph,” was the King’s only reply, as he opened the envelope and began to read.

“From the Republic...” He scanned the paper quickly, with a mounting expression of unease.

“Have you read this yourself?” he thundered, giving Engel a look that would have made lesser men uncomfortable. Engel, however, was used to Charlemagne’s moods and Renaud’s orders, and King Arlbert paled in comparison.

“I have not, Sire,” Engel said, politely. “I was instructed to give it to you, but not to peruse it myself.”

“Don’t play games with me, Viceroy. Let me rephrase my question. Are you aware of the contents of this missive?”

“Indirectly, yes, Sire,” Engel replied. “All of us in the Palace have heard – rumours of what is happening in the Republic, as well as the true facts about the defence of Kannschloss. While we hesitate to point an accusing finger...”

“Be done, man, be done,” Arlbert said, dropping the letter as if it burned his fingers, then picking it up again with trembling hands. “Has Sheffield been told about this?”

“Given the antipathy between Minister Sheffield and the individual in question, the Emperor felt it would be wise to come to you, first.”

“But the last point, man. How could he possibly be travelling, across battle lines, to Unity Isle? And what does he want there?”

“Perhaps you could ask Lord Lucan, Sire,” Engel said, firmly. “Now, I realize the difficulty of your position, which is why the Emperor has decided to treat this matter with sympathy. Will you come with us, or will you continue to trust a man who has played you false? Choose wisely, Your Majesty.”

“Very well,” Arlbert said, helplessly – then, recovering, he looked Engel squarely in the eye. “I will travel to Issachar, and meet your Renaud, since my – my own subordinate has played me false. But I will travel in state, with the Royal Family, and I expect to be received in honour, and not as some sort of vassal. I completely disassociate myself from the actions of – that individual, and I will not be held responsible for what he may or may not have done.”

“We are aware of that, Sire,” Engel said, kindly, “and we know that your Rough Riders have fought bravely at our men’s side. We also know that your operation in Fulton will go a long way towards repairing any, shall we say, loss of confidence on the part of the Emperor. Meet Renaud, Your Majesty, and make amends. It is better for all of us.”

“You have my word, Engel,” King Arlbert said, rising from his throne. “We will leave in three days’ time.”

“That would be perfect, Sire,” Engel said, bowing as he received his dismissal.

Katarina waited till he was out of the room, then stole towards the King’s side.

“My king,” she said, softly. “May I see that letter?”

He handed it to her, silently, and as she read it, her expression hardened, resembling – or so it seemed to Arlbert – Carranya’s own expression, when she had spoken to the Emperor after Wilhelm’s funeral.

“It is true, then,” she said, in a disappointed tone of voice.

“Yes, Katarina, yes. Sweet Infinity! How could we have all been so blind?”

“Then we have been betrayed?” Her expression was grave.

“Not betrayed to the enemy, which would be understandable, if still unacceptable,” Arlbert groaned, as his head sank forward on his chest. “Betrayed for – for filthy lucre. How could a nobleman, the son of noblemen, behave like a petty merchant? And what further machinations will he attempt on Unity Isle? I

will order Lucan to have him sent back here, and face trial for his actions. An example must be made.” He sighed. “When I think of what Sir Turbot would say....”

“Let him worry about himself, my King,” the Queen said, firmly. “Let us travel to Zion together, and convince them that not *all* Galvenians are as base as Sir Prescott.”

“I only hope they will trust us, Katarina,” Arlbert said, tonelessly, as she knelt by his side and comforted him.

“Well, we have a secret weapon, my lord,” she whispered. “Our child.”

“Carranya? What do you mean?” the King asked.

“Remember, my lord, how warmly she was received by the Emperor and Empress, when she spoke with them after Prince Wilhelm’s funeral. If they do not listen to you, or to me, they will listen to her.”

Arlbert brightened at once. “You know, my dear,” he said, looking at her fondly, “you may have something there.”

It was almost like a vacation – except that, every now and then, they would remember that, for no fault of theirs, they were exiles, men without a country.

Life was pleasant, if busy and slightly chaotic, on the Arnoldus estate. The men, tiring of leisure after a few days, had not hesitated to exchange their swords for ploughshares – or other farming implements – under the gentle but firm guidance of the lady of the house. The soldiers ate, drank, laboured, harvested, exchanged pleasantries with the eldest of the Arnoldus daughters, played with the younger children, tossed baby Athena into the air as far as her mother judged safe, and wished, at times, that they could forget the war, forget their own country, and settle down in this tranquil corner of the Cosmopolitan Republic.

But they could not forget. They were paying the price for their own loyalty, but the decree of the War Office – a decree that they found both cruel and unjust, but had no chance of appealing against – condemned them to remain where they were, perhaps for the length of the war, perhaps for longer. On some days, this resentment would boil over, and they would rage against Minister Sheffield, Sir Prescott, and the Galvenian Government in general. As Royal Marines, they would spare the King, but had no pity on his underlings, whom they held responsible for their predicament.

“Captain,” Penelope Arnoldus said, one day, as she, her niece, and Captain Harold Baker were seated in her sitting-room, “I have some news for you, though I do not know if you will want to hear it.”

“Mama,” Phemie said, entering the room and bowing before her new friends, “there’s a letter for you!”

“Thank you, dear,” Penelope said, absently, as she took it. “If you don’t mind, Euphemia, could you just head down to the dairy, and see how those two men are getting along?”

“With the milking?” Phemie giggled. “Oh, my goddess, they certainly seem to be having a hard time! I’ll go check on them and report back to you.” She was off in a dart, pausing only to beam at her cousin, whom she idolized.

“Humour me for a moment, Lady Penelope,” the Captain said, rubbing his forehead with his large hand. “Why does your charming daughter use that particular expression?”

“Oh, that’s quite an amusing story, really,” Penelope said. “Hieronymus has an old friend, a clergyman from Galvenia, who had worked in the Republic in his younger days, and who visits us sometimes. One day, when he heard Hercules, my second son, say ‘Oh, my God’ to express annoyance, he voiced his disapproval, though rather gently. Euphemia was rather fond of him, and asked him if ‘Oh, my goddess’ was also offensive. He replied that it wasn’t, because goddesses were all mythological, and mythological characters couldn’t be offended. She’s stuck to it ever since.” She laughed. “She’s a quaint child in some respects, but I was quite the same at her age.”

“That’s interesting,” Baker said, with a smile. “So what news do you have for us, my lady?”

“Please stop using that ridiculous title, Captain,” Penelope said, with a laugh. “We have no nobility here in the Cosmopolitan Republic.”

“But all your workers call you that, Aunt Penelope,” Sergeant Burns pointed out.

“That’s silly of them, too. Half of them are locals, and they just call me *Kyria* – ‘Lady’ – out of habit; it’s an honorific that has no greater significance than ‘Mrs.’ would in Common. The others, who are migrants, do it half-jokingly, because of the historical Lady Penelope. But that’s neither here nor there. I have a letter from Hieronymus.” She sighed.

“Is he being sent home?” the Sergeant asked, hopefully.

“I’m afraid not. Apparently, there are reports that the Varald are mounting an all-out sea attack, planning to attack Zion along the east coast, and then try to capture Checkpoint Bravo *en route* to Galvenia. The Commonwealth Naval Authority is already deploying additional forces there, and my husband has been asked to command them provisionally, in the event of such an invasion taking place. It’ll be hard on the children – they truly expected that he would be home for Saint Milkhail’s Day.”

“Do you think the War Office will deign to remember us, then?” Baker said, sarcastically. “I’m sorry, Lady Penelope, I’m just thinking of my men. I understand the danger to your husband, whom I’ve always admired.”

“Thank you, Captain. As to your question, it is possible, and Hieronymus has even speculated on that,” Penelope said, smiling as she mentioned his name. “However, there is worse. Apparently, Minister Sheffield does not know that you are still alive.”

Sergeant Burns exploded. “*What?*”

“Please don’t shout, Anastasia,” Penelope said, in her most maternal tone of voice. “I quite understand your surprise, though. Apparently Sheffield is busy most of the time with the King and with the new Prime Minister. The man who spoke to you on the radio, Captain Baker, was apparently an associate of Sir Prescott, the Galvenian War Commander. His name is Lieutenant Felix Gessler. Hieronymus has much to say about him, but it’s not fit language to be read in public, I’m afraid, especially if Euphemia strolls in here.” She blushed.

“We sailors are like that, my lady,” Baker said, with an apologetic expression. “Gessler. I’ve heard of the man. He’s Sir Prescott’s dogsbody. How dare he issue orders of that sort?”

“There is more, Captain,” Penelope said, looking at him with a troubled expression that sat ill with her clear blue eyes. “Apparently, one of Mr. Sheffield’s plans is to strike at Varald arms supplies, and they intend to do that by sending a force here, to the Republic.”

“Arms supplies?” Sergeant Burns’ face clouded over. “You know, Daddy often spoke of an arms factory here in the Republic, quite close to your home, which also had branches on the mainland and in San Delas. Is that where they’re going to strike?”

“I don’t know, dear,” Penelope said. “Why do you ask? You look upset, Anastasia.”

“I’m confused, Aunt Penelope,” Anastasia admitted. “You see, I remember Daddy telling me that that factory was owned by Galvenia. He even invested in it. Why would Galvenia ask her men to destroy her own factories?”

“Perhaps they are trading with the enemy,” Penelope suggested, doubtfully.

“By Galvenia?” Captain Baker scowled. “By some rich noble, then, and.....Oh, my goddess, as your daughter would say, Lady Penelope. I think I have it. Oh, my goddess, indeed. This is...” He seemed amazed by the implications of his own thought.

It was at that moment that Phemie re-entered the room, singing to herself as she did.

“What reports from the front, dear?” Penelope asked, noticing her daughter, and glad for the momentary diversion.

“They’ve finished, though old Calliope looks rather disgruntled about the whole thing,” Phemie said, with a laugh. “And they asked me to ask you if they could do something in the fields instead.”

“Oh, dear,” Penelope said, laughing. “Perhaps I should. Tell them I’ll speak to them later, Euphemia, after I’ve finished talking to the Captain. Now, isn’t it time for your piano lesson?”

“Oops,” Euphemia said, a little shamefacedly. “I forgot, Mama.”

“Never mind, dear. Run upstairs, I’m sure Mrs. Pombal is already waiting. She must have finished with Sophia by now. Have fun, then!”

“Of course, Mama,” the girl replied, as she ran out of the room and up the stairs.

“Now explain yourself, Captain,” Sergeant Burns said, looking perturbed. “What have you understood?”

“My dear Sergeant, it’s quite simple. There’s only one factory that could fit your description, and as a Commonwealth man, I ought to have thought of it earlier. That would be the Turbo Arms Factory Incorporated, with branches all over the Republic, but owned in part by investors from Galvenia. I even did a report on the armaments facilities of the Republic when I served under your husband, Lady Penelope. No one else could supply arms to a standing army on such a scale, not even all the gun-smugglers of the Fulton Republic.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Captain,” Penelope said, slowly, “but what of it? Have they gone over to the enemy, as I said?”

“Worse, my dear lady,” the Captain said, with mounting anger. “That factory’s chief shareholder, if my memory does not fail me, is none other than Sir Prescott Chuselwock.”

“Good heavens!” Anastasia Burns exclaimed. “Then...”

“Prescott is playing a double game,” Baker said, rising from his chair. “He’s probably making a pretty penny out of this war, selling weapons to both sides. And he had us silenced so that we wouldn’t find out. Mark my words, that expedition of Sheffield’s is going to end up just like we did.”

“That’s horrible,” Penelope said, sadly. “But Captain, are you sure? After all, your force was ordered to patrol the border, not to land on Republican soil. Why would they want you silenced?”

“Because the Varald attacked us first, Infinity knows why,” Baker explained, “and there was a good chance that if we returned, or made it to Republican bases, people would start asking questions. Flaming lands, perhaps that weapon the Varald used on us – that fire-thrower – was an invention of theirs.”

“It all makes sense now, Captain,” Sergeant Burns said, sadly. “For all we know, Prescott may even have leaked our position to the Varald, to have them attack us and give Galvenia a reason to enter the war.”

“That’s going a little too far, Sergeant,” Captain Baker said. “But considering that he’s involved in supplying arms to the Varald – if my deductions are correct – it’s not impossible.”

“What do we do now?” the Sergeant said, lowering her head.

“I’ll tell you what you can do, Anastasia,” Penelope said, confidently. “First, you and the Captain must contact the Galvenian Embassy and ask to hand over a message to the War Minister, or to their new Prime Minister. Since we now know that the order exiling you came from Lieutenant Gessler, and not from them, news of your survival will upset Gessler’s plans – and Sir Prescott’s.”

“It’s worth a try,” Captain Baker said, heavily. “I’ve tried contacting them on the usual frequency, but they block us out – probably more of that Gessler’s monkey-tricks. I wish I could string him up right now.”

“Next, I will send a wire to Hieronymus,” she went on, rising and placing an arm around her niece’s shoulders. “Remember, he’s a high-ranking Commonwealth official, and he’s on good terms both with Premier Josen of our Republic, and with General Finkel of the Commonwealth Special Forces. He may be able to do something.”

“Thank you, Aunt Penelope,” Sergeant Burns said, affectionately. “I guess what really gets to me is that we can’t do anything to help out. We’re stuck here. That’s pretty galling, considering that we’re all used to an active life.”

“If action is what you crave, Anastasia, I can always ask you to milk Calliope tomorrow, instead of those men of yours,” Penelope replied, with a chuckle. “But I jest. No, what you must do is keep yourself trained and ready. If what we have found out is correct, you will soon be joined by some of your men, and Prescott may try to interfere with them. You may be able to help them out, especially if their target is truly the Turbo factory. Explore the coast, and if you see any sign of them, join them and warn them of what has happened to you.”

“That sounds good to me,” the Sergeant said, resolutely. “Sir Prescott will soon learn that you don’t mess with the Royal Marines!”

“That’s the spirit, dear,” Penelope Arnoldus replied, approvingly.

“You’re going to look for a *sword*?” Ryan said, puzzled. They were sitting inside a dock at Serin’s Peak Naval Shipyard, which appeared from the outside to be disused; the inside was lit by two large candles, which enlarged their shadows to monstrous proportions.

“Not just any sword,” Henrik explained. “This one may date back to the very beginnings of humanity, and it may hold the key to all the troubles of Terra, even if it sounds melodramatic to say so.”

“But what makes you so sure it’s in Itaria?”

“Because the thieves who stole it didn’t know everything, Ryan. Father Marlborough explained that. The Sword of Regret, as he calls it, wasn’t actually in that museum that they targeted. The original was hidden by some of the Pontiff’s men, acting on a tip-off from Thomas Perrin, over two years ago.”

“Thomas...” Ryan still could not entirely believe what Henrik and Bernadette had told him about their old schoolmate. “You mean he worked it out?”

“It’s almost certain that he figured out, shortly before he died, that someone linked to his group was trying to find that sword. At that time, the original was still in the museum. However, he was discovered, and paid for it with his life, according to what the Pontiff’s men have told us. Before dying, he managed to warn Bishop Elias, the Pontiff’s secretary, and Elias arranged for some of his men to have it hidden, and a skillful copy placed in Saint Guibert’s Museum.”

“But what is so special about that sword? Is it a cursed object? Something that belongs to, um, the Lord of Darkness?” Ryan sounded dubious.

“Not exactly, Ryan. In fact, it’s the only thing that can stop them.”

“You’re not making sense, Henrik,” Ryan said, shaking his head.

“It’s hard to understand, Ryan,” Bernadette broke in. She had been silent until then, her eyes closed, and her hands folded as if in prayer. “Even we couldn’t believe it until we went over all the evidence ourselves. From the earliest days of humanity, that sword has been wielded in the name of justice. When the only man to survive the Catastrophe fought the demons, he used the Sword. When Lady Fina defeated the Lord of the Pits, her friend Prince Ryle used the Sword. When Kaleb defeated Samath, he used the Sword. When Kevin led the battle against Samath’s disciples, and drove them out of many parts of Zion, so did he.”

“Kevin?”

“A follower of Kaleb, and one of the Journeymen,” Henrik explained, noticing that Bernadette seemed embarrassed. “However, after Kevin’s death, his son was unwilling to accept the responsibility of wielding the Sword any longer, and handed it over to a fellow mage, who was returning to Itaria to lead a monastic life. This man handed it over to the Pontiff, who has guarded it carefully since then.”

“But if the sword is hidden safely, why should you go and look for it?” Ryan said. “Let it remain safe.”

“Because the men who hid it have been murdered, just two months ago,” Henrik replied, sadly, “and they were unable to reveal its location to any of their allies or friends. If the Sword has been found by the enemy, and destroyed, we would not be sitting here and talking peacefully – we would be facing something like Almonth Jakov’s rebellion, but on a world-wide scale. Therefore, it must still be in Itaria, in its new hiding-place.”

“Fine, I get it,” Ryan said, “but why send the two of you to get it? Aren’t there men enough in Itaria? Doesn’t the Pontiff have his own police or secret service?”

“Ryan,” Bernadette said, gently, “Itaria is in chaos, now. Almost every able-bodied man who has *not* rebelled is engaged in defending the country in some way – even women and children have been forced to contribute. Besides, Father Marlborough was keen to allow us to do our part. If we cannot serve Galvenia as part of her army, let us try and bring peace to Terra by finding a weapon that may bring the conflict to a close.”

“I’m just about ready to swallow the conspiracy theory,” Ryan said, “after what I saw on board the *Paradiso*, as well as what happened to me at Straukpass. Even then, I wasn’t quite sure, but though I’m an agnostic, I don’t believe in extraordinary coincidences. A world doesn’t dissolve into war just because the Commonwealth is busy squabbling. The death of Wilhelm, the Varald war, the coup in the Directorate, and now civil war in Itaria and arms deals in the Republic – there’s someone behind it. Perhaps it could be these guys.” He pulled out the metal plaque he had found during his adventure at Straukpass, and showed it to them. “Does this mean anything to you?”

Bernadette looked at the symbols on the plaque, drew her breath in sharply, then sighed. “Where did you find that, Ryan?” she asked.

“A thief who was interfering with package deliveries to the Emperor dropped it, during his flight,” Ryan said. “Armin and I managed to stop him at Straukpass, with the help of a Zion Army sergeant who was also looking for the package.”

“This symbol, Ryan,” she said, sadly, “is the symbol of the Third Way.”

“The Third Way?”

“The Way of Power. It has been used by numerous groups throughout history – by the Old Zionese who fought and persecuted the Itarian missionaries; by the disciples of Samath; by the secret societies that Itaria was forced to expel around C.Y. 158; even by Almonth Jakov’s War Hawks. It symbolizes power, ambition, and the will to dominate others. The three figures – a man, a woman and a beast – represent different facets of this idea; the man symbolizes violence, the woman, deceit, and the beast, power itself, personified. Were you carrying this with you for long?”

“Hmm, it’s been in my wallet for months,” Ryan replied. “I showed it to the police at Lorean when I reported the theft, but it made no sense to them, so I just left it there and forgot it, until you and Henrik told me – your story.”

“That explains it,” she said, smiling. “It was probably this object that caused me to faint when I shook your hand that day.”

“Guess I’d better dispose of it, then,” Ryan said, apologetically.

“No, I have a better idea,” Henrik replied. “Take it to the Museum of Science and Lore. They may know what to do with it, better than we do.”

“Heh, that’s not a bad idea, old bean,” Ryan said. “I guess I must be going now, because I promised Mum I’d be back in time for dinner.”

“That’s nice of you, Ryan,” Bernadette said, warmly.

Ryan laughed. “Want to come along? Mum always cooks up a storm whenever I’m home, so there’s bound to be extras for everyone.”

“We’d love to,” she said, “but unfortunately, we have to wait here until we meet the rest of the people who will accompany us on our journey. We’ll be leaving a day after you do, actually. Come and see us tomorrow at the same time, if you can. We still have more to tell you.”

“I think I ought to come,” Ryan said, shaking hands with both of them. “But tell me – even if you find this sword, who’s supposed to wield it? Even if there’s some chief conspirator, some fool successor of Jakov’s, can anyone use the sword to defeat him? Or does it have to be someone specific, such as a priest or a mage?”

Bernadette and Henrik looked at each other, rather at a loss for words.

“We still don’t know about that, Compadre,” Henrik said, after an uncomfortable silence. “Ideally, the sword should be wielded by a heroic mage – someone like Kaleb the Journeyman – but finding someone like that would be difficult. Even Father Marlborough acknowledges that. But we must prevent anyone on the other side from finding it first, and destroying it. Thus far, the Itarian army has been able to keep the rebels out of the capital, but they may not last another month. That’s why we have to go there, and get the sword out of there, as soon as we can.”

“Got it,” Ryan said, as he waved goodbye. “Perhaps the Zion will find someone suitable. In the meantime, good luck to both of you!”

“Best wishes to you too, Ryan,” Bernadette called out, as he left the docks and began to walk towards his home.

Henrik rose from his stool and opened the door, causing a gust of wind to come in. “Winter will soon be upon us,” he remarked. “I only hope we don’t freeze to death on the way out to Itaria.”

“Ah, the weather. Always a favourite conversational gambit,” Bernadette said, with a laugh. “At least Ryan is fortunate enough to go somewhere warmer, though I’ve heard nights are cold in the desert.”

Henrik rested his jaw against one hand. “Do you think we – ought to have told him yet?”

“About the sword?” Bernadette said, opening her blue eyes as wide as they could.

“No, I mean – not just the sword, but about what we have to do with the sword once it’s back,” he said, slowly.

“Henrik,” Bernadette said, walking up to him and slipping her hand into his, “I know Ryan’s been your best friend for years. And I know you hate to be the bearer of bad news, which is why both Father Marlborough and I told you that you could wait before you – told him. But it has to be done, sooner or later. Let him return from his mission, as I suggested, but wait no longer.”

“I suppose you’re right, Bernadette,” Henrik replied, as he blew out the candle and they began to walk, hand in hand, away from the disused dock-house. “I pray that he comes back safely, and I pray that when he learns the truth, he will be able to take it.”

“He will, Henrik,” she replied, confidently. “It is his Way, just as it is ours to go on this journey together.”

A powerful sword, Ryan thought, as he walked away from the docks, and along the path leading back to Davenport itself. More powerful than Grandpa’s, surely. But why was it hidden in Itaria of all places? Let me think this through. That’s what Mr. Anderson always told me to do, when my essays got tangled up at school.

He reflected on the matter for a minute. Because they’re pacifists, and most of them don’t carry a weapon. That must be it. The Zion must have decided that the Itarians, being both peace-lovers and loyal allies – ever since Johan saved them from the Varald – would keep it safe. They didn’t count on war breaking out in Itaria two centuries later, though. And now, my best friend and his fiancée – I don’t know if they’re officially engaged, but I’m sure they will be someday – are going to look for it. But even if they succeed, where could they hide it? Not in Zion, not with the war in its current condition. Perhaps in Galvenia. That priest of theirs probably wants it hidden in King’s College.

He laughed. It’s just like a comic book, isn’t it? An all-powerful weapon to defeat the forces of evil. A Chosen One who has to wield it at the right time. Perhaps Prince Wilhelm was the one, which is why the Varald had him eliminated and then launched their war. Or maybe it’s Carranya! I wonder what she knows about all this. She’s been taught by mages, so she would know....

“Well, well,” a voice said, with cold satisfaction, causing him to freeze. “Good evening, Eramond.”

Ryan turned around, then saw the glint of steel against the full moon, behind a tree. “By King Richard – what the hell are you doing here, Makarov?”

“Do not call me by that name,” Juno said, with a smile on his face, as he emerged from out of the woods. “The time has come for us to settle our accounts, once and for all.”

Run away, my friend. You cannot defeat him, but he cannot crush you. A fight would be a worthless exercise.

“Huh?” Ryan said. The voice was a woman’s, but it was not one he knew. “Who was that? Did you bring your girlfriend along, Juno? It’s sweet of her to be your cheerleader, but tell her it’s no use.” He laughed.

Juno flushed with anger. “So you hear her too, do you? She will provide commentary, while I utterly defeat and humiliate you, you low creature. It is the only way to avenge myself.”

I can’t afford to get into a fight now, the Army needs me in one piece! Ryan thought. “Look here, Juno, I’m just minding my own business here. In a little while, I’ll be out of Galvenia for months on end, and you can make a little wax doll of me and stick as many pins in it as you want. I’m a soldier in the Galvenian Army, and you’re not the enemy. Just make way, and we can forget this ever happened.”

“Ah, Private Eramond,” Juno said, sarcastically. “The boy born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Rest assured, Eramond, that even ten lifetimes of service in the Army cannot repay the debt you owe to men far braver than yourself. You will learn this now.”

Please, go away. This will only hurt you both.

“Juno, tell your girlfriend to beat it, too,” Ryan said, angrily. “If she’s afraid to see me, she might as well not watch while I teach *you* a lesson.”

“For her sake, I will give you a chance to apologize,” Juno said, slowly.

“Apologize for what?” Ryan said, his hand going to his sword. Then Reckland’s words came to his mind, and he paused. “Look, Juno, Lieutenant Reckland told me about your father. I’m sorry about what happened to him, but I had nothing to do with it...”

“Do not speak of my father with your unclean lips, Eramond,” Juno said, furiously, as he took a step forward and drew his own sword. “And do not try to disclaim responsibility. Do you know what it was that my father died defending? Do you still dare to pretend that you and your family were not responsible? Of course you do. That has always been your way, Eramond. The weakling’s way. Even today, as you cause pain to an innocent woman...”

Enough, Juno. He has offended, but it was a sin of inadvertence. He is no more guilty than his forefathers were.

“Looks like your girlfriend doesn’t agree with you, Makarov,” Ryan said, harshly. “Take her to the Carnival, and buzz off, all right? Besides, I’ve never caused pain to *any* innocent woman in my life, and you know it. Stop your lies. Even Marianne...”

“Do not waste time singing the praises of your foolish barmaid, Eramond,” Juno said, with a laugh. “I speak of someone far better than her.”

“Take that back!” Ryan said angrily, drawing his sword as well.

"I will do that at sword point, and in no other way, Eramond," Juno said, taking up a battle stance. "Defend yourself!"

"You asked for it," Ryan said, as he lunged forward, dodging his first tentative thrust with ease, and slashed at Juno's wrist, cutting it superficially.

"You're quick, Eramond," Juno said, looking at the wound with no apparent concern. "But that's not enough when you have justice on your side." He raised his sword, and a beam of blue light shot forth, deflecting Ryan's next move.

"What the hell was that, Juno?" Ryan said, dazzled by the light for a moment. "Started smoking exploding cigars?" He thrust forward a second time, forcing Juno backwards.

"Your low wit will not save you," Juno said, as he dodged Ryan's next blow, then launched a blade storm, slashing at different angles in rapid succession. Ryan, whose vision was still not clear, could not parry all the blows, and was wounded on the shoulder, though superficially.

"Hang it, Juno, that was a good shirt," Ryan said, gritting his teeth. "Here, run up a tailor's bill of your own." He swung his sword to the left, then changed direction at the last minute, and thrust forward at Juno's chest – then found his blade repelled as if by a shield. An orange light shone in front of the place he had just struck.

You have not kept faith with the one who loves you, and that is why I permit Juno to survive your blows.

"Very funny," Ryan said, taken aback at the accusation. "Does Juno write your scripts for you, shadow girl? Show yourself!"

"Would you fight a *woman*, Eramond?" Juno said, contemptuously, raising his sword and aiming another blue bolt at Ryan's chest. It caught him unawares, and he staggered back, stunned.

"Wh – what was that?" he exclaimed, but before he could finish his last word, Juno slashed wildly, cutting him on the cheek.

"Damn it, Juno!" Ryan said, as the blood dripped down his chin. "I'd already shaved this morning, you twit." Using the triple attack he had perfected with Hocha, he drove Juno back, then wiped his face with his sleeve. He then moved forward again, using the hilt of his sword to loosen Juno's grip on his weapon.

You fight well, but you need to make amends. Otherwise Juno will defeat you.

"Make amends to who? Look, whoever you are, this isn't funny anymore," Ryan said, angrily, as he ducked another blue beam from Juno's sword.

"Ignorant Eramond," Juno said, shaking his head. "Do you not realize that the person you speak to is incorporeal? She resides within my sword, which is a Sword of Justice."

“Yeah, and I’m Prince Derren’s twin brother,” Ryan said, with a laugh. “Tell that to the Marines, Juno. And while you’re doing so, try this.” He launched another attack, his blade aimed perfectly so as to disarm Juno once and for all – then found his blade deflected again, as if by a large iron shield.

“You fence well, boy,” Juno spat, “but the time has come to end this.”

No, Juno. I will not let you go that far.

“Looks like your ghost girl doesn’t like your dirty tricks, Juno,” Ryan said, tossing his head back. “You make a fine pair. Now why don’t you both go over to Davenport Park and have a snog, instead of wasting your time here?”

How....how can you be so....

And, from the edges of Juno’s sword, two orange rays shot forth, striking Ryan on the right arm. He was aware of nothing except pain – the worst pain he had ever experienced in his life – and his eyes blurred as he fell to his knees.

“You see,” Juno said. “He does not deserve your pity. Come, I shall finish him...”

“Stop! My God, stop!”

It was the third voice Ryan had heard in the woods, but this time, he had no problem recognizing it. Following close on its heels was a figure in a simple, short white dress, with a jacket loosely draped over her shoulders.

“Stop it, Juno! Leave him alone! What are you doing!”

“L – Lavie?” Ryan stammered, still clutching his arm and groaning.

“Miss Regale,” Juno said, calmly. “What a pleasant surprise. What brings you out at this hour?”

Lavie flushed. “That’s none of your business, Juno. What are you doing to Ryan?” She looked at his face, contorted as she had never seen it before, and ran to his side, but he was scarcely aware of anything but his pain. “He – he’s wounded!”

“I was merely teaching him a lesson, you see,” Juno said, “and he has, I think, learnt the first part of it. If you wish, I will continue, and you may watch.”

“You – you monster!” Lavie said, angrily, drawing her bow. “Go away, Juno, or I’ll defend Ryan myself!”

Juno laughed. “With a bow and arrow? I seriously doubt it, Miss Regale, though I have the utmost respect for your skills. However, if you request me to leave this – individual alone, I shall obey.”

A red glint had appeared in Lavie's eyes. "Go away, Juno," she said, her voice becoming shriller, "or I'll call the guards!"

"If you wish," Juno said, shaking his head in disapproval. "Good night, then. And count yourself lucky that I choose to listen to her, Eramond, or else..."

"I'll get you for that, Juno," Ryan muttered, but Juno had already disappeared, silently, into the woods behind him.

"Ryan!" Lavie said, kneeling down beside him. "Are you all right?"

"That jackass, Juno – used some sort of cursed attack," Ryan muttered, then flushed as he grew aware of Lavie's hand resting on his shoulder. "And just what are you doing here, Lavie?"

"Hmph!" Lavie said, putting her bow back in its notch on her belt. "Considering that I just got you out of trouble, Mr. Eramond, you could be a little more grateful!"

Ryan stood up slowly, leaning against a tree for support. "I'm sorry, Lavie," he said, shaking his head. "It's just that this – hurts like hell. Thanks, I guess."

"You're welcome, I guess," Lavie said, smiling at him, then staring in horror at his face. "Ohmygosh! Did Juno..."

"It's just a cut, Lavie," Ryan said, his hand going to the sword slash, which was still bleeding slightly. "I wonder what Mum will have to say about it!"

"Ryan, I can help," Lavie said. "Come with me to the docks."

"That's where I just *came* from, Lavie," he said, impatiently. "I was talking to Henrik, and on the way back, that idiot Juno was waiting for me. I ought to report him to the police – owning a magical weapon illegally is a crime in Galvenia."

"He's a creep," Lavie agreed, shivering.

"I'll actually have to agree with you on that," Ryan said, smiling a little. "But you still haven't answered my question. It's cold and dark out here. What are you doing out of your home at this hour?"

"I couldn't sleep," Lavie said, looking down at the ground rather intently, "because I was worried about....a lot of things. So I decided to head down to the docks to talk to Bernadette a little; she told me she and Henrik would be there tonight, getting ready for their trip. She has a calming effect on me, really."

"She has that effect on most people, except Alphonse Spenson," Ryan said, supporting his right arm with his left hand. "So what were you girls talking about?"

Lavie blushed, though it was too dark for Ryan to truly notice. "Oh, nothing, really," she said, shaking her head. "But you're right, Ryan. You can't go home in this condition. Bernadette can help you."

"I don't think a sermon is what I need right now, Lavie," Ryan said, stifling a groan. "A doctor would be nice, though."

"She has healing powers, Ryan," Lavie said, earnestly. "She can even close that cut of yours. Come along, now, and don't be a baby!"

"Healing powers?" Ryan said, weakly. "I think I've stumbled into the wrong....graphic novel..." He faltered, and Lavie stepped forward to support him. With some difficulty, they made their way back to the docks, where Bernadette (Henrik had apparently gone to fetch her a meal) listened to Ryan's story, with a concerned expression, as he lay down on one of the simple couches within.

"Can you help him?" Lavie said, hopefully.

"I believe I can," Bernadette said, reaching for a pouch that hung at her belt, "because that weapon was not a cursed one. At least, I don't sense any traces of evil magic, or of any sort of curse. It probably was a light-based attack of some sort."

"Like the Princess," Ryan said, stifling a moan. "She could use light-based attacks too."

"Yes, but it's rare to have a sword that uses it to such effect," she said, "and it's disturbing that it's being used without discrimination by that young man. Henrik has told me that he can be difficult."

"'Difficult' is putting it mildly," Ryan said, angrily.

"Now don't fret, Ryan," Bernadette replied, softly. "Close your eyes, this may dazzle a little." She bowed her head, folded her hands, and after a second, touched Ryan on the cheek. He stepped back at the flash of light, then ran his finger over the spot where the wound had been, with a bewildered expression.

"I – can't quite believe it," Ryan said, feeling the pain ebb away.

"Now, if this is light-based, we can give you some of these," she said, taking a few leaves out of her pouch, "and place them under your tongue. I'm afraid they don't taste very pleasant, but you'll feel much better, I promised."

"Take your medicine now, Ryan," Lavie said, with a laugh, as she handed the herbs to him.

"Ugh!" Ryan said, as a bitter taste covered his mouth. However, displeasure gave way to an overwhelming sense of relief as he felt the pain slowly ebb away over the next five minutes. He moved his right arm gingerly, then swung it around, mimicking the action of a cricket player. "I – This is

amazing!" He stood up, a broad grin on his face. "Thank you, Bernadette," he said, flushing. "I really don't know how I can, um, repay you.."

Bernadette gave him a smile that was almost maternal – or, at least, elder-sisterly. "Don't thank me, Ryan," she said. "Thank the Infinity, and thank Lavie, who found you and brought you here."

"Um, that makes sense, I guess," Ryan said, holding out his hand. "Thanks, Lavie. I guess I'd best get home, before Mum starts worrying."

"Ryan, do you want me to go with you?" Lavie asked, with an expression of concern, as they shook hands. "You may still be weak after what Juno did to you, you know." She shivered, and drew her jacket closer around her.

"No, I'll be all right," he replied, a little embarrassed. "Besides, there's quite a chill in the air. You ought to get back home too, and keep warm."

"Ryan, it might be safer not to go alone," Bernadette said. "Sometimes, a light-based attack can leave you feeling unsteady for hours, and those Moon Herbs I gave you can make you feel a little sleepy as well."

"Are you sure?" Ryan said, yawning.

"Take good care of him, Lavie," Bernadette said, hiding a chuckle behind one long sleeve, "and make sure he gets home to his mother safely. May the Infinity protect you, Ryan."

"Thanks again," Ryan said, sleepily, as he began his walk back to Davenport for the second time. He and Lavie walked together in silence for a while, each not sure what to say next.

"Why does Juno keep fighting with you, Ryan?" Lavie said, suddenly. "This is the second time I've seen him fight you, and he doesn't fight clean. What's the matter with him?"

"I'm hanged if I know," Ryan said, with a scowl on his face. "The idiot seems to hold me responsible for the fact that his father died, though I was a child of six when it happened."

"His father?" Lavie said, surprised.

"It's a long and rather pointless story, Lavie," Ryan said. "By King Richard, I'm tired. Can't wait to get home and sleep."

"But if Juno keeps worrying you like this, what will you do?" Lavie persisted.

"Defeat him," Ryan said, closing his eyes. "Look, Lavie, I'll be careful the next time I fight him, okay? Don't go into conniptions."

“Hmph,” Lavie said, shrugging her shoulders, though her expression was still kind. “Look, we’re quite close to home.”

“What was that?” Ryan said, suddenly.

“What?” Lavie asked.

“A sound, as if someone was crying,” Ryan said, looking around. “I hope Juno isn’t bothering anyone else.”

“Ohmygosh, I hope not,” Lavie replied, as she looked around herself, then turned away suddenly.

“What is it, Lavie?” Ryan asked.

“Nothing, Ryan,” she said, a little unwillingly. “Let’s just go home.”

“But it....Good heavens, what is she doing there?” Ryan said, suddenly noticing someone (no, let us be honest – it *was* Marianne) sitting outside her home, and weeping.

“Ryan...” Lavie said, an edge creeping into her voice.

Bother, Ryan thought. Talk about really bad timing. Maybe I should just go home...

But as he turned to follow Lavie, words echoed in his mind.

You have not kept faith with the one who loves you...

That voice, Ryan thought. Is Juno after Marianne? Was he using someone to taunt me over there? Am I – doing something wrong by walking away from her, and is that why that sword could hurt me? This is crazy.

“Ryan, please,” Lavie said, gently. “You’re not well, and...”

“I’m sorry, Lavie,” Ryan said, in a low tone. “But this is something I have to do...” And before she could react, he had rushed to her side, too far for Lavie to speak to him any longer.

“Grandpa’s acting silly again,” Emily said, making a face. “Or dopey, as Mr. Tamas would say!”

“Poor Grandpa,” Lavie said, with a laugh.

“Marianne, it’s all right,” he was saying. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have just left you like that. Look, I promise that as soon as I come back, war or no war, we’ll be married. I’ll never leave you again...”

Marianne did not reply, but the expression on her face said more than a thousand words.

And Lavie, left to herself, buttoned her jacket slowly, the wind whipping her hair about her, as she hung her head, and trudged back to the safety of her own home.

“Ryan, promise me you won’t take any risks,” Marianne said, as they stood side by side at the Davenport docks, watching the sun slowly sink into the sea. “It’s hard enough that they want you to leave a day early...”

“I know,” Ryan said, gently, looking at her. “Who would have thought they’d ask us to deploy on Saint Mikhail’s Day, of all days? And at daybreak, of all times. Why, I’ll have to miss the annual dinner at...” He stopped, suddenly.

“Annual dinner, my sweet?”

“Oh, just a family tradition,” Ryan said, casually. *Phew. If I’d said I wanted to have dinner with the Regales, she’d have been unhappy,* he thought. “But Mum and Dad understand.”

“I’m sorry I can’t come and see you off tomorrow, Ryan,” Marianne said, kissing him lightly on the cheek. “Father insisted that I accompany him to Lorean today evening – some nonsense about legal guardianship and custody. I wish it were all over with.”

“Don’t forget that, when I return, I’ll be the ‘legal guardian and custodian’, darling,” Ryan said, returning the gesture with ardour. “And if your parents should disagree, that’s just too bad.”

“Oh, Ryan,” Marianne said, happily, as she snuggled closer to him...

“Ryan,” a voice called out from behind, gently, “May I speak with you for a moment?”

Ryan groaned. *Perfect timing, you two,* he thought, looking annoyed, but Marianne remained calm.

“Hello, you two crazy lovebirds,” he said, with a laugh, as he turned to look at Henrik and Bernadette, who were also walking together. “What’s up?”

“Hello, Henrik,” Marianne said, warmly. “And hello, Miss...”

“Bernadette,” she said, holding out her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Marianne. Ryan has told us so much about you?”

“Oh, have you, Mr. Eramond?” Marianne said, winking at him, and holding out her hand in turn. “Well, it’s nice to meet you too. Ryan told me you’d be going to Itaria together.”

The two girls shook hands, but as they did, Bernadette fell forward, losing her balance as she did. Marianne, surprised at first, moved forward to support her, but Henrik was quicker, and caught her before she could fall.

“Are you all right?” Marianne said, in a friendly tone.

“I – I just lost my balance,” Bernadette replied, looking rather ill. “It’s just an accident. Could I – just sit down for a moment, please?”

Henrik, concerned, quickly dragged an empty crate to where she stood, and helped her sit. “Are you all right, my love?” he said, nervously.

“Quite so,” she said, frowning. “I must have – slipped, I guess.” She looked down at the ground beneath her, which was slightly uneven.

“Are you quite sure that’s all it is?” Ryan asked, stepping forward.

“What else could it be, Ryan?” she said, softly, as she stood up again. “Anyway, we’ll be there tomorrow morning to see you off. We just wanted to tell you that we won’t be here tonight – a scientist from the Museum of Science and Lore is coming to King’s College, and apparently she wants to talk to us before we leave.”

“That’s a pity,” Ryan said, though he secretly welcomed the chance of spending the rest of the evening, uninterrupted, with Marianne; he was reluctant to lose even a moment, now that his departure had been anticipated. “Anything else?”

“We just wanted to give you this,” Henrik said, still casting anxious glances at his friend. He handed a book to Ryan, which seemed, from the colour of its pages and the ancient cloth binding, to date back to at least his grandfather’s times. “Father Marlborough wanted you to have it, and to read it when you had the time. He thought you might find it interesting.”

Ryan looked at the cover – *The History of the Journeymen, C.Y. 107-156* – and laughed. “That’s nice of him,” he said, “since I’ll probably have a lot of time to kill on board ship. Is he a Journeymen buff, too?”

“Sort of,” Bernadette said, with something of her old smile, though she still appeared pale. Perspiration dripped from her forehead despite the low temperature.

“You really look unwell,” Marianne said, sympathetically, holding out her hand again. “Come along! Maybe I ought to take you back to your rooms at Serin’s Peak.”

“Thank you, Marianne, I think I’ll be all right,” Bernadette said, gratefully, as she turned to leave, still leaning on Henrik for support. “May the Infinity protect you both, my friends.”

“Thanks, guys,” Ryan said, as he watched them leave, and turned to look into Marianne’s eyes again. But let us, for a moment, not invade the privacy of our young couple, and follow the other two, as they made their way back into town.

“Bernadette,” Henrik said, slowly. “Have you sprained your ankle? You’re in pain, I can tell...”

“The dark....” she said, faintly. “I – I don’t understand any longer.”

“Understand what?” Henrik said, as he led her gently to a bench in the town square.

“I – I don’t,” she began, then stopped, as if even speaking was an effort for her. “I’m – so tired...Too much....”

“Bernadette!” Henrik cried out in alarm. “Sweet Infinity....Wait here. I’ll get Father Marlborough. He’s waiting for us at Serin’s Peak, with the carriage to take us back to King’s College. I can tell there’s something wrong. Please, tell me what it is...”

“Henrik...” She looked at him, and managed a feeble smile. “Henrik, I...”

Henrik gripped her hand, trying to help her up, but she had fainted.

No, Henrik thought, desperately. What on Terra has happened to her? Saint Geraud, Saint Integra....help me! He looked around, helplessly. I could carry her to Serin’s Peak if I tried. I can’t leave her alone here, when I don’t even know what has happened! Has she broken her ankle?

He looked at her face, and to his horror, he noticed that a thin trail of blood was running down one nostril. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and held it against her face, trying to stop the bleeding.

What can I do? he thought, then turning around, he saw the lights burning nearby in the porch of Casa Regale. *Lavie! She’s a friend of Bernadette’s, she could help!* “Bernadette, please, hold on,” he said, supporting her with both arms. “I’ll take you to Lavie’s house, and we’ll take care of you! Can you – can you walk, if I hold you?”

“Dear Henrik,” she murmured, making another effort to stand, but unable to do so. “I’m – I’m sorry...”

With a determined look on his face, Henrik gathered her up in his arms, and began to walk towards Casa Regale.

“Henrik...are you....” she said, drawing each word out with an effort, and opening her eyes briefly.

“Shh, don’t worry about that,” he replied, soothingly. “Just a little longer.” Still carrying her, he rang the doorbell, and the door was instantly opened by a surprised-looking Carmen.

“Miss Bernadette!” she exclaimed. “Goodness, what happened to her, Henrik?”

“I don’t know,” Henrik said, sounding on the verge of tears himself. “We were just talking to Ryan and Marianne at the docks, and she collapsed. We need to get help...”

“Poor dear,” Carmen said, sympathetically, as she looked at the girl’s pale face.

At that moment, Sigmund Regale emerged from his study. "Goodness, what's happening at this hour? Carmen, what's..." Then his eyes fell on Bernadette, whom Henrik was slowly lowering from his arms onto a couch, and he staggered back, as if he had been struck by a blow himself.

"What – how – wh..." he stammered, rushing forward. "Damnation, Spenson, what on Terra happened to that girl? Did she fall from..." He stopped, looking uncomfortable.

"She was suddenly taken ill, Mr. Regale," Henrik said. "It happened out of the blue....We need to get someone to help her!"

"I'll fetch a doctor," Sigmund said, walking towards the coat-stand. "This is....terrible."

Bernadette stirred. "Mr. Regale..." she said, perspiring more with each word. "Please..."

"What is it, child?" Sigmund said, with urgency in his voice, as he knelt down beside the couch. "Tell me!"

"A doctor....may not help," she began.

"I'll fetch your father, then!" Henrik said. "Hartridge isn't far away."

"Not Father.....Father Marlborough, please," she said, then fell silent, breathing heavily, her hat falling off her head.

"Marlborough?" Sigmund said.

"He's a professor of ours from King's College," Henrik said. "He's waiting at the docks to take us back there."

"Fetch him quickly, then, son," Sigmund said. "God speed!"

Henrik needed no further encouragement, and made his way to the docks as fast as his feet could carry him. In the meantime, Emily and Lavie, both in their dressing-gowns, came running down the steps.

"Daddy? What happened?" Lavie said.

"Miss Aquary's been taken ill," Sigmund said, helplessly. "Henrik Spenson brought her here. I don't know what's the matter."

Lavie hurried to her father's side, and placed a hand over Bernadette's forehead. "She's running a temperature, Daddy," she said.

"Good heavens, Sigmund," Emily said. "That poor child. Carmen, fetch us some wet towels, and let's carry her up to Lavie's room. Let's make her comfortable, at least."

While these instructions were being carried out, and Bernadette was settled peacefully in Lavie's bed, Henrik arrived with the Professor, both running upstairs in a great hurry. In his clerical robes, the good Father had some difficulty keeping up with Henrik, but he made an honourable attempt to do so.

"Good evening, Professor," Sigmund said, shaking his head and removing his spectacles.

"Good evening, Mr. Regale," Marlborough said, sitting down by Bernadette's side, and taking her pulse. "Now, Spenson, tell me exactly what happened."

"We had gone to the docks to meet Ryan, to give him that book of yours," Henrik began, his voice choked. "He was there with his girlfriend, Marianne, and she and Bernadette greeted each other – then Bernadette...lost her balance, and I got her a crate to sit on. She was able to speak, but seemed ill and flushed, and when we left the docks, she could hardly speak, and she began bleeding...." Overcome, he raised his sleeve to his eyes, and sat down as well, unable to say anything more.

"Thank the Infinity you acted fast, young man," Marlborough said, patting Henrik on the back. "If you'd waited even a few hours longer, she would have been in serious trouble."

"But what happened?" Lavie said, in a small voice, and holding her own handkerchief to one eye.

"Let me explain. Your friend, Miss Aquary, has healing abilities. However, such abilities come with a cost – a sensitivity to objects that are cursed or charmed in some way. Most of the time, such an object would just cause her to feel momentarily dizzy, or uncomfortable."

"I remember that," Henrik said. "Remember when she felt faint at your party, Lavie? Apparently it was because Ryan was carrying an object he'd found on his travels, a sort of bandit's calling card."

"Cursed?" Lavie exclaimed. "But – we don't have those sort of things in Davenport, do we?"

"However, there are curses and curses, Miss Regale," Marlborough went on, as he sought the pouch that hung from Bernadette's belt, and opened it. "A curse that has been placed on an object many years ago, or with no specific aim – like a bandit's calling card, or the staff of a dark mage – would not affect her. But an object that has been recently cursed, and that is currently doing harm, would cause her to collapse. To an outsider, it would look like she had a fever, but it would take her at least two weeks to recover from it, unless we intervened at the very outset."

"Recently cursed?" Sigmund said. "You mean, a conjuration that is still active, and that has been cast less than a year ago? I've heard of such things, but I never..."

"I see you're a Zion University man, Mr. Regale," Marlborough said, appreciatively. "Now, don't weep, Mr. Spenson – nor you, Miss Regale. Your speed has saved her a lot of needless suffering – besides the fact that she's a healthy young girl, of course. Mrs. Regale, I'm sure you're the perfect hostess, so could you just make her a cup of tea?"

“Tea?” Emily said, incredulously.

“Yes, ordinary tea, but just add these to your tea leaves when you brew it,” Father Marlborough said, holding out a handful of orange roots with a smile. “It’s fortunate that she was carrying Keole Roots with her, or we’d have had to head to Trinden to fetch them.”

“I remember the Princess telling me about Keole Roots,” Lavie said, with a sigh of relief. “Will she be all right, then?”

“Let her have her cup, and then you can see for yourselves, my dear young lady,” Father Marlborough said, in a comforting tone.

Emily returned with a cup of tea in exactly ten minutes, and with the help of both Henrik and Lavie, Bernadette slowly drank it. Though she still seemed weary, her perspiration gradually ceased, and the bleeding from her nose stopped.

“It’ll take a little while more to work,” Marlborough said, his expression brightening. “Now, all she needs to do is take some Sun Herbs for the next three or four days, and she should be as right as rain.”

“Thank you, Father,” Henrik said, shaking his professor’s hand warmly. “If something had happened to her, I...”

“I know what you mean, Henrik,” Lavie said, sympathetically. “But – Professor, we need to find that cursed object, and destroy it! It could easily hurt her again!”

“If someone is smuggling or hiding magical objects at the docks, that’s a crime,” Sigmund said sternly. “We ought to inform the port authorities, as well as the police.”

“Just a minute, please,” Marlborough said. “Let us proceed by elimination. The only people with Bernadette at the docks were Mr. Spenson, Mr. Eramond, and Miss Robertson. None of them could have been carrying such an object without being harmed themselves, or at least being aware of some sort of pain or discomfort, unless...”

“Unless what?” Henrik said, slowly.

“Unless they had cursed the object themselves,” Father Marlborough said, checking Bernadette’s pulse again. “Ah, good, she should be able to speak quite soon. And unless I’m very much mistaken, neither you, nor your friends, are mages of that calibre.”

“I’m not so sure about *Marianne*,” Lavie said, darkly.

“Lavie, dear!” Emily protested. “As much as you might dislike her, that doesn’t make her a sorceress!”

“Besides, Marianne was quite kind to Bernadette, and even offered to help her,” Henrik pointed out. “Look, I know about Ryan, but...”

“Could we change the topic?” Lavie said, annoyed. “Very well, it’s not Marianne. It’s certainly not you either, Henrik, because you’re silly about poor Bernadette. You couldn’t harm her if you tried.”

“Guilty as charged, Lavie,” Henrik said, softly, as he took the sleeping girl’s hand in his own. “And it’s not Ryan. There are only two possibilities. Either someone is hiding the object in the docks – in a crate, or on board a ship – or someone carrying such an object was passing by the docks, or hiding in them, at that moment.”

“Is there any way of finding this out, Professor?” Sigmund asked. “I’ve heard of detectors of cursed objects...”

“Unfortunately, those exist only in history books, at least in Galvenia, Mr. Regale. The Zion still make them, but we’re a long way from Caledonia. We could try the Museum at Lorean, but I still think it was someone passing by, who was carrying an item of that sort. I can’t think of anyone who’d want to hide such a thing in Davenport, of all places,” Marlborough said.

“Ohmygosh!” Lavie exclaimed. “I know!”

“Know what, Lavie, my sister?” The voice was low, but the words now came without a struggle. Bernadette stirred, and opened her eyes. “Goodness, where *am* I?”

“Bernadette! Are you all right?” Henrik asked.

“Henrik? Lavie? Father....Am I in King’s College? Oh, no – I remember.” She beamed at Henrik. “You brought me to safety, Henrik, didn’t you? I knew you would...”

“It was all I could do,” Henrik replied, with a smile.

“I – I’ve never reacted that way before, Henrik,” Bernadette said, apologetically. “It must have been something very powerful...”

“Something like a sword, right?” Lavie said, with a grim expression.

“That is quite possible, Miss Regale, but whose sword?” Father Marlborough said, surprised.

“Let me explain,” Lavie said, firmly, and she narrated what she had witnessed between Ryan and Juno, to an audience that listened with mounting discomfort.

“Makarov wouldn’t use a cursed weapon,” Henrik said. “He’s a nut, but he’s not evil.”

“Then why was he torturing Ryan with magical attacks?” Lavie said, hotly. “I’m sure it was him and that sword of his, with its blue and orange beams....Daddy, we ought to report him to the police, right away!”

“It may have been the sword,” Bernadette admitted, sitting up in bed with a little help from Henrik. “I know I said it wasn’t cursed, but I didn’t get close enough to tell on the night I healed Ryan. Besides, I’m a novice at detecting such things at a distance.”

“But what would that boy, Juno, have been doing in the docks?” Emily asked.

“I don’t know,” Lavie said, shivering. “He’s scary. I still remember the way he talked about teaching Ryan a lesson, and the pain Ryan was in...”

Sigmund, who was listening to this conversation rather absently, suddenly spoke. “Did you say blue and orange, Lavie?”

“Yes, Daddy! That’s what was coming out of the edge of his sword – some kind of light,” Lavie replied.

“At any rate, it might not be safe for you to return to the docks tonight,” Father Marlborough said. “Bernadette, I hate to say this, but Itaria may actually be safer for you than Galvenia, as long as an object like this is on the loose.”

“Can I still make the journey?” Bernadette asked, apprehensively.

“Of course you can, my daughter,” Marlborough said, affectionately. “Itaria has its dangers, but within its borders, no curse can ever truly rise above a mediocre efficacy. The Church ensures that.”

“Juno’s mother told me he was staying near Straukpass,” Henrik said, “though that was many months ago. Infinity knows what he’s doing around here.”

“At any rate, my child, please stay with us tonight,” Sigmund said, patting her hand. “Our home is always open to you, and you’re safe here. Tomorrow, we’ll have a word with the authorities, and we’ll try to clear this up, and trace that Juno if need be.”

“Thank you, Mr. Regale,” Bernadette said, with a grateful look on her face.

“Spenson, you’d better stay in the guest room, since I’m sure you wouldn’t want to stay too far from her,” Sigmund went on, kindly.

“I’ll stay with Bernadette tonight, Daddy,” Lavie said, with a smile, “just in case she feels unwell, again.”

“That would be quite satisfactory,” Father Marlborough said. “I’ll come by in the morning and take her back to King’s College, and I’ll also get some Sun Herbs on the way. Good work, Mr. Spenson, and good night to you all. May the Infinity protect you and your household.” He made a gesture of benediction, prayed over Bernadette for a few moments, and then left, quietly and without fuss.

“That’s a remarkable man, Spenson,” Sigmund Regale remarked. “Blue and orange. I would very much like to see that sword myself.”

“Daddy, don’t!” Lavie said, nervously. “Juno’s crazy! He might try to attack *you* with that sword, for all you know....”

“I was merely jesting, Lavie. But I’m truly grateful that you’re safe now, Bernadette,” he replied.

“So am I,” Emily Regale added.

“Thank you all so much,” Bernadette said, as they all embraced her in turn. “I’m – quite fine now. I’m sorry for the inconvenience...”

“Think nothing of it, child,” Sigmund said, gently.

Slowly, the members of the household all returned to their rooms, and all tried to sleep as best as they could.....

“Bernadette?” Lavie whispered, about an hour later. “Are you all right?”

“Quite all right, Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette whispered back. “Why do you ask?”

“I thought I heard you groan,” Lavie replied.

“I was probably snoring,” Bernadette said with a laugh. “Pleasant dreams carry you to the morning, Lavie.”

“You too,” Lavie said, laughing as well. She closed her eyes, and within a few minutes, she was fast asleep, but Bernadette lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Her body did not trouble her any longer, but her thoughts did.

If it isn’t that sword, then....No. It’s too horrible to even think such a thing, and besides, it’s not possible. I shouldn’t even mention it. People could get hurt, just because I made a mistake....

Winter came early that year in Galvenia, and nowhere was it felt more keenly than in Davenport. People left their homes reluctantly, wrapped themselves up as warmly as possible, and blamed it all on the Varald, though there was no logic to this attribution.

It’s never easy to say goodbye, Lavie thought, as she stood at the docks of Davenport, wrapped in a fur coat. *And three times in a row is a little too much, even for me.*

“Are you all right, Lavie?” Anne Lancaster said, buttoning up her own overcoat. “Goodness, it is cold out here.”

“Just thinking, Gran,” Lavie said. “I – I feel like everyone I know, except for my own family, has gone away, and I don’t know when I’ll see them again. Ryan, Henrik, Bernadette – and now even the Princess...”

“Courage, dear,” Anne said, with a smile. “You’ve still got me, remember.”

“Thanks, Gran,” Lavie said, as she looked ahead, into the mists that rose over the sea, remembering the events of the past week...

Ryan...

“Now be careful, dear,” Sheila Eramond said, warmly, as she clung to her son. “Listen to your commanders, or whatever the term is, and stay safe, do you hear?”

“I will, Mum,” Ryan said, extricating himself gently. “There’s no chance of my getting a swollen head with this goofy uniform of mine, anyway.”

“I think it looks quite nice, son,” Theodore said, with a laugh. “At least it’s not yellow.”

“Very funny, Dad,” Ryan said, absently, his mind still wandering back to the last few moments he and Marianne had shared.

I really get confused sometimes, he thought. Even once I come back safely, with a commission in the Army, how can we get married? And if I leave the Army during the war, who’d want to employ me? I really....

“Hi, Ryan,” a voice said, in rather subdued tones. Theodore and Sheila, noting the newcomer, took a few steps back.

“Er, hi, Lavie,” Ryan said, stifling a groan. *Just what I needed. I hope she doesn’t decide to imitate Mum...*

She was wearing the same clothes she had worn that night in the woods, except for the addition of woolen stockings and a shawl. “Ryan....I just wanted to tell you that I’m as proud of you as your mother and father are. I’ll be waiting for you to come back, whatever happens, and I’ll even pray to the Five Angels, like I did the last time...”

“The Five Angels?” Ryan said, blankly. *What the heck is she talking about?*

Lavie flushed. “It’s nothing, Ryan. What I meant to say is...” She stopped, and covered her face with her hands.

“Look, Lavie, I’m sorry about....what happened back there, okay? It was just....” Ryan began, haltingly.

“No, Ryan,” Lavie said, brushing her hand across her eyes, impatiently. “I understand. It’s all right, you don’t need to apologize.” With an effort, she smiled and held out her hand. “And I know you’ll come back safely, Ryan. Come what may, I’ll make sure you do.”

Ryan laughed nervously. “Will you? What if I get captured or something?”

“Then I’ll bring you back,” Lavie replied, laughing herself, “or *die trying!*”

Despite his annoyance, Ryan felt strangely touched, and turned away. *Why does she even bother saying a thing like that, after what happened? Is she just being silly? Or is she really loyal, as Dad said? Sheesh, I don’t even know. But I wish it was Marianne saying this to me, and not her.*

“Ryan?” Lavie said, noticing his somber expression. “Are you all right?”

“Never felt better, Lavie,” Ryan said, as they shook hands. “Thanks, I guess, and – er – keep the flag flying back here.”

“I will, Ryan,” Lavie said. “And I know we’ll meet again, someday, sooner than you expect.” She stepped away, to allow Ryan’s parents to bid him their last farewells.

“Hmph,” Ryan replied, though he was not really annoyed.

A little later, she stood on the deck, waving hopefully, as the ship slowly receded from her line of vision.

“Are you all right, dear?”

“Oh, I guess I am, Auntie Sheila,” Lavie replied, turning to face Ryan’s mother, who was looking at her kindly. “It’s – just the first time that Ryan is leaving the country, and....”

“I know how you feel, Lavie,” Sheila Eramond replied. “That’s why we’re both staying behind here; to see him off, and to welcome him when he returns.” She sighed. “Lavie, would you like to come home with us? We could – talk a while, if it makes you feel better.”

“Thanks, Auntie Sheila,” Lavie said, slowly. “I guess I will. And please come over for our Saint Mikhail’s Day dinner in the evening! Gran’ll be there, too, and....”

Henrik and Bernadette...

“Be brave, Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette said. Though she spoke confidently, the spring in her step had not yet returned, and it was clear that she was still suffering from the effects of what had happened to her at the docks.

“Are you sure you’ll be able to – make the journey, Bernadette?” Lavie said, with obvious fear in her voice. “You’re still not well, and..”

“Oh, I get stronger every day,” Bernadette said, with a broad smile, “and besides, I have Henrik to look after me. He’s sturdy enough for the two of us.”

Henrik, embarrassed, turned away to look at the men who were loading provisions on the small ship that would take them to Itaria. Before he could think of a suitable reply, they were all interrupted by the breathless arrival of a green-haired woman, wearing a long travelling cloak, whose scarf and hat threatened to fly away from her every minute.

“Wait for me! Wait for me!” she called out, brightly. “Sweet lands, don’t tell me you’re going to leave so soon!” She stopped, breathlessly, in front of Henrik, and grinned at him. “Good day, Mr. Spenson,” she said, shaking his hand vigorously. “It’s such a pleasure to be with you, and to be able to serve the people of Itaria, as well as my own country. I’m no fighter, as my sister Rosemary will tell you, but I will do the best I can!” She looked forward, a proud expression on her face. “And you, my dear? What a lovely blue robe you’re wearing. Aren’t you feeling cold? That little coat of yours won’t keep out our Galvenian winters, you know. Here, have a pair of earmuffs.” She extracted the object in question from within her cloak, and before Bernadette could reply, placed it over her ears. “And – oh, by the heavens, is that Lady Fina I see? Or are you just wearing a wig, young lady?”

“A *wig*?” Lavie stared at the woman in amazement. “What is it with wigs? That’s the second time someone’s asked me that question! Are you going to yank it to check if it’s real, too?”

“Pull it? Sweet lands, I would never dream of doing such a thing to Lady Fina, or any of her descendants,” Aline Sheldon said, rubbing her nose vigorously with one gloved hand. “Pardon me, my dear, but I didn’t quite get your name. Will you be coming with us, too? That makes me so happy! Us old scientists like to have younger company around, to keep things from getting too dull. Do you sing, Miss Fina?”

She’s nuts, Lavie thought. “My name is Lavie Regale, not Fina,” she said, politely. “I’m not coming on the ship, I’m just here to see my friend Bernadette off.”

“Regale?” Aline beamed at her. “Surely not a relation of Sigmund Regale, who so generously endowed our Museum with a Chair for the Study of Minerals and Alloys? He’s such a nice man. I met him once, long ago, and someone told me a rather sad story about him. But I must be wrong, you don’t look like him at all, Miss F – I mean Lavie.”

Poor Bernadette and Henrik! The woman doesn’t stop, Lavie thought. “He’s my father, ma’am,” she explained, “though I take after my mother’s side of the family in appearance. He is rather interested in science and lore, and studied a lot about it in Zion University.”

“How perfectly lovely!” Aline exclaimed, clapping her hands. “Oh, poor scatterbrained me. I haven’t even introduced myself! My name is Aline Sheldon and I work at the Museum. Technically, that should be *Doctor* Sheldon, but with every surgeon-johnny calling himself a doctor these days, why bother? You

can call me Aline, my dear. Is your father also here with us now? I'd like to meet the dear man, and thank him for helping to advance the cause of science."

"He's at home, sleeping," Lavie said, with a laugh. *She's rather amusing in small doses*, she thought. *And she could probably talk a sea-storm away!* "But I'll tell him you asked after him, and when you come back, you can always visit him at our home."

"Oh, how nice," Aline said, taking off her glasses and wiping them with her cloak. "I'm *such* a lucky girl, you know. I get saved by adventurers in the woods, I get a free trip to Itaria, and now I meet the daughter of a benefactor of humanity! Life's been good to me, that's for sure. Tell me, dear, do you know who Lady Fina was?"

"Er, someone who looks like me? A Zionese noble, or something?" Lavie guessed.

"Tsk, ts. And you seemed so intelligent and well-read," Aline said, looking gloomy for a fraction of a second, then brightening. "But of course! You must have gone to a Galvenian public school, and they don't teach legends in your schools! Mother insisted that I go to a school run by Itarian nuns, and look where it got me. I'm an old maid, and my sister's a nun herself, though it needn't have ended that way! Dear Bruce." She shivered, and drew her cloak so tightly around her that her hat escaped from her grip. Henrik kindly retrieved it for her.

"Bruce?" Lavie said, her head whirling.

"My poor fiancé," Aline said, tears coming to her eyes. "He was killed at Darington, you know. But of course you wouldn't, my child, you'd have just been a little girl at that time. Bruce would've liked you, Miss Lavie. I remember when...."

"Aline!" The voice behind them was stern, yet amused. "Are you boring everyone to death with your chatter again?"

"Of course not, Rosemary dear," Aline said, her smile returning at once. "She's my grumpy younger sister," she added, in an aside to Lavie. "Doesn't want us to have any fun."

"Very amusing, Aline," Sister Rosemary said. "You look familiar, Miss," she went on, turning to Lavie. "I've seen someone who looked and spoke a lot like you, but much older. She was at our convent a while ago, and brought us a gentlewoman who was on the run from her husband."

"The only old person I know well is my Gran," Lavie said, wondering what exactly she had stepped into.

"Ah, that would be her, dear. Lady Anne Lancaster. Are you her grandchild? Delighted, I'm sure," Sister Rosemary said, bowing to Lavie. "Such a kind person."

"That's Gran all right," Lavie said. "Let me get this straight, she brought someone in trouble to you?"

“Yes, a distressed woman who’d sought refuge with her on Mann Island,” Sister Rosemary explained. “Her name was Julianne Tolor. Unfortunately, she was again taken from us a few days ago. I’ve complained to the police, and informed Mrs. Lancaster as well. She was quite cross, I’m afraid.”

“Julianne Tolor?” Somehow, the name sounded familiar, but Lavie could not place it.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, dear,” Sister Rosemary said. “But make sure you find out about her - Goodness, I must make sure everything’s ready! Good day, Miss.” With these words, she took Aline aside and began giving her instructions.

“Goodbye, Lavie,” Bernadette said, as the two girls embraced. “I know the Infinity will preserve us. May he preserve you as well, until the day when we are together again.”

“Goodbye, Bernadette. May the Five Angels keep you safe,” Lavie said, gently. “Oh! I almost forgot. Here’s a little something from Daddy. He said you could open it once you were on the ship, and it would come in useful.” She handed a package, about the length of her forearm, to Bernadette, who blushed.

“Thank you so much, Lavie. Please thank your father on my behalf. He has been so good to me...” She stopped, embarrassed.

“Oh, Daddy has strong likes and dislikes,” Lavie said, patting her on the shoulder. “You happen to fall into the former category!”

Carranya...

“Mom, do you know anyone called Julianne Tolor?” Lavie said, as she and her parents, dressed rather elegantly, stood waiting at Serin’s Peak Naval Shipyard.

Emily frowned, and it seemed to Lavie that she was flushing, though more out of anger than embarrassment. “Tolor? The Tulors were a noble house, Lavie, like the Lancasters and the Delanors. Unfortunately, they did something beyond the pale, and lost their honours under the reign of George the Third.”

“What did they do?” Lavie asked.

“They supported Almonth Jakov’s rebels, the War Hawks, at the battle of Chespa Bay,” Emily replied, with an expression of distaste on her face. “It was a very dishonourable thing to do. After the battle, Father told me, the King wanted them executed, but some of the ministers managed to prevent him from doing it. However, the Earl of Tolor was stripped of his title, and both he and his wife died soon after. They left behind two daughters, one of whom was called -”

Sigmund, who had been walking near the waterline and tossing pebbles into the sea, walked back towards his wife and daughter. “Who did, Emily?” he asked, catching the last sentence.

“The Earl of Tulor, Sigmund,” Emily replied. “Lavie asked me if I knew anyone called Julianne Tulor.”

“Julianne...” Sigmund paused, looking as if he had been unpleasantly surprised. “Why do you ask, Lavie?”

“Well, I was at the docks the other day seeing Bernadette off, and giving her your farewell present, Daddy,” Lavie said, leaning close to her father, “I met a nun, who told me a story about Gran helping someone called Julianne Tulor. It sounded like something important. Has she told you or Mom about it?”

“I’m afraid she has, Lavie,” Sigmund said, gravely, “and I’m not sure if it would be wise to tell you about it. It’s a sordid tale.”

“Daddy, I’m eighteen!” Lavie protested. “You can tell me about it.”

Emily sighed. “Well, dear, on your birthday, when your grandmother came by, she told us both about this woman. She used to live in this town, but she’s left.”

“That Sister said it was because her husband was ill-treating her,” Lavie said, her eyes flashing with anger. “That’s terrible.”

“Indeed it is,” Sigmund said, heavily. “Unfortunately, for the sake of young Eramond, I’ve had to be very cautious in proceeding in this matter.”

“Ryan?” Lavie looked shocked. “What does this have to do with *him*?”

“Nothing directly, Lavie,” Sigmund said, then fell silent.

“Daddy, what’s the matter?” Lavie said, alarmed. “Has something happened to Ryan or his family?”

“What your father means, Lavie,” Emily said, gently, taking Lavie’s hand, “is that this woman – and her husband, who seems to be a scoundrel of the worst sort – are the parents of someone Ryan cares for a great deal.”

Suddenly, the significance of the name came to her, from a casual conversation she’d had with Ryan, months ago. “Ohmygosh!” she exclaimed, shivering at the conclusion she had drawn. “You mean....”

“Yes, dearest,” Sigmund said, taking her other hand and holding it firmly. “I mean your classmate, Marianne. Julianne Robertson is her mother. Tulor was her maiden name, as we have now found out. And Alex Robertson – I’d personally whip the man if I saw him, but I can’t do that, for Ryan’s sake. The bloody bandit.” Lavie had rarely seen her father furious, but this was one of those occasions.

“Why – why not inform the police, Daddy?” Lavie said, angrily. “If he’s that kind of person, I wouldn’t wish him on anyone, not even Marianne!”

"It's not that simple, Lavie," Sigmund began. "You see, that rascal has..."

"Lavie!" The voice rang out clearly in the winter air. "I knew you would be there."

"Princess?" Lavie's expression brightened, as she began to walk towards her friend. "Where are the King and the Queen?"

"They'll be arriving a little later, Lavie," Carranya said, her cape fluttering in the wind. "I came ahead of them, because Mother was feeling a little unwell."

"I'm sorry, Carranya," Lavie said, kindly.

"Good morning, Your Highness," Emily said, curtsying. "May you have a safe journey to Issachar."

"If I may be so bold as to ask, Your Highness," Sigmund broke in, making a stiff bow, "what is the object of this journey? Even the papers have been silent about it, merely saying that the King is extending the terms of our treaty of alliance with the Zion."

Carranya sighed heavily. "I wish I could tell you the truth, Mr. Regale," she said, "but unfortunately, I do not know it entirely, myself. All I know is that there may soon be trouble along the border, and that my father and Duke Renaud of Zion must meet to prevent a disaster. Moreover, this trouble has been brought about by the treachery of one of our own men."

"Treachery?" Lavie said, sharply. "What do you mean, Princess?"

Without a word, Carranya drew a sealed envelope from her pocket, and handed it to Lavie. "I know this is an irregular proceeding, my friends, but it may be the safest way. Keep this safe with you, Lavie, but do not open it, unless you hear that something has befallen us in Zion. If it does, unseal the envelope, and after reading what I have written, go straight to Sir Cornelius Fairfax in Lorean. If we return safely, however, destroy it."

"Princess, what's going on?" Lavie exclaimed.

"I am sorry I cannot tell you more, Lavie," Carranya said, embracing her friend. "You are the only person I can entrust with a task like this, and you are outside the palace. Please, for the sake of our friendship, do as I ask you."

"I promise, Carranya," Lavie said, returning the gesture. "If there's anything I can do to help you, I will do it – or *die trying!*" She laughed, nervously at first, then with more of her usual spirit.

"Princess, I am honoured by your trust in our daughter," Emily began. "And I am sure that Lavie will do as you say; moreover, as loyal Galvenians, my husband and I will do our best to help her."

"Indeed, Emily," Sigmund said, with an awed expression on his face. "May the Infinity keep you safe, Princess."

“Do be careful, Carranya,” Lavie said, fighting against the lump in her throat. “Ryan’s already gone, as has Bernadette, and now you’re leaving, too...”

“Dear Lavie,” Carranya said affectionately. “I know I do not have Ryan to protect me this time, but I must go. It is my duty, and my Way.”

“I understand, Carranya...” Lavie murmured.

“And you still have that cover with you, don’t you, dear?” Anne Lancaster said, breaking in on Lavie’s reverie.

“Yes, Gran, it’s safe at home, in one of Daddy’s lockers,” Lavie said, as they huddled together. “And though she didn’t say it, I’m sure I know who the traitor is!”

“Do you, dear?” Anne said, cautiously. “Who is it?”

“Sir Chuck – I mean, Sir Prescott,” Lavie said, darkly. “I’ve had my suspicions of him ever since that lunch we had together, at Checkpoint Bravo.”

“Sir Prescott?” Anne seemed amused, rather than surprised. “Well, I am loath to say anything against a fellow noble, but it’s not impossible, Lavie.” She shook her head. “But don’t go worrying your head about it, dear. The crowned heads of Galvenia are taking care of it, and if that Princess can do anything to make things right, she will.”

“I don’t remember seeing you before, boy,” the man in the cloak said, as he stood in the back room of the Explorers’ Guild, looking contemptuously at the young man before him. “Robb said you were – a messenger for *them*.”

“Yep, that’s me, daddy-o. So don’t shoot the messenger, ‘kay?” the young man replied, drawing his scarf – which covered not only his head, but most of his face – closer around him. Only his brown eyes were truly visible, and they seemed amused.

“Let us not waste time on chatter,” the man replied. “You know of the latest developments, do you not?”

“Geez, after you let Lugner down, I should be the one asking the questions, dude,” the man said, his hand going to his belt. The man in the cloak could make out the bulge of a firearm even under the thick jacket, and swallowed nervously.

“Now, there’s no need to get excited,” he said, in a placatory tone. “Tell your masters that things are going perfectly well. The man they are afraid of has been despatched, but they can still trace him using

the usual methods.” He laughed. “The problem of – the woman will soon be solved; my men have traced her to Straukpass, and will soon be rid of her.”

“Hey, you didn’t do so hot at Straukpass last time, loser,” the man said, with a taunting laugh. “I know you’re a nice guy and all that, but you’ve got to try harder.”

“You still owe me fifty thousand Commonwealth dollars for – keeping the trace on him, boy,” the man in the cloak replied, annoyed. “These things are expensive.”

“You know what they say, Robert, old bean,” the young man said. “Crime doesn’t pay.”

“Please, spare me the sermons,” the man in the cloak replied.

“Okay, here’s another one for you, little guy. There’s no honour among thieves!” The man laughed, and pulled a large pistol out of his jacket. “Now listen to me. The Brotherhood of the Ugly Faces is making the rules here, not you. So here’s what we say. Put your hands up, scum!”

“What?” the man in the cloak replied.

“He’s all yours, Bowes,” Armin Tamas called out, dropping his scarf, as Agent Bowes – accompanied by a group of policemen, led by Inspector Bosley, rushed into the room and immobilized the man in the cloak.

“I’ll get you for this,” the man in the cloak spluttered, but Bosley stopped him by waking up to him and punching him on the jaw.

“I’ve been waiting for this for a long, long time, Robert – or should I call you The Prince? Or Albert Farley? You’re been a naughty boy, indeed.”

“Robb...” Robert muttered, rubbing his jaw and wincing.

“Robb turned King’s evidence once he heard what you boys were *really* up to,” Agent Bowes – still wearing a loose shirt and trousers, and apparently impervious to the cold – replied, as he pointed his rifle at ‘Robert’. “In return for today’s little work, we’ve agreed to turn a blind eye to his mercenary jaunts here, especially since he’s netted us a pretty big fish today. I guess my boy was right – crime *really* doesn’t pay.” He laughed softly to himself. “You’ll have a long, long time to think about what you’ve done in prison.”

“Hah,” the man said, contemptuously. “I have friends in high places, you ignoramus. Even as you speak, there is someone in Davenport who will pull the right strings and have me released...”

“Shove it, Bobby-boy,” Bosley said, taking the opportunity to handcuff him. “You’re not going to jail like all nice criminals do. You belong to Bowes, not to me.”

“To the Secret Service?” The man shuddered, and shrank from Bosley’s advancing figure. “You can’t do that to me!” he screamed.

“Believe me, we will,” Bowes said, calmly. “Nice work, Armin.”

Armin looked at the cowering figure of the cloaked man with disdain. “Thanks, Chief. This is gonna hit a good man hard, Supremo,” he said, “but if he’s the traitor we’re looking for, I have no pity for him. And if I know that man well, he’ll understand too.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE HAND THAT WAS HELD OUT

*“For the LORD is creating something new on earth:
the Woman sets out to find her Husband again.”
(Jeremiah, ch. 31, v.22)*

“Good work, son,” Captain Fowler said, clapping Ryan on the back. “That last convoy is wreckage, and we managed to get both the drivers out. I’m sure they’ll have something to tell us, or my name’s not Dave.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Ryan said, as he lowered his rifle, watching the convoy – which had turned turtle after Ryan had shot its wheels out – lying on its side and burning, the smoke from its engines mingling with the dust of the Republican desert. “It looks like there are fewer of them than we expected here, though.”

“Senor, I have secured the men in the temporary holding rooms,” Juan said, walking up to both of them and saluting. “They are frightened, and I believe they will talk. One of them is from San Delas.”

“Nice work, Johnny,” Dave Fowler replied, touching his Republican Legionary’s cap. “I’ll let you sit in on the translation, unless we get orders to move forward. Now move out, men. It’s unlikely that there’ll be more of them.” In orderly fashion, the Galvenian Army recruits, accompanied by Fowler’s men, withdrew to the makeshift camp they had erected.

“You were right, Private,” Fowler said, with approval. “There are fewer here than our initial reports suggested. They’ve probably been warned about us, but even then, they can’t withdraw completely.”

“No, sir,” Ryan said. “The Special Forces men have moved on ahead, but they’ve ordered us to stay here overnight, and move out only once they give us the signal.”

“Reckland must be well along the coast by now, I’d say,” Captain Fowler said, removing his cap and leaning back in his chair. “And that blighter, Samuels, seems to be more interested in following the Special Forces than in leading you lads, which is why he’s left me in charge of the ruddy show. Not that I mind.”

“Sir!” Agent Devon Gerius entered the room, and saluted. “Permission to speak, Sir.”

“Chat away, if it makes you happy,” Fowler said, with a laugh.

“Sir, we shall begin interrogating the two men, with the help of Private Casales,” Gerius said, his hand going to his pistol. “Do you have any specific instructions?”

“Go easy on them, Devon. Most of them aren’t combatants; they’re just poor devils who would rather be mercenaries than slaves, or the servants of the chieftains. If they know nothing useful, there’s no point in trying to frighten them into a confession.”

“My thoughts exactly, Sir,” Gerius said, respectfully, as he saluted and left.

Ryan was about to follow, when Fowler called him back.

“Sit down, Private, there are a few things I’d like to tell you. You seem an intelligent lad, and heaven knows it gets bloody lonely out here,” Fowler said. “First of all, I must congratulate all of you on doing a good job. We’ve already seized weapons by the cartload, and the Varald are going to be furious.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Ryan said, as he sat down on a stool opposite the Captain. It seemed to him that the past few weeks – the long, dull sea journey, then the excitement of raids on the arms factories during which property, and not human life, was the main target – had gone by in a blur. Home seemed a distant dream to him, amid the dust and dry heat of the Republic.

“You’re a Davenport lad, aren’t you?” Fowler said, kindly.

“Yes, sir. Is the accent that obvious?” Ryan said, with a laugh. “I thought I could pass myself off as a Lorean boy quite well.”

“Ah, but I remember your name, Private. Your grandfather was one of the reasons I joined the armed forces in the first place, and he was Davenport’s local hero, wasn’t he?”

“That’s true, sir,” Ryan said, “though Grandpa never was one for honours and decorations.”

“That’s how it ought to be, if you ask me. Have you ever heard of me, lad?”

“I’m afraid not, Captain,” Ryan said, politely. “We were briefed about the Republican Legion before we left Galvenia, but that was all.”

“Hmm. Now, I may be wrong, since I haven’t seen you do too much with a sword, but you’re a pupil of Walter Whitworth’s, aren’t you?”

“You read me like a book, Sir,” Ryan said, appreciatively. “I was one of his students, though, sadly, he died this April.”

“It’s a wonder he lived that long, lad,” Fowler said. “My own father was a bit like him. He did a stint in the Army as a young man, then retired as a Lieutenant-Colonel and became a trainer. Only, he got bitten by the mythical bug; he started studying martial arts, magic arts, and Infinity knows what else. I used to find him rather boring at times, but he was a good man, Private. He set up a small school in Straukpass, and used to take on pupils like Walter did.”

“Straukpass?” Memories of his jaunt there, with Armin and the Sergeant, came to Ryan’s mind suddenly, and he smiled. “Why, I do believe I met someone fitting that description there.” And, in response to the Captain’s inquiring nod, he briefly narrated what had happened there.

Fowler nodded, clearly pleased. "Up the Fowlers! I knew the old man still had it in him, even after all this time. To think that that no-good, dirty, cheating..." His words trailed away, and he stared into space, angrily.

"What's the matter, Captain?" Ryan asked, with concern.

"An unpleasant memory, that's all, lad," Fowler said, slowly. His eyes went to Ryan's pendant, which he still wore beneath his uniform. "Look here, Private, may I ask you something personal?"

"Be my guest, sir," Ryan said.

"That trinket of yours – is it a gift from your sweetheart? You're too young to have a wife, but a fine young lad like you would certainly be no slouch with the ladies." He grinned.

"You sound just like my dad," Ryan said, surprised at the turn the conversation was taking.

"Hmm. Let me tell you a little story, Private Eramond. It may sound like I'm complaining, which is something I hate doing, but there's a method to my madness. Have you heard the old saw about men joining the Republican Legion to forget their past?"

"I believe I heard it mentioned once, by Minister Sheffield during our training," Ryan replied, cautiously.

"Well, it's true in some cases, and mine happens to be one of them. You see, Private, I was going to be a career soldier like my father, and like your granddad. I signed up as soon as I was of age – it was around 275 or so, and my old man was glad when I did. I wasn't bad-looking in those days, though you couldn't tell now, not after the desert's had its way with me." He laughed.

"At any rate, I had a young lady of my own at the time, lad. She was rather delicate, but she was always good fun. She could bring a smile to my face even if I'd spent the day on a hundred-mile march, and she was dying to leave her aunt's house – the aunt belonged to the dragon, rather than the human species."

"Oh, dear," Ryan said. "I believe I've met people like that, sir."

"The aunt wouldn't hear of Susie marrying, because I was just a private, but fortunately for her, she had an elder sister, who lived in Davenport and had a little money of her own. Remember her, lad, because she's the reason I'm telling you this story."

"I see, sir," Ryan replied, still mystified.

"That lady was married to a trader – or at least that's what he called himself, the fool. He was one of those wandering merchants who pick up trinkets by dubious means, and sell them to richer fools. He was frightfully strict, and didn't allow Susie to spend too much time with her sister. But on one of those visits, Susie told her about us, and she lent us enough money to get married on. We set up house with my father in Straukpass, and we were as happy as could be, though I did have to leave the country from

time to time. Susie's sister, Julie, visited us from time to time, sometimes with that beauty of a husband of hers. I couldn't stand him, honestly."

Julie? Ryan thought. *I never knew anyone by that name in Davenport, except...*

"Anyway, things went on well with us, and I reached the rank of Captain in the Galvenian Army," Fowler went on, "and was given the chance to do a tour of duty for the Commonwealth. I wasn't too keen on going, because Susie had been ill that year, and the doctors weren't helping much. But she wanted me to go – she was that kind of person, Private, always put others ahead of herself."

He paused, and cleared his throat, trying not to betray any emotion.

"So off I went, and I reached here – the Republic. I enjoyed the life here, with its chaos and its colours, and I wished I could bring Susie here; the sun would have done her good. But it didn't last; I received a wire saying that she'd been taken ill, and immediately applied for a transfer to Galvenia. It got held up by red tape – bloody bureaucrats – and by the time I returned to Straukpass, Susie was dead."

"I'm sorry, Captain," Ryan said, gently.

"Oh, don't be, lad," Fowler said. "I was done feeling sorry for myself long ago. That's how it is when you're a soldier for the Commonwealth, though if I had my time again, I wish I could have been with her just before...it all ended. But that's not the story. Apparently, when Susie was dying, she'd asked her sister to come and look after her, but she never came. I was surprised, because that wasn't Julie's way – she was a kind girl, too – and I went to Davenport, to see if anything had happened to her, too. I sent her a wire, saying I was coming, but she never replied, and I was worried."

"On the way, I was attacked by bandits. They were amateurs – and no match for me, especially since I was armed – and I took down one of them, while the other two ran away. But they did manage to steal one of my possessions – a keepsake that Susie had given me."

"A keepsake?" Ryan said, looking down at his own pendant.

"Wait for it, lad," Fowler said, softly. "Anyway, when I reached Julie's house, I was met by that twit, Robertson..."

Ryan's mouth fell open. "Robertson?" he exclaimed.

"Ah, *now* I have your attention," Fowler said. "Alex Robertson, Julie's husband. I asked him what was the matter with Julie. He gave me a mean little smile and said that she'd tried to disobey him by leaving home, and she'd been – disciplined. He said it that way, disciplined, and swung a whip through the air as he said it. Though I was an Army man, my blood ran cold. I'm used to people who try to shoot at me, but this was an entirely different animal."

"I told him to get stuffed – pardon my Zionese, Private – but he just kept on laughing, and he took something out of his pocket – the same trinket Susie had given me. I saw red, and I'm afraid I gave him quite a thrashing, but he ran inside his house and locked the door before I could snatch it from him. Not wanting to get arrested, I went to the Davenport police and registered a complaint against him."

"And what did they do, sir?" Ryan said, feeling sick. *This – this is not true. It's all a lie*, he thought.

"They listened to me politely, and said they would make inquiries," Fowler replied, "so I stayed at the Inn that night, and waited. The next day, I received a visit from two policemen. They were both armed, and warned me that I was in trouble for harassing a respectable merchant of Davenport. They told me that if I stayed a minute longer in town, I'd be put in prison."

"Good God!" Ryan exclaimed.

"I could have stayed and fought it out – after all, I was an Army veteran – but I suddenly felt tired and defeated. I paid the fine they suggested, and decided to say goodbye to it all – to a country that protected bandits and wife-beaters, but accused an honest soldier of being a criminal. I said goodbye to my father briefly, and signed up for the Legion; I already knew the Republic well, and I knew that there'd be nothing to remind me of Susie, of the life I once knew. I'd almost forgotten until you walked up with your regiment, wearing it."

"It?" Ryan asked, faltering, though he knew quite well what the answer would be.

"Susie's trinket," Fowler said, kindly. "Not only did it look the same, it has a dent and a chip at the very same place as the one she gave me, the day I took her to Caledonia for our honeymoon. I presume your sweetheart must have bought it from that son of a Varaldian slave trader. Selling stolen goods was quite Robertson's style."

"Sir, I..." Ryan found it hard to breathe.

"Lands of Ghetz, Private, you're looking ill," Fowler said, compassionately. "I hope I haven't..."

"Sir," Ryan said, with as much dignity as he could muster, "that pendant was given to me by my girlfriend. Her name is Marianne...." – he stumbled, then forced himself to continue – "Marianne Robertson."

It was Fowler's turn to look ill-at-ease, despite the composure with which he had spoken of his wife's death and Robertson's perfidy. "Flaming lands! Lad, I'm sorry..."

"It's all right, Sir," Ryan said, stoically. "You had no way of knowing..."

"I should still have broken it more gently, Private," Fowler said, leaning forward with a paternal expression. "I apologize."

“Poor Marianne,” Ryan whispered.

“Now, lad, don’t despair,” Fowler said, patting Ryan on the back. “Just because her father’s a rotten cheat, that doesn’t mean she’s anything like him. For all you know, she may not even know where that pendant came from.”

“She told me she’d bought it from a merchant,” Ryan said, brokenly.

“A white lie, lad, to save face with that father of hers,” Fowler said, encouragingly. “Remember, she’s Julie’s daughter and Susie’s niece, as well. Hell, she’s *my* niece, if it comes to that.” He laughed. “That’s sort of funny, isn’t it, Private?”

Ryan managed a short laugh. “I suppose so, sir,” he said. “Please, take this.” He removed the pendant from around his neck, and handed it to Fowler. “It belongs to you by rights.”

If Fowler had been a less forgiving man, he probably would have accepted. But he liked Ryan, whose rifle skills had made his mission far easier than he’d thought, and he shook his head. “No, lad, keep it. Susie’s in Heaven, rest her soul, and I know she still keeps an eye on her old soldier from time to time. I don’t need that reminder anymore. Keep it, Private, and when you return, remember that your girl’s not responsible for the sins of her father. Try to make her happy – or at least happier than her own poor mother was.”

“I will, Sir,” Ryan said, quietly.

“Good for you, lad,” Fowler said, with a smile. “Permission to leave, Private.”

“You understand, I hope, the seriousness of the situation,” Duke Renaud said, rubbing his hands together. Even across the large table, Carranya could make out his strong resemblance to his cousin, Wilhelm, and the thought caused her heart to skip a beat. On their arrival at Issachar, King Arlbert had spent three inconclusive days in discussion with Engel, with the result that Renaud himself had called for today’s meeting.

“Certainly, Duke Renaud,” Arlbert said, nervously, swallowing before he spoke. “I suppose there is no doubt about it all.”

“None at all, I’m afraid, Your Majesty,” Renaud said. His voice was loud, but kind. “I am glad that you did not resist or oppose poor Engel too much. He is a faithful servant, but even he almost balked at handing over so inauspicious a message.”

“Let me get this straight, then,” the King replied. “Sir Prescott has deliberately stayed away from the battle lines, even though he has urged his men forward; he has kept quiet about troop deaths that are

probably due to his mismanagement. This much is clear, and it is reprehensible enough. But the other two items, Lord Renaud, still fail to convince me.”

“I regret that,” Renaud said, looking at the Princess with obvious admiration. “But Ferzen is a thorough man, and he has been explicit enough. The Turbo Arms Factory, in the Republic, is supplying the both the Varald and the Itarian rebels with arms...”

“Itaria is no concern of ours,” Arlbert said, dismissively.

“It may soon be, Your Majesty,” Renaud said, calmly. “That much is clear from the arms we have recovered – though serial numbers have been filed off, and tags disguised, we can still be sure. Now, why is a factory owned by the commander of your forces supplying arms to the enemy, Your Majesty? I can assure you that my august uncle was most displeased when he learned of it.”

“I can assure you, Lord Renaud,” Carranya said, steadily, “that neither I nor my parents were aware of this dishonourable affair, and we condemn it most strongly. Refusing to acknowledge a problem is not the way of the Lionhearts.”

A small smile crept across Renaud’s face. “What I had been told was right, then,” he said, placing his hands on the table. “You, for one, will not deal falsely with us, Princess.”

“None of us will, Lord Renaud,” Queen Katarina said, looking at her daughter with pride.

“Very well!” Renaud replied, beaming at the Queen. “Now, as for the second matter. There have been a number of reports of bandits, and other men of doubtful antecedents, on both sides of the border. Some of these men even tried, rather childishly, to hold up a shipment of medicines for the Emperor. Fortunately, they were utterly inept, and were stopped by one of our soldiers, with the help of some Galvenian boys. Nonetheless, the activities of these bandits should not be taken lightly. Rumours speak of a man named Lugner, who was apparently the leader of these bandits.”

“That man is dead, according to our police,” Arlbert replied, “and his second-in-command, a man known as Robert, is now in custody as well. But what connection do these men have with Sir Prescott?”

“Ah, you have me there, your Majesty. I cannot produce a single piece of firm evidence linking them. However, many of these bandits have been communicating by radio with a receiver that, according to our scientists, lies within the confines of Lorean Castle.”

“My lord!” Arlbert said, angrily. “While we are allies, you have no right to engage in espionage of this sort. It is an unwarranted intrusion.”

“An intrusion, perhaps, Your Majesty,” Renaud said, calmly, “but one certainly warranted by recent events. Now, as I have already said, the Emperor is unhappy about these events, but he is not unreasonable. And he has been impressed by your loyalty thus far, as well as by the Princess’ brave

words. Therefore, he makes two simple requests of you, which will go a long way towards making amends.”

“State your requests, then,” Arlbert said, unhappily.

“First, that you strengthen border defences at Checkpoint Alpha and its environs, with regular patrols to keep any sort of banditry under check.”

“That is easily done, and my army will ensure this,” the King replied, relieved. “And the second?”

“That Sir Prescott, upon arrival at Unity Isle, be detained there until further orders, and be brought back to Galvenia and punished, with the punishment that befits a renegade,” Renaud said, closing his eyes.

“Come now, Renaud, let us be reasonable,” Arlbert said, perspiration appearing on his forehead despite the coolness of the room. “The House of Lords would never stand for it. Besides, think of the blow to the troops’ morale, if their commander was humiliated in that fashion.”

“If you refuse, Your Majesty, we will be forced to act ourselves. We have already apprised Viceroy Kanoi of the matter, and General Finkel and Commander Arnoldus of the Commonwealth Special Forces are also working along similar lines, based on information received from their own sources. If you act first, Prescott is yours; you can persuade him to resign quietly, citing wounds or ill-health, and let him live on his estate. If you refuse, then we will either seize him ourselves, or hand him over to the Commonwealth. They may not prove as merciful as you.”

“Lord Renaud,” Arlbert said, choosing his words carefully, “would not another solution be as effective?”

“I have been asked to listen to you patiently, Your Majesty,” Renaud said. “What is your solution?”

“Let us investigate the matter further,” Arlbert pleaded. “Let us ask Sir Prescott to furnish an explanation. If he fails to provide one to your satisfaction, then I will act, but let him have his say.”

“I am afraid that such a delay would prove unacceptable,” Renaud replied, implacably. “But if you wish it, the Emperor is willing to give you two weeks, and no more.”

“Two weeks!” Arlbert said, in dismay.

“Father, let us accept,” Carranya said, in a steady voice. “We can contact Minister Sheffield and the Special Services, and contact Unity Isle as well, within that period. If Sir Prescott is truly innocent, let him be proved so. If not, let us treat him as befits his actions.”

“Carranya!” Arlbert exclaimed.

“Well spoken, Princess,” Renaud said, clearly happy at this turn of events.

“But Carranya – the House of Lords! Think of the Lords, child! What would they do...” Arlbert said, looking around with a lost expression on his face.

“The Lords will be forced to take our side, if it is proved that one of them is a traitor, Father,” Carranya said. “We are at war. If they close ranks, they will also be branded traitors, and...”

“No, Carranya,” Arlbert said, attempting to recover. “That is how my father reasoned, and the result was merely that the Lords grew more powerful. You are young, and do not understand such things.”

“My king,” Katarina said, shaking her head, “that was a different matter. Besides, I do not think Sir Prescott is too popular with the rest of the Lords, who envy him his youth and his easy successes. At the moment, you are strong, my king. Make a trial of your strength. The Lords will not dare oppose you if you have clear proofs of Prescott’s actions.”

“Very well,” Arlbert said, reluctantly. “I will do as you say, Renaud, but I must ask you for every day of those two weeks. In the meantime, I shall order our troops to deploy to Checkpoint Alpha, to ward off any attack.”

“That would be most satisfactory, Your Majesty,” Renaud said, with a bow. “I thank you all for being so reasonable. That will be all for now, though there are still some details that require discussion. If you will join me for a ceremonial luncheon....”

The lights in the room went dim, and were suddenly extinguished, leaving its four occupants in semi-darkness.

“Dear me,” Arlbert said, fussily. “What is the matter, Renaud?”

“I’m not quite sure myself,” Renaud said, ringing a bell on the table beside him. “Let me summon the guards...”

Before he could finish speaking, a group of men entered the room, two of them bearing large torches. In the flickering light, Arlbert could recognize Randall Trask, who had accompanied him on their journey. The rest of the men, numbering ten, all wore the uniform of Galvenian palace guards, except for a tall man, wearing a black cloak, who stood beside Trask himself.

“Trask, what is happening here?” Arlbert asked. The darkness was making him uncomfortable, and he rose from his chair, looking around restlessly.

“What ought to have happened long before, Arlbert,” Trask said, and as he raised his hand, the man beside him aimed his sword at Renaud. Renaud, realizing what was happening, reached for his own sword, but the man fired a bolt of green light from the edges of his sword, causing the Duke of Issachar to fall back in his chair, stunned and silent.

“Confound it, Trask! What is this villainy?” Arlbert screamed.

“Father, be careful!” Carranya cried out, as Arlbert narrowly dodged a green bolt himself. Bowing her head in prayer, Carranya raised her hands, and a ray of light shot forth, striking Trask in the chest and knocking him to the floor.

“Very pretty, girl,” the man in the black cloak said, drawing his own sword. However, before he could aim it, Carranya raised her hands again, knocking the man’s sword out of his hand. The other ten men began to panic, and remained frozen in their places.

“My lord, can you speak?” Carranya said, rushing to Lord Renaud’s side, and placing her right hand over his head. “We have been ambushed!”

Renaud rose from his chair, shaking his head in surprise. “Princess, you...” he began, then stopped. “Follow me! We need to leave this place,” he said, motioning to the dazed King and Queen, who followed Renaud and Carranya down a corridor.

“This is my own portion of Fort Issachar,” Renaud explained, as they rushed towards a large door. He extracted a large key from his pocket. “If we can get in here...”

Suddenly, the door swung open.

“What is the meaning of this?” Renaud exclaimed, stepping away. At the door were ten more men, dressed in the uniform of the Zion Army, and carrying rifles.

“Soldiers, let us pass at once,” Renaud said, hastily. “There are intruders in the fort.”

“We see no intruders, except you,” one of the soldiers replied, aiming his weapon at Renaud.

“Damnation!” Renaud exclaimed.

“What will become of us?” Arlbert wailed.

Carranya, bowing her head, raised both her hands. A beam, ending in a ball of bright, white light, shot forth, knocking the rifle out of the soldier’s hands.

“Get her! Get her!” Trask’s voice called out, all of a sudden, from behind them, as he and the men with him rushed into the room, leaving the four Royals surrounded. “Shoot her, she’s the only one who can stop you fools!”

The soldiers fired, blindly. Most of their rounds flew wildly above everyone’s heads, but one bullet struck Carranya in the right arm, and she fell forward.

“Finish her!” Trask shouted. One of the soldiers aimed his weapon at her head, but before he could fire, Renaud had picked up the first soldier’s weapon, and fired, hitting Trask in the leg. The soldiers watched him fall, dazed, and Carranya, raising her left arm, fired another bolt of white light, which struck the second soldier and sent him sprawling on the ground.

“Don’t move,” Renaud said, angrily, pointing his weapon at Trask’s head, “or I shoot your leader. Drop your weapons, everyone.”

The soldiers stared at him, heedless of the weapons they were still carrying.

“Amateurs!” The voice echoed through the corridor, and it belonged to the black-cloaked man. “Are you women and children, that you let a mere girl defeat you thus?” He drew a small black device, about the size of a fist, from his pocket, and held it up. A bright green light shone forth from it, blinding Renaud temporarily.

“Father, step away!” Carranya said, between clenched teeth. She raised her hand, and aimed her ray of light at the device...

...and everything suddenly went black.

“Wh - what happened?” Arlbert said, groaning as he tried to stand, and bumped his head against a ledge above it.

“We’re not in the fort anymore,” Carranya said, wonderingly.

“My child,” Katarina said, with a sob. “Are you – hurt?” She rushed to Carranya’s side, reaching for her in the darkness.

“I – I’m all right, Mother,” Carranya said, holding her injured arm close to her body. “The bullet passed through me. I don’t think the injury is serious.”

“Where the hell are we?” Renaud growled, aiming his rifle into empty space.

“An excellent question, my lord,” a voice said, in cold, measured tones, as the room began to glow with a dim red light. “Perhaps you would find the answer if you thought of your illustrious ancestor, Friederich the Wise. Or should I say, Friederich the Fool.”

“You will take those words back instantly, you treacherous swine,” Renaud thundered.

“Oh, I don’t think so, my good Renaud.”

“Enough foolery! Show yourself, and fight like a man!” Renaud said, firing blindly in the direction of the voice.

And suddenly, the room was awash with light, and Carranya noticed that they were all inside a small room, whose door was locked. Near the upper part of one of the walls was a ledge, where the same cloaked man was standing, with Trask – still looking stunned – beside him.

“What is this place?” Carranya said, her voice echoing off the four walls of the room.

“An excellent question, girl,” the man replied. “Tell her, Trask.”

Trask laughed. “Stupid girl,” he said. “For years I’ve dreamed of avenging what you did to my men – you, Katarina, and that weakling of a husband of yours.”

“I – I don’t understand,” Katarina said.

“Answer the question, vile dog!” Renaud barked. “Where are we?”

“Sticks and stones, Renaud,” Trask said, spitting out the words. “Welcome to Inderness, Your Majesty. We hope you will all enjoy your brief stay here.”

Sitting on his bunk, with a glum expression on his face, Ryan read the letter he had just received, thanks to the ever-efficient Republican Postal Service.

Dear Ryan,

It seems strange to be writing to someone who’s thousands of miles away, but hey, you know me – I’d either write you this letter, or die trying. (That’s meant to be funny, buster!)

How far away Davenport seems, Ryan thought. The previous week’s action had been a sobering experience. They had attacked an ammunition factory quite close to the border between the continents of Fulton and Ghetz, but this time, their opponents were well-prepared. They had attacked the Galvenian forces from the rear, and despite a quick riposte from the Legionaries, three of Ryan’s mates had been wounded, and two killed.

Ryan, I hope you’re safe – no, I pray you’re safe. Every day, in fact. That sounds funny coming from a girl who’s never set foot in a church, except at weddings, but maybe Bernadette is rubbing off on me. I had a letter from her just a few days ago. They’ve landed at Itaria, though they had quite a rough passage, but she said she’d taken plenty of potions against sea-sickness along, so she and Henrik survived. They had a chatterbox of a scientist who came along with them, called Aline Sheldon. I met her just before they left, and she was quite a goof! She and Armin would get on well, I think.

The worst had come when they had broken through the lines of mercenaries guarding the factory, and had launched their attack on the facility itself. Ryan had been among the first group of men who had gone in, and he had launched a grenade to destroy the large steel door, only to find – as it blew open – that there were still civilian workers within, including women and children.

Well, Miss Sheldon was quite sea-sick, but it was nothing that Bernadette couldn’t handle. I think she and Henrik make quite a sweet couple, don’t you? (Don’t answer that if you don’t want to. Ha, ha.)

Very subtle, Lavie, Ryan thought, with a wry smile. One of the women had been wounded by a piece of wreckage from the exploding door, and Juan and Ryan had carried her to safety, and advised the others to leave the facility, which they did, looking almost like a funeral procession. If we hadn't been lucky, we would have killed some of them. They're not combatants. They don't deserve this. Damn the Varald, damn them to the bowels of hell...

Things are quite fine at home, except that they're rationing electricity, since they've had to move troops towards the border, and have put up makeshift bases over there. (That's what the papers say. 'Makeshift bases' sounds just ugly to me.) We had your mom and dad over for the Saint Mikhail's Day dinner, as well as Gran. We all missed you, Ryan.

On entering the facility, they had encountered a small number of fighting men, who – to Ryan's horror – were thrusting the workers in front of them as human shields. The Galvenian soldiers had managed to take down some of them – *That's how I saved Carranya* – but two of the workers, both young men barely out of their teens, had been wounded as the bullets began to fly thick.

Carranya's also left, with her parents, to meet some Duke in Zion. We heard that they'd reached safely, but for some reason, their return is delayed. Perhaps her mother was taken ill, poor Queen. I never dreamt, that day when school was out, that things would turn out that way for us. I only hope that through your efforts – and Henrik's, and Bernadette's, and the Army's, and the Princess's – gosh, even the Infinity's – it all ends soon, Ryan. Things are getting serious!

You've got that right, Lavie, Ryan thought. In an attempt to minimize damage, the Galvenians had drawn their swords, and Fowler had supported them with a rearguard action, sealing off the exit and preventing further mercenaries from entering, while leading the workers to safety. However, while in single combat with one of the desert fighters, he had suddenly dodged and pushed a worker in front of him. Unable to take any evasive action, she was wounded in the side, though not seriously, by Ryan's sword.

I don't know if this will get past the censor, but I think Sir Chucklehead has a lot to do with the troubles we're having. Don't ask me how I know – it's just little bits, here and there. Frankly, I don't know what people see in that jerk. I'm sure you could defeat him in a fight, unless he used dirty tricks like Juno did!

Thanks, Lavie, Ryan thought, sarcastically. Stricken, he had led her to safety, and stayed with her and the rest of the wounded while the men mopped up what was left of the facility.

“Bloody Varald,” Fowler had said, as he returned to the camp at night. “If they're going to use innocent people as cover, what can we do? I only hope this is a one-off, Private. And don't beat yourself up over it. You didn't mean to do that girl harm, after all.”

Davenport isn't the same without you guys. Even Armin isn't around. I met his mom the other day – she was catering for one of those 'Support Our Troops' lunches at the Mayor's house – and she told Mom

that Armin was working for the secret services, as some sort of errand boy. That sounds like the kind of thing he'd enjoy, for sure!

Trust Armin to look for easy work, Ryan thought. Two days later, they had marched further along the road, and intercepted a long row of vehicles carrying weapons. They had managed to disable seven of the ten convoys, but one of them, veering wildly off the highway into the desert sand, had fallen completely on one side, and both the men driving it were killed on the spot.

"Poor devils," Captain Samuels – who had returned to join them, close to the border – had said, when he heard the news. "Give them a decent burial, Private, or the vultures will get them."

There was a blot on the page, as if Lavie had pressed her pen hard against it, before the next line.

I'm not sure whether I should tell you this, Ryan, but I think you ought to know. I was quite shocked when I heard of it myself. Marianne's father was arrested last week in Lorean, by Inspector Bosley (do you remember him?) Apparently he'd been dealing in stolen goods and was the chief of a bandit ring, and it also came out that he wasn't treating his wife too well. Daddy was furious when he heard it, and said he wanted to whip him. (Daddy can have these chivalrous urges sometimes. Did I tell you that he went and yelled at Henrik's dad because Henrik's dad had said mean things about Bernadette? Silly Daddy.) He's now in custody at Lorean, and Marianne is alone at home with her grandmother. Gran is trying to trace her mother, who is also missing, so that she can come and look after Marianne, but we haven't had any luck so far. Ryan, I'm sorry. I wish this hadn't happened. I wish things had been different.

Geez, Lavie, you're not telling me anything I don't already know, thanks to Captain Fowler. Ryan shuddered. And Mr. Regale fighting with Mr. Spenson? Now that's something I would have liked to see for myself. He laughed. Why is Marianne's mother missing? Maybe she went back to Straukpass to stay with Captain Fowler's father. They ought to look there, if they had any brains.

The police are also looking for Juno, because they suspect that he may be carrying a magical weapon without a license. Something terrible happened just after you and Marianne said goodbye to Bernadette. She fell terribly ill, and Henrik actually had to carry her to our house. She was bleeding.....Ryan, it was awful. We got a priest to come and cure her, and he said it was probably due to someone carrying a cursed object nearby. I'm sure it must be that creep, Juno, and his sword. He ought to be locked up and thrown in jail for even using a thing like that! Especially for using it on you, Ryan. He can't hurt my friends and get away with it!

Wow, Henrik, I'm impressed, Ryan thought. But didn't Bernadette say the sword wasn't cursed? Maybe she isn't that great a mage. Still, I'm glad someone could help her. It must be that old guy, Joaquim. He's half blind, but Henrik thinks very highly of him!

The other day, Jeannelle Socius – our former First Lady – came to Davenport. I wish I looked as good as she still does, when I get to her age! She'd come to meet Mom and Dad, and she also thanked me for my sympathy on that horrible day at the Lorean Oval. They spoke together for quite some time, and Daddy

was looking quite troubled at the end of it all, but he wouldn't say what it was. I asked Mom, but she said she'd tell me about it later.

Socius, Bainbridge, what's the difference? Ryan thought, impatiently. *They're not the ones fighting here. Maybe she was asking Mr. Regale for more funds for the war coffers, or something.*

The winter here is quite cold, and boy, am I glad that I've got more than enough furs, and coats, and scarves! I gave Carmen a fur coat of her own for Saint Mikhail's Day, since she has to get up every day early in the morning to go to that chapel of hers. Sometimes I go along, just to listen to the singing, and I light a candle, hoping that all of you will come back safely. Especially you, Ryan.

She never tires of it, does she? Ryan grinned. *One thing I'll say about Lavie; her silliness can even make me forget the realities of war for a while!*

It's snowing right now as I write this. Do you remember that snowman we built a little before your tenth birthday, Ryan? We called him Crumple, because it rhymed with Grumple and Frumple! But, hey, I shouldn't ramble on like this. Can't help smiling at the memories, though!

Stay safe, Ryan, and do write back if you have the time. We're all waiting for you back home, especially your mum and dad. Mom and Daddy send their love, as do Gran and Carmen. Carmen's promised to cook up a storm once you and Juan get back, and this time, I'll help her again!

*Lots of love,
Lavie.*

One thing I'll say for Lavie, Ryan thought, is that she's certainly lost a bit of her edge after turning eighteen! The Lavie I once knew would still be mad at me, especially after what happened that night following the fight with Juno. I guess that old proverb is right. Absence does make the heart grow fonder.

With a sigh, he lay down on his bunk, and closed his eyes. Every moment of sleep was precious, because once a convoy was sighted, they had to move immediately in order to intercept them.

"Ryan!" The voice woke him just as he was drifting off to sleep. "Ryan, come out! The Captain wants to see us all near his tent, right now!"

"Er, sure, Charlie," Ryan said, looking up at his platoon-mate, Private Charles Downs, with half-open eyes. "Another convoy?"

"No." Downs shook his head. "There's news about the King and Queen, and it doesn't look good."

"What?" Ryan sprang up from his bunk, and hastily pulled on his boots. Moving as fast as he could, he ran towards the fire outside Captain Fowler's tent, where most of the men were huddled together, with mournful expressions.

“Ah, that’s the lot of you,” Captain Fowler said, as the last of the men came in. “Now listen to me, boys. This is nothing to do with our mission here, but we’re all Galvenians, fighting for Galvenia, and you ought to know. We’ve just had news on the radio that the King and Queen, as well as the Princess and Duke Renaud of Zion, have been kidnapped from Fort Issachar, where they were conducting talks, and have been taken to Inderness.”

“Good God!” Ryan exclaimed, and most of the men said something similar, though their language was more or less colourful.

“But Inderness is over a hundred miles away from Issachar,” Private Howell, the geography-loving Marine, observed. “How could they possibly do that?”

“The details we received from the War Office are very unclear, Private,” Fowler explained. “Apparently they were ambushed during their summit, but before they were captured, the Princess managed to send a message to Sir Cornelius Fairfax, telling him of what had happened.”

“A message, Senor?” Juan asked.

“We do not know how she did it, Private Casales,” Fowler replied. “However, there seems no doubt that they are currently detained at Inderness – Zion forces, tipped off by Sir Cornelius, have investigated Fort Issachar and found it empty, with many of Duke Renaud’s guards dead or wounded. Emperor Charlemagne and Prime Minister Bainbridge have also received an anonymous telegram, telling them that the Royal Family are being detained in Inderness, and will be kept there until the Galvenians withdraw from the war in Zion.”

“Hell, no,” a burly Marine named Gilmore observed. “Never give up, never surrender, never retreat. We’re the Galvenian Army.”

A chorus of cheers greeted this announcement.

“Charlemagne has already dispatched troops to Inderness, and Sir Cornelius is negotiating with Minister Sheffield about sending some of our men there, too, though they might take time for such a journey. Do not panic, men. I am telling you this to make you aware of the kind of people we are fighting. The Varald will stop at nothing, and this is war. Continue to fight bravely, then, with the knowledge that every blow we strike will further weaken the Varald, and may contribute to the speedy release of our King.”

“Yes, sir!” the entire platoon replied in chorus.

Sweet Infinity, Ryan thought, looking dazed and feeling numb. *Carranya? Please, let her be safe.*

“Sheffield, we must act!” Sir Cornelius was ordinarily the most calm and urbane of men, but on this day, he seemed positively agitated.

“Don’t you trust our Zion brethren, Cornelius?” War Minister Sheffield replied, calmly. They were sitting in Sir Cornelius’ office at the Military Academy, and Cornelius stared, almost frozen, at a spot behind Sheffield, next to his coat-hanger. “And I must say, Bainbridge wasn’t too happy about your sending the word out on your own initiative. Why create a panic?”

“Why hide the truth, Sheffield?” Sir Cornelius said, bringing his hands down on the desk with a soft *thud*. “Especially after I...saw her myself. I still can’t explain it.”

“Just as the late Captain Baker did, Cornelius. That child has magical powers, as you well know, though we’ve been careful to keep them private. She’s been educated by mages, and though what you say surprises me, it is quite possible.”

“That’s all very well. So she has the ability to send a message. But that doesn’t mean she can fight, or defend herself. Hang it, Sheffield, that girl is nineteen! She’s just a little older than my own son! We can’t pin our hopes on her, especially where the Varald are involved. Remember Wilhelm. Remember Koketsu.”

“I remember all too well, Cornelius, and this excitement does not become you,” Sheffield said, sternly. “If she really has magical abilities, she would have warned us if her life was truly in danger. What exactly did she, um, tell you?”

“It was brief and to the point. *Sir Cornelius, this is Carranya Lionheart. My parents and I are being held in an unknown location in Inderness. We were taken there by Trask...*”

“Trask!” Alan Sheffield exploded. “That bloody man! That no-good, greasy, traitorous.....”

“Sheffield, this display of temper does not become you,” Cornelius said, with a harsh laugh. Anyway, she said that they’d been taken there by Trask along with some unknown men, and Duke Renaud was with them. I could see her, and she was wounded in one arm. She said nothing else, except: *Do not surrender or weaken your efforts, and listen to the person who comes in my name, for she is there by the will of the Infinity.*

“Hmph, she’s getting religious. That’s a bad thing for a Royal,” Sheffield said, darkly. “That scoundrel, Trask....but who was she talking about?”

“Sir Cornelius!” A guard burst into the room, looking pleased. “There’s a young lady here to see you.”

“Wipe that smile off your face, Private,” Cornelius said, irritably. “When our King has been taken prisoner, what is there to grin about?”

“Beg pardon, Sir,” the guard said, apologetically, “but she’s quite a looker, she is. A smashing young girl! She’s come with an old lady.”

“Who could that be?” Sir Cornelius said, resting his chin on his hand. “Send her in, guard, and please maintain the solemnity that is required of you.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard said, opening the door.

He wasn't jesting, she is a sight for sore eyes, Sir Cornelius thought, admiring the young girl in her fashionable fur coat, though Sheffield looked at the newcomers with a rather jaundiced eye. “Good morning, Miss. How can I help you?”

“Sir Cornelius Fairfax?” she asked.

“That would be me, young lady,” he replied, in his most charming tones.

“I have a message for you, from the Princess,” she said, removing her hat and shivering a little. “My name is Lavender Regale.”

“From the Princess?” Sheffield made a sudden, jerky movement, causing his chair to scrape against the ground.

“It looks like she was telling us the literal truth in that message, Sheffield,” Cornelius said, with quiet satisfaction. “What sort of message, Miss Regale? Did the Princess appear to you?”

“*Appear* to me? Huh?” Lavie replied, confused. “No, Sir Cornelius – Ohmygosh, Gran’s waiting outside! Can she come in, too?”

“Your grandmother?” Cornelius laughed. “Of course she may, child. Guard, allow this young lady’s grandmother to come in. After all, she must have a chaperone.”

“Very funny!” Lavie said, tossing her head. “Come on in, Gran!”

“My goodness – Lady Lancaster, is that you?” Sir Cornelius said, wide-eyed and wide-jawed.

“Oh, Sir Cornelius!” Anne laughed, as she entered and divested herself of her voluminous overcoat. “You were such a darling baby, and you’ve grown up to be such a fine man. How I wish Gerald could see you now. I hope your dear mother is well.”

Sheffield laughed loudly, causing Sir Cornelius to flush. “Er, that’s all very well, your ladyship – but what is all this about a message?”

“Sir Cornelius,” Lavie said, firmly, “before she and her parents left for Issachar, Carranya gave me an envelope, containing a message that she had written herself. She told me to give it to you in the event that she did not return. As soon as I heard that she was captured, I came here as fast as I could, and Gran wanted to come along, because she knew you as a little boy.” She laughed.

What a lovely laugh she has, Sir Cornelius thought, appreciatively. "Have you read this message, Miss?" he asked.

"Carranya asked me to bring it to you directly," Lavie replied, "so I didn't." She took the envelope from out of her handbag, and handed it to the Interior Minister.

"This is most irregular," Sheffield complained. "Look here, Cornelius..."

But Sir Cornelius did not answer, as he had opened the cover, and was reading what the Princess had written, which covered the better part of three pages. At the end of it, he replaced the contents in their cover, and looked at Sheffield ominously.

"My goodness, Miss," he said, a little hesitantly, "is the Princess sure of what she has written?"

"Carranya is one of my best friends, besides being our Crown Princess," Lavie said, stoutly, "and she would never lie."

"This is...dreadful," he replied, quite at a loss for words. "Sheffield, we must inform the Prime Minister at once."

"Inform him about what?" Sheffield said, drily.

"It seems we are faced, not with one wicked plot, but with two," Sir Cornelius replied, gravely. He then rose from his chair. "Private, come in here at once!" he called out.

"Sir?" the soldier said, stepping inside and glancing surreptitiously at Lavie.

"Take this message to Prime Minister Bainbridge," Sir Cornelius said, hurriedly writing down a few words on a piece of paper, and sealing it with his signet ring. "A bonus to you if you can deliver it there within an hour."

"Sir, yes, sir!" the soldier replied, grabbing the letter and dashing out of the room.

"Cornelius, I must object," Sheffield said, stiffly. "This entire proceeding is..."

"Perhaps we should wait and see what the Prime Minister says, Mr. Sheffield," Anne said, kindly, taking a flask out of her hand. "Would you like a little tea? I'm afraid Lavie and I left in a hurry, so we thought we'd have some on the way. It would do you good."

Sheffield looked daggers at her, but said nothing.

"Now, gentlemen," Anne went on, "I'm neither a politician nor a soldier, but I also know something about this affair, as Inspector Bosley and Agent Bowes may have told you. You see, I was the one who took Julianne Tumor into my home..."

“Bosley? Bowes? What are you talking about?” Sheffield said, impatiently.

“Let her speak, Sheffield,” Cornelius said, waving him aside. “She is speaking of a recent operation that was successfully concluded by some of our men, under the supervision of Sir Douglas.”

“Sir Douglas!” Sheffield said, contemptuously, thinking of the aged noble who was his nominal superior. “I know nothing of such an operation.”

“Calm down, Sheffield. We did not realize its importance ourselves, until we concluded it. Ladies, I’m afraid I’m going to have you to wait for a while. I suspect the Prime Minister may want to speak with both of you.”

“But what about the Princess?” Lavie exclaimed. “We can’t just leave her in some fortress in the Zion Empire all alone! We have to try and save her, somehow!”

“I suggest you leave that matter to those better qualified, young lady,” Sheffield said, slowly. “This is a delicate matter, and we need to proceed with caution...”

The red glint that many had learned to dread now appeared in Lavie’s eyes, and even Sheffield, wily old hand that he was, shrank a little.

“Better qualified? Huh! Listen to me, Minister! Carranya is in danger, as well as the King and Queen! This isn’t the time to be cautious!” Lavie said, indignantly, rising from her chair.

“Miss Regale,” Sir Cornelius said, kindly, “please forgive my colleague and I. The fact is that neither of us are quite sure what to do ourselves. We have received word from Emperor Charlemagne that his forces are mounting a rescue operation, even as we speak. I have myself pledged to send some of our own men in support, which has become all the more urgent after your message. If I know Bainbridge, he will see things your way. Please give us a little time, Miss.”

A little mollified by Cornelius’ manner, Lavie sat down, and even managed to smile. “Well, I hope he does, Sir Cornelius,” she replied.

“Don’t worry, sweetie,” Anne said, laughing into her shawl. “And how about a cup of tea, while we wait?”

“That sounds great, Gran,” Lavie said, smiling at her affectionately.

“I wouldn’t mind some myself, Lady Lancaster,” Sir Cornelius added.

Sheffield threw his hands up in resignation. *What is Galvenia coming to these days? Really, the Princess ought to be reined in somehow. This is imprudent*, he thought.

“Who died and appointed you commander, son?” Captain Mohto said, with a guffaw, as he looked up at the imposing jaw of the Intelligence agent. “I know Admiral Yatsu asked us to remain stationed off the coast, but we never had orders to land!”

“Well, you have them now, Captain,” Agent Striker said, holding out a telegram. “Our Division received these instructions from the Admiral himself, including his authentic call-sign, today morning. We – meaning the Assault Corps and Intelligence men on board your ship – are to disembark here, at Port Ness, and move inland to Inderness, where men of the 107th Mage Battalion and the 18th Imperial Battalion are already moving towards the ruins of Castle Bertrand.”

“To rescue Duke Renaud and the Galvenians, I presume,” Mohto said, nodding as he glanced at the order. “Well, it’s a good idea, but what makes them so sure that they’re being held at Fort Bertrand? Inderness is full of ruined strongholds, any of which would make a good hiding-place.”

“The mages have done their work well, apparently,” Striker replied, smoothing his hair down. “Apparently one of the captives – I am certain it was the Princess – was able to send a message of magical origin to Galvenia, and the squadron leader of the 107th was able to trace it to Fort Bertrand. Now, Sergeant Burnfist’s a lot of things, but she knows her spells.”

“You didn’t do Prince Wilhelm much good when you worked together the last time, Agent,” Mohto said, irritably. “Let’s hope you can do a little better with Renaud.”

“My dear Captain,” Striker said, calmly examining his fingernails, “an agent of the Intelligence Division is permitted one failure, but not two. I shall redeem myself.”

In the meantime, as the mages of the 107th were marching on Inderness, they were joined by an unexpected visitor...

“Hello, Caris,” a voice called out, cheerily.

“*Freya!* What in the name of Johan’s broken sword are you doing here? I thought you were still holding down Kannschloss and Acemel,” Sergeant Burnfist cried out, happily.

“I came here the same way our prisoners presumably did, Caris,” Freya replied, drily. “Where one man can lead, another can follow. And we won’t be too many, if there are mages to be dealt with!”

“Then there’s no doubt.” Sergeant Burnfist slammed her fist into her palm. “Flaming fires, I knew the Warp Cannons still existed, but I didn’t know anyone was going to try and use them in this way!”

“Remember your lessons, Burnfist,” Freya said, in a lecturing tone. “The last time the Warp Cannon at Inderness was used was in 156, when some of the renegades used it to escape and leave Bertrand out in the cold.” She chuckled. “Even a jobbing-level mage could have detected that. What surprises me is that there exist mages outside our army who are powerful enough to reactivate it, after it has lain dormant for over a century. That would require....”

“...the right spells, or the right materials. Don’t use that school-marm tone on me, Freya,” Sergeant Burnfist growled. “Of course, once it’s activated, it remains so for at least a month, and anyone well-trained enough can follow it to its source, even if they can’t warp to other destinations. I’m impressed, big sister.”

“Oh, there’s no need to be, little sister,” Freya said affectionately, slapping the Sergeant on the back. “It’s just that our family has preserved some traditions for thousands of years, and yours hasn’t. We’ve just had word that the Assault Corps will be joining us soon, as well as some of the Intelligence boys.”

“Intelligence? Damn it, it must be that Striker,” Sergeant Burnfist muttered. “He’s bad news, Freya.”

“Bad news? He sounds like a very capable man,” Freya replied, shaking her head. “What’s the matter, Caris, did he have the bad taste to prefer another woman to you?”

“Burn you, Freya!” the Sergeant replied, scowling. “I don’t like yellow-haired men, anyway. No, what I meant is that the man is reckless. Even when I worked with him on the *Paradiso*, he tried to play the fool, and in the end, it was Princess Carranya who literally prevented us from dueling on board!”

“Well, Carranya’s here, too,” Freya said, laughing, “so we’re in for interesting times.”

‘Interesting’, however, was not the word Carranya would have used. She and her parents, along with Duke Renaud, were still in their cell, which was open to the elements, but whose walls were too high and smooth to scale. Their captors had not treated them too badly – there were blankets and pillows, there were old, musty mattresses, and there was a regular supply of food and water, though its preparation left much to be desired. The only fly in the ointment was Trask, who regularly appeared to gloat at them; the cloaked man, who seemed to be his leader, had not appeared after their capture, except to seize Renaud’s empty rifle and stun him again. He lay sleeping in a corner, while the Royals huddled together in blankets, feeling the winter wind bite into them.

“Stupid Queen,” Trask had said, in his last lecture before he, too, had presumably felt hungry. “I’ve waited for years to get even with you.”

Katarina opened her eyes wide. Few men could resist those green eyes, as Arlbert knew well, but they had no effect on Trask. “What are you speaking of, Trask?” she said, reproachfully.

“How quickly you forget, woman,” he spat. “Cast your memory back to nine years ago, Katarina, if your illness has not rotted your brains yet. I was Commander of the Palace Guards at that time, and you and your precious husband had gone to Davenport, with you moaning and groaning all the way. Foolish and weak. That’s what you always were; a daughter of the Varald, and not the Lionhearts.”

“Stop insulting my mother, you traitor!” Carranya said, angrily, placing her arm around Katarina, who looked hurt and on the verge of tears. “I do not know how you and your renegade mages brought us to this place, though I can guess.”

“Foolish girl, are you going to try your parlour tricks with light rays again?” Trask said, and this time, he literally spat on the ground. “Our shields are too strong for a single person to pierce, even if you were Lady Flare herself. And you are not exempt from my vengeance, either, for you were the cause of my humiliation.”

“I?” Carranya said, indignantly.

“Tsk, tsk. I see your memory is as bad as that of your mother. Remember Davenport Beach, Princess. Your precious parents had left you there alone – your father to butter up Jerry Saunders, Sigmund Regale, and all those men who are ruining Galvenia, and your mother to lie on her bed and look decorative. Tell me, Katarina, are you really ill, or was that just a ploy to make Arlbert sympathetic enough to marry you?”

Arlbert, roused by these words, glared at Trask. “You will pay for this dearly, Trask – very dearly indeed!” he shouted.

“Empty threats, you puppet. That’s what you are. A puppet whose strings are pulled by the Zion, the Lords, and the wealthy businessmen. A king of absolutely nothing – except those, like Katarina and Carranya, who are weaker than you.”

“Silence!” Arlbert said, feebly.

“But let me return to my story. Don’t you like stories, Princess?” Trask said, sniggering. “After God knows how long, your precious parents suddenly realized that you had gone missing. I searched the entire town, high and low, only to find you making mud pies with some boy, like a kitchen maid’s child. I wish I had taken a camera with me, Princess. I wonder how your many admirers, including that vapid Regale girl, would react if they saw you in such a foolish position.”

Carranya flushed with anger. “You villain,” she said, quietly but with a distinct note of menace, “your words have no power to hurt me. You do not understand anything. And do not bring my friend, Lavender Regale, into this affair. She has done nothing to you.”

“I do not understand?” He laughed loudly. “How ironic. Anyway, it was my duty to bring you back, you stupid child, and you resisted. So I told my men to use force – as much force as possible. You Royals need discipline, and your mother and father were too soft with you. Unfortunately, they did not appreciate my lesson. Your fool of a mother was dressing you in some frippery or the other when she found out that we had bruised you.”

Carranya shivered, remembering the part of her tale that she had not told Lavie – indeed, that she had not told anyone, except her mother – and involuntarily at that.

“You had wounded her,” Katarina said, indignantly. “Those were not mere bruises. And she never cried or complained, even when you handled her roughly. Was she a cart-horse, that you should use your sticks on her?” She held Carranya close to her.

"I was doing my duty while you were lying in bed, woman, and while your husband was feathering his nest," Trask thundered. "And all the reward I got was to be demoted to a glorified Palace lackey, to have my own brother and some of my best men – whom you dared to call criminals – removed from their posts, and to have lesser men promoted above my head."

"As you well deserved, Trask," Arlbert said, angrily. "I would not treat a dog the way you treated my child that day. Be a man, and accept your punishment. Is it for such a foolish reason that you betray us, and to the Varald of all people? Are you a Galvenian? Have you no pride, no honour?"

"The Varald?" Trask laughed again. "How little you know, Arlbert. Truly, you have the soul of a petty shopkeeper, and not a King, just as your wife has the soul of an old midwife, and not a Queen."

"That is enough!" Carranya said angrily, bowing her head and raising both hands. A ray of light shot out, and struck Trask on the face. Though most of it appeared to be reflected, enough of it went home for him to wince with pain.

"You see," Carranya said, with a laugh. "Your shields are not that effective."

"But each blow of that sort costs you dearly, Princess," Trask said, rubbing his cheek furiously. "It is cold here, and you lack warmth. If you want, I can also cause you to lack food and water. And what will become of those magical powers then? No one can save you, until you accede to my master's terms."

"That is out of the question," Carranya said, firmly. "You wish us to betray the Zion? You wish us to leave Socius' blood unavenged? We are not like you, Trask. It is truly you who understand nothing."

The beginnings of a reply trembled on Trask's tongue, but he controlled himself, remembering his master's orders. "Very well. As of today, you will receive no food, only water. Tomorrow, we shall remove your blankets. And the next day, your water shall dry up. We shall see how long your arrogance lasts in the face of sheer need, Princess." He turned and stormed away quickly.

"What do we do, Katarina?" Arlbert said, shivering as he pulled his blanket closer around him.

"First of all, let me wake the Duke," Carranya said, walking to the other end of the cell, then kneeling beside the sleeping man and chanting. Renaud opened his eyes suddenly, shook his head, and stared in disbelief before breaking into a smile, and rising to his feet slowly.

"Oof! Princess...that's the second time you've had to start me up," Renaud said, in a low tone. "I am truly grateful. My poor cousin was right about you, after all."

"Prince Wilhelm?" Carranya said, softly.

"Yes, Princess. I know it's widely rumoured that Wilhelm and I hated each other, and that I was glad when he died, so that my path to the throne was clear. But it wasn't like that, Princess. It wasn't easy to

hate Wilhelm, unless you were an ape like Trask who merely masqueraded as a man. We all loved him – his father and mother, his cousins, uncles and aunts. He spoke about you sometimes, you know.”

“So he told you...about us?” Carranya whispered.

“By Lord Geraud, Princess, I was like an elder brother to him. We had the same tutor. We’d discuss everything, even his Francis escapades. When he told me about you, I was skeptical, to be honest.” Renaud lowered his voice. “I thought you’d be either a crank like your grandfather, or an empty diplomat like your father. But Wilhelm insisted that it wasn’t so, and though it’s too late now, I apologize – to him, and to you.”

“Thank you, Duke Renaud,” Carranya said, smiling. “I must confess that I was wrong about you, too. I thought you would be a territorial expansionist like your uncle, or a fence-sitter like your grand-uncle. But my better feelings told me otherwise, and I apologize as well.”

Renaud burst into laughter. “By Johan’s bones, Princess, you have a ready tongue,” he replied. “Come, take my blanket as well. The one you have is riddled with holes.”

“That is too kind of you, Duke Renaud,” Carranya said, though her teeth had begun to chatter. “But what would you do with mine?”

“Oh, I am far better insulated than you are, Your Highness,” Renaud said, looking down at his large frame with complacency. “But let us not trade too many pleasantries, or we may be tempted to forget the difficulties we are in. Let us test your wits on a more weighty matter. How the hell do we get out of here?”

“I believe there is a way, Lord Renaud,” Carranya said, looking at him squarely, “but we have not yet found it. In the meantime, let us keep our spirits up. Let us not give Trask the satisfaction of thinking that he can beat us into submission, as he did when I was a child of ten.”

“That animal,” Renaud thundered. “The first thing I’ll do when we get free is to give him two good beatings. One for daring to put us here, and one for your sake, Princess.”

“I see Zionsese gallantry is not dead yet, my lord,” Carranya said, laughing despite the freezing temperature. “But now let me return to my parents. Poor Mother has always had trouble with the cold, and she may need what is left of my skills to survive the next few days.”

She walked over to where Katarina lay, her head perched in Arlbert’s lap and her lips turning blue, and began to chant again...

“Fantastic work, boys,” Captain Fowler said, shaking hands with Captain Samuels, as the two commanding officers surveyed the wreckage of what had been the Turbo Arms Factory. They had

crossed the isthmus into the Cosmopolitan area early that morning, aided by clement weather, and were joined by more men aboard Reckland's ship, which was waiting for them off Marcopolis.

"That large farm, there, belongs to a Commonwealth official," he had told them, "so don't march within its line of sight. We don't want to attract undue attention."

"A Commonwealth man? How did he get wealthy enough to get a place like this, John?" Fowler had said, skeptically. "I thought Commonwealth men were..."

"Oh, they're local celebrities," Reckland had said, with a grin. "I was speaking to some of the sailors when we landed. He's currently on a tour of duty, I think in Zion, but his wife, his eight children, and his hundred-odd farm workers are all around."

"Perhaps we should pay them a visit when the shooting's over, John," Fowler had said, with a grin. "The Cosmopolitans are renowned for their hospitality."

"Anyway, I'll remain here until you send word about what's happened to the factory, and then I'll move a little further inland. Good luck, Dave." And after a military handshake, Reckland had returned to his ship.

Now, as the night sky loomed large over them, Fowler gathered the troops into the small camp they had set up near the factory. There had been surprisingly little resistance to their advance at first, but as they had approached, they realized that the entire perimeter of the Turbo Arms facility was surrounded by scimitar-wielding mercenaries. An intense fire-fight had followed, followed by a melee in which Eramond's Legacy had acquitted itself quite well, to the pleasure of both its owner and his commanding officers. After that, the factory itself was gutted, and its machinery destroyed by Downs' team, with the help of a small cannon and grenades.

"What a fight that was, Private Eramond," Fowler said, clapping Ryan on the back, as they sat around the fire. "Whitworth would've been proud of you, though not of that scratch. 'Don't get too close, boy', that's what my old man would've said."

Ryan looked at the gash on his arm, now bandaged, with a smile. "All in the game, sir. I still can't believe we managed to take them without any loss."

"It was stupid of the Republicans to have so few men with rifles guarding that factory, that's all I can say. We had more firepower, and that was that."

"We've only got one headache, sir," Private Howell said. "What do we do with all those prisoners?"

"I'm waiting for instructions from the War Office, Howell," Fowler said, looking at the large enclosure in which seventy-nine men – both factory workers and a few surviving guards – were in chains. "My guess is that they'll ask us to keep the mercenaries, but release the civilians."

“But where will they go, Senor?” Juan asked.

“Oh, they’ll probably join the smugglers on the coast in more or less disreputable activities, Private Casales,” Fowler said, with a chuckle. “Now, if everyone is accounted for, let’s...”

“Sir!” It was Gilmore’s turn at the radio today, and he came running towards the fire. “A message from the High Command, but on a different length. They wish to speak with you, Sir.”

“Bloody hell,” Fowler said, surprised, as he rose and made his way towards the radio.

“Captain Fowler speaking,” he said, firmly. “The Turbo Arms Factory now belongs to history.”

“Good work, Fowler,” the voice at the other end replied. “Detain all combatants as prisoners, but release the rest. However, there is still one task for you to complete tonight.”

“You’re not on the usual frequency, sir,” Fowler noted.

“We were being intercepted by Commonwealth forces, and decided to change tack, Fowler,” the voice said, reassuringly. “Listen to me. Our original plan was to move on the alleged spot where the Varald were meeting their allies by day, reconnoitre it, and seize it if conditions were favourable. However, the most recent intelligence reports suggest that the facility is being used tonight, by a handful of Varald men and their contacts. They may or may not have any sort of backup. I order you, therefore, to send in a small team – containing your best riflemen – and storm the facility tonight. This is a directive from Minister Sheffield himself.”

“Yes, sir,” Captain Fowler replied, saluting instinctively. “We shall proceed immediately.”

“Good, Captain. Over and out,” the voice replied, before a burst of static signalled the end of the transmission.

A few minutes later, Fowler was organizing the expedition himself.

“No harm in being a little cautious, men,” he said, as Samuels nodded approval. “Private Eramond, you and twenty of the men will lead the first wave. Begin by surveying the area, and when you are certain that you can proceed, move in. Once your position is secure, send us the appointed signal – two flares. We will then move in and encircle the area, for safety’s sake. Gilmore, go with them, and Wills can handle the radio. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir,” Ryan said, feeling his heart beat faster. *This could be dangerous, but I’m ready.*

And so it was that Ryan and his men began their march through the night, under the able guidance of Howell, whose sense of direction was as uncanny as his knowledge of geography was exact.

“We ought to be quite close,” he said, after about five hours had passed. “Look, over there.”

"I see no sign of any movement, Senor," Juan said, looking into his binoculars. "Let us move in."

"Should we, Eramond?" Gilmore asked. "Perhaps we should just wait a little, and see how things unfold."

"No, I think Juan is right, Gilmore," Ryan said, loading his rifle. "If they're not there, we can still collect any material of importance, and when they come back, we'll be ready."

"Very well," Gilmore said, as they moved forward. They had not gone very far when Howell noticed Gilmore kneeling on the ground, and lighting a flare rocket.

"Not so soon, Gilmore!" Howell shouted. "Only after we've secured the target, remember!"

"Shut up," Gilmore said, and a green flare rocket lit up the desert sky.

"Infinity, Gilmore, not green! Red..." but that was all he could say, for almost as soon as the flare went up, Ryan's company found itself encircled by a group of men riding camels, who seemed to have appeared from the west.

"Gilmore, you traitor!" Ryan shouted. "Every man, ready to fire!"

"I gave you a chance, fool," Gilmore said, as he drew a pistol and fired, wounding Ryan in the right shoulder.

"Gilmore!" Ryan fell to his knees, blinded both by the flash and the pain. There was a sound of shouts and gunfire. Ryan tried to shoot with his other arm, and managed to hit one of the camels, but his men were outnumbered. As the sounds grew more chaotic, he felt something strike him hard on the head.

I'm sorry, Marianne... he thought, and then he remembered nothing more.

"Over here!" Freya Raienji shouted, raising her staff, the tip of which now glowed with an orange light. "They're somewhere behind and beneath this wall."

"Should we just blow it up?" Sergeant Burnfist said, a little taken aback at the thickness of the wall. "Goodness, we Zions certainly know how to build."

"A good idea, but what if the falling rocks injure our captives in a dungeon beneath?" Wolfgang Striker pointed out. "If we could break it apart slowly, then use the Omega Wave..."

"I'm not using the Omega Wave unless you can get those rocks to the size of cannonballs, Striker," the Sergeant objected. "It doesn't work well on anything too large."

"It's still worth a try."

Sergeant Burnfist turned to Freya in exasperation. “You see what I mean?” she said.

“It is an interesting idea, Agent,” Freya said, lowering her staff, “but we – Ah, Caris, I have just the thing.”

“Don’t call me Caris in front of *him*,” the Sergeant grumbled.

“What if you hit those rocks with one of your fire-based attacks? That would weaken the bonds between them – the concrete, or whatever. Then the Assault Corps could use their cannon, and we could use the Omega Wave to clear up the rubble. Is that all right, *Rebecca*?” Freya said, sweetly.

“Hmph! It might just work, but – That much fire? From me alone?”

“Caris, don’t be silly. There are seven other fire mages with us. If you work as a team, you can easily do it,” Striker said.

“Very well, *Wolfgang*,” Sergeant Burnfist said, with a short laugh. And less than an hour later, the rocks at the side of Fort Bertrand were glowing red.

“Move in, men!” Striker commanded. The cannons of the Assault Corps fired, and the wall crumbled away with no more resistance than if it had been made of cardboard.

“Now ain’t that sweet!” Burnfist said, looking at the wreckage of the wall with approval. “We don’t even need the Omega Wave, Wolfie. Move in!”

Heading into the dank recesses of the fortress, Freya’s staff began to glow more brightly, and to tremble in her hand.

“We’re very close to the Warp Cannon,” she said, solemnly. “Now, I propose we...”

“Welcome!”

The passage was suddenly filled with light, and the cloaked man appeared, floating in the air as if suspended by invisible ropes, and beaming. In his hand was a staff which also glowed orange, and at his belt was a black device, which gleamed with green light. The men of the Assault Division, unused to such a blatant display of magic, stepped back respectfully, but the three leaders moved forward.

“He’s showboating,” Freya whispered, too low for anyone but the other two to hear. “Annoy him a little, to throw him off his game.”

“Gotcha, sis,” the Sergeant whispered back. Aloud, she said, in an amused tone, “Who are you, you circus clown?”

“Are you putting on that show for your girlfriend, son?” Striker added.

“Ah, wind and thunder. It’s nice to know that you’ve graduated to two elements,” was Freya’s comment.

All this was calculated to infuriate the enemy mage, who was clearly very proud of his skills, and it succeeded.

“Silence, you Zion fools!” he screamed. “Do you even know who I am?”

“Let me guess, Prince Dyss of Factoria,” Striker said, stroking his chin.

“Or Emperor Johan’s ghost,” Sergeant Burnfist suggested, with a loud laugh.

Freya smiled at him with a maternal expression. “Son, is that you? Come down, supper’s ready! And don’t forget to wash your h...”

“*Enough!*” A bolt of yellow light shot towards Striker, but he dodged the blow easily; a second was aimed at Burnfist, but Freya cast a shield around her well in time. With an effortless motion, she raised her own staff, and a strong gust of wind – enough to throw the Sergeant’s blue hair into complete disarray – literally turned the mage upside-down, his feet dangling in the air.

“Damn it, Freya, I just combed my hair this morning,” Sergeant Burnfist said, laughing at the mage’s discomfiture. “Go ahead, men, use him as target practice. The idea is to *just* miss him.”

Bullets began to whistle past the man, as he clumsily tried to right himself. “Damn you!” he screeched. “By the Great Beast Gharon, I will make ...”

“Oh, you like the Way of Darkness, do you?” Striker said, drawing his firearm. “Here, be enlightened.” He fired, and the cartridge exploded into a burst of yellow, just inches before the mage’s face.

“What – I can’t see!” the man exclaimed, helplessly. “Where are the rest of you, you lunkheads?”

Three more mages, this time coming on foot, walked up behind the now-blinded mage.

“Caris, handle them, they’re trying to delay us!” Freya said, as her staff turned almost entirely orange.

“You got it, sis,” Sergeant Burnfist said, casting a wall of fire in front of the men.

“Open fire!” Striker said, and moved out of the way as the Assault Division began to fire, before the men could raise their own defensive shields. One of them was struck in the chest and fell, but the other two managed to shield themselves in time.

“Caris! What are you doing?” Freya exclaimed, as the Sergeant raised her sword high.

“We don’t have time to waste, Freya. Even my sword can feel it!” Sergeant Burnfist shouted, and the two men suddenly found themselves floating in the air.

“An Omega Wave in that narrow a space? You’re good, Caris,” Striker said, with a broad grin. “Let’s run!”

The three of them, followed by the Assault Corps, rushed deeper into the building, until they came to a flight of stairs. The mages and Zion soldiers remained outside, guarding the newly-made entrance.

“They must be down there,” Freya said. “My staff says the Warp Cannon is just behind that wall!”

“This poses a dilemma,” Striker said. “If we save them, our villains can easily warp away. But if we go for the Cannon, then they might try something desperate...”

“I can do this, Freya,” Sergeant Burnfist said, with a steely look on her face. “Horamim be damned, this is enough. Let’s finish it off.”

“Good girl,” Freya said, approvingly. “Striker, come with me, and take half the Assault Corps. The rest of you stay with the Sergeant, in case any more goons turn up.”

“A capital idea, Raienji,” Striker said, drawing his weapon. “Good luck, Caris.”

“Break a leg!” Sergeant Burnfist shouted, cheerfully, as the two disappeared down the stairs, accompanied by their escort of soldiers.

It was the third day since the prisoners had been transferred to their dungeon.

“Land ahoy, lads!” Merrick called out, walking up and down the deck with a vigour that belied his sixty-odd years. “That’s Itaria City, the City of the Eternal God, right there for ye. D’ye see it too, Miss?”

“I do, Mr. Merrick,” Bernadette said. Her cap had been disposed of – Henrik had convinced her that neither he, nor the rest of the crew, would mind – and her blue hair streamed behind her. Despite the chill of a typical Itarian winter, it felt good to her to be on deck, and so near land.

“I’m not really a traveller,” she had confessed to Henrik as they had waved their last goodbyes to Jonas Aquary, who had come with a mixture of great pride and paternal regret to see his only child – and her “fine young man” – off safely on their journey.

“Don’t worry, neither am I,” Henrik said, looking at the vast expanse of the Sea of Arlia with some trepidation, and placing an arm around her. “But you know what they say, misery loves company.”

“And I’m certainly in the best company I could hope to be in, right now,” she said, looking up at him and smiling.

“Aren’t they cute, *grande soeur*?” Aline said in a low tone, peeking at them from behind a mast. “I wonder what we’re all going to do in a boring place like Itaria, though.”

“Aline,” Rosemary said, sternly, “let me tell you a few things.”

“Be my guest,” Aline said, rather girlishly, as she took her hat off and ran both hands through her unruly green shock of hair, making it even untidier than it was to begin with.

“First of all, Aline, you are my sister, my only surviving relative besides Mother, and I love you dearly. But, alas, I also know your weaknesses. You may be the greatest physical scientist in Galvenia...”

“That’s too kind of you,” Aline said, ironically.

“...but you also are the most scatter-brained and loose-lipped woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. Now remember, in Itaria, we must be discreet. We are looking for something hidden, something that will need all of our combined skills put together, and we don’t want that mission compromised because you decide to take off on a verbal flight of fancy.”

“I understand, Rosemary,” she said, looking out to sea. “I won’t let you down, for the sake of the Church, and for dear Bruce’s memory as well.”

“Good. Next, I must tell you about that young woman. Did Father Marlborough tell you about her – illness?” Rosemary looked at her meaningfully.

“Indeed, she did,” Aline said. “Poor, brave girl.”

“And you understand what it means, don’t you?”

“Rosemary, my sister,” Aline said, impatiently, “I am not a child. If you mean, do I realize that she is a Li...”

“Aline!” Rosemary said, sternly, but with a twinkle in her eye. “That’s exactly what I mean. Don’t go blurting out things just for the fun of it.”

“I’m sorry, Sister,” Aline said, biting her lip. “I’ll try to keep my mouth shut.”

Rosemary patted her on the head. “Oh, Aline, one day you’ll be the death of me,” she said, laughing.

“As Kaleb said to Samath, Sister, so watch your words,” Aline replied, merrily.

But that had been long ago, when the ship had first set sail, and much time had passed since then.

“Bernadette,” Henrik had said gently, one evening, when they were about half-way to Itaria, “I think Sister Rosemary wants to speak to us.”

Bernadette, who had fallen asleep against Henrik’s shoulder as they sat admiring the moonlight, got up with a start. “Oh, dear, was I...” She blushed. “Henrik, why didn’t you wake me?”

"I was sort of enjoying it," he said, with a broad grin. "After all, you did say I had broad shoulders, so I thought you were just testing them out."

"Now, children," Rosemary said, with an indulgent smile, "there's a time for everything, and now's the time for a little lecture." She sat down on the bench next to them, looking out at the full moon.

"Bernadette, are you feeling quite well now?" she asked.

"As far as I can tell, yes," she replied. "Ask Henrik, too. He'll tell you I'm in good shape – I'm even keeping ahead of him when we read those books of Father Marlborough's, now!"

"Good. Now, have you noticed anything else that is – out of the ordinary?" she said, tentatively.

"Only dreams," Bernadette said, with a rather dreamy expression. "I mean, I dream about my family and my friends – about Lavie, and Princess Carranya, and Mrs. Lancaster, and Henrik..."

"Nice of you to put me last," Henrik said with a chuckle.

"Henrik! I didn't mean that!" Bernadette said, slapping him on the arm lightly. "But I often dream of a bright light – just a white light. It's quite pleasant, actually, but it's never happened before I set sail."

Sister Rosemary nodded, clearly satisfied. "Now, Bernadette, that's quite normal for someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"Let me put this in plain language," Rosemary said. "You know, I'm sure, that there are two kinds of Healers in the world – Ordinary Healers and Light Healers."

"Yes, Sister," Bernadette said. "The Princess is a Light Healer, as Father and I found out."

"That's not quite what I was going to say," Rosemary said. "Now, until a certain age, there is no difference between the two. However, it takes a dramatic physical experience – usually an illness or an injury – to activate the latent powers of a Light Healer. It's not always an illness – there is the well-known story of Saint Henrietta, whose powers blossomed after she gave birth to her first child – but it's always something biological. An emotional change, such as bereavement or falling in love, can't do it. Now, Bernadette, when you encountered that cursed object – and it must have been either a powerful one or a group of two or more, from what Father Marlborough told me – he had reasons to suspect that you, too, had powers of that sort."

"Me?" Bernadette said incredulously, placing one hand over her breast. "Sister, you must be mistaken."

"That's quite incredible," Henrik said, looking at her fondly, "but I've always known she was incredible."

"Oh, don't be so sentimental, young man," Rosemary said, teasingly. "Now, one of the first signs that such a power has been awakened is a series of elemental dreams."

“Elemental dreams?” Henrik shook his head. “That sounds like psychology to me.”

“Nothing of the sort,” Sister Rosemary said, brightly, “and I’ve studied psychology, so I ought to know. An elemental dream is a dream in which there are images of one of the magical elementals, and nothing else – light, water, fire, wind, earth.”

“But I don’t feel any more different, or more powerful,” Bernadette replied.

“That’s because you need to train those skills, Bernadette,” Sister Rosemary said. “And while I have no powers of my own, I am on this ship to train you. Come with me.”

The training – and Henrik’s company, of course – had helped pass the long hours on board ship, and just the day before, Bernadette had triumphantly healed a fish which had accidentally impaled itself on one of Merrick’s lines.

“That’s good work, young lady,” Rosemary said, approvingly. “You’re going to be worth your weight in gold when we get to Itaria, that’s for certain.”

“Can she use those powers to heal that scar on her forehead?” Henrik asked, running his hand over it gently.

“Unfortunately, no,” Rosemary replied, regretfully. “Even the most powerful Healer can only heal a fresh wound, and there are limits even there. Moreover, no Light Healer can use her powers on herself, for reasons that Aline probably understands better than I do. You can still use your ordinary powers on yourself, if that’s any consolation.”

And now they were setting foot on Itarian soil, for the first time in their lives.

“Henrik,” Bernadette said, excitedly, clutching his hand as they got off the ship, “I’ve dreamed of coming here, as a pilgrim, ever since I was a little girl. And now, I’m coming here to *serve* them – it just feels so...”

“I know what you mean; I used to day-dream about being a professor in one of the Universities here, too!” Henrik said, looking out from the port to the rest of the city.

The rest of the crew – fifty men of the Lifter’s Guild, Rosemary and Aline, and Bernadette’s classmate Amelia Rushden, a last-minute addition – followed them, with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

“Bernadette, my sister,” Amelia said, enjoying the feel of solid ground, “I don’t know what I would have done if it hadn’t been for your sea-sickness potions.”

“So where do we proceed next, Sister?” Henrik asked.

Before Rosemary could answer, the group was accosted by a large Sister who was still wearing an apron over her habit, and whose hat seemed to compete with Aline’s in a which-would-fall-off-first contest.

“Greetings, my young Galvenian friends!” she said, in strongly accented Common. “Welcome! I am sorry that none of His Holiness’ men could come here to receive you, but we live in difficult times!”

“That’s quite all right, Sister,” Henrik said, politely.

“Oh, we have been waiting for you!” the nun replied, excitedly. “I am Sister Moretta, Keeper of the Pontifical House. Welcome to Itaria.”

“Thank you, Sister Moretta,” Bernadette said, brightly, holding out her hand. “We are all very glad to see you.”

“So am I, *signorina!*” Moretta replied, shaking her hand vigorously. “Come, follow me.”

“Goody! Now, when do we eat?” Aline said, absently, as she arranged her spectacles on her nose.

“Aline, my sister,” Sister Rosemary whispered, “remember your manners.”

Ryan awoke inside a small room. It seemed like a chamber in a small but decent hotel, or a student’s dormitory, except that there was no ventilation but a small window which could not be opened.

Where am I? he thought, and then it slowly came back to him. The instructions to march forward, Gilmore’s betrayal – *I’ll kill him if I ever see him again!* – and then the blow to his head. He rubbed the spot on the back of his scalp, which was still sore, and felt a bump there.

There was no light in the room except a single candle, which burned steadily on his table. Looking out of the window, Ryan could tell that it was just past sunset; looking the other way, he saw that the door to the room was barred. He stared for a moment, with his mouth open, as he realized what this meant.

I’m a prisoner. A prisoner of war. He frowned. *But this is a pretty classy room for a prison! Did that Commonwealth guy find us out there and pick us up?*

“Ah, I see our fearless hero has woken at last,” a voice said, in mocking tones. There was a faint foreign accent to it, but looking through the bars of his cell, Ryan saw a man who looked as Galvenian as he did.

“Where am I?” he said, trying to keep calm.

“In a place of refuge, young man,” his interlocutor replied. He was middle-aged, perhaps a little older than Ryan’s own father, with grey hair at his temples and darker hair covering his balding head. He seemed quite harmless, but Ryan could make out the gleam of a revolver at his belt. He wore a blue uniform, similar to Ryan’s own. “We even call it The Shelter – *Al-Mu’afa*, if you like learning foreign tongues. Which isn’t a bad idea, considering that you’ll be here a while.”

“The Shelter? Is this a hospital?” Ryan said, rubbing his head.

“We have a doctor if you need one, but you don’t look like it – that wound on your shoulder was just a flesh wound, if I’m any judge.”

“Give me a straight answer,” Ryan said, looking ruefully at the torn and blood-stained sleeve of his uniform. He tried lifting his arm, and groaned. *This is even worse than Juno and his stupid sword. I’m sure I’ve broken something*, he thought.

“Well, what’s your question?” the older man said.

“I told you. What is this place? Why am I here?” Ryan said, his voice rising.

“A place where prisoners are kept in safety, boy,” the man said, impatiently. “You and two of your men were picked up in the desert, after our raiders told us you’d been fighting them. Can’t have that. This is safe territory, and we don’t want any of your soldier boys messing around here.”

“I am a soldier of the Galvenian Army,” Ryan said, proudly, “and I was on a mission.”

“Galvenia? That’s a long, long way from here, son.” The man shook his head. “Now you know what they say. When defeat is inevitable, accept it with grace. You’re not going anywhere now.”

“How long do you intend to keep me here?” Ryan said, in a level tone.

“There are only three ways out of here, boy,” the man replied, his hand moving closer to his weapon. “First, you can go up there, sooner or later.” He looked up at the sky. “Second, you could try to escape, but I wouldn’t recommend it – it boils down to the first way in the end. And third, someone could care enough about you to pay the penalty and have you removed.”

“Penalty?” Ryan exclaimed.

“The Refuge is a business, son,” the man said, slapping the butt of his revolver. “Every man who comes in here comes in with a price on his head. If someone can pay that amount, then you’re free. It’s simple.”

“Hmph. What’s the price on *my* head?” Ryan said, forcing himself to smile.

The man consulted a notebook that was clipped to his belt dispassionately, not looking at Ryan until he had found what he wanted. “Ah, here you are, boy. Ryan Eramond, soldier, imprisoned for waging illegal warfare on Republican territory. Five million Commonwealth dollars.”

Ryan’s jaw dropped. “Five *million* dollars? Are you insane?”

“I don’t make the rules here,” the man replied, with a frown. “They do.”

“They?”

“Enough of your chat, now. If you want a book to read, I’ll get you one from the library – provided you behave yourself. If you want a chaplain to repent of all your crimes and sins, we have an old crow whom we keep around here, because he’s harmless. And we’ll take you out for your exercise tomorrow morning. Now let me go about my rounds in peace, boy. You Galvenians!” He shook his head and strolled away casually, leaving Ryan confused and despairing.

Five million dollars. This is a fine mess I’m in! But I can’t afford to lose my nerve. They talked about this at the Academy. Stay calm, and try to find out as much about the place as possible.

A little later, another man, carrying a curved sword and speaking a language Ryan did not understand, left him a bowl of soup and a piece of bread. The soup was largely hot water, and the bread was similar to concrete in its consistency. But it gave him something to do, so he ate it morosely, looking out of the window.

Presently, he fell asleep, and dreamed of drowning Juno in an ocean of stale soup, with Lavie watching and cheering as Juno’s head bobbed up and sank beneath the surface.

“Katarina,” Arlbert said, desperately, as he paced up and down the room. “Please....don’t give up.”

“My king,” Katarina said, looking up at him from beneath her blanket, as she lay on her mattress. “Are you well?”

“That low churl, Trask, certainly wasn’t joking,” Renaud growled. It was an appropriate sound to make, for his stomach had been growling the whole day. “Princess, the next time he makes his appearance, fry his face again, please. I know it’s a futile gesture, but it’s a gesture, at least.”

Carranya smiled wanly at him. “Please, Lord Renaud,” she said, kneeling at her mother’s bedside. “Mother isn’t well, and – oh, if only I had just a little more energy.”

“Have a cigar,” Renaud suggested, taking a large one out of his pocket. “I know it’s considered taboo for women to smoke, Princess, but it’ll keep you warm. Thank God that buffalo didn’t rifle my pockets.”

“I think I can do it,” Carranya said, standing up. “Father, please help me. I need to make a decision.”

“What is it, my daughter?” Arlbert said, nervously. Though he admired his daughter, he could sense from her voice that this would not be an easy decision to make.

“Father, it may take days, or even weeks, before the Zion army or our own men find us. I can try to help them, by sending a message to the nearest loyal soul in Galvenia, as I did earlier. But there is no guarantee that they would reply.”

“It is still a worthwhile option, my daughter,” Arlbert said, then shuddered, as what sounded like an explosion echoed above them. “Goodness, what was that?”

“Perhaps, my king...” Katarina said, through lips that were almost numb, “perhaps it is the rescue.” Her head fell to one side, and her breathing became laboured.

Arlbert covered his face with one hand. “And the alternative, Carranya?” he muttered.

“You know that I have healing abilities, Father. If I am not mistaken, I have saved up enough to give Mother several days’ respite – a respite that she desperately needs, in this weather, and without food or drink. Doing so would drain me of any ability to send a message, but it would secure Mother’s life.”

Arlbert looked at his wife, who was growing paler by the hour, and made his mind up quickly. “If it is our destiny to be rescued, my daughter, so be it. Save Katarina. Save your mother, Carranya.”

Carranya smiled. “It was my intention to do so, Father,” she said, “but I wanted your approval.” She cradled her mother’s head in her own arms, and began to chant. The walls of the room seemed to glow, as did the Princess’ own face, and Arlbert felt a strange wave of warmth go through him.

“No, Carranya,” Katarina said, her voice growing a little stronger. “If you...”

“Hush, Mother,” Carranya whispered. “The King wishes it so.”

For almost an hour, the walls grew alternately light and dim, until finally, Carranya’s head slumped forward. Katarina sat up on her mattress, her cheeks flushed, her lips no longer blue.

“My king...” she said slowly, then looked down. “Carranya! Oh no...”

Arlbert rushed over to the Queen, taking her by the hand and embracing her. “Katarina, my love...” he whispered, then noticed that Carranya was not moving. “Carranya, my child, what is the matter?” he said, leaning down.

“She....I think she used the very last of her strength, my lord,” Katarina said, her hand gripping the King’s. “I felt her slacken, and I told her to stop, but she would not listen to me.”

“Princess?” Renaud said, walking over to join the King and Queen. “Good God, Your Majesty, what’s happened to her?”

“I think she tried her best to cure me,” Katarina said, shaking her head. “And now...”

“She’s alive,” Renaud said, taking her pulse. “But I don’t think she’ll last too long.”

As if on cue, Trask reappeared on the ledge above them.

“Ah, the foolish girl has fallen,” he said, laughing to himself. “Are you going to fire me again, Katarina? When my masters become rulers of Terra, will you come begging to me for a job? Look on my works, and recognize that you and your foolish husband...”

“For the Infinity’s sake, shut up, you silly man,” a clear voice said, and a shot rang out. It bounced off Trask’s shield, but Trask stepped back, as if in pain.

“S – Striker?” Renaud said, with an awed expression.

“And Raienji, my lord,” Freya said, as she lifted her wand and aimed it at Trask’s heart. A lightning bolt shot forth, and there was a crunch as of broken glass.

“His shield’s gone, Striker. Finish him, while I take care of the Princess,” she said, rushing forward.

Striker fired, and the bullet struck Trask on the chest, but bounced off.

“El Metal, by the Empire,” Striker said, with a laugh. “I see you’re well prepared, whoever you are. But there are things you don’t know.” He reloaded and fired again, and this time, as the bullet struck Trask’s armor, his chest began to cover with ice.

“Wh – what is this?” Trask said, terrified.

“A Chill Cartridge, to give it its vulgar name. At low temperatures, my good man,” Striker said, reloading, “and in the hands of a non-magical creature like you, El Metal behaves like any other metal. Which is to say, it cannot keep even ordinary ammunition out. Perhaps you would care for a demonstration.” He fired, and the bullet pierced Trask’s chest. Blood spurted from the front of his armour, and he screamed.

“I’ll – destroy you!” he said, as he fell to his knees. He fired blindly, missing Striker twice and Raienji once, but hitting Queen Katarina in the leg.

“Move in, all of you!” Striker said, and the room was suddenly filled with the men of the Zion Assault Corps. “Do not let that man escape.”

Grappling hooks were thrown, and before Trask could realize what was happening, he was seized and trussed by some of the Corps’ most agile men and women.

Suddenly, the entire room shook, as if an explosion had taken place nearby.

“Good work, Caris,” Freya said, as the orange glow began to disappear from her staff.

“Where are the rest of them?” Renaud said, grabbing a rifle from one of the soldiers near him.

“They must have escaped, Lord Renaud,” Striker said.

Renaud looked at the Agent with affection. "I honestly thought we were going to starve in this wretched hole. Thanks to you and your men, that's not an option." He walked over to Trask, who was being hauled down from the ledge, and kicked him viciously in the ribs. "That's for what you did to all of us," he said, and the Assault Corps men cheered. He then followed it up with an even more violent kick. "And that's for what you did to the Princess, you son of a Varaldian dog."

"Careful, Renaud," Captain Raienji said, still bent over the unconscious Princess. "We need that man alive."

"Oh, sorry," Renaud said, casually, as he dusted off the toe of his boot. "Come on, let's get out of here!" Suddenly, he noticed Freya standing besides the Queen. "Goodness, the two of you do look like twin sisters."

"Indeed we do," Katarina said with a smile, limping as she leaned on the King's arm for support. "Is my daughter all right, Captain?"

"She'll make it. I've just got to get her back to the base in time, Your Highness," Freya said, calmly.

As they turned to leave – Freya carrying the Princess in her arms – they were greeted by Sergeant Burnfist and the men with her.

"Blazing furnaces!" she said, running towards her friend. "Those Varald imbeciles were guarding the Warp Cannon, but though they fought like madmen, they were no match for us. The Cannon's gone, and may Horamin forgive me."

"Oh, forget Horamin," Freya said, airily. In a shorter time than they expected, they were out in the open, when the Sergeant suddenly spotted something on the hill below them – a single Varald cannon.

"Good heavens!" the King said, stepping back nervously. "They'll – blow us to smithereens, if we try leaving!"

"It's just a single cannon, Caris," Freya said. "Agent Striker, would you hold the Princess for a moment, please?"

"It would be an honour," Striker said, as he gently lifted Carranya into his own arms.

"Ready for a team act, Caris?"

"Ready when you are, Freya!" Sergeant Burnfist said, happily.

"All right, then. Men, move down into their line of vision, until they show signs of firing – then hold the line, and open fire. They can't have too many men there – only a few of them made it out of Acemel."

The Assault Corps slowly descended, along with the Sergeant's men, until they saw the cannon's fuse being lit.

“Now, Caris!” Freya said.

“Omega Wave, here we go!” Burnfist lifted her sword, and the cannonball floated in the air, as the Varald soldiers watched, totally discomfited.

“All right, time to end this game,” Freya Raienji said, “Bombs away!”

As she lowered her wand, the cannonball came crashing down precisely on the cannon it had issued from, obliterating it.

“Now fire at will, men,” the Sergeant said. A few rounds later, the remaining Varald lay on the ground, dead. Two of the Zion soldiers had been wounded, but not seriously.

“Turkey shoot, Freya,” she said, looking down at the wreckage below.

“Our job isn’t over. We’ve got to get them back to the base,” the Captain pointed out.

“If you don’t mind, Captain,” Striker said, “there is a simpler solution. We still have a ship waiting off the coast. It would hardly take any time for us to bring her – and the rest of them – back to Galvenia, via Checkpoint Bravo.”

“You seem to have forgotten about me, Agent,” Renaud growled.

“I apologize, my lord,” Striker said, noting with relief that the Princess seemed less pale, and that her grip on his neck was strengthening slightly. “In that case, Captain Raienji, your plan seems the wisest, and we are sure to have medical support at Taufel. Onward!”

“Onward, for the Empire!” the men replied in chorus, as they – together with Renaud and the Royal Family – made their way, in triumph, to the garrison at Taufel.

Two weeks had passed since Ryan found himself within the walls of The Shelter – two long weeks. The same man who had spoken to him the first day would appear twice each day, in the morning and in the evening. By dint of slow questioning, Ryan slowly tried to understand more about the facility he was a prisoner of – but it made no sense to him.

The prisoners all met in an open square in the mornings for compulsory exercise, which was usually a series of stereotyped marches, squats and bends that Ryan knew all too well from his school physical education classes. There were all kinds of people with him – fellow Galvenians, Republicans, even some who looked typically Zionese or Varaldian – but they were all men. There were forty of them, and they were not permitted to speak to each other. On the very first day, Ryan had recognized Juan, but as they moved eagerly towards each other, two stone-faced Republican guards had pulled them apart and administered a series of painful blows with a leather whip.

That's one experience I'm not keen on repeating, Ryan thought. The marks on his back still throbbed, even though two weeks had passed.

None of his personal possessions – his knapsack, his rifle, his sword, or even his pendant – remained with him, though the man told him they would be returned when he left. “Which, for most people, means you’ll be buried with them,” he had said, with a laugh.

Ryan did not find it particularly funny.

By the third week, the lack of human company – except the guard – was driving him nearly out of his wits. *What I wouldn't give to see someone from Davenport again, even if just for an hour.* The books the man provided him with were scarcely better. Whoever ran *Al-Mu'afa* certainly had a twisted sense of humour, for the books were all romance novels, or the poems of the Sob Sisterhood and their imitators.

On one occasion, the man had held out a knife to him.

“What’s that for?” Ryan asked.

“It’s in case you can’t take it any more,” the man said calmly, whittling away at a piece of wood. “Not that many take that way out, but it’s good to know you have options, son.”

Ryan had been tempted to snatch the knife from the man’s hands and make a desperate attempt at escape, but decided against it immediately. *That would be as suicidal as actually taking that knife and killing myself,* he reflected. *It's not worth it. While there's life, there's hope.*

The food had been middling to awful throughout, and there had been days when his digestive system, used to nothing worse than his mother’s occasional experiments, had capitulated.

Who'd have thought I'd welcome Lavie's brownies now? he thought, as he lay groaning on his bed one day. He was exempt from the boredom of the ‘exercise’ on such days, but the writings of Roxanne Winters scarcely seemed a more pleasant alternative.

At the end of the third week, the blow had fallen.

“Looks like someone cares for you, son,” the man had said, walking up to his cell with a wink. “Letter from home, though I say so myself.”

“From home?” Hope rose within Ryan. If word of his capture had gotten out, then the Army would have been alerted. Perhaps the Government would negotiate with the Republic, and he and Juan would be on their way home. He’d make it back, just as he had done from the *Paradiso*.

But these hopes were dashed the moment he tore open the letter and read it.

It was from Marianne, and informed him – in language and terms that left nothing to the imagination – that their relationship was over, and that even if he should ever set foot in Galvenia, she would have

nothing to do with him. It accused him of betrayal, of leaving her alone in her darkest hour, and – the unkindest cut of all – of cowardice.

Me? A coward? Ryan thought, angrily, as he tore the letter into tiny pieces and threw them into the wastepaper basket. *What's gotten into her?*

Anger gave way to remorse, as he remembered what Lavie had told him.

Her father's been arrested, he thought. *She was probably expecting me to come back home soon. I can understand that. Maybe I shouldn't have thrown her letter away.*

But one accusation still rankled.

I'm no coward, Marianne, he thought, defiantly. *A coward wouldn't have put up with nearly a month of this. A coward would have taken the knife from that stupid man and cut his throat, or something like that. A coward wouldn't have agreed to lead all those raids I did. You've got me wrong.*

Still, he waited in hope. If Marianne had heard of his imprisonment, then his father and mother would have, too – as would the Regales, and maybe even the Princess. He waited for another week, but no further letters came, and he found himself feeling ill and feverish.

This climate is getting to me, he thought. In desperation, the next time the man came, he asked to meet the chaplain. *At least it's someone to talk to,* he thought. At night, the old dreams from the days after the *Paradiso* would come back – dreams of his trying to save someone, but shooting them accidentally. Sometimes it would be Lavie, or Carranya; at other times it would be his own mother or father, or Henrik, or Bernadette. An addition to these scenes, which would leave him in a cold sweat as he awoke, was the appearance of Marianne in the background, laughing wildly.

The chaplain was an elderly man, wearing a rather frayed black suit, and almost completely bald. His name, he said, was Percival King, and he was from Darington.

"That's pretty close to home, Reverend," Ryan had said, tugging at the tight collar of his red jumpsuit – all the prisoners were given identical red jumpsuits to wear – as he spoke.

"Oh, is it, my son? I take it you're from Lorean, then."

"Davenport," Ryan replied, and had found himself talking – about his home, about his father's business, about his school days, about the Three Compadres, about Lavie's quirks and her mother's cooking. He did not mention Marianne, for the thought of her still made him angry and dejected all at once.

On a few occasions, the Reverend King had delicately mentioned the Church of Infinity, but Ryan had just smiled as he shook his head. "Ask my friend Henrik about it. He's in Itaria now," Ryan had said. "Infinity knows what's happening to him."

"In Itaria? Good heavens, that's not at all safe," the Reverend King had said, though his tone conveyed nothing more than mild surprise. "But you did say 'Infinity knows', didn't you? It's good to know that you acknowledge the omniscience of the Infinity, Mr. Eramond."

"That's just a way of talking," Ryan had said, feeling tired. "It's an expression. The Infinity knows, thank the Infinity, for Infinity's sake. Haven't you ever heard it before?"

"Oh, thousands of times, Mr. Eramond. But rest assured, there are many things the Infinity knows, far more than you or I will ever know. And even if you are unmindful of him, he is mindful of you."

He handed Ryan a thick book that had seen better days.

"You might prefer this to the fare they have here at *Al-Mu'afa*," he said, with a gentle chuckle, as he left. "Good day, Mr. Eramond."

And, grudgingly accepting that the priest was right, Ryan picked up the book – a translation of the *Evangelium Infinitate* into ornate Common – and began to read. It wasn't much of an improvement, but it was still better than Roxanne Winters, and it kept his mind off Marianne – sometimes.

The same month had passed far more peacefully for Princess Carranya, but she still found her mind returning to the circumstances of her rescue...

She had awoken, in what seemed to her the softest bed that she had ever slept in. Opening her eyes, and beholding a familiar face, she had smiled at once.

"Mother!" she exclaimed.

But in a split second, she had realized her mistake. Though the woman bending over her resembled her mother very closely, there were differences. First of all, she was stockier, and more muscular. Her hair was shorter. And, most importantly, she was wearing the uniform of a Captain of the Zion Army.

"Good morning, my daughter," the woman had replied, with a laugh. "Oh, by Johan's bones, that is funny. I just bet your mother that you would make that mistake."

"Is she here, too?" Carranya said, hopefully, making an effort to rise.

"Now, don't be in a hurry to get up too quickly, girl," the woman replied. "Do you remember me?"

"You were part of the team that rescued us, I know," Carranya said, "and you have my eternal gratitude. But tell me, why are you and my mother so alike?"

"My name's Freya, Your Highness. Captain Freya Raienji. And to answer your question, have you ever heard of Princess Esmeriah of Gyrus?"

“I’ve read the legends about her, Captain,” Carranya replied. “But I’m afraid Gyrusian history isn’t my strong point.”

“She was a ruler of Gyrus, thousands of years ago,” Freya explained. “Following the fall of Gyrus, when it became a vassal of Meldia, she was injured and lost her memory, living under an assumed name. However, upon meeting a handsome young widower, Ryle of Factoria, whom she had been linked with in her younger days, her memory returned. They married, and founded the noble house of Traznov, living on an estate in Gyrus. Later on, some of the family migrated to Meldia, and adopted Esmeriah’s old pseudonym, Raienji, as their surname. We’re very distantly related, in other words.”

“Well, that’s an honour, Captain,” Carranya had said. “Where are Mother and Father?”

“They’re waiting to see you in the next room, Princess. This is the Zion military garrison at Taufel. And next time,” she said, in a maternal tone, “don’t pour so much into a Light Healing spell, child. We could have lost you back there. Sweet lands, Striker even had to carry you back most of the way.”

Carranya blushed. “Agent Striker?” she asked.

“That would be the man,” Freya replied with a laugh. “Extraordinarily lucky man, if I say so. With the risks he takes, he ought to be dead or crippled by now.”

Before she knew it, they were on the road back to Lorean, accompanied this time by Captain Raienji as special envoy – Agent Striker had stayed behind with the men at Inderness, to complete what he humorously termed the “mop-up” there. Lord Renaud had made the journey with them, as the envoy of the Zionese government, and was received in state by the people of Galvenia, who were overjoyed at the miraculous rescue of their rulers – and, more importantly, of their beloved Princess.

“This is truly a great honor, Lord Renaud,” Prime Minister Bainbridge – a faithful disciple of Socius, but lacking his charisma – had said, officiously, as he welcomed the Duke of Issachar to Lorean Castle. A ball was held that night, at which the Princess was reunited with her friend.

“Lavie!” she exclaimed, walking over to her slowly – a speed dictated not by any physical indisposition, but by the cumbersome nature of her ceremonial attire. “How good of you to come at such short notice.”

“Princess, I’m just so happy you were saved,” Lavie said, beaming at her, as the two women embraced. “When I heard you were captured, I didn’t know what to do – I just grabbed that letter and ran as fast as I could. Fortunately, Gran told me to slow down!” She laughed.

“Oh, Lavie, I am glad to see you too,” Carranya said, affectionately. “I still shiver at night, despite the many blankets that it is my privilege to own, thinking of the four of us in that cell.”

“I hope Duke Renaud was good company,” Lavie said, with a wink. “Sitting together in a cell isn’t the most pleasant way to spend time.”

“He was, Lavie – he even told me a little about...” Carranya stopped, and closed her eyes.

“About – Francis? Prince Wilhelm?”

“That’s right,” the Princess replied, with a smile. “But tell me about yourself, Lavie. My own troubles are too fresh in my memory to talk about sensibly right now. How did Sir Cornelius react to the message you gave him?”

“He was very nice, Princess,” Lavie said, as they walked hand in hand along the upper corridor of the ballroom. “Minister Sheffield was quite huffy, though! I think it was the breach of protocol that annoyed him, more than anything else. And when the Prime Minister came by, he was kind, too. In fact, that very night, he sent out a group of men from Lorean, to march on Inderness.”

“They would have arrived too later, Lavie,” Carranya said, “but they will still be useful to our friends in Zion, and it was a noble gesture.”

“It was Sir Cornelius who insisted on it,” Lavie explained. “Minister Sheffield was all for caution, and he thought the Zion would save you – I guess he was right, but it felt terrible just waiting there, knowing that you were all in danger.”

“All’s well that ends well, Lavie,” Carranya said, patting her friend’s hand. “Have you had any word from our friends in Itaria?”

“Bernadette’s just landed there – I received a letter from here, and then a couple of wires. Apparently they’re looking for hidden objects in the tunnels of Itaria. I’d never heard of them, and I had to look them up in one of Daddy’s books! It was quite interesting.”

“Ah, the underground Church,” Carranya said, with a pensive expression. “The tunnels were where the Itarians hid, during the Varald invasion. What sort of hidden objects?”

“Bernadette mentioned a sword,” Lavie said, wrinkling her brow, “but though she wanted to tell me about it, she didn’t have the time, because she was ill just before she left. Poor girl.” She shivered, and Carranya’s eyes widened as she narrated the events of that night, and her suspicions about Juno.

“Good heavens, Lavie,” Carranya said, looking very sombre indeed, “I wonder if....”

“What is it, Princess?” Lavie said, alarmed by the sudden change in her friend’s expression.

“The symptoms you described – one of my teachers told me about them, long ago. Father Marlborough was right when he said that only a recently cursed and very powerful object could do that, especially to a strong girl like Bernadette. It could, of course, be that man Juno’s sword. But there is a simpler explanation, though I don’t like to think of it.”

“Tell me, Princess,” Lavie said, earnestly. “I need to warn Bernadette if she’s in danger! Itaria’s full of ancient objects.”

“A wise old woman once told me that the effect of a single, large cursed object could be easily mimicked – and would have the same effects – by *two* small, less powerful objects, if they had both been charmed or cursed recently,” Carranya said, slowly. “And besides, from the description you give, Juno’s sword does not sound like a cursed object – it uses light-based magic, and that is all.”

“Two small objects?” Lavie said. “Maybe Juno uses cursed wrist-bands, or gloves...”

“Clothing is very hard to charm,” Carranya explained, closing her eyes and remembering what she had learned, many years ago. “A solid with a regular structure, such as the metal of a sword or shield, or the lattice of a crystal, is what’s needed – or two crystals with dissimilar structures. I’m sorry, Lavie. I’m just thinking aloud. Was there anything like that over there?”

Lavie began to shake her head, then her expression gave way to one of total shock.

“Ohmygosh! Oh my...no, Princess. That’s too horrible!” Lavie said, shaking her head. “Even *she* wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

“Whom do you speak of, Lavie?” the Princess said, leaning forward.

“The pendants...” Lavie said, with a horrified expression on her face. “Ryan and Marianne’s pendants. Blue and red crystals, side by side. They were both wearing theirs, and Bernadette said she began to feel ill as she shook hands with Marianne!”

“Marianne?” Carranya looked at Lavie kindly. “Lavie, I know how you feel about Ryan, but Marianne’s a teenage girl, who has never shown any magical abilities. It takes tremendous power – and a tremendous desire to do evil – to curse any sort of object even briefly.”

“But what about her father?” And, to Carranya’s dismay, she explained what had happened to Marianne’s mother, who was still missing, and her father, who was now in a high-security prison at Lorean.

“Lavie, my dearest friend,” Carranya said, when she had finished, “we are in very, very deep waters indeed. Mrs. Lancaster told me about the Honourable Julianne long ago, when you visited me. With my help, she was put in touch with Sir Douglas McIverny, head of the Secret Services, who was intrigued by the possibility of treason, and began to investigate on his own – he did not want to bother Sheffield, who was preoccupied with the war. It is his men who must have traced Alexander Robertson and captured him. A leader of bandits, a dealer in old artifacts – Lavie, I’m afraid we need to speak to Marianne at once.”

“To Marianne?” Lavie said, unwillingly.

“Yes, for she may be in danger too. Remember, she is as young as you are, and she may not have an idea of what her father is doing. Perhaps her father gave her the objects to woo Ryan with, and she knows nothing of their origin.”

“But – Ohmygosh!” Lavie almost screamed, and only the thought that she was in the Royal Ballroom caused her to lower her voice. “Ryan – still has the other pendant! He was wearing it when he went to the Republic! Princess, we have to warn Ryan, too!”

“I don’t think that’s necessary, Lavie,” Carranya said, with a wry smile. “You see, I think I know what those charmed crystals are for.”

“Some sort of love potion?” Lavie said, disdainfully. “Is *that* why he’s still so besotted with her?”

“Magic cannot influence one’s mind, Lavie,” Carranya said, soothingly, “unless one’s mind is already bent on evil. No charmed object could make a good man like Ryan fall in love with someone against his will. However, my tutor told me that such objects were popular in the old Meldian Kingdom. They were used to tell one of the lovers – the one who had cast the charm, or at least willed it – where the other was, at all times.”

“A – tracking device?” Lavie’s eyes began to turn red. “That’s – that’s just creepy, Princess! You mean Marianne could keep track of Ryan’s movements all this time?”

“If it was only Marianne, that would be quite harmless, Lavie....” Carranya began.

“Carranya, it’s not ‘harmless’!” Lavie protested. “It’s – gosh, what a cheap thing to do! I would *never* do a thing like that!”

“What I mean is that it may not have been Marianne alone who was tracking Ryan, Lavie,” Carranya said, sadly. “It may have been her father. Marianne would have only been a receiver.”

“Her father?” Lavie’s eyes were round with horror. “Princess, that’s just....Thank God Ryan’s in the Republic, and he’s in jail!”

“We still need to investigate this fully, Lavie,” Carranya said. “Tomorrow, you and I are going to pay Father Marlborough a visit. There are things we need to know.”

“I’m with you, Carranya,” Lavie said, as they descended the stairs, to return to the merry crowd. “I only pray that Ryan is safe.”

“We’ve covered six of the tunnels here, lads,” Merrick said, with a sigh, “and we ain’t found nothing yet. But lose ye not heart. Isn’t that so, Miss?”

“Absolutely right, Mr. Merrick,” Bernadette said, raising her lantern. “At least we know where the Sword *isn’t* hidden.”

“And besides, we *have* found out something,” Henrik said, returning his sword to its sheath. “First, we know how the rebels entered the agents’ quarters and killed them – it was through the second tunnel on the east side. We have sealed and guarded that passage. Second, we know that someone has let all kinds of creatures loose down here, and has been feeding them, which means that they want something hidden. Pack dogs don’t normally live in tunnels.”

“Filthy brutes,” one of the Lifters complained, rubbing his bandaged wrist. “Thank Infinity they don’t carry any diseases. And thank the Infinity again that you’re around, Miss. It still hurts, but not much.” He touched his cap to Bernadette, who smiled.

“Third, we also have good news – the Zion Emperor has sent ships to protect the coast of Itaria, and they should reach soon. Once these reinforcements arrive, we can secure the northern bank of the Claudia, and then we can investigate the tunnels on the northern side of the city. In the meantime, though, we must continue combing the tunnels here, on the south side.”

“What if the Sword is somewhere else?” Amelia Rushden said, wearily, sitting down on a rock. “What if it’s in Zion?”

“Father Marlborough explained that, my sister,” Bernadette said, patiently. “And the testimony of those other two rebels who repented, Giuseppe and Veronica, confirms it beyond the shadow of a doubt. Thomas had written to Archbishop Elias, and Elias made arrangements to hide the Sword. If our enemies have found the Sword and destroyed it, the rebels would be far bolder in their attacks.”

A low growl was heard in the passage directly in front of them, and Henrik drew his sword.

“Get yer guns, men,” Merrick barked, as the group of twenty Lifters drew their pistols.

“I don’t like dogs,” Aline complained, as she drew her own firearm.

“Don’t worry, Aline, I’ll protect you,” Bernadette said, raising her arm as she cast defensive shields around her companions.

“Ooh, if I had a daughter, I wish she were like you,” Aline said, gratefully. Suddenly, a loud *beep* sounded from the device that hung at her belt.

“Huh?” she said. “I’m registering a strong concentration of El Metal here. How did that happen?”

“The dog!” Bernadette exclaimed. “Henrik, be careful!”

There was a second growl, but the creature that emerged was no dog. It was larger than a wolf, with sharp claws and a shaggy mane around its head, and it snarled as Henrik turned to face it.

“Mother!” Aline wailed, as she raised her weapon and shot point-blank. The wolf – if that was what it was – was wounded slightly, and took a step backwards. Two more of the men fired, but their bullets bounced off the animal’s thick hide.

“Now!” Henrik lunged forward, and thrust his giant sword towards the beast’s throat. There was a scratch, and a few drops of blood fell from the wound, but its protective skin was not fully pierced.

“It’s the damned Gorn Jabola all over again!” Henrik said, firmly. “Bernadette, cover me!”

“I’m ready!” Bernadette said, trying not to betray her fear, as she strengthened the shield around Henrik. The creature snarled and threw itself at Henrik, but bounced away, causing a few sparks to fly in the air.

“Not so tough, huh?” Henrik said, thrusting forward again. This time, the skin over the creature’s throat was broken, and Henrik’s sword was buried deep within its windpipe.

“Hurray!” Aline shouted, as she moved closer and fired, hitting the creature in one eye. It howled with pain, and Henrik made use of the opportunity to thrust forward once more, wounding the creature in its chest. However, the gash in its throat began to close itself, as if healed by a powerful spell.

“Its wounds are healing rapidly!” Amelia said, with alarm.

“Dear me, Sister Rosemary was right,” Aline said, with a frown. “You *can* toughen up a monster with that wretched metal. Miss Bernadette, hit him with a Light Healing spell!”

Bernadette blinked. “I don’t want to *heal* it, Aline, my friend,” she protested. “Even I wouldn’t go that far. The creature is dangerous!”

“Listen to me,” Aline said, her voice suddenly firm. “A cursed creature reacts paradoxically to Light Healing! Believe me!”

“I believe you, Aline,” Bernadette said, raising her hands and chanting. The creature seemed bathed in light for a moment, and then it groaned.

“Now watch this!” Aline said cheerfully, shooting again. The creature was struck in one lung, and collapsed on its side, panting. “See! I told you so, *mon enfant!*”

“Very sweet, Aline,” Henrik said, appreciatively. With a final slash, he severed the creature’s head almost completely from its torso, and it – or rather, its disjoined portions – lay still.

“Now you can tell the girls at Saint Nealus’ that you defeated a Gorn Jabola, too,” Henrik said, placing his arms around Bernadette, who was shivering. “Excellent work, darling.”

“I – What manner of creature was that? It seemed – not just bestial, but corrupted,” Bernadette said, drawing closer to him.

"It's an old wives' tale that turned out to be true," Aline said, seriously, as she explained what Sister Rosemary had told Juno in her Chamber of Silence. "And though I'm still a respectable scientist, and find the idea of a magical beast repugnant, I have no choice but to accept the evidence of my own eyes. We're very fortunate to have you, Miss Bernadette."

"Miss Aline, what happened to you?" Amelia said, surprised. "You're – um – talking in a different way."

"Oh, I know!" Aline said, her voice returning to its previous intonation. "This is how I talk to all my friends, Miss Rushden! And you are a friend, at least in my eyes. It's just that when I give a lecture, I have to sound scientific! Like when I write a paper, you see? Have you ever read any of my papers, dear?"

"We get the point, Aline," Bernadette said, laughing, as she pulled away – rather reluctantly – from Henrik. "I will say this, these tunnels are never dull as long as you're around."

"Miss Bernadette..." Aline's voice suddenly sounded choked, as if with emotion. "You've always been so kind and understanding to me..."

"Now, don't cry, Aline," Bernadette said, patting her on the shoulder. "We're all feeling a little 'frazzled', as Henrik's friend Ryan would put it, right now."

"Are they long-lost relatives?" Amelia asked Henrik. "They're both so naïve."

"It's a possibility," Henrik said, with a chuckle. "Now, Aline, is your detector picking up any more El Metal?"

"Not in a radius of several miles, Mr. Henrik," Aline said, resuming her 'scientific' manner as she consulted her device. "That creature must have run quite fast to get here so soon."

"Well, if there's no danger, let's go ahead," Henrik suggested. "If they've bothered guarding this last tunnel with a beast like that, there must be *something* ahead."

"Won't I score off Rosemary today," Aline said, rubbing her hands together in glee. "She's sitting behind with her stuffy books, while we do the exciting stuff!"

"We could well do without another creature of that sort, excitement or not," Amelia said, nervously, as the group moved down the tunnel.

"Good evening, Sir," Carmen said, politely but a little wearily. She had not had a letter from Juan in weeks, and though she kept up her cheerful façade, those who knew her well – especially Emily – could tell the difference. "Are you here to see Mr. Regale?"

"I'm afraid so, Miss Herrera," the man said, in a melancholy tone. He was a remarkably old man, and reminded Carmen of Father Joaquim – not only because of his age, but because he was also, obviously, a priest, right down to his collar and his black robe. "I have something to tell him, and I'm afraid it can't wait. Could you tell him that Professor Marlborough, from King's College, is here with news about a friend of his?"

"How do you know my surname?" Carmen said, taken aback.

"Oh, Joaquim and I are old friends, Miss," Marlborough said. "I'll take a seat, if you don't mind. Sometimes, this work of mine can be quite wearying." Removing his hat, he sat down on the nearest sofa, and sighed, as Carmen rushed into the library to inform Sigmund.

Sigmund, who with his wife had been listening to Lavie play the piano in her music-room, looked up at Carmen with surprise. "Marlborough? I'm forever grateful to the man for saving Bernadette's life, but this is an unexpected visit. What does he want, Carmen?"

"He said he had news about a friend of yours, Mr. Regale," Carmen said. "He looked rather upset about something, though."

"Itarian priests always look like that, Carmen," Lavie said, with a giggle. "Do you remember how solemn Father Joaquim looked, during that christening last week?"

"You will have your joke, won't you, Miss Lavie?" Carmen said, smiling back, as Sigmund and Emily left to greet the newcomer.

"Mr. Sigmund Regale?" Marlborough rose from his chair. "It's a pleasure, sir, though I wish once again that we could have met under more auspicious circumstances. Instead, I come first in a case of sickness, and now as the bearer of rather grave news. The Infinity does have a strange sense of humour."

"Does your Church teach that?" Sigmund said, with a short laugh. "But I forget my manners. Are you a descendant of the Marlborough who was Viceroy of Issachar during the Galvenian War of Independence, Professor?"

"A distant one, Mr. Regale," Marlborough said, pleased at the identification. "The Viceroy had a brother, who disagreed with Johan's policies and fled across the border to Alton shortly before the battle of Lorean Castle. He took Galvenian citizenship, married a local girl, and I'm one of his many descendants."

Sigmund nodded. "Carmen mentioned that you had news about a friend of mine," he said. "Which friend do you speak of, and what has happened to him?"

Marlborough looked around. "Mr. Regale, is your daughter anywhere nearby?" he said, confidentially.

"Lavie?" Sigmund looked surprised. "She's in the music room with Carmen, playing away merrily. She is a good player, even if it's I who says so. Does this have something to do with her?"

"I'm afraid so," Marlborough said, and Sigmund was aware of a sinking feeling within him – the same one he had experienced when Commander Arnoldus, many months ago, had mentioned pirates. "Could we sit here and speak? She'll have to know, eventually, but I'd rather not be the one who told her." He shook his head, thinking of Princess Carranya.

Sigmund and Emily sat down on the sofa opposite Marlborough's, and they spoke in low tones.

"It's about an old friend of yours," the priest began. "Ryan Eramond."

"Ryan?" Emily's eyebrows rose a little. "Dear me, what could you possibly have to say about him? He's on a tour of duty in the Fulton Republic."

"Mrs. Regale, the Church has members everywhere, even in the most unlikely places," Marlborough said, softly. "One of them is an old student of mine – a man named Percival King. He is a prison chaplain in a place known as *Al-Mu'afa*."

"Prison?" Emily exclaimed, dismayed.

"*Al-Mu'afa*?" Sigmund said, shaking his head. "I've never heard of it. Is Ryan – being held there?" He spoke the words unwillingly, forcing himself to continue.

"I'm afraid so. Now, this isn't common knowledge yet, but what King tells me is that Ryan, and the men with him, were led into an ambush in the desert of Fulton, where they were betrayed by one of his fellow soldiers," Marlborough said. "Of course, the Galvenian Government either doesn't know this yet, or is choosing to keep silent, because making a covert operation public would leave them with egg on their faces. But there seems no doubt that the lad King spoke to is Ryan Eramond of Davenport. He speaks of you and your daughter sometimes, Mrs. Regale."

"Of Lavender?" Emily smiled, despite herself. "Dear me, I wonder what he had to say."

"We must bring this to the attention of the Galvenian Embassy at Fulton, Professor," Sigmund said, calmly. "If Ryan is a prisoner, the Government can negotiate his release."

"If he were a prisoner of Fulton, that would be possible," Marlborough said. "But *Al-Mu'afa* is no ordinary prison. You know, I suppose, that our Republican brethren have the strange knack of turning everything, even human lives and relationships, into a business proposition."

"I remember," Emily said, with a frown. "When we were just married, and I was expecting Lavender, a Republican businessman came to our home, with a proposal to import mail-order brides for lonely Galvenian men. Sigmund chased him away with a shotgun." She laughed at the memory.

"Indeed I did," Sigmund said. "But what does this have to do with *Al-Mafia*, or whatever the cursed place is called?"

"*Al-Mu'afa*, Mr. Regale," Marlborough corrected him. "It translates roughly to 'The Safe Place'. *Al-Muafa* was started about twenty years ago, as an experiment by Premier Rasheed of the Republic, to see if private businessmen could run a prison better than the local government. It was founded with funds from investors all over Terra – including Galvenia and the Zion Empire. Rasheed soon found out that the prisoners were being ill-treated, and ordered the Republican divisions to besiege it and capture it. However, the force he sent was insufficient, and the mercenaries guarding it repelled his men. Humiliated, he simply consigned the place to oblivion, and stopped sending prisoners there."

"You mean it's an abandoned prison?" Emily said, sadly, thinking of Ryan languishing in a deserted building.

"Not at all, Mrs. Regale," Marlborough replied, angrily. "The mercenaries continued to hold the prison, releasing those prisoners who were wealthy enough to pay a bribe, and letting the others remain, some until they died. When Rasheed died, his successor, Alexander Josen, reached an agreement with the businessmen who owned *Al-Muafa* – essentially, a policy of 'don't ask, and don't tell'. Josen would be free to send political prisoners there, but so would anyone who could pay the cover charges."

"What?" Sigmund exclaimed, angrily. "You mean I could have you thrown in there if I just *paid* them enough?"

"Quite so, Mr. Regale, quite so," Marlborough said, with an expression of disgust. "As I said, our Republican friends can make money out of everything, including human freedom."

"This is – despicable," Emily said, her own feathers quite ruffled. "Is Ryan there as a political prisoner?"

"It is possible, Mrs. Regale, but unlikely, given what Percival found out. You see, anyone wishing to place a man in *Al-Muafa* must pay a price. For a political prisoner, Josen gets concessions – the cost to his government is rarely more than, say, a hundred thousand Commonwealth dollars. But for a private prisoner – a man whom someone has paid to be detained – the cost can amount to millions. Percival went through the records one day – they are exposed publicly, as there is no one to see them – and found that the price set on Ryan Eramond's release was five million dollars."

"*Five million dollars?*" Sigmund stared at him, shocked. "Good heavens, man, who could have paid that sort of money?"

"That is what we must find out, Mr. Regale," Father Marlborough said. In their outrage, their voices had grown increasingly loud, and none of them had noticed the appearance of Lavie at the door to the library, listening intently to every word of their conversation, and growing more white-faced with every moment.

"I can easily pay the sum, Marlborough," Sigmund said, impatiently. "We will arrange to have it transferred to Fulton, and..."

“That’s a noble gesture, Mr. Regale, but *Al-Mu’afa* protects itself well. They will not release a prisoner unless the amount is handed over to them in person, and unless an escort of at least two people is sent to take the prisoner back to where he came from. This escort is, of course, sworn to silence. In most cases, the escorts are also ambushed along the return journey, especially if there is a secret to be hidden. It is a winning proposition for them – they get their money, they vacate their cell, and nobody ever knows.”

“I will bring him back,” a voice said, suddenly. “Or die trying.”

“Good heavens!” Emily said, rising from her chair, white-faced herself. “What are you doing here, Lavie? You weren’t supposed to hear any of that, my child!”

Lavie walked towards the centre of the drawing-room, unsteadily, holding on to the walls or the furniture for support. Carmen, uncertain about what would happen next, followed her a few paces behind. “Father Marlborough – please, please tell me. Is Ryan well? Is he wounded? I have to know,” she pleaded.

Marlborough looked up at the heavens, as if cursing his truly unfortunate sense of timing and his ill-luck, then turned to look at Lavie sympathetically. “My dear Miss Lavender, he is quite well. He was wounded in the shoulder during the ambush, and his collar-bone was broken, but *Al-Mu’afa* has its doctors, and they are not unnecessarily cruel – they are civilized, if you follow Josen’s idea of civilization. And while I admire your devotion, it would be suicide to attempt such a journey. Better men than you have tried, and failed.”

“Why – Daddy, why can’t the Government do anything?” Lavie said, despairingly. She swayed forward, and Emily caught her in her arms and laid her gently on another sofa.

“Yes, indeed, Marlborough,” Sigmund said, looking at his daughter sadly. “Why can we not appeal to Josen? Ryan was not waging war in the Republic, and if he wants a bribe, I can pay his filthy blood money, several times over.”

“Daddy...” Lavie said, looking at Sigmund and trying to smile.

“It’s not that simple, Mr. Regale,” Marlborough said. “Remember, there are Galvenian businessmen who invest in *Al-Mu’afa*, as well. Given the silence of the Commonwealth – even of our crusader for justice, Lord Lucan – on the issue, it is only fair to assume that even our Government – or some of its members – are implicated. They may be sympathetic, but that is all.”

“I won’t believe it,” Lavie said, between sobs. “There – there must be a way, Professor. Ryan – we can’t just let Ryan die, in some cell in the desert. There – must be a hope, somehow, *somehow*....” She buried her face in Emily’s shoulder, and could speak no more.

“My poor child,” was Marlborough’s only reply, as he removed a handkerchief from his sleeve and wiping his eyes with it. “By the Infinity, Miss Lavender, you’re enough to make this old man cry.”

Sigmund, who was in tears himself, merely nodded. "All the same, Professor," he said, brokenly, "we must – make the attempt."

"Trust the Infinity, Miss Lavie," Carmen said, softly, walking over to her young mistress. "There will be a way."

Lavie suddenly sat upright, surprising everyone else in the room. "Ohmygosh, the *Princess!*" she exclaimed.

"Princess Carranya?" Marlborough said.

"We must tell her, Mom!" Lavie said, her voice slowly returning to its normal tone. "She would do anything to help Ryan, I'm sure! Daddy, we've got to go to Lorean right away, and tell the Princess and Sir Cornelius what has happened!"

"It's worth a try, Mr. Regale," Marlborough said. "But I've lived in the Republic myself, and alas, I know its men and their ways too well. If that approach fails..."

"Then we'll think of something else," Lavie said, standing up and tossing her head back. "I'm sure we can."

"If wishes were horses..." Marlborough began, but he stopped. He did not have the heart to contradict Lavie, though he knew how it would all end.

"This is rapidly becoming a treasure hunt," Henrik said, annoyed, as he lay down on his bunk, rubbing his eyes. "And not a particularly amusing one."

"Dear Henrik," Bernadette said, consolingly, as she brought him a glass of lemonade. "At least we have hurt the rebels, even if we do not have the Sword yet. And you have done well."

"That's right," Henrik said, feeling a little lighter as he looked at her face. Though Moretta maintained a strict curfew in the convent in which they had all been accommodated, she did permit members to visit each other before nine o'clock in the night. "That Gorn Jabola wasn't guarding the sword, but it *was* guarding a cache of arms, which now belong to the Pontifical Guards and the Zion. The Imperial ships have been sighted, too, and will be here in a day."

"I wonder what Lavie is doing now," Bernadette said, as she poured herself a glass, and sat down at the chair by Henrik's bedside. Henrik sat up as well, moving his foot – which had been wounded in a battle with pack dogs – gingerly.

"I wonder what's happening to Ryan, too," Henrik said. "As it is, we don't get much international news here, but the radio did say that the Galvenian Army has blown up an arms factory in the Republic, and Jedda has condemned the act at the Commonwealth."

"If we could find the Sword.." Bernadette began, but stopped. She knew what it would mean – a possible end to the war – but she also knew *how* the Sword would have to be used, and both she and Henrik shrank from that fact. "Just imagine, Henrik. It would mean a return to life as we knew it – to King's College, and beyond..."

"Yes, beyond," Henrik said, looking at her fondly. "Let's propose a toast – to Ryan, to Lavie, and to finding that Sword as soon as possible!" Their glasses clinked, and they drained them to the full.

"What about us?" Bernadette asked, with a smile.

Henrik leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "That's understood, darling," he said. "We can always have another toast, though, if you feel like it. Or an Itarian ice-cream!"

"Dear, dear Henrik," Bernadette said, stroking his head. "Our wounded hero, and still going strong."

"Have any of you seen my – Oh, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" Aline said, flushing with embarrassment, as she entered the room and looked at the couple. "I'll be leaving now, I promise!"

"Oh, come in, Aline," Henrik said, kindly. "What are you looking for?"

"The Sword of Regret, right?" Aline said, with a giggle.

"Very funny, Aline," Henrik replied. "I mean, what are you looking for *now*?"

"My blue detector," she said, looking around the room. "Not the black one I always carry on me, the blue one. It's an Aura Detector. I was just reading one of Mr. Marlborough's books, and I believe I've solved the entire thing!"

Bernadette turned to face her, amazed. "Solved what, Aline?" she asked.

"Why, how to find that silly sword!" Aline said. "What a question, Miss Bernadette. Well, Rosemary and I were having a friendly discussion today, and we found that the Sword of Regret probably had the capacity to absorb – um – the Old Republican word is *psyche*, but how do you say it in Common? Damn it, Aline, you used to get good marks in languages!"

"Souls?" Bernadette suggested.

"*Not* souls," Aline said, stoutly. "Souls are immortal, indestructible, and indivisible. Like atoms."

"Atoms?" Henrik suggested. "Isn't that a speculation, Aline?"

“Dear children,” Aline said, looking at the two of them fondly. “Well, I’ll talk to you about atoms some other day. But a *psyche* isn’t a soul – it’s the impression a soul makes when one lives in this world. Something like a gramophone recording of one’s mind – dear me, that is a terrible metaphor. Rosemary was telling me legends about swords that could absorb *psyches*, and after I did a little calculation, I found out that it was possible – at least in principle.”

“That’s nice, Aline,” Henrik said, “but how does that help us find the Sword?”

“Remember your own Holy Book, Mr. Henrik,” Aline said, copying Rosemary’s ‘stern’ expression, and causing both of them to laugh. “The Man of Regret’s sword gave him the ability to absorb skills and even memories from others.”

“That’s because it was cursed, Aline,” Bernadette said, gently. “It wasn’t an ordinary sword. Besides, the Sword of Regret may have been named after him, but the Holy Book is clear that the original was destroyed. We aren’t looking for anything *that* old.”

“Ah, that’s what you think. I may yet surprise you, Miss Bernadette!” Aline said, mysteriously, dropping her voice. “Anyway, here’s my idea. *If* the Sword of Regret has such an ability, then we can use this property to find it! And that’s where my – Ah, got it!” She grabbed a blue device from the dresser, and hugged it close to her. “This, my dear Miss Bernadette, is an Aura detector, Aura being a pretty scientific word which means much the same as *psyche*.”

“You mean, you can detect *minds* with that thing?” Henrik said, incredulously.

“Oh, no, Mr. Henrik, not minds. Recordings of minds. It’s a hard concept to explain. Think of it as a photograph – a snapshot of a person’s mind at the time he was killed by the sword. My detector can identify such patterns, even at a distance. If we comb the city using it...”

“Then we can zero in on the sword, *assuming* you’re right,” Henrik said. “But frankly, the idea of some sort of immortal thought waves being locked inside a sword is rather strange to me.”

“Life *is* strange, Mr. Henrik,” Aline said, cheerfully. “Why, a year ago, would you even have imagined the three of us sitting here, and having this discussion, in Itaria of all places? Would you, Miss Bernadette?”

And Henrik and Bernadette were forced to admit that, indeed, they would not.

A week had passed since Father Marlborough had brought her the news about Ryan, and Sigmund had appealed to the Republican Embassy, receiving a polite telegram in reply, but nothing else. A visit to Carranya had brought more consolation, though even the Princess had pointed out the difficulties that had to be surmounted. And an audience with Minister Sheffield – whose men were still stationed off the Marcolpolis coast – was the most disappointing, as Sheffield pointed out that to attack a non-military installation in a foreign country would be seen as an act of war.

“We are already in the thick of war with the Varald,” he had said. “While I condole the loss of one of our bravest men, we cannot risk another war for his sake. Nor can we make this public, as morale would suffer.” And Sigmund, noticing the red glint in Lavie’s eyes, had rapidly concluded the interview, though he had made a sharp comment about how destroying factories in a foreign country was scarcely less hostile an act.

For the next few days, Lavie had remained at home, eating little and smiling even less. It was painful to Sigmund and Emily to see her thus, without the trademark bounce in her step, and finally Emily had wired her mother, asking her to take Lavie to Mann Island for a change of scenery. Anne had readily accepted, and in her grandmother’s house, Lavie began to plan again – knowing, inside, that she was only dreaming, but refusing to concede defeat.

“Dina, tell me more about the Republic,” Lavie said, leaning forward as she and her friend sat at one of the tables of the Mann Island Archery Academy’s cafeteria.

“The Republic, Miss Lavie?” Dina Kaleem smiled, showing off a brilliant row of white teeth. “It is my country, yes, but I do not like to go back there. It is – not a nice place for young girls, no.”

“What do you mean, Dina?” Lavie said.

“They put us for sale, yes,” Dina said, with an unhappy expression. “It is not like Galvenia, where if you like one boy, you can go with him for dancing. If you do those things in our country, Miss Lavie, it is great dis – I am sorry, I forget the word. You are given punishment. Bad punishment.”

“Disgrace?” Lavie suggested.

“Dishonour,” a male voice said, breaking in from behind. “Ah, those wacky Republicans.”

“Please, who are you?” Dina asked, admiring the man, but embarrassed to be talking to a stranger.

“Introduce us, Miss Regale,” Agent Striker said, doffing his Zion University cap. “It’s always a pleasure to meet new people.”

“Ohmygosh, how did you get here?” Lavie exclaimed. “Dina, this is Wolfgang Striker. He works for the Zion government.”

“A – politician? Is that how you say this, Miss Lavie?” Dina said, still rather flustered.

“No, I just work for the politicians, Miss,” Striker said, politely. “If I may ask, Miss Regale, why this sudden interest in the Republic?”

Lavie flushed. “I’m not sure if I should tell you that,” she said, turning her head away.

“Miss Regale, I may know more about this than you think, and I may help you recover something that is lost,” he said, and as he looked at her, he silently mouthed one word: *Ryan*. “Could we speak for a little while, say at the Café?”

Lavie nodded. “I’ll talk to you later, Dina,” she said. “Thanks, and good luck with Level 5!”

“Many thanks, Miss Lavie,” Dina said, brightly, as Lavie and Striker left the room.

“Why does Miss Lavie ask about my country, when she is having so many – ah, admirers, that is the word – in hers?” Dina wondered, as she drank her coffee calmly. “Of course, Republican men will like her, too!”

In the meantime, Lavie and Striker, walking together in silence, had reached ‘Café Au Lait’, Mann Island’s imaginatively-named coffee shop and restaurant. They sat down, and Striker ordered two cups of hot chocolate, which they sipped in between their conversation.

“Agent Striker,” Lavie said, “before I begin, let me explain something to you.”

“Go ahead, Miss Regale,” Striker replied, pulling his cap back on, as the last breezes of winter began to make his ears turn cold.

“I don’t know if you’ll understand this, because you’re an Intelligence agent,” Lavie said, softly. “I know you’re supposed to be cold, and emotionless, and ruthless. But I want you to understand me. I don’t care if you want to save Ryan for some political purposes of your own, or for another ‘mission’, whatever it may be. I – I love Ryan, Agent Striker, and I want him back, safe and sound. I...” She faltered. “I know he doesn’t care for me the same way, and if he returns, he’ll probably go back to his girlfriend, Marianne. But I want him safe and alive, Agent Striker, even if he doesn’t want me....” Her head sagged forward, and she stifled a sob. “Ryan....”

Striker looked at her with a strange expression – it could have been called calculating, but it was too sympathetic – and waited till she had calmed herself before speaking.

“Miss Regale, as you say, I am an Intelligence agent,” he said, calmly. “I serve the Zion Empire, and Emperor Charlemagne, and Duke Renaud, and the memory of the late Prince Wilhelm. And it is true that, being older than you – and a man to boot – I may not experience the same emotions that you do. But let me assure you that my interest in that young man is entirely personal. He rendered me a great service by keeping Princess Carranya alive; without Carranya, the alliance between the Zion and Galvenia would have been doomed. He has fought at my side, and in a sense, he is a brother in arms. I may not love him the way you do, of course...” – he laughed – “...but I am not entirely without better feelings. If I am permitted to go on a mission to save him, I shall do so, as I helped save your Royal Family.”

“Thank you, Agent Striker,” Lavie murmured. “And I am ready to do anything to help you.”

“Now, let us be clear about certain things, Miss Regale. I have spoken to that man, Marlborough, and frankly, I am not satisfied with his account of things. He is a defeatist, perhaps because of his age, perhaps because of his Itarian religion.”

“Aren’t Zions all Church members too?” Lavie asked.

“On paper, yes,” Striker said, with a laugh. “In practice, no. But that’s neither here nor there. Now, our Intelligence Division has made its own enquiries, and while escape from *Al-Mu’afa* is difficult, it is not impossible. A few skilled men, with the right contacts and enough money, can pull it off. I’ll wager my entire fortune on that, not that Intelligence men earn that much.”

“But will your Government agree?” Lavie said, sadly. “After all, Ryan isn’t important to *them*...”

“Ryan may not be important to them, Miss Regale,” Striker said, “but there is plenty at *Al-Mu’afa* and its environs to interest them. It is rumoured that the Varald have contacts with Republican agents there, and that important plans and documents may be hidden in the prison. If we can substantiate these rumours, then Charlemagne would be raring to send me off – especially since the land war against the Varald is now firmly in our favour, after their foolishness at Inderness. Trust me, we will find a reason.”

Lavie looked at him, her eyes shining. “Agent Striker, I – I don’t know how to thank you...”

“Hush, Miss Regale,” Striker said. “Wait for a few days, and you will have a more definite answer from me. In the meantime, I will give you one hint. Practice your archery, for it may come in more useful than you think.”

“My...” Lavie stared at him with awe. “You mean you’ll take *me* along with you?”

“As the Republicans say, the thing is possible,” Striker said, running his hand along his jaw. “Now, remember. Not a word about this, not even to your parents or your grandmother, until I can be sure. Can I trust you?”

“Of course! We’ll bring Ryan back, or...” – she beamed at him – “...*die trying!*”

“Don’t die on me, Miss Regale, but that’s the spirit,” Striker said, as he quickly paid their bill and left the restaurant, leaving an exultant Lavie behind.

Just like in my dream, she thought. I’ll show him the Way!

“Out of the question!” Sigmund Regale thundered. “We certainly want him back in Davenport, but not at the cost of my daughter’s life! Lavie, how could you even think of doing such a thing?” He looked at her in dismay. They were all seated in the drawing-room at Casa Regale, and the atmosphere was tense.

“Mr. Regale,” Princess Carranya said, gently, “if it means anything to you, if I were in her place, I would do the same thing.”

“Your Highness, with all respect,” Sigmund replied, “if I was in your father’s place, I would say the same thing – in fact, I suspect the King would forbid you from taking such a step, just as I forbid my daughter! I admire courage as much as the next man, but this is folly!”

“Sometimes,” Carranya said, glancing at Lavie, “we have to take risks for the sake of those we love, Mr. Regale.”

“You know, dear,” Emily added, “Lavie’s not exactly marching into battle. Agent Striker and his men will be doing the actual fighting, and Father Marlborough has agreed to go along with them. Think of it as a spring vacation.”

“Hmph!” Sigmund snorted. “Emily, you’re trying to sweet-talk me into letting her go, as you did when it came to Checkpoint Bravo. But this isn’t the same! We’re talking about a secret prison, unscrupulous mercenaries, and Infinity knows what other perils! I’m sorry, Emily, but I love my daughter, and I cannot let her throw her life away in this manner!”

“Daddy!” Lavie said, indignantly. “Would you want me to just sit at home, while someone else just....”

“You know, Mr. Regale,” Sheila Eramond added, “Lavie has a point. We all have done foolish things for those we care about, I’m sure. I know I have, and you have, and Emily has...”

“Please, Sheila. And Lavie, don’t indulge in wishful thinking,” Sigmund said, heavily. “After all, it’s not like Ryan is going to run into your arms and forget that Robertson girl, just because you make the trip with these Zion m – Oh, goodness. I’m sorry, Lavie. I didn’t really mean that,” he said, as Lavie began to weep. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, Daddy,” Lavie sniffed. “I already told Agent Striker that I didn’t expect anything in return. I just want to know that he’s alive, and safe back in Davenport...”

Sigmund placed his arm around her. “Lavie, dearest,” he said, “be reasonable. I’ll pay the amount, every penny of it...”

“Out of the question, Sigmund,” Theodore Eramond said, firmly. “We’ll share the costs. And while I understand the risks, I understand how your daughter feels, too.”

“You’re all being foolish,” Sigmund snapped. “Look, I know what it means to take risks. They don’t always end up well. Sometimes, they end up horribly wrong, especially where young women and – young men are involved. And this is not business, Theodore, this is Lavie’s life we’re talking about.”

“I will personally ensure her safety, Mr. Regale,” Striker said, solemnly.

“As you ensured Prince Wilhelm’s?” Sigmund said, turning on him.

“As I ensured Princess Carranya’s,” Striker replied, calmly, leaving Sigmund speechless for a moment.

“Anyway, I have made my decision, and it’s final,” he said, aware that the opinion of everyone in the room was against him, but determined not to waver. “I will bankroll this entire operation, if you want, but Lavie stays at home. Is that clear?”

“Dear,” Emily began, “couldn’t we...”

“No, Emily,” Sigmund said, sternly. “Am I clear?”

To everyone’s surprise, it was Lavie who broke the deadlock.

“I suppose you’re right, Daddy,” she said, shaking her head and drying her eyes with Emily’s handkerchief. “Promise me one thing, though. Pay the five million dollars out of my own inheritance.”

“Lavie...” Sigmund looked at her, and hesitated.

“Please, Daddy. Let me do that for him, at least. Let me feel that I had *something* to do with his rescue,” she pleaded, taking hold of Sigmund’s hand.

Sigmund sighed. “Very well, Lavie. I’m sorry things had to be this way, but I will honour this promise.”

The little gathering broke up – Carranya returning to Lorean Castle in her carriage, Striker to Checkpoint Alpha, Sigmund to his library, and Emily to her kitchen. Theodore stayed behind, hoping that he could speak to Sigmund in private, but after Carranya and Lavie had said their goodbyes, Sheila walked up to Lavie, who was standing on the porch of her house.

“You’re quite right, Lavie dear,” she said, encouragingly. “Goodness, I don’t know that I wouldn’t want to go myself, except that dear Theo would be lost without me.”

“Auntie Sheila,” Lavie said, softly. “Do you think I’m being foolish? Is Daddy right?”

“Lavie, dear,” Sheila replied, as they walked together, slowly, a smile slowly coming to her lips, “whatever it is that you thought of doing, it isn’t half as foolish as what I did, when I was just a little bit older than you.”

“What was that, Auntie?” Lavie asked.

“Oh, it was when we were newlyweds, dear. We didn’t have much money – I was an orphan, and Theo had a small allowance from his father, and it was only thanks to Emily that we could pay for the wedding in the first place.”

“Mom?” Lavie said, surprised.

“Yes, dear,” Sheila said, affectionately. “My father, Benjamin Robinson, was a bailiff on the Lancaster estate. Emily and I grew up very close, you know.”

“That’s cool!” Lavie said. “So what did you do, and why do you say it was foolish, Auntie Sheila?”

Sheila laughed. “Theo was just starting out on his business career back then,” she said, “and he needed just a little more money to expand. Sigmund had helped him, but Sigmund was having difficulties of his own at that time – his own investments weren’t doing well – and he couldn’t do anything further. It made me sad to see him so dejected, Lavie – he’d always dreamed of being a businessman, and he just needed a little more capital. That’s when I decided to interfere.”

“How?” Lavie asked.

Sheila’s eyes twinkled, and she whispered a few words in Lavie’s ear.

“You’re joking!” Lavie replied, with a giggle.

“I’m afraid not, dear. It was rather amusing, though dear Theo was a little embarrassed when he found out. But that’s it, my dear, the true story of how Eramond Delivery Services got off the ground.”

“Ohmygosh, that’s – awesome!” Lavie said, clapping her hands. “Did Ryan know about this?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t told him yet, dear,” Sheila said, growing misty-eyed at the mention of Ryan, and patting Lavie’s hand. “You know, you could tell him about it when you see him again.”

“Me?” Lavie said. “But that’ll take ages...”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way, dear,” Sheila said, winking at Lavie. “I only wish I was young enough to do so myself, but you still ought to try, Lavie.”

As Sheila joined Theodore and returned to their home, Lavie’s head was in a whirl.

After all, she thought, the Princess did it too! But how? I’m going to need some help.

“My young friends, I understand your hurry,” Pontiff Pious XXI said, as the Galvenians, one by one, knelt and kissed his ring – Henrik and Bernadette with respectful awe, Amelia and Sister Rosemary with correct posture and reverence, and Aline with a giggle that she could barely conceal. “And, believe me, I share your concern for the retrieval of the Sword – in fact, I thank you for hurrying to our aid. But we must decide upon the matter of timing. To act too early may be dangerous, but to delay would be futile.”

“Your Holiness,” Aline said, standing upright, her white lab coat fluttering about her, “we have combed every tunnel in the southern part of the City, and we’ve drawn a blank! We can’t wait any longer! For all

we know, the rebels could be counting on such a delay! The boats they have cannot harm us once we enter the tunnels, and we know how to defend ourselves!”

“They have a point, Carlo,” Elias said. “Once we announce that we have the Sword, those rebels will be demoralized, and so will the men they serve.”

“I think we should give our friends a chance,” Archbishop Legrand said, enthusiastically.

“Dr. Sheldon, would you be interested in a position at the Pontifical Academy of Science and Lore?” the Pontiff said, kindly. “Your own work here has been of the highest order.”

“You’re too kind, Your Holiness,” Aline said, with a girlish curtsy that had Rosemary making a disapproving sound, but which amused the Pontiff himself considerably. “But Galvenia is my home.”

“So explain this to me again, Doctor,” Elias said, skeptically. “You claim that your device can detect the Sword based on the imprints left by its prior victims, do you?”

“That’s about the size of it, Your Grace,” Henrik said. “And from what Aline has told us, this matches very well with what we know of such swords, from the Holy Book.”

“I am not a scholar, young man,” Elias said, “and I still do not trust those rebels. Carlo, let them remain here. The first reinforcements from Zion are landing, and they will reinforce the Claudia in a day or two. Would such a delay make any difference, given that we have waited for months?”

“I understand the need for precautions, Your Grace,” Bernadette said, a little hesitantly, “The rebels would grow more desperate once they heard of the Zion reinforcements, and might attack us now. I agree with you that we should wait a little.”

“Clever girl,” Elias said, appreciatively. “Sister, what do you think?”

“I’m with Aline, Your Grace,” Rosemary said. “If we can find it, things may end quite happily for all of us.”

“Miss Rushden?”

“We have waited long enough,” she said, shaking her head. “Let us make the attempt.”

“Mr. Spenson?”

“I’m with Bernadette,” he said, stepping closer to her. “Your Grace, even if the rebels try to infiltrate the tunnels, the Zion would defend us. Let us meet the commanding officer of the Zion Army – Zion soldiers are all educated in magical lore – and explain the situation to them. They would certainly help us.”

“You argue well, Mr. Spenson,” Legrand said. “However, I have it on good authority that the rebels have withdrawn from the banks of the Claudia, and are regrouping further east, perhaps trying to climb the Five Hills and enter the city through that route.”

“That would be foolish, Legrand,” Elias said, impatiently. “They’d need to be world-class mountaineers to pull off a stunt like that.”

“They are Itarians, and climbing is a national sport, Elias,” Legrand said. “Your Holiness, Dr. Sheldon is right. Send the Galvenians to the southern tunnels. They can enter through the Abbey of Saint Bernard, which is quite secure.”

Pious XXI looked at the people gathered before him with a grave expression.

“Saint Bernard,” he said, thoughtfully. “Perhaps that is a good omen.”

“I assure you, your Holiness,” Legrand said, “that they will be quite safe. I have been supervising that portion of the city, ever since the rebellion trapped me here.”

“All things considered, I will follow your suggestion, my good Legrand,” the Pontiff replied. “Go, my friends, and follow the highway to Saint Bernard’s Abbey. Once you enter the crypt beneath the small chapel, you will find yourself in a corridor that is connected to every one of the thirty-three tunnels of the northern district. God speed, Dr. Sheldon, and may the Infinity guide you and your companions.”

“Oh, you’re such a nice man, Your Holiness,” Aline said, blushing, and the rest of the team, bowing respectfully, made their way in haste to the Abbey.

“I hope they are safe, Carlo,” Elias said. “Truly, though the Church in Galvenia is small, it bears many noble flowers.”

“Hmph. Still have an eye for a nice girl, do you, Elias?” Legrand said, mockingly. “But I warn you, the blue-haired girl’s already fallen for the tall boy, or so Moretta tells me.”

“Very amusing, Legrand,” Elias snorted. “Carlo, how should we receive the Zion now?”

“You could begin by raising your hands in the air,” Legrand said, but not in his usual tone of voice. “That is the traditional gesture of surrender, my friends.”

“What are you babbling about, Legrand...” Elias began, then turned to see that Legrand – looking quite grim, and unlike his cheery self – was pointing a large pistol at him.

“Your taste in practical jokes is deplorable, my good Legrand,” the Pontiff said. “Put that museum piece away, or the Zion might mistake you for a rebel.”

“Ah, that is a good point, Your Holiness. Who is the rebel? The one who defends Itaria as it has stood for centuries, or the one who allows it to become a plaything of the Zion?” Legrand laughed harshly.

“Are you quoting Kartner to take the mickey out of him, Legrand?” Elias said nervously.

“Not at all, gentlemen,” Legrand replied. He fired a shot in the air, and the room was filled with Italian Guards – whose weapons were all trained directly at the Pontiff and his secretary. Following them were two men, one in a black robe, and the other in a clerical suit.

“Treason!” Elias screamed. “Legrand, you....you spawn of the Pits! You will burn in Hell for this act of yours!”

“Oh, I’m not so sure,” Legrand said, as the guards immobilized Elias and bound him. “What news, Gray?”

“My good Legrand – as the Pontiff calls you – you have done your job admirably,” Ronald Gray said.

“And our friend here has done an excellent job with the late Archbishop Mazarus.”

“Mazarus?” Pious XXI said wonderingly, still remaining seated in his chair, with a regretful expression on his face.

“Yes, Mazarus,” the man in the robe said, drawing a large square of cloth from his cloak, and unfolding it. “Today, my friends, this flag will fly over Itaria, and the Zion shall be confounded once and for all.”

Pious looked at Legrand unflinchingly. “Legrand, my friend, I can understand your betraying me for ideology – for power, even. But for *this*?”

“Look well at it, Pious,” Gray sneered, unfolding the flag to reveal three faces – the representations of a man, a woman and a beast. “It is the symbol of all you stand for. You were meant to be manly in defending the Faith. Instead, you behaved like a woman. And now, you and your lick-spittle Council will be handed over to the Beast, for the chastisement that is your due. For the Beast cannot do evil without the Infinity willing it. As the Infinity allowed Meldia to die in the past, as the Infinity allowed the City of the Eternal God to be held by the Varald in the past, He is now abandoning you, Pious. These three faces will be the last thing you see, as happened with poor Mazarus.”

Pious XXI sighed. “I always had my suspicions about that,” he said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Simple, my good Pontiff,” the man in the cloak said, drawing his sword and pointing it at Pious’ heart. “You will come out with us and greet the Zion forces. You will tell them that the rebellion has been quelled, and that they are safe to return home. Then you will pray to the Five Angels that they have a safe passage home. If you attempt anything else, it is they who will suffer. The Beast may be limited by the Infinity, but do not test its power.”

“Gray,” Pious said, wearily. “If you have forgotten everything you learned here, remember one thing. Those who choose the Beast as a companion do not redeem it; it corrupts them.”

“Enough words, Pious,” Gray said, coldly. “The Zion are disembarking, even as we speak. Come, follow us.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Why, we will send you to meet the Beast yourself, and we will make the process slow – as we did with your lackey, Mazarus. We will then emerge, explaining that you died of a broken heart due to the rebellion, and that Legrand has been appointed your successor. He will speak, if you will not.”

“Very well,” Pious said, his shoulders sagging. “I will come with you.”

“Carlo, no!” Elias shouted, but one of the guards stunned him with a blow to the head before he could say more.

“Poor Clement,” the Pontiff whispered, as he marched ahead of Gray and Legrand. “Fear not, I will be true, even if they have played me false.”

“So I was right,” Lavie said, sadly, as she sat at one of the tables at the Queen’s Head. Some of the regular patrons, surprised to see a girl of her age and appearance in the local pub, glanced at her curiously before returning to their pints. Spring had not yet quite arrived, and the sun was setting.

“It was quite easy to find out, my child,” Marlborough said, taking a draught of his glass of ale. “It was almost certainly those pendants which affected your friend Bernadette. And I apologize for the venue. It was Mr. Striker, here” – he glanced dubiously at the Zion agent, who was adjusting his cap – “who suggested it, since the Princess had to attend the Queen’s birthday celebrations.”

“All that is very nice, old man,” Striker said lazily, as he drank the last of his beer with appreciation, and ordered another one. “But it’s nothing compared to what I have. Miss Regale, guess which Galvenian noble owns a substantial number of shares in *Al-Mu’afa*.”

Lavie paused, as the implications of the question sunk into her slowly, and then her eyes lit up with anger. “Sir Ch – Sir Prescott,” she said, her hand trembling as she laid her orange juice down. “The vile, disgusting, low....” She felt herself choking on the words, and could not continue.

“I can understand Prescott wanting to avenge the destruction of Turbo Arms,” Striker said, looking sympathetically at Lavie, “but I cannot understand why he would want young Eramond as a prize, especially since Ryan is a sort of local hero. And we have no clues of his whereabouts, though our Commonwealth contacts tell us that he may have headed for Unity Isle. His motives, frankly, puzzle me. Why inflict such a terrible vengeance on a young man whom he probably does not even know?”

“Actually,” Lavie said, blushing furiously, “there *is* a reason, but....”

“I think I understand,” Marlborough said. “Sir Prescott was probably, shall we say, an unsuccessful suitor. Spare Miss Regale the blushes, Agent.”

“As you wish, old man,” Striker said, curtly. “So are you serious about accompanying us?”

“I am, young man,” Marlborough said politely, “because I, like you, have privileged information of my own. Listen to me. The safest place to land on Republican soil is on the coast of Marcopolis. Not far from that coast is an estate, which belongs to dear friends of mine. We will find shelter and support there.”

“You speak, I suppose, of that man Arnoldus,” Striker said, with an indifferent expression.

“Commander Arnoldus?” Lavie said, brightening. “I know *him!* He looked after Daddy and I at Checkpoint Bravo, and told us about his wife and his eight children.”

“A charming family, Miss Regale, and you will soon make their acquaintance, if you are able to join us,” Marlborough said. “But there is more. In her last letter, Penelope spoke of a group of men who had arrived at her estate under strange circumstances – Galvenian soldiers and sailors, who had been ordered not to return home. Apparently they came from a ship called the *Alexandra*.”

“But wasn’t the *Alexandra* sunk right at the beginning of the war, by the Varald?” Lavie said, puzzled. “I remember Ryan getting upset about it, and that was the day he started talking about signing up.”

“Quite right, Miss. I wired Penelope for further details on hearing this, and she replied, saying that the men had been ordered to stay put on the orders of a man named Felix Gessler, much against their will.”

“Gessler!” Lavie’s face was wrinkled with disgust. “I know *him*. He’s Sir Chucklehead’s toady – I mean assistant, Professor. I was right all along, Sir Prescott *is* a traitor!”

“Indeed he is, Miss Regale,” Striker said, reaching the end of his second tankard. “Now, if those men are unhappy with Prescott, there is every chance that we may not need any sort of support; they would be enough to take a place like *Al-Mu’afa*, if we played our cards right. And as for the stories of escorts being ambushed, those are not human ambushes, Marlborough.”

“Oh, really, young man?” Marlborough said, a little annoyed by Striker’s off-hand attitude.

“We have agents who work with some of the desert mercenaries nearby,” Striker said, “and those are birds of prey, not humans. They are Republican vultures, which have been bred carefully to attack any unfamiliar person.”

“Vultures?” Lavie asked, with a look of surprise.

“That’s the closest description I could get, Miss,” Striker said. “But all this is not of much importance. I must go, for the Zion government has reasons of its own to raid that prison. Marlborough must go, for he is a friend of the Arnoldus family, and he can gain entry himself as a chaplain. There is room enough on our boat, for I will only take about ten men with me – but if you choose to come, Miss Regale, we can easily accommodate you.”

“Now wait a minute, Agent,” Marlborough said, gently. “There are conventions to be observed. A young woman like Miss Regale cannot travel alone to the Republic, with twelve men as her only company. She must have a chaperone of some sort. If her mother, or her housekeeper...”

“I asked Carmen,” Lavie said, shaking her head. “She’d love to come – especially since you told her that Juan was a prisoner, too – but Daddy has threatened to fire her if she got on your boat, and she needs her job. As for Mom, I’m sure she’d come if it was up to her, but Daddy...” Her eyes flashed red. “Why doesn’t he understand how I feel! Why does he keep talking about caution, and risk! This isn’t business! This is...”

“All is fair in love and war, as the ancients say,” Striker observed, “but perhaps Mr. Regale has reasons of his own to caution you. Perhaps he has experienced reverses of his own through taking risks, or permitting others to take them. Perhaps he merely wishes to protect you, though he realizes that you are growing up. I am not a psychologist, but those are all valid reasons.”

“Valid for *him*,” Lavie said, with a sniff. “If I could just convince Daddy...”

“I shall pray that the Infinity may soften his heart, Miss Regale,” Marlborough said, with a smile. “But remember, as our Zion brethren say, the Infinity helps those who helps themselves.”

“Are you trying to tell her something, Reverend?” Striker said, leaning forward.

“Ah, you remember my title,” Marlborough said, with a pleased expression. “Perhaps there are other things you would care to remember when addressing me.”

“Such as?” Striker said, his expression relaxing.

“I leave that to your imagination, Agent,” he said. “I merely wish to remind you that this is a delicate mission, that our journey to the Republic will be a long one, and that cooperation is essential. Wouldn’t you agree, Miss Regale?”

“Well, if you mean getting *Daddy* to cooperate,” Lavie said, with a smile, “I have to agree.”

“We shall be leaving three days from now, from the regular docks at Davenport, then,” Striker said. “My men are waiting at Darington, and will cross the border tomorrow. Make your preparations, my friends, for as the Reverend said, this will be a long journey.”

“I’ll try my best,” Lavie said, resolutely.

“I have a bad feeling about this, somehow,” Amelia Rushden said, in her usual measured tones. “They should not have let us go so easily.”

“Perhaps Archbishop Legrand was driven to optimism by the news of the Zion ships, my sister,” Bernadette said, as she lit a candle in the small chapel that still existed in the seventh of the northern tunnels.

“Is that for your mother, Miss Bernadette?” Aline asked, fiddling with the larger of the two knobs on her blue device. “Let me light some too, for dear Father, and for Bruce.” She knelt down beside Bernadette.

“Aline, my sister,” Rosemary said, indulgently, “does that gadget of yours actually serve any purpose?”

“We’re getting closer, *grande soeur*,” Aline said, as she finished lighting the candles and rose to her feet. “We’ve combed the first six tunnels, and there was nothing there. But look here.” She pointed to the display on her device, on which an occasional green peak stood out against a flat line. “Those are auras.”

“They’re probably your own, my poor sister,” Rosemary replied.

“Let’s move on, my love,” Henrik said – he had been kneeling beside Bernadette as well, praying for his own mother. “After all, we only have twenty-six more tunnels to explore.”

“As you say, Henrik,” Bernadette replied, slipping her hand into his, in a gesture that he had grown to love.

They searched two more of the tunnels without any further results, though Aline’s detector still registered faintly. On the ninth, Aline’s device began to glow, and the straight green line on its screen became a mountain-range of peaks and valleys.

“Arr, that’s a pretty display, Miss,” Merrick said, glancing at the device.

“We’re very close!” she whispered, excitedly. “Miss Rushden, you’re the most level-headed of us. Please go on ahead.”

“Why?” Amelia asked.

“Auras are tricky creatures, at least according to the ancient books,” Aline explained. “I’m not a mental scientist, but apparently, they can be temporarily masked on the detector by strong emotions, especially pleasant ones. Our two turtledoves, there” – she pointed to Henrik and Bernadette – “would confuse the issue.”

“Dear me, Aline,” Amelia said, with a smile, “you do think of everything.”

“That’s what I’m here for, my friend,” Aline said, patting her on the arm encouragingly. “Step into that room, and carry this with you. If the peaks multiply, and the valleys become fewer, then we are very close indeed.”

Suddenly, there was a howl behind them.

“Infinity,” Merrick said, impatiently, “not another one of them dogs. Mr. Spenson, stand by me.”

“Certainly,” Henrik said. “Bernadette, step back, but be ready to shield us if I need it.”

“As you wish, Henrik,” Bernadette said, retreating cautiously.

There was another howl, and this time, it was closer.

“That didn’t sound like an animal,” Henrik said, drawing his sword.

“It didn’t sound human either, lad,” Merrick said, nervously, as he placed his hand over his pistol – and was suddenly thrown to the ground.

“Sweet Infinity!” Henrik exclaimed. The creature that had fastened itself to Merrick could not be described easily – it had a large, white body, long limbs like a frog, but its head and jaw were like that of a dog. He rushed forward and slashed at it, causing it to fall off Merrick.

“Bernadette, shield Merrick!” he shouted. “I can take care of this.”

“Henrik, be careful!” Bernadette cried out, as another identical creature flew in his direction. Henrik brought his sword forward, puncturing it, and it fell to the ground, as if it were a deflated balloon.

Two of the Lifters, in the meantime, had shot the creature that had attacked Merrick.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” Sister Rosemary said, removing her hands from her face and looking at the intruders.

“Perhaps they’re frogs treated with that metal,” Bernadette suggested, as she healed the slash over Merrick’s arm. “I hope there aren’t any more of them.”

“Let’s move ahead, Aline and Amelia are already moving on,” Sister Rosemary went on, alarmed at the suggestion. “Goodness, what ugly creatures.”

However, before they could proceed any further, they were almost flattened – by Aline, who was literally dancing through the narrow corridor with excitement.

“I think we’ve achieved our goal at last,” Amelia said, smiling at Bernadette.

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Amelia, my sister,” Bernadette said. “Aline, why are you rejoicing?”

In reply, Aline led them down the tunnel she had just emerged from, and pointed to a light sword, with a long, thin blade that glowed blue, which was locked within a display case. “This sword’s aura readings are off the charts,” she said, pointing to her device, whose screen was now entirely green. “If it isn’t the Sword of Regret, then...”

“...it’s still something extraordinary,” Henrik said, looking at the weapon. “We need to get it out of that case, though.”

Bernadette walked up to the case and examined it. “There is no keyhole or lock on it,” she said, shaking her head, “but look.” She pointed to four dials and a small indentation on the metal stand on which it rested.

“Arr, we can just break it open,” Merrick said, aiming his pistol at the case and firing. The bullet struck the glass, then fell to the ground uselessly.

“Sweet lands!” Aline said. “A sword full of auras, and now Meldian glass...what a treat for a lover of material sciences!”

“Meldian glass?” Amelia asked.

“A transparent material, which looks just like glass, but is as strong as several layers of steel,” Henrik explained. “It’s still made in some parts of the Zion Empire. Unfortunately, there’s no way of breaking it, except at extremely high temperatures. We need to unlock it.”

“Henrik, there’s something written here!” Bernadette said, studying the stand more carefully.

“Goody, I love puzzles!” Aline said, wiping her glasses clean on her coat. “What does it say, Miss Bernadette?”

“It’s strange....Listen to this,” Bernadette said, reading the Varald-style letters by the light of her lantern.

*Begin with the battle that gave birth to the sons of the new South.
Take away the birth of a brave lad, who died that this sword would be preserved.
Add the final cleaning of the Lifters.
And let the touch of a brave woman unlock the door.*

“That’s pretty easy!” Aline said. “Let’s see, the Southern nation must be Galvenia! That would be the Battle of Lorean Castle, but I’m terrible at dates.” She frowned. “Miss Bernadette?”

“I wonder which chronology they want,” Bernadette said. “The battle was fought in 9710 of the old Imperial Calendar, though.”

“That’s a good guess, since there are four dials,” Henrik said. “The birth of a brave lad. Lord Geraud, perhaps? Prince Derren? But none of them helped preserve this sword, as far as I know.”

“Henrik Spenson,” Bernadette said, with a laugh. “No, I’m just teasing you, Henrik.”

“Thomas Perrin,” Sister Rosemary said, firmly. “Wouldn’t you agree, Amelia?”

Amelia blushed. "I'm glad to see that someone remembered him," she said, softly. "Commonwealth Year 280."

"The cleaning of the Lifters – Mr. Merrick, you'll have to help us there!" Aline said, brightly. "Now hurry up, we're almost there!"

"That would be the year 157, Miss," Merrick said, darkly. "The year when them traitors and dark mages made us all get into trouble."

"Let me calculate, Miss Bernadette," Aline said, closing her eyes. "Ah, I have it. 9587, or my name isn't Aline."

"Do the honours, Bernadette," Henrik said, taking her by the hand. "It did say a brave woman."

"Really, Henrik," Bernadette protested, blushing as she positioned the dials to 9, 5, 8 and 7. There was a loud *click*, and the indentation glowed, but the case remained closed.

"Now keep your hand there, darling," Henrik said. She did, but nothing happened.

"Perhaps we've got the wrong number," Amelia suggested.

"Then why did it start glowing?" Sister Rosemary asked.

"Arr, maybe it needs a *man's* touch, Merrick said, tapping the indentation with his index finger, then starting away, wringing his hand. "Darned thing's protected by a Lightning elemental."

"Or maybe it's particular about women," Bernadette said, with a smile. "Amelia, my sister, would you try?"

"Me?" Amelia said.

"If bravery is the ability to bear suffering patiently, all alone, then you are the bravest of us all," she said, gently.

"I agree," Henrik said, smiling at her.

"Well reasoned, Miss Bernadette," Sister Rosemary said.

"Go ahead, *petite*, it can't bite you!" Aline said.

Reddening, Amelia slowly placed her hand over the indentation. There was a sound of glass cracking, and the Meldian glass covering the sword fell away.

"It seems I was right, my sister," Bernadette said. "Take the Sword, Amelia."

“The Sword?” A smile slowly crept across Amelia Rushden’s face, as she took hold of the Sword of Regret with her right hand. “Sweet Infinity, it’s light – astonishingly light. It feels like – like a knife, or a stick.”

“The recordings are still off the charts, Miss Amelia,” Aline said, waving her detector over the surface of the sword, then switching it off. “There’s no doubt, we’ve done it!”

“Excellent work, my friends,” Sister Rosemary said, beaming at Aline and embracing her. “I knew you could do it, Aline, my sister.”

“We did it, Henrik!” Bernadette said, excitedly, as she rushed to his side, and he gathered her into his arms. “And all thanks to Amelia.”

“Thomas has been avenged,” Amelia said, solemnly, kneeling down and holding the sword in the air. It gleamed a brighter blue, encircling her head with a crown of light.

“Now ain’t that pretty, Miss,” Merrick said, happily. “Come on, all of ye, let’s get back to the Pontiff!”

“Not so fast, now.”

“Who said that?” Amelia said, getting to her feet, still holding the sword.

“Not me,” Henrik said.

“Behind you,” the voice said, a little more loudly. “Ah, the Sword. How fortunate that none of you truly know what it is, or how to use it.”

“Who are ye?” Merrick said, angrily. “Show yer face, if you’re a man!”

“Oh, that is easily done,” the voice replied. “Good evening, children. I’m afraid I’m going to have to curtail that mission of yours, because things are getting out of hand here.”

The corridor behind them was illuminated with a bright yellow light, and the identity of the newcomer was now unmistakable.

“I’ve seen you before, girl,” he said, contemptuously. “And that boy next to you. The time has come to put an end to your insolence, once and for all.”

“R – Reverend Gray?” Bernadette said, as she and Henrik stepped closer to each other.

“How pleasant it is to be recognized,” he said, with a smile. “Now hand over that sword, and I will let you live, and return to your own heathen country. If you do not, I am afraid the Beast will consume you all.”

"I do not fear the Beast," Sister Rosemary said, "and I don't know quite who you are, my fine fellow, but if you're trying to impress me, you're not doing a good job."

"Silence!" Ronald Gray said, taking a step forward towards Amelia. Behind him, the shadows of several men, whose swords gleamed in the light of their torches, could be made out. "Give me the sword, girl."

"Leave her alone!" Bernadette said, stepping between him and Amelia. Gray looked at her with annoyance for a moment, then roughly pushed her aside.

Amelia looked at him, raising the sword in the air. "You – you and your men," she said, suddenly. "You were the ones who killed Thomas."

"We gave him a chance, too," Gray said. "You need not suffer the same fate as him."

"You – you demon!" Amelia screamed, and she lunged forward furiously. Though the sword did not touch Gray, a beam of blue light shot forth from it, and Gray was sent flying against one of the walls of the tunnel.

"Quickly! Run for it!" Henrik said. "Merrick, cover us!"

"You got it, son," Merrick said, as he and his men fired. In the chaos that ensued, amidst the angry cries of Ronald Gray, they made good their escape, with the sword still glowing. They soon found themselves in another makeshift chapel, which happened to have a door.

"Close that door, Henrik," Sister Rosemary gasped, as they all entered the room. Henrik slammed the door shut, and stood guard near it. "Well, at least we've bought ourselves some time."

"But what now?" Bernadette said, looking at the tear in her stocking ruefully. "We need to escape from here, somehow."

"We'll find a way," Henrik said, lending her a handkerchief, which she tied around her grazed knee.

"We can send a message to the Pontiff," Aline said. "I always carry my pocket transmitter with me! Let me try"

"Just a minute," a voice said, coldly. "You're not sending any message, woman."

Before Aline could speak, the transmitter was knocked out of her hands. Four women, all young and wearing short skirts and leather jackets, stepped forward, hands outstretched.

"I remember you from King's College," Henrik said, surprised. "It looks like your manners haven't improved in the meantime."

"Shut up!" one of the women said, pointing a finger at Bernadette. A yellow bolt shot out, but Henrik managed to bring the flat of his sword up in time, and it was deflected harmlessly onto one of the walls.

Another woman lunged at Amelia, but Amelia's sword again glowed a bright blue, and the the woman stepped back, clutching her chest.

"We can't shoot," Aline said, helplessly, as she reached for her weapon. "It wouldn't be sporting."

"How sweet," the third woman said, knocking Aline's gun out of her hand with a flying kick. The fourth woman rushed forward to attack Bernadette, but Henrik interposed himself between them, and pushed her away, sending her against a wall.

"Ah, I have it," Aline said, fumbling with her gun. "Here, enjoy yourself!" She fired, and her cartridge burst into a yellow blaze in front of her opponent, blinding her.

"Now! Tackle her, boys!" Merrick said, as the Lifters rushed over and immobilized the third woman, tying her up with a rope which was part of their equipment. However, in doing so, they had taken their eyes off the first woman, who fired a bolt at Merrick, causing him to fall to the ground.

"Mr. Merrick!" Bernadette cried out, casting a shield around him. Henrik rushed forward and brought the flat of his sword up, striking the woman in the face. In the meantime, the fourth woman removed a knife from her belt, and charged at Bernadette.

"No, you don't! Never!" Henrik said, slashing wildly, just as the knife was inches from Bernadette's throat. The weapon was deflected, but scratched her slightly on one cheek.

"Are you hurt, Bernadette, my sister?" Amelia said, frightened.

"I'll be burned if I let that happen again," Henrik said, fiercely, as he grabbed the woman by her collar and pushed her against a wall. "Tie her up too, friends."

"Aye, aye, sir," the Lifters said, producing a second rope. The woman whom the Sword had stunned still lay against the wall, motionless but breathing regularly, and the first woman had her head turned to the wall, covering her face with her hands.

"Bernadette," Henrik said, anxiously. "Are you..."

"It's just a scratch, Henrik," she said, as Henrik wiped the drop of blood from her face. "Goodness, it must look like I'm weeping tears of blood. How dramatic." She laughed. "The important thing is that we're all safe."

"How did they get in here?" Aline asked, scrambling around for her glasses, which had been knocked to the ground in the tussle. Sister Rosemary calmly retrieved them, and replaced them on her nose.

"That way!" Henrik said, pointing to a fairly new steel ladder, which seemed to ascend into a lighted passage. "Quickly, let's follow that trail before Gray and his guards catch up with us."

"Good idea, son," Merrick said, shaking his head vigorously. "By the Infinity, that stung."

“An excellent idea, Henrik,” Amelia said, looking at the Sword with a mixture of awe and unease as they all climbed up the stairs.

“Is everything clear, Carmen?” Lavie whispered, as she climbed down the stairs from her room and stood at the entrance to Casa Regale, a small suitcase in her hand, her bow and arrows slung across her back.

“Yes, Miss Lavie,” Carmen said. “Mr. Regale’s fast asleep, and unless you try hard, you’re not going to wake him up.”

“Give this to him in the morning, Carmen,” Lavie said, handing her a folded piece of paper. “Poor Daddy. I hate doing this to him, but...”

“Don’t worry about that,” Carmen said, taking her hand. “I know I’d come with you, too, if I had the chance. Good luck, and may the Infinity keep you safe, dear Miss Lavie – you, and Master Ryan, and Juan, too.” She wiped away a tear.

“Don’t worry, Carmen,” Lavie whispered, with a twinkle in her eye. “I’ll bring them back, or...”

“Good heavens, Miss Lavie!” Carmen said. “It’s your mother!”

And, indeed, Emily was hurrying down the stairs, walking on tip-toe. Lavie stared at her in horror, but Emily smiled at her – the same smile she had worn when Lavie had returned from her trip to Checkpoint Bravo.

“Come on outside for a while, dear,” Emily whispered, putting her arm around Lavie. “We can’t speak too loudly here.”

“Mom, what are you doing here?” Lavie asked, amazed.

“Your father had a little of his favourite wine tonight, at my suggestion,” Emily said, with a wink. “If I know Sigmund, he’ll wake up tomorrow with a bit of a headache, but that can’t be helped.”

“Mom...” Lavie began.

“Listen to me, Lavie,” Emily said, affectionately. “I didn’t want to let you go on this journey, until I received a letter from the Princess. I think you ought to read it yourself.” She slipped it into the pocket of Lavie’s jacket. “And for what it’s worth, I think it’s – the right thing to do, Lavie. I know that if I was your age, and Sigmund were in prison....” Her voice trailed off. “Oh, and one more thing, you might want to have this. It’s a gift from Sheila.” She handed a book to Lavie.

Lavie looked at the cover and giggled. “Very funny, Mom!” she said. “I didn’t know Auntie Sheila had such a sense of humour.”

“Oh, she does,” Emily said, embracing Lavie. “Come back safely, dearest. I trust those two men with you, because the Princess recommended them. I would have sent Carmen, too, but that would be putting too much of a strain on poor Sigmund’s patience. I’ll miss you terribly, but I know you’ll come back to us.”

“I love you, Mom,” Lavie said, returning the embrace.

“Miss Lavie,” Carmen whispered, “Agent Striker is waiting down the road.”

“Off I go, then,” Lavie said, then paused for a moment to wave goodbye to her mother and to Carmen one last time, before disappearing towards the docks at Davenport.

“No chaperone, Miss Regale?” Marlborough said, shaking his head as he spotted her. “Now, I hope I’m an honourable man, and so is the Agent, but still...”

“Hmph, you’re enough of an old woman yourself, Reverend,” Striker said, cheerfully. “Now step on board, Miss Regale. Let me show you your cabin.”

In the meantime, Emily and Carmen slowly made their way back home. They did not feel guilt – they truly meant it when they said that they would have done the same – but they also knew that the house would seem very empty to them in the days to come.

“There goes our brave girl, Carmen,” Emily said, softly, as they entered Casa Regale, and closed the door without a sound. “May the Infinity keep her safe.”

“He will indeed, Mrs. Regale,” Carmen said, with a smile. “And I hope that Master Ryan appreciates the trouble she’s taken, if nothing else.”

“Thank the Infinity that that tunnel led inside a church,” Bernadette said, as Henrik and Merrick bolted the heavy door at the top of the stairs. “We ought to be safe here.”

“But we need to get back to the Pontiff’s residence as soon as possible,” Henrik said, getting to his feet and looking around cautiously. “If we’ve been traced in this way, the Pontiff and his men might also be in danger!”

“Goodness, no!” Amelia exclaimed. “But that’s the other side of town. It will take us over two hours to get there on foot, and if the rebels have crossed the Claudia...”

“I don’t think these are rebels, Amelia, my sister,” Bernadette said, consolingly. “Rebels would have been more numerous. These are a small force – perhaps just the Reverend Gray and his disciples – sent to confound us. Fortunately, they did not succeed.”

“Let’s walk out of the church,” Aline said, brightly, hooking her device to her belt and drawing her gun. “We might as well know the worst soon, don’t you think?”

“Aline, my sister,” Rosemary began, but was interrupted by the sound of a creaking door.

“Someone’s entering the church!” Merrick said. “Lads, at the ready!”

The Lifters – some of whom were wounded, but who had stood firm throughout this journey – raised their pistols in reply.

“Let’s see who this is. Bernadette, stay with Amelia and Aline,” Henrik said. “I’ll take Merrick and some of the Lifters, and the rest will stay with you to guard the door, in case any of Gray’s men try something funny.”

“Dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, firmly, “I am coming with you. If there are mages involved, you will need my shield. Merrick can stay with the others.”

“Bernadette...” Henrik began, looking at her with growing admiration.

“No time for poetry, lad,” Merrick said. “I can hear footsteps.”

Henrik laughed. “Well played, Mr. Merrick. All right, Bernadette, come with me.”

“Goody! Can I come too?” Aline said, nodding enthusiastically.

“No, Aline, guard the entrance,” Rosemary said, firmly. “Don’t leave me all alone here.”

“I would never do that, *grande soeur*,” Aline said, affectionately.

“They’re getting closer!” Henrik said, as he and Merrick stepped forward, the Lifters following close behind. Suddenly, they saw the ground before them burst into flames.

“Don’t move, fools,” a voice said, clearly and confident. “If there’s one thing I hate more than *anything* else, it’s renegades who hide behind their religious nonsense.”

“Goodness!” Bernadette exclaimed. “It’s the Zion soldiers!”

The speaker stepped forward and looked at Bernadette closely and appraisingly. “Now aren’t you clever,” she said, removing her helmet and tossing her head. “What’s a nice girl like you doing with these rebels, by Johan’s bones? If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were an Aquary from my own country.”

“I *am* an Aquary,” Bernadette said, happily. “Bernadette Aquary, daughter of Jonas Aquary. We have come from Galvenia in search of the Sword.”

“Galvenia?” Sergeant Burnfist was taken aback. “What in the Pits are *Galvenians* doing here? It’s times like this that I wish Striker was there with a ready answer. And what Sword do you speak of?”

“The Sword of Regret,” Bernadette explained. “Amelia, my sister, give it to me.”

Amelia stepped forward, holding the Sword, which continued to glow a faint blue.

“Flaming fires!” the Sergeant exclaimed, nearly dropping her own sword. “You kids have done it! I’m Sergeant Burnfist, Zion Special Forces. We were sent here from Inderness to support the sea landing, but received a message that there were rebels in the northern tunnels.”

“How did you reach here so soon?” Henrik said, surprised. “Inderness is a long way from here.”

“There is only one way,” Bernadette said, comprehension dawning on her. “But I never knew it was still active – I thought it had lain dormant for centuries.”

“Dormant, but not dead, you clever Aquary girl,” Sergeant Burnfist said, clearly pleased. “Yes, there’s a Warp Cannon in Itaria, and some fool has reactivated it. Unfortunately, he also made it easy for us to follow him here. My, this is a pleasant surprise. The Aquarys and the Burnfists have been friends for thousands of years.”

“If I may interrupt this reunion, Miss Bernadette,” Aline said, rubbing her forehead, “shall we get out of here, first?”

“That’s child’s play, ma’am,” Sergeant Burnfist said, with a broad grin. “Follow me. Our men have secured the passage to the Palace, and we need to get there soon!”

“The Palace?”

“The Pontiff is being held prisoner,” the Sergeant explained. “He has been betrayed by one of his men, an Archbishop named Legrand. He is now being held by the rebels in a dungeon in the Palace. The Assault Corps is trying to take the Palace, but they are being repelled by a magical shield. And you, girl, are going to help me break it. My men and I could have done it on our own, but you’re going to make it easier.”

“Me?” Amelia exclaimed.

“That sword of yours, and your friend Bernadette,” Sergeant Burnfist said, laughing. “Run along, now. I’ll explain on the way. We can never be too swift, when we’re dealing with the Third Way.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Rosemary said, as she followed the group out of the church.

“Very clever, Pious,” Legrand said, angrily, as he strained against the handcuffs around his wrists. He had led the Pontiff out to meet the Zion forces, as per his plan, but had been stopped by Moretta, asking rather indignantly where they were going. Legrand was about to use his weapon again, but Pious raised his hand.

“My good Moretta, will you see to it that the peas are shelled?” he said, looking at her kindly.

Moretta blanched, then replied angrily. “Your Holiness, you burden me with too much work...”

“Enough,” Legrand had whispered, furiously, as he led the Pontiff out.

Soon, the Zion forces were landing on the beach, and were making their way towards the Palace, when one of them suddenly noticed a flare being launched into the air.

“Good heavens, man, did you see that?” Lieutenant Shin said, raising his eyebrows. “Something’s happening at the Palace!”

“Two green flares...” Sergeant Harmon waved in alarm. “Sir, the Palace has been taken by the rebels! It’s a distress signal!”

Hearing the explosions in the sky, Legrand looked back, then stared at Pious angrily. “Who was the fool who fired those – Oh, I see. Very clever, Pious.”

“What are the orders, Sir?” Harmon said, as he and his men slowly moved the cannon into position.

Lieutenant Shin stepped forward, till he was within eyeshot of the Pontiff and Legrand, and spoke loudly. “This is the 20th Imperial Battalion of the Zion Army. We know that you are holding the palace. Release the Pontiff, and surrender your positions, or we will open fire at once.”

“Sir,” one of the renegade guards with Legrand said, “what do we do? We don’t have enough men to hold the Palace, not against an army of that sort! Kill him!”

“Quiet, fool,” Legrand said, angrily. “We cannot harm the Pontiff in plain sight of the Zion Army. Let us make the best of a bad job. If we can draw them into the palace...”

Moving forward hesitantly, they had greeted the Zion forces with every appearance of politeness and kindness, explaining that the flares were a warning to the city, not to them. Shin looked unconvinced, and Legrand began to feel fear for the first time in many months.

If that fool of a mage cannot hold the Palace, and Gray cannot find those brats, then we are in trouble.

“Greetings, Your Holiness,” Shin said, kneeling down before the Pontiff. “What is the situation here?”

“All is well, Lieutenant,” the Pontiff said. “It is as it was in the glorious days of Emperor Johan.”

At these words, Shin’s expression changed, and he raised his hand. “Seize them, men!” he ordered, pointing at Legrand and the false Pontifical Guards. Before they knew what was happening, they were captured and disarmed.

“Your Holiness,” Sergeant Harmon said, bowing reverently, “are you well?”

In a few brief words, Pious explained the situation, only showing distress when he spoke of his friend Elias.

“We will secure the river as soon as we can,” Shin said, pointing to a battalion of Zion Assault Corps men who were climbing up the beach behind him. “In the meantime, we will secure the Palace.”

“Dear Moretta,” Pious said, with a smile. “She has remembered the old phrase, as you did.”

“There are some things we are trained not to forget, Your Holiness,” Lieutenant Shin said. They walked towards the palace, but found their way blocked, as if by an invisible barrier.

Suddenly, a man in a dark robe appeared on one of the turrets of the Palace, brandishing a staff. Despite the distance that separated them, his voice was clearly audible.

“Legrand, you are a fool,” it said. There was a bright flash of light, and Pious XXI had suddenly disappeared.

“Your Holiness!” Harmon cried out. “Where have you gone?”

“Damnation,” Shin said, drawing his sword. “I didn’t know it was still working.”

“What is, Lieutenant?”

“A Warp Cannon, by the Infinity,” Shin said, shaking his head. “If I read this correctly, that black-cloaked Joe has a powerful sword or staff, which he is using to shield the Palace. He can only be defeated by an equally powerful weapon. We could try the cannon, but there is always a chance that his shield is strong enough to repel them. Besides, they might try to harm the Pontiff if we get too close. Harmon, bring me the wireless.”

With unsteady hands, Harmon brought him the field radio, and Shin picked up the receiver. “Burnfist, can you hear me?” he said.

“Loud and clear, Shin,” the Sergeant’s voice replied, cockily. “How are things?”

“Not too good, Burnfist. We’re being blocked by some sort of magical shield. Do you think cannon would be worth a try?”

There was a silence on the line for a moment. “It would drain his energy, but if we’re truly dealing with the Third Way, that’s not a good strategy; they can draw energy from the Pits directly. It’s still worth a try. In the meantime, I’m going into the tunnels.”

“The tunnels?”

“Our detector has signalled the presence of a powerful weapon there, Shin,” the Sergeant replied. “The rebels are probably trying to bring it back to the Palace. If they do, that Palace will be impregnable,

unless a thousand mages all attack it at the same time. If we can get the weapon, and warp directly into the Palace...”

“Burnfist!” Shin exclaimed. “This is no time for theatrical heroism!”

“It’s the only way, Shin. If we can get that weapon, we can destroy whatever it is that’s generating the shield. All the power beyond the Pool is of no use to them, unless they have something to direct it.”

“Very well, Burnfist,” Shin said, with a sigh. “Make haste, though.”

“You got it, bro! Over and out,” Burnfist said, and the connection went dead.

“It’s worth a try, she said. Harmon, cannons in position.”

There was a sound of shouts and curses as the weapons were wheeled into place.

“Fire.” The order was given calmly, and a volley of cannonballs flew towards the Palace. Some of them struck its walls, but most of them were repelled, and landed on the ground, causing the earth to shake.

“His shield isn’t perfect, Sir,” Harmon said.

“But once he realizes that, he will reach beyond the Pool,” Shin said. “Reload, and continue. Do not let up.”

That had been a few hours ago. Now, with the Zion forces rapidly running out of ammunition, the man in the cloak – who had been joined by a returned and sullen Ronald Gray – were now standing outside the door of a cell, which contained the Pontiff and Elias. Other cells held other members of the Council of the Evangelium, as well as Moretta, who had resisted them to the last, to the point of bombarding them with every vegetable she could lay her hand on.

“So this is what Itaria comes to,” the mage said, stroking his chin. “A fat old nun, throwing tomatoes at us. Very dignified, Your Holiness.”

“Your insults cannot hurt poor Sister Moretta, who has more integrity in her toe-nail than you have in your rotten body and soul,” Elias said, defiantly. “Kill us, if you will, but the Spirit of the Infinity will endure.”

“Ah, the old lie,” Gray said. “My dear Elias, there are times when the sword is mightier than the spirit. And once those Zion fools run out of ammunition, we will slaughter them, too.”

“We would not have had to wait, if you had succeeded in finding that sword, Gray,” the mage said, angrily. “Beaten by a handful of Galvenian children.”

“Listen, my friend,” Gray said, “in a few moments, I shall be Pontiff, and I’d like you to remember that. Besides, those children were accompanied by armed guards.”

“How interesting,” the man sneered. “Wait. Did you hear that?”

“A low rumble,” Gray said.

“Is your Beast suffering from indigestion?” Pious said, mildly.

“Silence!” Gray said, raising his hand as if to slap his former leader.

“By the great Gharon!” the cloaked man said, cursing as he stepped away from the cell. “Those fools have warped into the Palace.” His staff began to glow red. “Gray, take the guards and encircle the Pontiff’s audience chamber. They must have landed there.”

“Oof!” Aline said, rising to her feet and rubbing her head, as she winced with pain. “You could have been more gentle with that spell, ma’am.”

“I’m afraid I’m not an expert at the Warp,” Sergeant Burnfist said, apologetically. “My friend Freya gave me a crash course, but she’s in Galvenia right now.”

“Where – Oh, this is the Pontiff’s throne room, Henrik,” Bernadette said, smoothing down her hair, and perching her hat on her head firmly. “Goodness, my clothes are a mess. I’m only glad Father Riordan can’t see me now.”

“I don’t see any of the rebels,” Henrik said, “but we’d better be cautious.” He reached for his sword, but suddenly found that the room was surrounded by armed men, including the upper gallery. Those in the gallery had firearms, but those beneath only had swords and knives.

“Be careful what you wish for, boy,” Ronald Gray said, scowling at Henrik. “Men, finish them.”

“You will not,” Amelia said, stoutly, raising the Sword.

“Stand by me, girl,” Sergeant Burnfist said, drawing her sword and casting a wall of fire around Amelia. “That Sword has to remain with us.”

“You naughty boy!” Aline said, angrily, raising her weapon and firing. The flash cartridge exploded before the Reverend Gray’s eyes, and he fell back.

“G – I can’t see!” he screamed. “Men, kill them! Kill them all!”

“Henrik!” Bernadette shouted, as she noticed one of the men charging at him from behind, sword in hand. She cast a shield around him, and the warning was enough for Henrik to turn around and lunge forward, piercing the man’s chest.

“Come on, all of ye!” Merrick said, as his men drew their pistols. “For the Church, and for Galvenia!”

“Aye, aye!” the Lifters replied, as they began to fire. The bullets flew thick and fast, and many of the Lifters fell, though they took far more of the less skilled rebels with them.

“Bernadette!” Henrik said, noticing a man charging on her. He lunged forward, and his sword struck the man in the eye. Henrik stepped back, horrified, as he noticed the blood trickling from the man’s orbit. The man fell to the ground, muttering incoherently.

“Henrik, you...” Bernadette began, then felt someone pull at her robe from behind, knocking her hat off in the process.”

“Well, what do we have here,” the man said, dragging her by her hair. “A sorceress, with the brand of the Beast on her forehead. I think a little exorcism is in order.”

“Don’t you dare touch her!” Henrik said, striking the intruder with a large fist. The man fell back, and Henrik pointed his sword at the man’s throat.

“Well played,” Gray said, as he drew a weapon of his own and fired, striking Henrik in the left side of his chest.

“*Henrik!*” Bernadette screamed, as Henrik fell, clutching his side. “Henrik, no....oh, no....”

“You spawn of the Pits!” Sergeant Burnfist shouted, raising her sword. A yellow beam struck the Reverend Gray, and his clothing caught fire. He screamed, and ran around helplessly.

“Th – it’s quiet in here somehow,” Amelia said. “Bernadette, my sister...”

“Henrik,” Bernadette said, despairingly, as she knelt by his side. “Henrik, say something...”

“You’re the most pleasant thing to look at in this entire battle,” Henrik said, between his teeth, with a strained smile. “Bernadette....” His head fell to one side, and he coughed, drops of blood coming to his mouth.

“Henrik..” Bernadette said, holding his hand and chanting. “Please, Henrik...”

“We’ve got them all,” Merrick said, with satisfaction. “Except that them fools have taken eight of our men with them. They can’t shoot for peanuts.”

The Reverend Gray was still lying on the ground, moaning softly.

“Time to put that fire out, I guess,” Sergeant Burnfist said, picking up a large bottle that contained holy water and pouring it on the Reverend. He spluttered, and continued to whimper with pain.

“He – he’s taken Thomas, and now he’s taken Henrik,” Amelia said, sobbing. “Let me finish him.”

“No, Amelia,” Bernadette said, sadly. “If we do that, we are no better than he is. The mages of the Third Way are our true enemy, as the Sergeant explained on the way. He is merely a tool.”

“I’ll kill them, then,” Amelia said, angrily. “Aline, let’s go get him.”

“Poor Miss Bernadette,” Aline said. She was also kneeling beside Henrik, and moving her black device over the wound in his chest. “And I have good news for you!”

“Good news?” Amelia said, frowning.

“The bullet didn’t touch his heart, Miss Amelia,” Aline said. “This old detector of mine works on other metals besides El Metal, though it’s not very accurate! Now, you’d think a big-hearted young man like Mr. Henrik would’ve been hit, but this is a miracle! It’s injured his left lung, but – Miss Bernadette! Use your Light Healing spell! It’ll hold him together until we get to safety.”

“I – I’m not sure if I can,” Bernadette said, her face pale. “I – I’m afraid...”

“Nonsense, child,” Sister Rosemary said, stepping out from the defensive shield that Bernadette had cast around her, and placing her arm around the younger woman. “You can do it, by Saint Integra. It’s our best chance.”

“I will try,” Bernadette said, more firmly. Placing her hand over his forehead, she bowed her own head and began to chant. Slowly, the blood on Henrik’s lips began to recede, and the wound on his side began to close.

After what seemed like the longest half-hour in her young life, Bernadette finally looked up, and though she was in tears, they were tears of joy.

“Praise the Infinity,” she said. “He’s safe. Henrik – Henrik, can you hear me?”

“Oh, praise Him,” Amelia said, looking at Henrik’s face, to which colour was slowly returning.

“Bernadette?” He reached up to touch her face. “I – I guess you understand why I don’t care much for guns, now.”

Despite herself, Bernadette began to laugh through her tears. “How can you joke at a time like this?”

In reply, Henrik rose to his feet, a little unsteadily, taking her by the hand. “You saved my life,” he said, simply, embracing her.

“I was just returning the favour, dear Henrik,” she replied, holding him closer.

“That’s all very nice,” Sergeant Burnfist said, miming a yawn, “but we need to get a move on. They obviously don’t have too many men in the Palace, and those they have are lousy fighters, but there’s still one very powerful mage to be dealt with.”

“You’re right, of course,” Henrik said, stepping aside slowly, but still holding Bernadette’s hand. “We need to finish him off. Any ideas?”

“It depends, Mr. Spenson. How good are you with a sword?” Sergeant Burnfist said.

“Pretty good, though I say so myself,” Henrik replied.

“Henrik!” Bernadette admonished him. “You’re still wounded, and you can’t...”

“Wait, darling,” Henrik said, slowly. “What exactly do I need to do?”

And Sergeant Burnfist explained. As the group listened to her, they found themselves nodding in agreement. “It might just work, Sergeant,” Sister Rosemary said. “But what if there’s more than one?”

“That’s a risk we have to take, Sister,” Sergeant Burnfist said, her hand going to her sword. “Come, Mr. Spenson, and you too, Bernadette Aquary. Follow me. He’s not too far from here.”

Outside, night was falling.

Lavie’s first day on board the *Empress Sylvania* – while the above events were unfolding in Itaria – was, by comparison, a quiet one. Both Striker and Marlborough made agreeable companions, though they were inclined to bicker at times, and Lavie scarcely felt home-sick for the first few hours. Even the simple food on board ship seemed a novelty to her.

By evening, her mood had changed.

“Mom, Daddy,” she said, looking out across the sea. “I miss you guys. I hope I’m doing the right thing.”

Walking up and down a few times, but still feeling uneasy, she returned below decks, and as she walked back to her room, she passed Agent Striker’s, which was not occupied at the moment.

Now, Lavie had faults as well as good qualities, and curiosity – especially about unusual or beautiful objects – was one of her faults. Her eyes were drawn to an enamelled pocketwatch that rested on the Agent’s table.

Hmm, that’s pretty, she thought. It looks just like one from Daddy’s collection! I wonder how the Agent could afford a thing like that. Perhaps it’s an heirloom, like that lovely watch Ryan’s grandpa left him. Poor Ryan, he was furious when Armin accidentally ruined it! I know the Agent is attached to this watch too, he looks at it quite often!

There was nothing else on the table, except a small Republican-Common dictionary.

He's doing his homework. The idea brought a smile to Lavie's face. *How long ago it seems that I was still in school, studying my own dictionaries and encyclopedias! I wonder if he'd mind if I had a look...*

With a sudden movement, Lavie picked up the watch and flipped it open. The dial was an exquisite piece of work, with long hands that seemed made of Republican ivory, and jewels marking the times at 12, 3, 6 and 9 o'clock. But what made her gasp – and almost drop the watch – was the photograph, or picture that was framed by the upper panel. It showed the face and shoulders of a young woman, one whom Lavie knew all too well.

Ohmygosh, she thought, feeling confused and surprised. *Why on Terra would the Agent have a....No, that's just not possible! But then again....*

She remained frozen to the spot, her eyes fixed on the photograph, for several moments, until a voice broke in on her thoughts.

"May I have the watch back, Miss Lavie?"

"Ohmygosh!" Lavie almost leapt several inches in the air, then turned around to face the Agent, who was looking at her with a kind, slightly sad expression. "Agent Striker, I'm so sorry! I know I shouldn't have...."

"Think nothing of it, Miss," Striker said, holding out his hand. Almost automatically, Lavie returned the watch, which he glanced at before flipping it shut. "It is a lovely piece of work, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Lavie said, blushing a deep red. "Daddy collects things like that, though books are his true love – Oops, that was an unfortunate choice of words, Agent. I'm so sorry."

"You flatter me, Miss Lavie," Striker said. "And don't worry about offending me – I shouldn't leave my personal possessions out in the open, but Marlborough wanted a cocktail, and there's no one to mix them on board except me, I'm afraid. It was sheer carelessness."

"Agent, are you....related, or something?" Lavie said, grasping at a straw.

"Call me Wolfgang if you want, Miss Lavie. No, we are not related, except in the broad sense that all men and women are descendants of Rhue and Kloe, or whatever names they have in Marlborough's latest translation." He chuckled. "My tie to that girl is something like yours to young Eramond's, if I must be brutally honest. But it is a tie that binds, all the same."

"Really?" Lavie said, surprised.

"Well, Intelligence agents are people, too, Miss Lavie," Striker said, ruefully. "And though it may surprise you, we have feelings as well."

“I’m sorry, Agent Striker,” Lavie said, softly. “Is that why you’re here in Galvenia – and in Davenport – so often?”

“Perhaps, insofar as my Director and my Emperor permit me, Miss Lavie,” Striker said. “Why do you ask?”

“Because....” *Poor Agent Wolfgang. He’s in the same situation as I am, but it’s hopeless.* “But you do know....about her, right? That there’s....someone else?” Lavie said, hanging her head.

Striker sighed. “As I said, we are in the same boat, Miss Lavie, in more ways than one.” He laughed. “And I would be a poor Intelligence agent if I didn’t know certain things. But I mustn’t feel sorry for myself. Like you, I feel impelled to do the right thing, even if it brings me no profit. Helping you rescue young Eramond is part of the therapy for me, as the psychologists would say, and if it would make her think well of me in some way, I am content.”

Impulsively, Lavie took hold of the Agent’s hand, and looked at him sympathetically. “Agent Striker....I wish things could have been different, for both of us. And yet, I know that I must extend my hand to Ryan, whether he wants it or not. Is that – unnatural?”

“I don’t know if I’m being foolish, and I don’t know if I’m being wise,” Striker quoted, ironically. ““But it’s something that I must believe in’, as the popular song goes. I’m sure you’ve heard it.”

Lavie smiled. “It’s one of my favourites,” she admitted.

“Well, Miss Lavie, I’m glad you’ll perhaps see me as slightly less calculating and emotionless than you first thought,” Agent Striker said, shaking her hand warmly. “And for what it’s worth, I am glad of your company here. Though we both seek something that is beyond our reach, let us hold out our hands to those we care for. And more importantly, let us be friends.”

“That would be nice, Agent Striker,” Lavie said, with a laugh. “After all, misery does love company.”

“Damn it, he’s not anywhere!” Sergeant Burnfist said, glaring at Sister Rosemary out of sleepless eyes. “We’ve combed the entire palace, we’ve wiped out every renegade in here, our men have sealed all the exits, and the rebels have been pushed back far beyond the Claudia. If I was the commanding officer, I’d just call it a victory and move on out. Shin is ready to do so. But I can’t leave this place as long as that mage is still here! He’s more dangerous than all of them put together.”

“He may have left, using his ‘Warp Cannon’ or whatever the contraption is,” Rosemary said, calmly.

“That’s unlikely,” Sergeant Burnfist said, with a laugh. “He can’t warp anywhere except within Itaria, and he can’t follow me back to Inderness – I ordered my men there to blow it to pieces before I came here. A damaged Warp Cannon can still work for a few days, unless its core is destroyed with fire. When we

were at Inderness, I crippled it, but left it open, knowing that it might come in useful soon. And I was right.”

“You mean he can’t use the one at Inderness now, but he can use the one here?” Amelia said, emerging from the washroom and drying her face on a large towel.

“Quite right, girl. Now, where’s that Aquary friend of yours? I need her,” Burnfist said, sternly.

“Oh, Bernadette’s looking after our sick men!” Aline said, coming in to the room they were now sharing. “Mr. Spenson’s quite well, but I can’t say the same about poor Mr. Gray. He’s not having an easy time of it.”

“Serves him right,” the Sergeant growled. “I have no pity for the likes of him. He betrayed his ruler, and worse than that, he made an alliance with the Third Way. He deserves every bit of the frying I gave him, and if he can’t take it like a man, well, cry me an ocean.”

“Aline, could you please come here?” Bernadette said, peeping in from the next room. She wore an old apron of Sister Moretta’s over her blue gown, and she looked tired and distressed.

“Goodness, Miss Bernadette,” Aline said in alarm, “you look terrible. Is Mr. Henrik all right?”

Bernadette brightened. “Dear Henrik’s all right,” she said, “and to the Infinity be the glory. But it’s Father Gray I’m worried about. I’ve used my best spells, and his burns have healed. He says he feels no pain, but he seems – tormented.”

“You mean his aura – oops, I meant his soul – is sick? That’s a job for a priest,” Aline said, shaking her head. “Call the pontiff, and ask him to say ‘Ego To Dissolvo’ or whatever the formula is.”

“Aline!” Rosemary said, indignantly. “You know perfectly well what the formula of forgiveness is, and there’s no need to make fun of it!”

“He refuses to see the Pontiff, or any of the priests here,” Bernadette said, sadly. “He says they....bring horrible visions to him. His Holiness tried to visit him early in the morning, but he screamed so much that I had to ask him to go.”

“Ask him to tell us where his master’s gone, you blue-haired child,” Sergeant Burnfist said, gruffly, but affectionately. “Perhaps that will ease his conscience.”

There was the sound of a scuffle in the next room, and Bernadette and Aline rushed back into it.

Henrik had risen from his bed, and was holding Gray in a firm grip. “He tried to jump out of the window,” he said, soberly, “and as much as I would like to be indifferent, I couldn’t let him. We’d better tie him down, in case he does anything foolish.”

“Dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, as the two of them replaced Gray in his bed, and secured his hands and feet with spare blankets. She turned to fetch a wet towel, to lower his fever, when he suddenly spoke.

“Girl, come here,” he said, feebly. “I knew you were trouble since....since that day in King’s College.”

“I promise you, Father,” Bernadette said gravely, “that it was never my intention to trouble you, though, to be quite honest, you were asking for it that day.”

Gray glared at her, but then his expression grew troubled again. “Gharon....I can’t see properly, girl,” he moaned. “Are my eyes burned?”

“They seem as well as mine, Father,” Bernadette said.

“And you, boy,” he said, turning to face Henrik, who was pulling his jacket on. “You admired Mazarus, didn’t you? How does it make you feel to know that my – my ally planned his death?”

“Father, you are not responsible for the actions of your ally, unless you actively conspired with him,” Henrik said. “You are a priest of the Church of Infinity, and I find it hard to believe that you would have stooped so low.”

“*Corrupti sunt....Socius, too....I begged him to spare Socius, to leave him to the judgement of the Infinity....But he never listened.....and in the end, I agreed....Damnation, damnation. Pious was right. I am....corrupted....*”

Henrik glared at him. “You mean the women who murdered the Prime Minister were...yours?” he said, hotly. “But why? What did Socius do to you?”

“He offended me, boy.....me and my certainties....my beliefs.....my knowledge that I had the truth....and, to serve that truth, I have now given myself over to a lie. Socius.....may find pity, but not me.....Oh, Gharon, show me no more....”

“We need an exorcist, Bernadette,” Henrik said, looking out of the window. “He’s....possessed.”

“The pit....that’s where he is, boy. The pit. Drawing power...Find him. Make him pay.....let me not be thrown into the Pits in vain,” Gray said, in a pleading tone, grasping Henrik’s hand. “Forgive me, boy.”

“I am obliged to,” Henrik said, softening a little. “What pit...”

“Summon....Girl, are you still there? I know you....I know I took advantage of you to wound the boy...”

“Father Gray,” Bernadette said, sitting down at his bedside, and looking at his haunted eyes with her own clear ones, “you have done much evil. People have suffered because of you, including the man I love, and the friend who has been like a sister to me. You cannot bring the dead back to life, but for what it’s worth, you have my forgiveness, as you have Henrik’s. By telling us where to find the enemy, you can make amends.”

“Pious...Pious was right....” Gray repeated, releasing Henrik’s hand and grabbing Bernadette’s, convulsively. “Girl, tell me your name, and pray for my soul. The summoning pit.....I be.....that’s where he is...”

“My name is Bernadette, Father,” she said, looking at him kindly. “Which summoning pit?”

Gray’s entire body jerked and shuddered for several moments, and Henrik flinched. When he spoke again, it was with a tremendous effort.

“Bernadette.....pray....for me....”

It seemed to her, as she looked at his face, that she was witnessing a battle for the man’s soul. After a few minutes’ struggle, his grip loosened, and he looked at her with a blank, almost childlike smile.

“Yes, I will wait, Heavenly Father.....as long as you wish.....until the end of time....girl....find...the Way....”

Bernadette leaned forward, but Father Gray was no more, and she quietly slipped her hand out of his. She remained bowed in prayer for some time, then rose.

“I think....he was all right, in the end,” she said, tears coming to her eyes, as Henrik held her to his side. “May the Infinity have mercy on his soul, poor, misguided man.”

Henrik nodded briefly. “We need to find the summoning pit,” he said. “I know there were summoning pits in Janwen and Estrana, and archaeologists have found others. But where would there be one in Itaria, of all places?”

“Arr, I can help ye with that, my lad,” Merrick said, walking into the room and surveying the remains of Father Grey with an inscrutable expression. “There’s only ever been one pit in Itaria, and that belonged to the old Lifter’s Guild, in the days when it went rotten.”

“You must be right,” Bernadette said. “He did say ‘I be’...perhaps he was trying to use the Guild’s phrase.”

“That makes perfect sense, my love,” Henrik said, smiling at her. “Where can I find it, Mr. Merrick?”

“Oh, it’s buried under ruins, son. The old memorial to Emperor Johan was where the Guild had its headquarters, but it was razed to the ground in 157, and it’s a rubbish dump now, because it’s considered cursed.

“He may have warped there,” Bernadette said, frowning.

“Great,” Henrik groaned. “How do we excavate an old junkyard now? It’ll take weeks!”

Sergeant Burnfist suddenly appeared at the door, with a large grin on her face.

“Not with me on your side, son,” she said, confidently. “Come, Merrick, lead me to this pit, and may the Omega Wave reveal the truth.”

“Goody! A real archeological expedition!” Aline said, clapping her hands. “And my Aura Detector will certainly trace that sword or rod he’s using! Off we go!”

“Heaven help us,” Burnfist said, wryly, as they made preparations to leave.

At precisely that moment, in the town of Davenport, Sigmund was sitting at his desk, a wet towel wrapped around his head, and reading two letters. It was hard for him to say which of them pained him the more.

The first was in a familiar hand, and he had trouble composing himself long enough to finish reading it.

Dearest Daddy,

I’m leaving with Agent Striker and his men to find Ryan at Al-Mu’afa. I know you didn’t want me to go, Daddy – but this is important to me, more important than you’d ever know. I simply can’t stay back here at home, while Ryan is locked in a cell, wounded and maybe even ill. Ever since that day I met the Princess in the park, and then met Gran a week later, I’ve known that someday, I’d have to help Ryan. I didn’t know when or how, but my time has come, and I have to try. I know you’ll be angry, but try to understand, and remember that I’m always, always,

*Your loving daughter,
Lavie*

Sigmund scowled at the mention of Anne Lancaster, but the allusion to the Princess mystified him, and he did not know what to make of it. A tear (or, perhaps, a drop of water) had fallen on the last line, blurring the word ‘daughter’ slightly, and he rapidly held the letter away to avoid spoiling it further himself.

He felt neither anger not disappointment; he felt as if this had been fated to happen, somehow – as if he were paying the price for things that had happened long ago.

I couldn’t protect her, he thought, and I couldn’t protect Lavie. It’s – amusing, in a horrible way. Perhaps that man, Marlborough, was right. The Infinity is nothing but a cosmic jokester, and right now, I’m a character in his latest black comedy.

The second, though distressing in a different way, left him with no such feelings – instead, it filled him with an urge to punch the author in the face, if he were unfortunate enough to be present at that moment. It was written in a scrawl that Sigmund Regale knew all too well, and this is what it said:

Regale,

Be reasonable. You know very well that I have ways of making you pay, even here. Did you think you could ignore me? Now stop playing around, and come to my help. There are things that I'm sure you do not want anyone to know – not your lovely wife, nor your daughter, nor the shareholders of Regale Enterprises. And certainly not the Press. Think carefully, my friend.

There was no signature, but none was necessary.

Damn him, Sigmund thought, as visions of his old shotgun danced in his head. I should just go to the police. He's held this over my head for years, but what he doesn't realize is that now, he's in a worse position than I am. Let him publish, and let him damn himself.

An idea suddenly came to him, but he dismissed it as being foolish.

Emily will already be terribly hurt over Lavie's leaving, though she doesn't show it. The Lancaster breeding will always tell. If I couldn't tell her all these years, how could I tell her now? And yet – perhaps it's the best way. She always understood. She was the only one who understood, at the beginning.

An image of Lavie as a child came to his mind. She was sitting on his knee – she must have been about eight or nine – and looking at him, wide-eyed and smiling.

"Daddy," she said, lightly, "is it true that you're very rich?"

"Why, Lavie," he'd said. "Who told you that?"

"Cathy and Jaye, from school," Lavie said. "They liked my new dress, and said I had it because my Daddy was a rich man!"

"Oh, Lavie," Sigmund said, stroking her head. "I suppose that's true, if you count dollars. But there are some things that money can't buy."

"Really, Daddy?" Lavie said, curiously, leaning against the front of his blazer. "What kinds of things?"

"You, for starters," Sigmund said, affectionately. "I couldn't walk up to a shop and say: 'Please find me a wonderful little girl just like Lavie', even if I paid them millions of dollars."

"Thank you, Daddy," Lavie said, laughing. "And what else?"

"My, you are in an inquisitive mood today, my daughter," Sigmund said, seating her more comfortably on his lap. "Well, your mother."

"Mom?" Lavie said, clapping her hands. "Aw, come on, Daddy, you're just being nice to us here! And I remember what 'inquisitive' means, too, because you told me last week!"

“How clever of you, Lavie. Would you like to hear a story?”

“I love stories, Daddy! Except that the ones Ryan tells me are always about fighting. I don’t like fighting – not that much, though I like Ryan,” she said, loyally.

“Well, a long time ago, I wasn’t very rich at all, Lavie. I had some money which was given to me by my father, but I didn’t know what to do with it. I had ideas, of course – investments, enterprises. I was going to put Davenport on the map, and make it famous. I was going to collect beautiful things. But the other people I talked to – the other business people – thought I was being silly. They told me to forget about all that, and do something safer.”

“I know how that feels, Daddy,” Lavie said, sympathetically. “Last week, I told Ryan that we should get married, and he said it was a silly idea! Do you think it’s silly, Daddy?”

Sigmund laughed out loud. “Lavie, my daughter, you’re growing up a little too fast for my liking. Now, I’m not saying it’s silly – Ryan’s a nice boy, of course – but I’m not letting him take you away from me so soon. Do you hear me, young lady?”

“Sure, Daddy!” Lavie replied. “Maybe I’ll wait till next year!” She laughed in turn.

“Anyway, there was only one person who thought my idea wasn’t silly – and that’s what kept me going. I kept on meeting other businessmen. I invested. We started a company, then another one. Davenport began to grow. I was able to help some of my other friends, like Ryan’s daddy. And before I knew it, people were looking at me and calling me a rich man. But it wouldn’t have been possible if that one person hadn’t stayed with me, and encouraged me.”

“And was that your Daddy?” Lavie asked.

“Heavens, no, Lavie,” Sigmund said, shaking his head. “It was your mother. Emily was perhaps the only person, besides me, who believed that Regale Enterprises would work. And because she believed in me, I tried. I worked hard, Lavie. I had the money, but I would have given it all up if she hadn’t convinced me to take a chance. And it worked. That’s what I mean by things that money can’t buy. No amount of money could have bought me someone like Emily, or someone like you. Do you understand, Lavie?”

“I like this story, Daddy,” Lavie said, looking up at him lovingly. “Tell me another one, please...”

With a start, Sigmund returned to the second letter, and calmly tore it into pieces, which he threw into the fire.

Strange how we remember things at different times, he thought. And I was right. Ryan has taken her away from me, too soon. Oh, too soon. It was my fault. I almost drove her away from me – and Emily as well – and it took that trip to Bravo to start making things right again. And now she’s gone. She’s gone...

“Sigmund?” The gentle voice broke in on his thoughts, and Emily was at his elbow, with a cup of tea in her hand. “Sigmund, are you all right?”

Sigmund laughed shortly. “As well as I can be, given the circumstances, Emily,” he said, taking the cup of tea with an unsteady hand. “Thank you. No, I know what you’re going to ask me, Emily, and no – I’m not angry with Lavie, strangely. I’m just....numb. I feel like I’m the punchline of a joke, and the Infinity particularly enjoyed telling it, somehow. When I think of my plans...”

“Plans?” Emily said, shaking her head. “Sigmund....our daughter’s gone.”

“Gone to follow her destiny, from what she writes,” Sigmund said, sadly, as he drank his tea. “This cursed war – it’s taken Ryan from his parents, and now Lavie...”

“And Henrik Spenson, and Bernadette,” Emily said, softly. “All our lives, we worked hard to protect our children, and now they’re away, protecting *us*. It’s strange.”

“Bernadette....” Sigmund began. “Look here, Emily. Would you mind if I told you something? It probably won’t make you think too highly of me, but I doubt that’s an issue anyhow, not after the way I behaved towards Anne...”

“Sigmund,” Emily said, kindly, sitting opposite him and placing her hand on his shoulder, “believe me when I say that I still think highly of you, despite what happened between you and Mother. Looking back, I see that you must have had your reasons. I was upset for Lavender more than for myself, and Mother’s a tough woman anyway. If there’s something on your mind, tell me.”

“It’s a long story, Emily,” Sigmund said, wearily, “and one that I should have told you long ago. But I think I’m a coward in more ways than one, and this is one of them.”

Emily looked at him patiently, but said nothing.

“I’m sure you remember that, when we married, I had no living relatives, except Vincent and my father, who was already ill and dying, and whom we hardly met. I never mentioned my sister, except to tell you that she’d died young in an accident, and that Father didn’t want any of us to talk about it.”

“I remember, Sigmund,” Emily said.

Sigmund reached into his pocket, and drew a small photograph out of it. “This is the only picture I have of her,” he said, unable to look her in the eye. “I’d like you to look at it.”

Emily took the picture from him silently, looked at it, then felt her hand go limp with the surprise. Except for the slightly thinner cheeks and the shorter hair, it was a picture of Lavie that was smiling back at her, and the girl was wearing the same pendant that Sigmund had given Lavie on her birthday.

“Good heavens, Sigmund,” Emily said. “She looks just like...”

“Don’t say it, Emily – don’t say it,” Sigmund said, his hand going to his forehead. “That was my sister, Victoria. Our mother died a little while after she was born, and I was the one she looked up to – her big brother. Father never had much time for any of us – he was too busy making his sordid little deals, and hoarding his money – and it was me she’d come to, whenever she had a little problem of her own. She was just like Lavie, Emily – cheerful, brave, and even able to charm my father on occasions. We both loved her very much – Vincent and I.”

“Father had clear plans for all of us. I was to go to University and become a scholar. Vincent would carry on the family business. And Victoria would marry a rich man. I’m glad to say that none of those plans ended up coming to fruition. Vincent didn’t want to be a miserly broker and money-lender, and he had already met Agatha and developed a love of potions and trinkets. I wanted to be a speculator and an investor, a captain of industry. And Victoria – like Lavie – fell in love. I was overjoyed for her, because he was a good man, but most of all, because he wasn’t at all the kind of man Father had in mind. He was young, reasonably good-looking – though I say so myself – and he was training to be a doctor. He was of Zioneese origin, but a citizen of Galvenia. His name was Julian – Julian Ellis, from Hartridge.”

“I’ve never heard of him,” Emily said, “and yet I think I see where this is leading.”

“Father was furious. He told Victoria she’d never have a penny from him, but she didn’t care – besides, by that time, I’d already made a little money of my own, speculating on antiques. Julian genuinely liked me, and I admired him – I promoted their little romance as much as I could, and was often the one who’d take the bumps from Father, who was beginning to fall ill at the time. They announced their engagement, and I gave them my blessing. Then it happened.”

“Victoria and her fiancé went riding one day, in the woods near Hartridge. They’d done so hundreds of times, and it was a fine day. There was no reason why anything should have gone wrong. Besides, she was a fine horsewoman – even a born noble like your mother would have granted her that. But, as it happened, a pair of wolves attacked them that day. Fortunately, Julian had a gun with him, and shot one of them, but the second of them attacked Victoria’s horse, and she was – thrown from her seat. Filthy horses. To this day, I can’t think of horses without thinking of her. Her neck was broken. Julian carried her all the way back to our home – we had a much smaller house in those days, Emily – and I’ll never forget the day I opened the door to find him carrying her in his arms. She was still alive, but she died soon after they reached here. She did get to see me and recognize me before....” He could not go on, and his head sank forward.

“Sigmund, I’m so sorry,” Emily said, reaching out and touching his head. “Is that why you didn’t want Lavie to go? Were you afraid that...”

“That’s not the whole story, Emily,” Sigmund said, bitterly. “Father was furious, and he and Julian would have come to blows if I hadn’t stood between them. With a heavy heart, I began to make the funeral arrangements, since Father would have nothing to do with them. However, that night, I overheard a conversation between my father and one of the shady agents who worked for him. He wanted this man to find a group of local hoodlums, and attack Julian in retaliation for causing his daughter’s death.”

“Merciful heavens!” Emily exclaimed.

“I was horrified. I ran for my shotgun, and tried to reach Hartridge and warn Julian, but by the time I arrived there, it was too late. Julian had already been assaulted, and he was in the infirmary. Ashamed of my father, I paid for his care. He was grateful, but made me promise never to see him again, or to speak of Victoria to him.”

“However, he soon changed his mind – he was still furious with my father, though he was willing to forgive me. A few weeks later, he went straight to the magistrate, and made a formal complaint against my father, his agent, and his hired thugs. The magistrate, who was young and looking to build his reputation, was inclined to view the whole matter very seriously indeed. He decided to set up a panel to investigate not just the assault on Julian, but other offences that my father and that particular agent might have committed. One of the members of that panel was a well-known lawyer – Sir Gerald Lancaster.”

“Father?” Emily said, shocked.

“Yes, Emily. It was at that time that I had met you, and had begun to believe that things were looking up for me, after losing Victoria. I couldn’t stand the thought of his learning about it – or, let me be honest, of *your* learning what kind of man my father was. I didn’t want to lose you, Emily.”

“Sigmund...” Emily said, gently.

“My father was sick, and begged me to spare him the ordeal of a trial. So, on the agent’s advice, I gathered together as much as I possibly could, and met the magistrate. He was all too eager to accept a bribe, and he dissolved the panel, saying that he’d found that his witnesses were unreliable, and that there was no truth in the matter. Sir Gerald, who hadn’t yet reached Hartridge, was told that his services were not required, and he stayed home, ignorant of the true story. Julian was furious. He wrote me an indignant letter, asking me how much blood-money I had paid, and left Hartridge to join the Army. I never heard of him again. He had a sister, who was a friend of Victoria’s, but whom I didn’t know well. I let the matter drop, and – I married you, and was happy, Emily. I almost fooled myself into believing that I had outraced the past.”

“A few years later, after Lavie was born, I thought I’d make amends of a sort, by tracing his sister, and helping her if she was in need. However, I learned that she’d married an older man, and was now living in Darington, which was under dispute at the time. Again, I just let the matter drop, thinking that I would only make things worse by interfering.”

“But Sigmund,” Emily said, a little confused, “though you *could* have done much better, I – why didn’t you tell me? Sigmund, we always helped each other, remember? When we had our troubles, I was there for you, and you for me. Why didn’t you just *tell* me?”

"I'm sorry, Emily," Sigmund said, rather lamely. "The one joker in the pack I hadn't counted on wasn't Julian, or his sister – it was the agent. That bloody bandit waited till I had made my fortune, and then he crept back into the picture."

"Sigmund! Such language," Emily said, patting his arm.

"It's what he is, Emily," Sigmund said, angrily. "He threatened to publicize the story in the media, or to tell you, or my shareholders, or the Board of Directors. And somehow, he had the documents to prove it. By then, I was a public figure of sorts, and had already ruffled enough feathers. A scandal, even an old one, would have meant the end of Regale Enterprises – worse, it would mean losing your esteem, and Lavie's esteem. How could I face my daughter, telling her that my own father was involved with bandits, and that I'd bribed a Galvenian judge? For years, that blasted man has made me pay. Oh, not open blackmail – a commission here, a favourable deal or a tip there, a word in the right ear when he was in dire straits. And today, he has the unmitigated gall to write to me from prison, asking me for help. I could strangle him if he were here."

"Good – heavens, Sigmund!" Emily exclaimed. "You don't mean – is it..."

"Yes, Emily," Sigmund said, shaking his head, the hesitation from his voice gone. "Alex bloody Robertson. That blood-sucking leech has made me pay, for the last ten years."

"Well, he can't harm you now, Sigmund," Emily replied, consolingly. "Who would listen to confidences from a jail-bird and a suspected traitor?"

"But that's not all, Emily," Sigmund went on, speaking quickly and almost breathlessly. "As Lavie grew up, I was frightened."

"Frightened?"

"Frightened by her resemblance to Victoria – oh, not just her face, you Lancasters have a long line of beautiful women, too," Sigmund said, with a wan smile. "I mean her spirit, her pluck, her joyousness – I didn't want her to end up the way Victoria did. I wanted to protect her. So I tried to make her read my – boring books, as she called them. I tried to make her dour and dull, as I had become, thanks to that infernal Robertson. I resented her grandmother, who was treating her the way I'd treated Victoria. I thought it would end up badly. I pushed Anne away, and I almost pushed you away too, Emily....and, in time, I would have pushed Lavie away as well. We humans aren't rational creatures, you know..."

"Poor Sigmund," Emily said, rising and putting her arms around him. "Now listen to me, dear. Frankly, what you've done isn't too different from what hundreds of people – even nobles – have done in this country, and while I'm not proud of you, you've been through Hell for long enough. If your sister were still alive, I'm sure that's what she would say."

"One last thing, Emily," Sigmund said, as he leaned against her arm, and smiled. "Last year, I met Julian's last surviving relative."

“Really?” Emily said, curiously. “Was she still in Hartridge, or in Darington?”

“She was in our home on more than one occasion, Emily,” Sigmund said, looking fondly at his wife, and wishing he had told her the truth far earlier. “You liked her – we all did, especially our Lavie. You might remember her. Eyes as blue as Julian’s, an old-fashioned dress, a kind face and a lovely voice – not to forget an uncanny liking for my boring old books. I’d like to think that Victoria would have been very proud of her niece, if only she’d lived.”

“*Sigmund!*” Emily exclaimed, but this time, her tone was clearly indicative of pleasure. “You mean...Bernadette?”

“Yes, dear,” Sigmund said. “I don’t know how much her mother has told her, but I – knew I had a chance to make amends, Emily. When that girl returns from Itaria – and I hope she will, safe and sound – I shall ask her, and tell her the story. She’s a fine young lady, and I’m sure she’ll take it as well as you did. And I hope that she will continue to accept my friendship and protection, even after she learns the truth.”

“Good heavens, that almost makes her *our* niece, Sigmund,” Emily said, happily. “And Lavie’s cousin. Now don’t fret, dear. Your sister is gone, and it’s right that you should still mourn her. But Lavie is different, just as Bernadette is different from her uncle Julian. And I know that they’ll both come back safely, Sigmund. I know it.”

“Thank you, Emily,” Sigmund said, rising to embrace her. “You’ve always known – how to make me keep believing, even after all these years. Thank you.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, Sigmund,” Emily said, a light blush coming to her cheeks.

And for a moment, they could almost believe that Lavie – and Bernadette – would be returned to them shortly, and that things would be as they were before, only better.

“I wonder how the Regales are doing,” Bernadette said, absently, as she walked down what seemed to be the thousandth tunnel in Itaria. “They’ve been true friends to me, Henrik, even though I was a complete stranger when we first met. I hope Lavie isn’t too lonely, now that all of us are scattered across the world.”

“Well, the Regales are nice people, darling,” Henrik said, as he knocked aside a flimsy wooden partition with his sword, “and frankly, you’re hard to *dislike*. Except by my father, the genius.”

“Oh, Henrik, you shouldn’t mock your father like that,” Bernadette said, with a laugh. “He’s entitled to his views, even if they’re not very pleasant ones.”

“That junkyard wasn’t hard at all to clear,” Sergeant Burnfist said. “Up the Zion! Now, do you understand what I’ve told you, Amelia?”

“Yes, Sergeant,” Amelia said, nodding obediently. “This calm is quite unnerving, though.”

“It’s almost as if the rebels lost their spirit, the minute Legrand was captured and Gray died,” Sister Rosemary said. “If a work is not from the Infinity, it cannot endure.”

“Tell that to the Varald Directorate, *grande soeur*,” Aline said, rather crossly, removing a pebble from her shoe. “Or to the Cult of the Deity. In this case, the rebels were just outgunned and out-manoeuvred by the Zion!”

“You sound unhappy, Aline,” Bernadette said, kindly. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s this detector of mine,” Aline said, pointing to the screen. “I’m detecting plenty of auras, but the waves are the wrong way.”

“The wrong way? Maybe you’re holding yer machine upside-down, Miss,” Merrick suggested.

“That is *not* funny, Mr. Merrick,” Aline protested. “Here I am, pointing out a violation of the laws of nature, and is that all you can suggest?”

“A violation?” Henrik said, interested. “What do you mean, Aline?”

“Oh, let me explain!” Aline said, cheerfully. “You see, every person who lives makes a positive impression on this world – I don’t mean that we’re all good, but we all make a mark. We all change the nature of things, just by behaving in a particular way. Even when we plan something, we create the potential for a change, and auras contain frozen potentials. For example, if Rosemary had been thinking of gorging herself on Italian ice-cream, or dancing in front of the Pontiff in a polka-dotted dress...”

“Aline, my sister,” Rosemary said, frowning, “do be quiet.”

“I’m talking to Mr. Henrik, sister, not to you,” Aline said, with a chuckle. “Anyway, those potential changes would be part of an aura, and if the sword killed her at that moment – don’t grumble, *grande soeur*, it’s just an illustration! – then those changes would be recorded, as potential modifications of the fabric of reality. Those are what generate the waves. The closer we are to the recording instrument, the bigger are the modifications we can detect. I’m trying to use layman’s terms, but that’s pretty close!” She beamed.

“So what’s wrong?” Henrik asked.

“An aura is always an upward wave, or a series of them, based on what was on the victim’s mind when the sword got him,” Aline went on. “However, I’m now recording only downward waves. Those are – I can’t express it exactly, but those are *negative* modifications of reality. Whatever that might mean. It’s puzzling! And I don’t like puzzles that I can’t solve.”

“They could be something else,” Bernadette suggested. “Perhaps they’re modifications of another reality, or another world.”

“Another world?” Aline said. “Even if there are other worlds in the sky, as the astronomers say, we’re too far away to pick up auras from them!”

“But a summoning pit is a place where one can – if you believe the Holy Book – contact demons, and demons don’t belong to the ordinary world,” Bernadette went on. “You could be recording, not the minds or the auras of men, but....”

“Then we’re very close,” Amelia said.

“Another idea occurred to me, Aline,” Henrik said. “See if you can find a spot where you can record *both* kinds of waves. That would mean that we’d found both the sword – or staff – that that mage is using, *and* the pit. We’d be sure of our destination.”

“It’s not that easy, Mr. Henrik,” Aline said, shaking her head. “Remember, we’re already carrying a sword full of Auras, and we can’t drop it. We’ll have to....Good heavens!”

“What happened?” Amelia said, lowering the sword, whose light was serving the purpose of a lantern for her.

“It’s off the charts again, in both directions,” Aline said. “We’re...very close! Hurray!” She jumped up – and found the ground giving way beneath her.

“Help me, Mr. Henrik!” she pleaded.

“Oof, here you go,” Henrik said, helping her out of the hole that she found herself in. “Looks like we’ll have to go deeper.”

“I don’t like the look of that,” Sister Rosemary said, pointing to a plume of smoke that was rising from the newly-formed hole, “but it’s a further sign.”

“Mr. Spenson,” Sergeant Burnfist said, “I don’t really need to ask, but remember, you’ve been wounded, so play it safe. Are you ready?”

“Yes, I am,” Henrik said, firmly. “We have to end this, or Itaria will still be in danger, even if the rebellion has been largely quelled.”

“What’s strange is that the shield around the Palace fell soon after Grey died,” Merrick said. “D’ye think *he* was the one keeping it up?”

“I have heard of collaborative spells, old-timer,” Sergeant Burnfist said, “but those require two or more mages. Unless...no, that’s not possible. Let’s move in.”

They climbed down cautiously, and moved further into the depths of the tunnel, the smoke around them growing thicker.

“It almost smells like incense,” Bernadette said, with a smile. “Perhaps there’s a chapel down here, too.”

“A demonic chapel?” Sister Rosemary said, looking doubtful. “You’re too optimistic, Bernadette.”

“Her optimism saved my life – and quite possibly Ronald Gray’s soul – so I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad quality, Sister,” Henrik said, proudly.

“Listen,” Amelia said. “Someone’s groaning.”

“Flaming lands, just what we needed!” Burnfist said, irritably. “Another stupid creature. You don’t know how many of those frogs we had to fight on our way to you.”

“It could be someone who’s held prisoner,” Bernadette said, as the groans grew louder. “We need to help them.”

“Be careful, Miss,” Merrick said. “It could be a trap.”

“The Aura Detector isn’t picking up anything demonic,” Aline said, with a smile. “Let’s go ahead!”

“I’m feeling sleepy,” Henrik said, stifling a yawn.

“Dear Henrik,” Bernadette said affectionately, as she patted him on the back. “Me too, truth be told. We all need rest, but we can rest only once we’ve found that man.”

They had travelled only a short distance, when they came across a small room that was decorated like a chapel, except that there was no altar. A large censer stood in one corner, out of which thick, pleasant-smelling fumes emerged. In one corner of the room was an old man in a white robe, whose sunken cheeks and dry lips spoke of the treatment he had endured. He was chained to one of the benches in the room, and it seemed as if he were struggling to stay awake.

“Stand back!” he said, in a gruff but kind voice, which was commanding despite its feebleness. “Those fumes will weaken you if you stand here too long.”

“I see,” Sergeant Burnfist said, and with a quick motion, she drew her sword, and the entire censer was surrounded by a yellow wall. “Rather an old trick, actually.” She snorted. “I didn’t know you grew Paramekia Roots in Itaria.”

“Paramekia Roots?” Bernadette exclaimed. “Aren’t they used for healing head injuries?”

“Yes, but if they’re cursed, they make you dopey,” Burnfist explained. “Now who are you, old man?”

The man began to revive a little, but still spoke slowly. "My name is Pierre Legrand, and not long ago, I was Archbishop of the See of Marcopolis. How long ago it seems. And if it is not impolite to ask, who are you, young lady?"

"Hmph! I'm Sergeant Rebecca Burnfist of the Zion Special Forces, and I'll trouble you to remember that," she replied, impatiently.

"Archbishop Legrand?" Bernadette said, wonderingly. "But – weren't you captured by the Zion Army just yesterday?"

The cleric's expression darkened. "So he did it, after all. The foul swine! Offspring of a Republican vulture! Pardon my language, Miss. I didn't believe it was possible, but he's done it. Infinity save us all."

"Who?" Henrik asked, as he broke the man's chain with his sword

"A disciple of that infernal man, Gharon," Legrand replied. "Oh, we knew about the conjurations; we just didn't believe they were still possible, not in Itaria. Even when they captured me, and cast the spell in front of me, I laughed at them, saying that to change a person's appearance was the stuff of legends...."

"Changing your appearance?" Aline said, disbelievingly. "That sounds like a fairy tale, all right! Even your Book of Saints wouldn't go that far, *grande soeur!*"

"I must admit it's hard to believe, despite the old legends," Sister Rosemary admitted.

"Nonetheless, it's what he did," Legrand said, dryly. "Whoever's been passing himself off as me in the Pontiff's residence must have been creating a world of trouble, while I lay here, and that scoundrel, Gharon...."

"Gharon?" Amelia said, nervously. "Isn't Gharon....a demon from the *Book of Origins*?"

"No, he's a man, a mage to be precise, who has chosen to name himself after his master," Legrand said, shaking his head. "I would wring his neck if I could, but he's grown too powerful. The rebellion in Itaria was just a cover for his activities – I'm sure he's thrown his lapdog, Gray, to the demons by now, if I know him well. It's bad enough that he's starved me and poisoned me with those fumes, but his gloating is more than I can take, though I'm a patient man."

"Father Grey is dead, Your Grace," Bernadette said, softly. "But what do you mean when you say that the rebellion was a cover?"

"I'm sorry, young lady, could you – help me up?" Legrand said, struggling to his feet, as Henrik and Bernadette assisted him. He sat down on one of the benches, while she measured his pulse.

"Here, have a pull o'this, Father," Merrick said, handing him a flask. "Good Lorean brandy, that's what ye need."

“I must say I wouldn’t mind,” Legrand said, smiling as he sipped the contents of the proffered flask before returning it to its owner. “Ah, that’s much better. Young lady,” he said, looking at Amelia, “would that be the Sword of Regret you’re holding?”

“It is,” she said, holding it out.

“Then there is hope,” he said, with a sigh of relief. “It would have been almost impossible to defeat that man without it, but that’s not the case now.”

“If you don’t mind, Monsieur Legrand,” Aline said, frowning, “could you explain what’s happening here? My poor little head is starting to spin!”

“It’s simple, Miss,” Legrand said. “The Third Way is among us again, as it was in the day of Inderness.”

“The Third Way...” Bernadette shivered. “You mean the followers of Samath?”

“Not quite, Miss. They no longer call themselves that, but that’s what they are. A group of dark mages, who want to rule Terra with the help of their powers. There are many of them, most of whom are greedy and incompetent. But there is a small group of them whom we all have cause to fear.” He paused, and Bernadette gave him a drink of water. “I learned of this last year, in the Republic, when many of the men in my parish began to fall ill with mysterious sicknesses. Investigating the matter further, I uncovered something very ugly – a group of mages who were experimenting with all sorts of spells, which I wouldn’t want to discuss in front of you children. Fortunately, we found him and questioned him, before handing him over to the Republican authorities, who had him stoned. But before he died, he gloated that there were four more like him, in all the countries of Terra, and a fifth who would appear when the time was right.”

“Four?” Sergeant Burnfist said. “Maybe one of them was that circus clown in Inderness. My men took him down when they captured the fortress, and even with twelve of my mages, it was hard going.”

“So they’ve appeared in Zion, too,” Legrand said, sadly. “The one in the Republic was weak, but yours was stronger, Sergeant. Gharon is now beneath us, and he grows more powerful with each passing day. If what that reprobate told us was true, there are two more – one in Galvenia, and one in the Varald Directorate.”

“And the fifth?” Amelia whispered.

“Ah, by that time, he was suffering from the effects of too many Moon Herbs – my men were novices, and tried to loosen his tongue with them – and he was raving. He said the fifth would appear at the new Janwen.”

“The new Janwen?” Henrik said. “I thought Janwen had burned to the ground, and besides, the best scholars say it’s near the Zion-Galvenia border.”

"I didn't understand either, my son," Legrand replied. "Goodness, I'm hungry. That villain only allows me two bowls of soup a day, and I'm sure he drugs them, too."

"Why does he hold you prisoner?" Bernadette asked.

"Because of his spell, Miss. The man who is impersonating me, the disciple of Gharon, will lose my appearance if I appear in the same place as him – don't ask me for the science behind it – and the transformation would be enough to kill him. Once Gharon has drawn sufficient power from here, he will kill me, too."

"Anyway, Monsieur, say thank you to Aunt Aline, who always has a sandwich handy!" Aline said, cheerfully, taking a cellophane-wrapped packet out of her lab coat. "Don't forget to say Grace before your meal, though, Bishop."

"Very amusing, Miss Aline," Legrand said, with a laugh, as he made short work of the sandwich. He closed his eyes for a few moments, a contented expression on his face, before he spoke again.

"As soon as I learned of this, I informed the Pontiff, who recommended caution. But I didn't want to be cautious, especially after I learned of other things from my friends in Galvenia – Father Joaquim, in particular. When I approached the Pontiff a second time, he ordered me to investigate these matters secretly, and he gave the same instructions to Joaquim. He also asked me to write privately, in my own name – but with his seal – to Prince Wilhelm of Zion, who was co-regent with Charlemagne, and whose tutor had been one of ours. Wilhelm took the matter very seriously indeed – but, unfortunately, they seem to have got to him first."

"You mean it *wasn't* the Varald?" Burnfist thundered. "Good Lord, those imbeciles have dragged us all into a war for no reason at all!"

"Scarcely for no reason, Sergeant," Legrand said. "You see...."

Suddenly, the candles that were lighting the room were extinguished, and a chill wind blew through the room.

"Infinity help you, my friends," Legrand said, rising to his feet. "It's Gharon..."

"Welcome, my friends," a voice said. It was clear and even friendly, and it was followed by the appearance of the black-robed man, though his robes now glowed red, as if they had been set on fire, but were not consumed. "It is such a pleasure to have company down here, as I'm sure you will agree, Legrand."

"Burn you, Gharon!" Legrand said, hotly. "Your reign of infamy will end today."

"How confidently you speak, for someone whose name has been dragged through the mud," Gharon said, drawing a sword whose blade was as fiery-red as the robes he wore. "And while you are right in

assuming that I have not attained my full powers, that is just a matter of time. Allow me to demonstrate.”

He raised his sword, and a beam of red light hit Sergeant Burnfist squarely in the chest. Without a word, she crumpled to the ground, her mouth open, her tongue protruding.

“No!” Bernadette said, quickly casting a shield around the Sergeant, which blocked Gharon’s second beam. “Leave her alone!”

“Ah, you speak bravely for a simple country girl,” Gharon said. “But are you strong yourself?” He pointed his sword at her, but Henrik was upon him before he could do anything further.

“You son of Hell!” he shouted, as he thrust forward. Gharon, taken by surprise, was wounded in one eye, and staggered back.

“Now!” Henrik said. “Amelia, use the Sword!”

Amelia aimed the Sword of Regret at Gharon, and bowed her head. A blue beam shot forth, and there was a sound as of nails scratching against glass, which was almost deafening.

“I can’t break the shield!” Amelia cried out. “Henrik, help me!”

“With pleasure. Bernadette, cover Amelia,” he said, as he lunged forward. His sword went through Gharon’s shield with difficulty – it was not completely pierced – but Gharon was wounded in the throat.

“Let ‘im have it, boys!” Merrick yelled, as his men aimed their pistols at Gharon. But before they could fire, he stood upright, the wound in his eye and throat visibly healing in seconds.

“This is quite amusing,” he said. “Perhaps I underestimated you. But now, you stand no chance. Especially you, foolish boy.” He aimed his sword at Henrik, and Henrik’s left side glowed red.

“Hmmm. Attack the weak point, as they always say,” he said, and a yellow beam struck the red area before Henrik could react. The impact threw Henrik against the wall, but he still struggled to rise to his feet.

“You wicked boy!” Aline said, angrily. “You wicked, wicked boy! You can’t do that to Mr. Henrik!” She drew her weapon and fired, and a coating of frost began to form on the front of Gharon’s robes, whose red glow was now diminishing.

“Damn you, woman,” Gharon said, angrily. “Did you seriously think you could inconvenience me with a toy of that sort?” He sliced forward, and his sword would have pierced Aline’s heart instantly if Bernadette had not cast a second shield.

“Very pretty, you foolish girl,” Gharon said. “Two shields isn’t bad for a rustic wench like you. But now you’ve left yourself bare. Perhaps you might want to experience the same as that swaggering soldier.”

He aimed at Bernadette, but Henrik crawled over and tripped him up with a legsweep, causing his beam to hit the wall harmlessly.

“There are things you do not know, Gharon,” Bernadette said, calmly, and suddenly everyone noticed that there was an object at her belt, which was glowing a bright blue.

“Do you intend to kill me by pinpricks?” Gharon said, scornfully. “Let me finish the boy, first. Die. *Die.*” He charged furiously at Henrik, but Henrik managed to crawl out of the way, and he slashed at Gharon’s leg, which began to bleed. However, Gharon’s second blow pierced Henrik’s side, and he began to bleed as well.

“You will not go further!” Bernadette said, desperately, and suddenly Henrik, too, was surrounded by a shield – though Bernadette was visibly weakening. In frustration, Gharon turned on her, only to be met by a crowd of angry men.

“Kill him!” Merrick said, and the Lifters all opened fire – only to find their bullets bouncing off the shield formed by Gharon’s cloak.

“I will,” Amelia said, as she charged forward desperately. Gharon parried the blow with his sword, but the Sword of Regret was stronger, and he was temporarily disarmed.

“It’s time to end this!” Gharon screamed, as he reached for his sword. “You wish to die bravely? Very well, let this place be your tomb!” He raised his hand, and the entire room began to shake.

“Oh, very clever,” Sergeant Burnfist said, gritting her teeth. “Amelia, do what I told you!”

Amelia raised the Sword, and the blue beam from its blade joined the yellow beam of Burnfist’s. Suddenly, the rumble stopped.

“What is this foolery?” Gharon said, angrily.

“I assume you’ve...never heard of an Omega Wave,” Burnfist said, defiantly, one hand over her chest. “With the Sword of Regret to help me, I can hold this tunnel together.”

“And I am ready,” Bernadette said suddenly, walking over to Henrik, who was making a valiant attempt to rise. “Henrik, stay with me. Hold me, dearest.”

“This isn’t the time,” Rosemary muttered, peeking out from under a bench.

Dazed, Henrik placed his arm around her, and suddenly the entire room was bathed in blue.

“We’re all safe now,” Bernadette whispered in Henrik’s ear. “Thank the Infinity, and thank Mr. Regale. And now I am truly ready.”

“Hooray!” Aline said, firing another Chill Cartridge at Gharon’s helmet, which began to frost over.

“I’ll destroy you all,” Gharon said, firing red beams blindly, but Bernadette’s shield now covered the entire room, leaving him in a corner.

“Henrik, stay close to me,” Bernadette said, helping him stand. “And now, it is time to wash you away, Gharon. Fire and water. If you wish to be clean, like Father Gray, now is the time.”

“You issue me an ultimatum?” Gharon said, contemptuously. “I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but....”

And then it happened, out of nowhere. A wave of water – as blue as the Sea of Arlia – suddenly arose from the floor, engulfing Gharon from foot to head. The red of his cloak seemed to dissolve in the water, and he screamed, as if he was being tortured. Then, as swiftly as it had arisen, the wave disappeared, leaving Gharon standing alone, water dripping down his face and trunk, looking lost and confused.

“Master!” he cried. “What is this power, Master....”

“It means the end of your Way, Gharon,” Henrik said, straining to speak clearly. “Amelia, now is the time.”

Without a word, Amelia stepped forward, and a blue beam shot forth from the Sword of Regret. It struck Gharon over the throat, and he began to crumble. He did not fall – it was as if his clothing, and his body, were turning to dust, which slowly fell like snow to the ground. The group watched, amazed and unable to speak, until all that remained was a pile of dust, and a sword that now looked like plain, dull steel lying on the ground beside it.

“Infinity be praised,” Legrand said, folding his hands together and kneeling.

“I – I did it,” Bernadette said, a smile suddenly appearing on her face, and her hand going to her belt. The device she wore no longer glowed blue. “I can’t believe it....”

“I believe it....my love,” Henrik said, as he leaned against her for support.

“Gharon is – gone?” Amelia said, looking at the Sword and shaking her head.

“Hurray! What was that, Miss Bernadette?” Aline said, as she began to clap loudly.

Sergeant Burnfist sat down on a bench, a grin on her face. “I’d say it was a strong form of water-based magic, if I remember my own school days,” she said. “Where on Terra did you learn a spell like that, Bernadette?”

“I didn’t even know I could do it....” Bernadette said, softly, “until....” Her voice failed, and she sat down on the floor, with Henrik kneeling beside her.

“We can discuss things later, children,” Sister Rosemary said, arranging her coif carefully. “Your Grace, do we need to go down to that summoning pit now?”

"I very much doubt it, Sister," Legrand said, with a laugh. "If he'd really drawn that much power, we couldn't have survived him, unless...But as you said, we can discuss things later. We need to get back to the Palace as soon as possible, with that sword of Gharon's. I'm going to enjoy seeing that impostor collapse before my eyes, that's for sure."

"It's a long way back," Amelia said, still holding the Sword tightly. "Henrik's hurt, and Bernadette's exhausted. The Sergeant is wounded as well. Aline, do you detect anything else?"

"Nothing at all," Aline said, with a smile, "though we still haven't found that Warp Cannon the Sergeant was talking about." She picked up Gharon's sword, and tapped it with a tuning fork which was in her pocket, singing along to the note it produced.

"Flaming lands, I have my own idea about that," Burnfist said. "But let's not destroy it so soon, we can still make use of it! Hold on to your hats, kids, we're going to see the Pontiff!"

There was a flash of light, and the old chapel was empty, except for the dust that had been Gharon.

Over three weeks had passed since Gharon had been defeated, and the rebellion – without its leaders – slowly began to fade. An uneasy silence was felt throughout the City of the Eternal God, broken only by the cheerful shouts of children who, for the first time in months, were free to play in the streets. But though there is still a little to be told regarding Itaria, we must now return to the coast of Marcopolis, where a little ship, with the rather grand name of the *Empress Sylvania*, was coming in to land against the backdrop of a glorious sunset.

"That's the Fulton Republic, Miss Lavie," Father Marlborough – who, like Striker, had taken to addressing her by her first name – said, as he pointed to the coastline. "And over there's the lighthouse, the one the smugglers all use."

"Smugglers?" Lavie said, with a little shiver.

"Oh, they're not dangerous, Lavie," Agent Striker said, removing his cap. "They keep to themselves, and just make a lot of money. If your eyesight is good, that big white house with the tower, there, is where we'll be staying."

"Ohmygosh, it looks nice!" Lavie replied. "Do they know we're coming today?"

"We've already informed them, Miss," one of Striker's men said, climbing onto the deck. "We should be landing shortly. From there, it's just a little over a mile and a half to the mansion."

"That sounds like quite a long walk," Father Marlborough said, looking down at his stylish shoes regretfully.

"If you insist on dressing up foppishly, Reverend, I'm not responsible," Striker said.

"A decent pair of shoes is hardly foppish, Striker," Marlborough said. "Besides, that cap of yours is quite ridiculous. Were you even in Zion University in the first place?"

"Stop it, both of you," Lavie said, with a laugh, sensing that one of the pair's interminable not-quite-arguments was about to begin. "Look, we've reached the docks!"

The next hour or so passed in a pleasant daze, as everyone on ship – along with their few items of luggage – disembarked. As Lavie made her way out of the docks, with Striker behind her, she was suddenly aware of a small figure walking up to her, and looking at her with bright, curious eyes.

She reminds me of little Betty from Westchester, Lavie thought, and the memory made her feel a little lighter. "Hello, little girl," Lavie said, in a friendly tone. "Who are you?"

"Mama sent me here to look out for you all," the girl explained. *What a nice smile she has, even with those crooked teeth*, Lavie thought. "I'm here to make sure you don't get lost! She's sent a carriage to fetch you all, because Father Marlborough might find it hard to walk all the way!"

"Out of the mouths of babes, Marlborough," Striker said, stifling a giggle. "It seems your footwear is famous in Fulton."

"What's your name?" the girl asked Lavie. "You look the same age as my big sisters, but you're much prettier than they are!"

"Oh, you charmer," Lavie said, beaming. "My name is Lavender Regale."

"That's rather a silly name," the girl said, reflectively, "but not as silly as mine. Mine is Euphemia Arnoldus. It's an old family name, and I got stuck with it. But everyone calls me Phemie, except my sister Irene when she's mad at me!" She laughed.

"Well, everyone calls me Lavie, Phemie," Lavie replied. "It's not an old family name, though; my mother just liked the sound of it. Do you know, I met your father once, at Checkpoint Bravo? It was quite a while ago."

"You met Papa?" Phemie said, excitedly. "Tell me all about it."

"Miss Lavie," Marlborough said, "perhaps we could discuss this all on the carriage. We shouldn't keep them waiting for too long, you know."

"Oh, my goddess, is that you, Father Terence?" Phemie said, bowing with comical exaggeration. "On behalf of Mama and Papa, I welcome you to the Fulton Republic."

"Oh, my *goddess*?" Lavie said, laughing. "Where did she get that from?"

"It's a long story, and I'm partly responsible," Marlborough said, patting Phemie on the head. "Come on, let's get going."

The drive was a pleasant one, and before Lavie realized it – for she was busy telling Phemie about her father, and their encounter with "Sir Chucklehead" – they had reached the entrance to the Arnoldus mansion.

"Kyria Arnoldus," Father Marlborough said, bowing and kissing Penelope's hand, "these are the guests I told you about. We are most grateful for your hospitality."

"Oh, stop it, Terence," Penelope Arnoldus replied, with a laugh. "Introduce us, please. This is Agent Striker, I presume. Should I call you Wolfgang or William?"

"Either will do, my lady," Striker said, politely, "as long as you don't call me too early in the morning. I'm a late riser."

"Very amusing, I'm sure," Penelope said. "And you must be Miss Regale. I see you've already made friends with Euphemia..."

"Mama, don't call me that," Phemie said, making a face. "I was just explaining it all to Lavie..."

"Lavie? Yes, that sounds just about right, I'd say," Penelope said, shaking hands with her. "You must be exhausted, my dear. Would you care to rest a while? Dinner won't be ready for a moment, and the children are all busy with their homework." She looked meaningfully at her daughter.

"Oops, me too," Phemie said, regretfully. "I've got to catch up, now! See you later, Lavie! Tell me more about Papa and Sir Chickenhead, when you get the chance!"

"Sir Chickenhead?" Penelope said, amused. "My husband has told me a little about you, Lavie, but who might the chicken-headed gentleman be?"

"It's a long story, ma'am," Lavie said, with a sigh.

"Oh, don't stand on formality, my child. You can call me Aunt Penelope if you want, or just Penelope. Do *not* call me Lady Penelope, Marlborough and the others do that just to annoy me. And Mrs. Arnoldus isn't much better, because it just makes me nostalgic for Hieronymus." She sighed.

Hieronymus? Euphemia? They have funny names, Lavie thought, suppressing a smile. "Wasn't he going to come home?" Lavie said. "He told us he would, quite soon..."

"That was before the war, my dear," Penelope said. "Now..."

But before she could finish her sentence, the sound of thunder filled the air.

“Looks like one of our spring showers,” she said, looking up at the sky. “Come on in quickly, they can be quite vigorous!”

And indeed, within a few minutes, it had begun to rain furiously. Fortunately, her guests obeyed her without delay, and none of them suffered any injurious consequences.

At dinner-time, Penelope – to Lavie’s amusement and surprise – arrived in the dining-hall, where she and her two chaperones (she had begun to call them that, in her mind) were waiting, and rang an immense gong of bronze.

Ohmygosh, what was that for? Lavie thought, her ears ringing. But the purpose of this action was soon obvious, as seven children all lined up in the hall, looking curiously at the newcomers.

“It’s the only way to get their attention in a big, sprawling house like this, Lavie,” Penelope explained.

“It’s still funny!” Lavie said, between laughs.

“My children,” Penelope said, affectionately, “as you well know, we have more guests today. Two of them are from Galvenia, and one of them is from the Zion Empire. Remember, you’re all little ambassadors of Fulton, so be on your best behaviour. Do you understand, all of you?”

A chorus of voices assured her that they did – except for a small baby who was being carried, protectively, by one of the older girls.

“Now, introductions are in order. First is Father Terence, whom you all know.”

“Oh, my goddess!” Phemie said, giggling.

“That will be enough, Euphemia,” Penelope said, austerely. “Next, Agent Wolfgang Striker from the Zion Intelligence Division, who is staying here while on a mission.”

“Wow!” a young boy of about twelve said. “Do you carry a gun with you? I’m Alexander, and I want to be a soldier someday, but in a proper army like yours. The Republican Army is a joke!”

“I see you’re well informed, my lad,” Striker said, with a grin.

“And finally, Miss Lavender Regale, from Davenport in Galvenia, who’s come to search for a missing person. Lavender, like Euphemia, prefers to go by an abbreviated version of her name, so please call her Lavie, unless you wish to annoy her.”

“Hello, *Lavender*,” the taller of the older girls said, teasingly. “How did you come by that name, anyway?”

“Blame my mother,” Lavie said, with a smile. “The Lancasters were always rather fond of lavender, and even believed it had medicinal properties.”

"The *Legends of the Cosmopolitan Fathers* talk about that, too, Miss Lavie," a studious-looking boy in his early teens, with glasses that resembled Sigmund's, observed. "Saint Tryphena is often represented with a flask of lavender oil, representing her good deeds."

"Goodness, you sound just like my father," Lavie said. "He loves reading old books like that."

"Would he be Mr. Sigmund Regale?" the boy said, clearly impressed, "I have heard of his collection. It's an honour, Miss." He shook hands with Lavie rather solemnly.

"Hercules is rather attached to his books, too," Penelope said, affectionately. "He's going to end up a monk or a scholar some day, mark my words."

"I go to school, too!" a little boy of about five said, proudly, as he looked up. "And Hercules is my big brother."

"Well, Lavie can be your big sister for a few days, Jason," Penelope said, ruffling her youngest son's hair.

"Hercules wants to be Patriarch of the Cosmopolitan Republic," his younger brother said, mockingly. "I've seen him practice speeches in front of the mirror."

"What's a patriarch?" Lavie asked.

"Something like the Pontiff," Father Marlborough explained, "but the Republican Church has its own hierarchy."

"Alex," the scholarly boy said, with dignity, "shut up and go read your comic books. At least I don't want pictures of Lieutenant Lightning sewn into my undershirt. Why Mama indulges you, I'll never know."

"I'll get you for that, Hercules!" Alexander said, with a laugh.

"Dear me," Lavie said, laughing, "you're all quite entertaining."

There was the sound of a gurgle. "Athena agrees with you, Miss Lavie," the girl holding the baby said. "I promise you we're not putting on a show, though. We're like this all the time!"

"What a lovely baby," Lavie said, leaning down to admire her. "Can I hold her for a while?"

"Be my guest, I'm feeling rather tired," the girl said, gratefully. The baby looked up at Lavie, smiled, and pinched her nose.

"Ohmygosh, she's got quite a grip!" Lavie said, turning red and laughing.

"It's Irene's fault, Lavender. She never tries to break that habit," the tall girl said, shrugging her shoulders, as she received a gleeful Athena into her own arms. "She spoils that child dreadfully. If I had the handling of her..."

"If you weren't so busy trying to be a fashion-plate, Sophia..." Irene replied, indignantly.

"Girls, girls, this isn't the time," Penelope said, in a placatory tone. "Now let's all just sit down, and we can ask Father Marlborough to say one of his lovely prayers."

"Can he say it in *Cosmopolitan*?" Hercules said, hopefully. "I need to work on my translation skills."

"Show-off," Phemie said, affectionately. "I can speak *Cosmopolitan* as well as you can!"

"Ah, little sister, speaking and translating are quite different," Irene said, remembering her last exams, as they all sat down. An olive-skinned woman, with a broad smile and a rather over-large apron, began to pour out generous servings of a thick soup, which made Lavie's mouth water after the plain fare on board the *Sylvania*.

"Thank you, Jeshura," Penelope said, as the woman finished her rounds and withdrew into the background.

"This is quite amusing, Marlborough," Striker said, with a laugh. "It takes me back to my own childhood."

"Were you from a large family, Wolfgang?" Marlborough asked.

"As a matter of fact, no, but I had plenty of cousins and friends," he replied. "I see a little of myself in young Alexander, actually."

"See!" Alexander said defiantly, sticking out his tongue at Hercules. "I'm like the Agent!"

"Secret agents who stick out their tongues make very easy targets," Hercules shot back.

"Boys, *please* observe the decorum due to our guests," Penelope said, with a laugh.

The four courses of the meal that followed the soup were quite excellent in their own way, and – warmed both by the food and the laughter of her new companions – Lavie's spirits began to lift, despite the rain outside. At length, it was time for all of them to retire.

"Meet me tomorrow, Lavender," Sophia said, with a demure smile. "I want to know about the latest fashions in Galvenia."

"No, meet *me*, Lavie," Irene said, proudly, bouncing Athena on her knee. "We can play the piano together, if you know how. I love music, though Sophia's a terrible player! Poor Mrs. Pombal can barely get her to play a scale in full."

"And poor Irene's hair looks like a scarecrow's, no matter how hard she tries to comb it..." Sophia began.

“Girls, I’m sure Lavie is quite tired,” Penelope said, interrupting what might have otherwise escalated into a full-blown battle of the siblings. “And I’m sure she’ll meet *all* of you tomorrow, and get to know you better. But now it’s time for bed. Go up to your rooms, and I’ll be with you soon!”

A little reluctantly, the Arnoldus children obeyed their mother, and soon Lavie was shown to her own room. It was spacious and comfortable, with a large bed that seemed extremely inviting to its current occupant.

“If you need anything, just pull that rope, dear,” Penelope explained, “and Jeshura’ll come and take care of you. She’s an extraordinary woman. Hieronymus has had her in his family ever since the Commonwealth rescued her parents from a group of slavers, and she joined us when we got married. I couldn’t possibly run the house without her.”

“Slavers?” Lavie said, horrified.

“Oh, that was a while ago, dear,” Penelope said, reassuringly. “They’re much less common now, though I wish they were even rarer. But don’t worry your head about such things – Euphemia and I do enough of that! Have a good night’s rest, and tomorrow, you can tell me what exactly you’re going to do. Terence told me, but I’m sure you’d like to talk about it. Heavens, if I thought I could bring Hieronymus home that way, I wouldn’t mind trying.”

Lavie blushed. “Penelope, do you think I’m being silly?” she asked. “My father and mother thought so, though Mom changed her mind...”

“My dear child,” Penelope said, kindly, “that’s what parents are supposed to think and say, you know. I suppose we all want our children to be safe, more than anything else in the world. But just hearing your story, and thinking of you, I was thinking of my old lessons as a girl.”

“Your old lessons?” Lavie said, curiously, sitting down on the large bed.

“Yes, girls from good families are expected to learn several languages, in this part of the world,” Penelope explained. “The Old Republicans have a word for what you’re doing, Lavie. They call it *hesed*.”

“Hesed?” Lavie said, trying out the new word, tentatively.

“It’s quite an extraordinary word, which no one can quite translate into Common. It has a variety of meanings – mercy, loyalty, faithfulness. But I think the closest I can come to it is ‘faithful love’ or ‘steadfast love’, Lavie. According to the Old Republicans, it’s the way their God cares for them, despite their many mistakes. It seems to me that you care for Ryan that way, Lavie – despite his mistakes.”

Lavie blushed. “I’m not a goddess, Penelope. But....do you think my coming here is because...I feel that way about Ryan? Do you think I’m really showing ‘faithful love’ towards him? I don’t know if Ryan would see things the same way....”

Stammering, she tried to tell Penelope about Marianne, and about what had happened just before Ryan had left.

Penelope smiled and took Lavie's hand. "I don't *think* so, child," she said, affectionately. "I know. And I believe that the Infinity, even if he isn't exactly as Terence describes him, will reward you for it. Now go to sleep, dear. The sun's sure to come out tomorrow."

"You're right, Penelope," Lavie said, happily, as she stretched herself out. "Gosh, you're almost as wise as my Gran. Thank you so much, and good night."

"Sweet dreams, child," Penelope said, as she left the room quietly. And when she returned a little later, Lavie was fast asleep, dreaming that Hercules – who was wearing a priest's robe – was pronouncing her and Ryan man and wife, while Irene cheerfully played an out-of-tune piano.

"Did that dream come true too, Gran?" Emily asked, wide-eyed. "I can't believe you went all the way there to fetch Grandpa!"

"I was younger then, Emily," Lavie said, "younger and wiser. And no, it wasn't Father Hercules who married us, though Phemie was one of my bridesmaids. Dear girl, she made her father and Penelope very, very proud when she grew up."

"What did she do, Gran?" Emily asked, naturally curious, as a ten-year-old girl would be about other ten-year-olds.

"She became the first woman to represent the Republic at the Commonwealth," Lavie explained, "and she did a lot of good, especially after the Second War. She had to step down a few years ago because she wasn't too well, and she now lives in the same big house as her father, with her own family."

"That's nice, Gran," Emily said. "So what happened next?"

"Good morning, Mr. Henrik!"

Henrik groaned and turned his head in the direction of the voice. "Where am I?" he asked.

"Bernadette..."

"No, it's me, Aline," the speaker replied, hurrying to replace a nurse's cap – which was about to fall off – on her head. "Miss Bernadette's sleeping, dear girl. But she keeps mentioning your name, so don't worry, she hasn't forgotten you! That aquatic spell consumed a lot of energy."

Henrik blushed. "Mentioning my name?" he asked.

"In her sleep, Mr. Henrik, in her sleep," Aline said, with a wink. "Now, I hope that nasty boy, Gharon, didn't hurt you too much. The Pontiff's own doctor had a look at you, and he said you'd broken two ribs

and your lung was punctured again, but your heart was in the right place. Something” – she beamed at him – “that I have never doubted myself!”

“That’s sweet of you, Aline,” Henrik said, with a tired smile. “It still feels like someone tried to gouge out my left side, though. Blast that Gharon.”

“Oh, but he *is* blasted, have no doubts,” Aline said, giggling. “You have a way with words, Mr. Henrik. Is that why Miss Bernadette is head over heels in love with you, poor girl?”

“Poor girl?” Henrik said, indignantly. “Why?”

“Well, if you go around getting wounded like that and making her cry, that’s just mean, Mr. Henrik,” Aline said, pointing an accusing finger at him. “To borrow a word from San Delas, you shouldn’t try to be so *macho*. You’re not the type. Sergeant Burnfist would be, if she’d been born a boy!”

Henrik laughed, despite the pain in his side that it caused him. “Are the others all right?” he asked.

“Miss Burnfist had a crack in her breast-bone,” Aline said, standing at a window and admiring the sun, “and it didn’t improve her temper much, I must say. Miss Amelia’s fine, though she’s still a little rattled. And poor Rosemary’s quite all right, as you would expect from someone who spent the battle hiding under a bench!” She laughed. “Mr. Merrick’s fine, and he was *so* proud to meet the Pontiff, I thought he’d explode.”

“And the city?” He sat up in bed, and looked at the walls of the room.

“The minute Gharon died, the remnants of the shield around the Palace fell.” Aline sat down at his bedside. “The Zion Army now control the coast, as well as the Claudia. We had a wireless message saying that they had crossed the river and were suppressing rebellions in other places. Monsieur Legrand is sure that it’ll be over soon. Goodness, it was both horrible and funny when we brought him back here!”

“Why, what happened?”

“The false Legrand – the one the Zion army had put in the dungeon, here – turned into powder, too. Miss Bernadette and Rosemary tried to convince him to repent, but I’m afraid he was rather rude to them, poor things.”

“Poor soul,” Henrik said. “Why do they fall to dust like that, Aline?”

“It’s still a mystery,” Aline confessed, “but I do like solving mysteries, Mr. Henrik! And what I think is that the forces that bind human tissues together can be modified by using the El Metal, so that...”

“Ah, my young friends,” a voice said, gently. “It is such a pleasure to be with you, on this day when my country begins to return to freedom at last. You have my gratitude and my blessings, for the rest of your lives, and beyond.”

“It – It’s the Pontiff!” Henrik exclaimed, drawing the bedsheet over his chest, which was covered only by an undershirt and bandages, and blushing. “Your Holiness, it’s....”

“Oh, let us not be stuffy, as you Galvenians put it, Mr. Spenson,” Pious XXI said. His expression was cheerful, and bore no trace of the turmoil he had experienced over the past few days.

“Your Holiness!” Bernadette said, walking into the room and bowing low. “Good morning, Your Holiness. Are you quite well?”

“Very well, thanks to you, Miss Aquary,” he said. “I know I wasn’t wounded, but those herbs helped me overcome my natural tiredness. I trust you are well, too.”

“Quite well, thank you,” Bernadette replied.

“You’re so nice, coming and visiting us like that,” Aline said, holding up a plate proudly. “Look, I even made you a sandwich!”

“That seems quite delightful,” Pious said, taking an enthusiastic bite from it and smiling. “But in the meantime, let me apprise you of what is happening now.”

“Wait for me, Aline, you goose!” Sister Rosemary said, as she and Sergeant Burnfist rushed into the room. “Your Holiness, I....”

“Ah, Rosemary, always punctual,” Pious said, with a wink. “I see you and Moretta have made friends. She was quite enthusiastic about your cooking. Poor Moretta, to be tied up and thrown in jail isn’t easy at her age.”

“I do the best I can, Your Holiness,” Rosemary replied.

“And I salute you for your dignity in the face of the enemy,” Sergeant Burnfist growled, drawing her sword in a military salute.

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Pious said, solemnly. “Now that you are all here – Mr. Merrick has gone to see to the burial of his men, along with my good Legrand – I can tell you what has happened. The rebels have surrendered in many places, and those holding out are short of ammunition. Our exorcists detect no more demonic influence in the city, suggesting that whatever there was died with that man Gharon. And once we tell you the location of the Warp Cannon...”

“You *know* where it is?” Burnfist said. “Damn it, I was looking forward to hunting again.”

“Not me!” Aline said, stoutly. “Sergeant, the rest of us are civilians! We don’t *like* marching for a hundred miles carrying bags of rocks, even if that’s what you call fun!”

“Dear me, Aline,” Amelia said, emerging from the chapel at the side of their rooms and kneeling, “you always put things so nicely. Good morning, Your Holiness.”

“My young friends – and I include you, Aline, in that number, for you are younger at heart than all of us – words cannot express my gratitude to you, or to the Zion Army. Lieutenant Shin and his men could not be with us, as they are completing basic security measures across the town, and sealing the tunnels. But all is not done, yet.”

“I understand,” Henrik said. “Though the Church and the country are safe, danger still threatens Terra. As Archbishop Legrand said, there are still two mages of this sort who could appear – one in the Varald Directorate, and one in Galvenia. And we still do not know what ‘the new Janwen’ refers to.”

“But Henrik,” Bernadette said, drawing close to his bedside, “the other three mages are dead. Can the remainder still carry out their designs, now that their allies are gone?”

“I can help you with that question, my child,” Pious said. “But first, tell me. What was that remarkable object you used in the fight with Gharon? Even an old hand like myself was at a loss to explain it.”

“It’s a gift from a dear friend,” Bernadette said, unhooking the device from her belt and handing it to the Pontiff. “He told me to use it when all seemed lost, and that is what I did. I believed in the Infinity, and I believed in him.”

In her mind, she re-read the note that had accompanied the machine, when she had finally unwrapped it, on the day they had entered the last tunnel beneath the ruins of the Guild.

My dear Bernadette,

Enclosed is a curious object that I have owned since I was your age. At that time, I was at least a little like you – idealistic, and interested in magic. I soon realized that I did not have the gift, but I could always admire it from afar. The man from whom I bought this told me that it contained both a shield strengthener, and a powerful water-based attack – something that, somehow, brought me back to you, and the eyes that you share with someone I once knew. He said it would only work in the presence or proximity of the one I loved. I laughed at him, but looking at you, and reflecting on the matter, I realize I was wrong. When the moment comes, my child, if you and young Spenson are in danger, make good use of it. Accept it as a gift from a man who is growing old, and who feels a need to make amends, but who genuinely wishes you all that is good. On the day your God brings you back to us, I shall perhaps be able to tell you more. Bless you.

*Yours affectionately,
Sigmund Regale.*

“A dear friend?” Aline said. “Mr. Henrik, you mischievous boy, where did you find a marvel like that?”

“It wasn’t Henrik, though it would only work if Henrik were with me,” Bernadette said, a smile coming to her face. “It was Mr. Regale from Davenport.”

“Mr. Regale?” Aline clapped. “I was right, he *is* a benefactor of humanity!”

“Lavie’s dad?” Henrik said, wonderingly. “I knew he collected valuable objects, but this may have been the most valuable of all. He must have given it to you because of your friendship with Lavie, darling.”

“Perhaps,” Bernadette said, wondering what exactly Sigmund had meant by making amends. “Whatever the reason, he has helped saved us.”

“Subtle are the workings of the Infinity,” Pious reflected. “Out of our joys and sorrows, our losses and friendships, our possessions and skills, out of the derring-do of the Zion and the bravery of the Guild, He fashioned the rescue of the city. And I am sure that He will protect us still. Now, if I may make a suggestion, springtime in Itaria is a magical time of year. Do not hasten to return to Galvenia until you are fully healed, and until you are fit enough for the journey. Until then, remain with me as your guests, and make use of anything that will help you in your quest – even the Itarian Archives, if you see fit. I thank you again, and I invite you all for today evening’s meeting of the Council, at which you will have places of honour.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness,” Henrik said, gratefully. “We will never forget this.”

“And we will never forget you, Mr. Spenson – nor you, Miss Aquary. It is sometimes said that every Pontiff must make a prophecy at some time in his life, and I am ready to make mine. The two of you still have a long journey to go, and you will encounter all that life in this world has to offer, but it will only make you stronger. And some day, my children, you will give Itaria a great gift – a gift greater than all the gold or silver that any King or Emperor could give us – perhaps the greatest gift of all. Remember this, my friends, as you travel the long road of life.” He placed his hand over the heads of Henrik and Bernadette – who were staring at him, and at each other, in awe – and prayed softly as he gave them his blessing.

“Whee!” Aline said, starting to applaud again. “Of course, you’ll have to marry them later, Pontiff!”

“Ah, Dr. Sheldon,” Pious said, bursting into laughter, “as your friend Miss Rushden said, you *do* put things nicely.”

To those gentle readers concerned about Marianne’s whereabouts, and her safety and well-being, I must now ask you to travel to a stately manor in the fashionable part of Lorean – a manor that we have not visited so far, but which is not unknown to us.

“My good Gessler,” Sir Turbot H. Chuselwock said, removing his monocle from his eye, “the atmosphere at the House of Lords is rather frosty these days. I do wish they would stop being envious of my dear son. Envy is such a plebeian emotion, don’t you think?”

“My lord,” Felix Gessler said, sternly, “you must not allow them to take liberties with you. If Sir Prescott has travelled to Unity Isle, and is now on his way back, why should they take offence? His men have their orders, and they have fought well in Zion territory. The Lords have no right to indulge in ill-tempered conjectures, much less to even breathe the word treason.”

“Such an ugly word,” Sir Turbot said, sipping his whiskey. “And unfortunately, one that is used far too loosely. My son, Gessler, is a born leader. His ways are not the ways of pettifogging little men, like Sheffield and Socius.”

“Socius was no great loss to our country, my lord,” Gessler said, insinuatingly. “In the meantime, though, we must take steps to secure his reputation against jealous little men.”

“Quite so, Gessler, quite so. Tell me, who is that charming young lady who is staying with her duenna in the Purple Room? Prescott is quite a favourite with the ladies, as I was in my own youth,” Sir Turbot replied, proudly. “Is she awaiting his return?”

“She is, my lord, and she is also the key to salv – I mean, defending Sir Prescott’s honour, and the honour of your family,” Gessler said. “Her father has been unjustly imprisoned and falsely accused by the policemen of Glendale, and she relies on us for protection.”

“Unjustly imprisoned!” The monocle fell from Sir Turbot’s face, but he ignored it. “Gessler, this is most painful. This is what parliamentary democracy and the rule of the mediocre have brought us to. What is the poor man accused of?”

“Espionage and banditry, my lord,” Gessler said. “In fact, though, he has always been our faithful servant, and if he has seemed a spy to some, it was a clever deception. He was working on the instructions of your son.”

“The policemen shall soon realize that I am not without influence, Gessler,” Sir Turbot said angrily, as he began to compose an indignant letter.

“Always”, in Felix Gessler’s peculiar vocabulary, in this case meant, “a few months ago,” which was when Sir Prescott had first instructed Gessler to make contact with Alex Robertson.

“Tell him that he is a fool to sell his talents to a single bidder,” Sir Prescott had ordered him. “I can use his abilities just as well, and he runs far less risk with me than with his current masters.”

So Gessler had cultivated the acquaintance of the elusive Mr. Robertson, until he had what his master wanted.

“That is perfect, Gessler,” Sir Prescott had said. “Tell him to abandon his previous plans. They will result in too much unpleasantness. Instead, let him just hand – the positions to you, and leave the target free. I will take care of the matter in my own way.”

So Ryan had been allowed to go to the Republic unmolested – and had escaped from one trap, laid by one set of conspirators, only to fall into another – and it was not over.

“It is not enough to have him gather mildew, Gessler,” he had ordered. “I must break him. If Robertson’s former masters sought to entrap him through the girl, two can play at that game.” The pendant had arrived at Galvenia soon enough, and Gessler had spun a plausible tale, telling a horrified Marianne that Ryan had deserted his regiment, and had then tried to sell the pendant to buy his safety from Varald soldiers.

Marianne had refused to believe him at first, until he administered the *coup de grace* – Sir Prescott’s voice over the radio, ostensibly from the Republic, informing her with the deepest sorrow that her lover had proved to be a traitor, and was faithless to her as well.

“It is said that he was seduced by a Republican agent,” Prescott had said, in lugubrious tones. “The women of the Republic are as unscrupulous as they are beautiful.”

And Marianne, still wounded by the loss of her father – whom she both cared for, and feared for his hidden streak of brutality – had been all too ready to believe in Ryan’s perfidy, when confronted with the Commander of the Galvenian forces himself. Especially when Gessler had come to her with an offer of temporary shelter in Chuselwock Manor, until her father was freed from prison.

“I must say, for foolish nobles, they treat us well,” Antonia Robertson observed, as she stretched herself out comfortably in an easy-chair in the garden. “Are these friends of your father’s too, girl?”

“Hush, Grandma,” Marianne said. Having found both security and comfort after the pains of the past months, she was anxious lest her grandmother’s tongue endanger this. But fortunately, Antonia spent most of her time sleeping, eating, and reading the novels that the domestic help – expertly coached by Gessler – would bring her regularly. Life was good.

Despite all this, she found herself thinking of Ryan at times.

How could he do this to me! He made such a big deal of Jeremy Stockhelm, and then he goes and sells us all out – not just me, but even that stupid Army that he was dying to join! Marianne had little idea of what Republican women truly looked like, but Sir Prescott’s throwaway phrase haunted her.

Ryan....

“Ah, Miss Robertson,” Gessler said, walking out into the garden. “I must say, I have both good and bad news for you.”

“Is this about....Ryan?” she asked, anxiously.

“Not at all, Miss,” he said, admiring her on the sly. “First, it is almost certain that your father will soon be released. Sir Prescott and his father are well-connected, and I am sure that the machinations of men like Bosley and Bowes will soon be uncovered for what they are.”

“Is that the good news?”

“Yes, Miss Robertson. Unfortunately, there are people who have other ideas. These people are working to reunite you with your mother, and to have you taken to another town, far away from your friends and your father. You would not want this, would you?”

Poor Mother, Marianne thought. I wish things hadn't gone – the way they did. I wish Father hadn't made me say those things....but I had no choice. Oh, Ryan....

“Miss Robertson?” Gessler said.

“I don't know, really,” she said, shaking her head and looking down. “I feel sorry for her, sometimes...”

“But she left your father, didn't she?” Gessler said.

That's my cue, she thought, thinking back bitterly to the times she had acted in school plays. That's my chance to say what I was told to say, rather than.....what really happened.What's true? I don't know if I even know, myself.

“Yes,” she said, slowly.

“Then listen to me. The release of your father may take a little while – perhaps a week or two. In the meantime, do not return to Davenport, and do not try to contact any of your friends, or you may be taken advantage of. It pains me to tell you this, but sometimes, the truth is bitter. Do you understand, Miss Robertson.”

“Yes, Mr. Gessler,” she said, tonelessly.

“Excellent!” Gessler said, rubbing his hands together as he re-entered the house, and climbed up the stairs to the rooms that ordinarily belonged to his master. One of them was a library, and behind one of the bookcases was a panel that slid back...

“Gran!” Emily exclaimed, understanding dawning on her. “You mean Sir Chucklehead made Marianne write that letter?”

“Not quite, dear – he just told her a lot of lies about Grandpa, he and that horrible man, Gessler,” Lavie said, still indignant after sixty-odd years. “And Marianne's wounded pride did the rest.”

“But why, Gran? Why?” Emily said, sadly. “Was it just because....he wanted to marry you?”

“That was what we all thought, Emily,” Lavie said. “But Sir Prescott was playing a very clever game, and we didn’t quite understand it until a little later...”

The next day dawned brightly in Marcopolis, but by the afternoon, the spring showers had returned.

“Miss Regale,” Marlborough said, as Lavie sat near the window of her room, watching the rain, “I have good news for you.”

Lavie rose immediately. “What is it?” she said, trying to hide her excitement.

“First of all, I’ve just received a wire from my friend Legrand in Itaria. The civil war there is nearly over. Apparently some of the members of the Pontifical Council were being manipulated by a dark mage, who was defeated – by that young woman, Bernadette Aquary, and her friends.”

“Bernadette!” Lavie exclaimed, happily. “That’s – that’s just awesome, Professor! I – I know I’ve been thinking of Ryan most of the time, but she’s like the elder sister I never had! How did she do it?”

“Radio Itaria will be making a formal broadcast tomorrow, my dear young lady,” Marlborough replied. “And I must say, I share some of your pride; she was one of my favourite pupils. She has done us proud – she and that brave young man, Spenson. My friend also mentions the contributions of Miss Amelia Rushden – I’m not sure if you know her – and Dr. Aline Sheldon, as well as a small group of men from the Lifter’s Guild.”

“Aline Sheldon? I know *her*,” Lavie said. “Goodness, she’s such a scatterbrain! What would *she* have done?”

“I think we will have to wait till they return to Galvenia, to hear the whole story,” Marlborough said. “And now for the second piece of news. Do you have a formal dress with you?”

“What?” Lavie said.

“A ball-gown, or something to be worn to a formal occasion,” Marlborough explained.

“I know what you mean, Professor,” Lavie said, puzzled, “but why?”

“Get dressed, Miss Regale,” Marlborough said, with a twinkle in his eye. “We’re going to a wedding, and it ought to be interesting.”

“A wedding?” Lavie said, shaking her head. “I don’t think I understand what’s going on. Whose wedding?”

“Ah, I’ll leave that to my young friend Wolfgang to explain. She’s all yours,” he said, as he opened the door to let Striker in. He was still wearing his Zion University cap indoors, but had changed into a suit.

“Gosh, Agent Striker, you look quite dapper,” Lavie said, with a grin. “So what’s this about a wedding?”

“It’s simple, Miss Regale. The contact for all attempts to release a prisoner from *Al-Mu’afa* is the doctor there. He does not like to discuss business on his premises, for obvious reasons, and prefers to meet his contacts – as he calls us – at social occasions. Tonight happens to be his nephew’s wedding, and he will talk business with us there. Will you come, Miss Regale? We can try to handle the matter by ourselves, but having come this far, it is only right that we give you the choice. Besides” – Striker gave Marlborough a meaning look – “these Republican plutocrats do tend to melt at the sight of an attractive young lady, for some reason.”

“I will,” Lavie said, firmly, though she could not help laughing at the Agent’s last clause. “So does that mean we just pay the money to him, and Ryan goes free?”

“Not so, Miss Lavie,” Striker replied. “As Marlborough has already told you, paying the money only guarantees you an entry into *Al-Mu’afa*. Once inside, we are on our own, until we bring him out safely and transport him to a safe place. That wily old sawbones didn’t elaborate, but there are various kinds of guards – both animal and human – and our money will not keep them away.”

“Can’t we fight our way in?” Lavie said. That morning, Penelope Arnoldus had told her about the Galvenian soldiers, and had even introduced her to her old acquaintance, Private Burns. The two of them had re-enacted the the hair-pulling incident for the benefit of her young nephews and nieces, amusing them no end. “I’m sure Sergeant Burns and her men would be willing to help us.”

“They’ll have their hands full tackling the mercenaries who surround the place for miles once we try to leave, Miss Lavie. We can take some of them with us, but Marlborough and I have both made enquiries, and their forces at at least fifty men strong. We’ll have to manage it on our own. Of course, we can protect you, but we make no guarantees.”

“Protect me? I’ll fight with you, Agent,” Lavie said, proudly. “I’ve done it before, and I’ll do it again.”

“Before?” Marlborough said, mildly.

Without a pause, Lavie described what had happened on the road to Lorean Castle, on the day when she had received the Princess’ missive.

“Sweet Infinity!” Marlborough said. “I hope Euphemia didn’t hear me say that, though. I know you would not lie, Miss Regale, but really – this is quite remarkable.”

Striker ran his hand across his jaw, and looked at Lavie with renewed appreciation. “Miss Lavie,” he said, “all things considered, I think it’s fortunate that you came with us. You may be able to help us more than you know. But first, let us get ready. Republican weddings are ostentatious, and the man we are to meet loves a little finery. Imagine you’re going to the Palace for a tea-party, and dress accordingly. And one more thing: for reasons of etiquette, cover your head and face. I have asked our friend Penelope to lend you a veil.”

“A veil?” Lavie said, frowning.

“A matter of local culture, Miss Lavender,” Marlborough said kindly. “It is not compulsory, but it would make our host more favourably disposed towards you. He is rather traditional.”

“Maybe Bernadette should have come along with us, Professor,” Lavie said, with a laugh. “I can see her wearing a veil, but *me*? It’s going to feel strange. But if it’s going to help us get to Ryan, I’m for it!”

“Wisely said, Miss Lavie,” Striker said, “Now, let us prepare ourselves. We need to leave in a few hours, and Marlborough must tutor you on the etiquette to be observed when addressing this man. His name is Anfri Shaudat. It’s good to be prepared.”

“You’ve got it, Agent Wolfgang,” Lavie said, brightly, as she began rummaging inside her wardrobe.

Unlike the Itarian wedding – which is the solemnization of a sacred bond before the Infinity – and the Galvenian or Zionese wedding, which is a family affair, weddings in the Republic are generally exercises in gamesmanship. The game in question, of course, is to impress one’s circle of acquaintances, and it is usually followed by much hand-wringing once the accounts are settled. There are strict codes, perhaps thousands of years old, outlining who pays for what, which are often stretched, but never transgressed. Banquets and sideboards are loaded, clothing is loud and colourful, music is raucous, and a vague atmosphere of the carnival hangs over the entire proceedings.

Goodness, Lavie said, feeling the ground shake as the band’s drums pounded an incessant beat, *how can people even talk to each other with all this racket?* She ached – literally – to put her hands to her ears, but had been told by Marlborough that this would be seen as a sign of displeasure, and an impolite one at that.

Well, I am displeased, she thought, feeling justly annoyed. *The things I do for Ryan....* The idea brought a smile to her face. *Imagine Ryan getting married to some girl he’s hardly met, with all this cacophony in the background! And, though it’s not nice to say it, some of those clothes are just – ugh! I can just imagine what Mom and Daddy would have to say.* In comparison, her green gown and little hat, to which a light veil had been affixed, seemed like the most casual of attire. She flinched as a woman whose robe was entirely studded with sequins and tiny stones passed her by, giving off a nearly asphyxiating smell of perfume.

“Don’t cough, Miss Lavie,” Marlborough said, kindly. “I know the temptation to do so is as overpowering as that odour, but it would not be in good taste.”

“Leave the girl alone, Marlborough,” Striker said. “I saw you coughing into your handkerchief yourself, just a moment ago.”

“At least I’m discreet about it,” Marlborough said, in a dignified voice.

“Ah, my friends! Welcome!” The man greeting them was not particularly short, but despite being as tall as Lavie, he gave off a general impression of resembling the statues of gnomes Lavie had once seen in an amusement park. The largeness of his moustache, the rather amateurish dyeing of his hair, his wrinkled face and his large girth perhaps all contributed to this. “My friends from Galvenia and Zion. I am delighted to welcome you to this humble celebration.” He wore a long robe with so much silver-thread embroidery that Lavie wished for a pair of sunglasses, and on his head was a turban that put Bernadette’s “mushroom hat” to shame.

“Good evening, Shaudat Bey,” Striker said, politely, folding his hands in salute.

“Good evening, Sir,” Lavie said, softly.

“Ah, it is such a pleasure,” Doctor Shaudat said, laughing loudly. “Now, I understand that you would wish to partake of tonight’s banquet. So shall we dispose of the formalities first?” He chuckled.

“That would be very kind, Doctor,” Marlborough said. “As Waldemar Jarzon said, one must conclude business before seeking pleasure.”

This seemed to amuse the portly Shaudat even further, and he led them into a side-room, just off the banquet hall, in high good humour. The hall itself had the bride and groom – who were a little younger than Lavie herself – on a stage, looking rather lost on gaudy red leather chairs, and being swamped by guests on all sides.

Poor kids, Lavie thought.

When they were all seated comfortably, Doctor Shaudat sat down in an ornate chair which was almost a throne, and looked at Lavie, then at Striker, intently.

“Now, *effendi*, it is time to talk business, as you said,” he began. “Let me see, we are speaking of a young man. A Galvenian. You Galvenians are really most impertinent.” He snorted.

“Shaudat Bey, we beg your pardon,” Marlborough said, politely. “The young man did not act on his own, and he was following the orders of his government.”

“Then why does his Government not intercede to save him, my good man?” Shaudat said, laughing as if he had made the most hilarious joke in the world.

“Shaudat Bey, it is a delicate matter,” Striker said, “and – let us be honest – the life of one man is of little import to a Government that is dealing with millions. But we are the young man’s friends, and we are willing to pay the price of his freedom.”

“Freedom?” Shaudat chuckled again. “You ask for much, my Zionesse friend. And why does *your* government interest itself in this affair?”

“Bey,” Striker said, in a submissive tone that Lavie had never heard him use, “I do not ask on behalf of my Government, but as a friend. We accept that the young man has done wrong, and we are willing to pay the penalty.”

“Ah,” Shaudat said, in a rather uninterested tone. He then turned to Lavie and beamed. “And you, young girl? How charming of you to dress as a woman should. I suppose you are his betrothed. You are certainly of age, as is the young man. Your parents should have shown more circumspection in choosing your husband, though.” He laughed to himself.

What is he talking about, the dope? Lavie wondered. “Er...Sir, Ryan and I have been friends from childhood, and his family and mine are also close friends. I’m not exactly his ‘betrothed’, but I do want him back safely.....”

“Ah, say no more,” Shaudat said. “You Galvenians arrange things differently. See, I am a well-informed and well-instructed person.” He grinned. “I know that you have strange customs and ways, and since I am a kind man, I shall not criticize them – though I still consider them foolish and unwise.” He winked at Lavie. “It is most foolish of your parents to send you here with two strange men. But you Galvenians have different ideas of honour, of course.”

Hey, my parents didn’t send me here, Lavie thought. I came of my own free will! The thought brought a smile to her face, and this pleased Shaudat, who thought that his heavy-handed efforts at wit had impressed Lavie.

“I apologize for that,” Lavie said, kindly, remembering Marlborough’s coaching. “But we would be indebted to you if you would consider our plea, and grant us the favour we seek.”

“How could I refuse a favour to one such as you?” Shaudat said, grinning and baring all his teeth – which, to be honest, were rather the worse for wear. “The very halls of Paradise would consider your presence an honour, Miss Regale.”

Hmph, this is Sir Prescott all over again, Lavie thought, though she rejoiced inwardly, for Striker had told her that when the discussion moved to the stage of such compliments, their goal had been achieved.

“You flatter me, Shaudat Bey,” she said, modestly, bowing her head, and eliciting a pleased smile from Marlborough. “I know I am a stranger in your land, but I ask this, trusting in the goodness of your heart and the compassion of the Deity.”

If Shaudat could glow any brighter, he would have transformed into a light bulb at this point. “It shall be as you request, my dear lady, and may the Deity show you his favour,” he said. “Now, of course, there is the little matter of a gratuity for services rendered, since I am but your humble servant. I trust you have made the arrangements, gentlemen.”

With a silent nod, Striker unwrapped the package he was carrying – which seemed, to all outward appearances, to be a wedding present – and opened it, revealing a black leather case. Doctor Shaudat

opened it with a flourish, examined the contents thereof – five million Commonwealth dollars, in bonds from the Royal Bank of Galvenia – then closed the case with satisfaction.

“Quite satisfactory, my dear Miss Regale,” he said, nodding. He placed the case inside a safe on the wall behind him, locked it, and then reached into the pocket of his tunic, from which he withdrew a large brass key. “This will give you access to the rear gate of our place of safety, and I will instruct the guards to withdraw for two hours, from ten hours to noon. It is all I can do, but I trust it will be sufficient.”

“Two – oh....I am grateful, Shaudat Bey,” Lavie said, softly. “You have the eternal gratitude of the House of Regale.”

“A noble house, judging by the beauty and nobility of its offspring,” Shaudat said, with a bow. “And now, let us not dwell on such ugly things. Our Republic is a place of colours and lights, and I invite to you join us in our little celebration. Come with me, my friends.”

“Impossible, my dear Inspector,” Fossen said, mildly. “That boy has a lot of flaws, but he is not a criminal. And besides, the sword does not belong to him. It is mine, and he has it only as long as he remains my disciple – or unless I bequeath it to him.”

“You still need a license to own a magical weapon, Mr. Fowler, or Fossen, or whatever your name is,” Bosley said. The old man’s studied attitude of calm annoyed him, and in his book, men with assumed names were criminals until proved otherwise.

“If you dislike the name I have chosen as a Wanderer, you may use the one I was born with,” Fossen said, his eyes twinkling as he bent over his cauldron. “And now, my dear friends, what would you say to a little soup?”

“It smells quite delightful, I must say,” Anne Lancaster said, inhaling deeply. “And I do hope you’re happy in your new home, Julianne, my dear.”

“Quite so, Mrs. Lancaster,” Julianne said, with a smile, as she helped Fossen serve the soup. “Mr. Fossen has been very good to me – as good as you were, if I may say so. I only wish I knew where my child was.”

“Oh, we know that, Mrs. Robertson,” Bosley said, looking grim. “It’s why we came here – besides the little matter of a young lad who’s shooting off his sword where he shouldn’t.”

Julianne winced. “Please, Inspector,” she said, slowly, “I would prefer if you did not address me by that name.”

“My apologies, ma’am,” Bosley said, as he drank his soup greedily. “Goodness, this is quite fine stuff. Did you make it, or did the old man help you?”

"I make my own soup, Inspector," Fossen said, chuckling into his beard. "And if you want a license, here is mine." He took a scroll of parchment from a shelf on the wall, unrolled it, and handed it to Bosley.

"Hmm....John Fowler, Lieutenant-Colonel in His Majesty's Army....legal owner of the sword.....sold by Y. Nikando of the Zion Merchant's Guild....authorized by Sir Edwin Fairfax." Bosley muttered, as he read it. "You're a slippery customer, Fowler. And if Fairfax and the Zion can vouch for it, it can't be what we're looking for, ma'am."

"Certainly not," Jonas Aquary said, with a smile. "Whatever harmed my beloved daughter, it wasn't that sword, Inspector. Trust me on that. I know the Nikandos, and they're trustworthy merchants."

"You said you had been able to trace Miss Robertson," Anne said, as she finished the last of her soup. "Where is she?"

"Unfortunately, she's in a place that we can't touch with ease," Bosley explained. "She's in Chuselwock Manor, along with her grandmother."

"Chuselwock Manor?" Julianne said, surprised. "Good heavens!"

"What is she doing there?" Jonas asked, curiously.

"We do not know. All we know is that Sir Prescott is far more slippery than you, Fowler. For over a month now, proofs of his treachery have been presented to the Parliament and the House of Lords. Even the King knows about it. Hell, even the darned Zion know about it, and boy, aren't they laughing at us. But for some reason, they hesitate to take action against him. Mark my words, someone's on the take here."

"Bribery?" Anne said, mildly.

"Or blackmail, your ladyship. After all, wars breed secrets and corruption of their own, and it's hard to believe that everyone except Prescott has clean hands. Besides, it was that Palace policeman, Trask, who betrayed our King and Queen at Issachar – and he's being treated with kid gloves, too. I'd have hanged him if I were King, let me tell you."

"That makes sense," Fossen said. "But that still doesn't explain one thing: what does Prescott want with a young girl like Julianne's child? She couldn't be of any importance to him."

"She was Ryan Eramond's sweetheart," Anne said, a little reluctantly, "and we know that Prescott had a hand in Ryan's imprisonment." Ever since she had heard the story of Ryan's capture from her daughter and son-in-law – and the news of Lavie's departure – she burned with the desire to walk up to Chuselwock Manor herself, and give both father and son a piece of her mind. "Perhaps Prescott, who is a notorious womanizer, wanted the poor girl for himself."

“I will not stand for that,” Julianne said, indignantly. “My child has suffered enough at the hands of her father. I know the pain she has gone through, being coerced or cajoled into lying for *his* sake. I will not let her fall into the arms of another bandit, even if he bears a title.”

“Brave words, ma’am,” Bosley said, cautiously avoiding his earlier mistake. “But how do we proceed?”

“We could ask your disciple, Juno, to challenge the man to a duel,” Jonas suggested, with a laugh. “From what you tell us, he seems to be quite a dangerous fighter.”

“Well, as long as he’s hunting bandits, I have no objection,” Bosley replied. “But I’m still not comfortable with the idea of using a blade-for-hire to deal with Prescott. Remember, Prescott’s a big fish. He’s avoided prosecution from the Galvenian Government till now, even after two of the papers have got wind of his actions, and Sir Cornelius censured him in Parliament. We need to handle this delicately. Besides, we don’t have much time. Remember, right before the war, a convicted criminal – Kodenai – managed to escape from one of our most secure facilities. If Robert escapes....”

“Infinity forbid!” Julianne said, horrified.

“I think I might have an idea, Inspector, if you would care to hear it,” Fossen said, as he poured out second helpings of soup for Jonas, Anne and Bosley.

“Well, tell us about it, Fowler. For all your silliness, you’re a veteran of His Majesty’s Army, so you ought to be able to help,” Bosley replied, drinking his soup with gusto.

“It’s simple,” Fowler said. “We just need the help of one more person...”

The front door swung open, and a young man in a cloak entered, hanging up his sword above the door as he did. He looked at the group before him with a mixture of mild surprise and disdain. “I did not know you were planning a tea-party today, old man,” he said.

“More like a soup-party, my son,” Jonas said.

“Ah, Juno, just the man I want,” Fowler said. “Look here, you need to help us. You know Julianne, of course. We’re going to try and rescue her child.”

“The future of Galvenia is in danger, old man,” Juno said, coldly. “There is no time for this.”

“Juno,” Fossen said, kindly but firmly, “there is always a time to protect the innocent. Now, listen to me.....”

It was Lavie’s first ever journey in a motor vehicle, but the sandy roads and half-broken highways of the Cosmopolitan desert were hardly an auspicious venue for it. She felt as if every single bone in her body was being jarred out of place, and held on to the metal door for dear life.

"It's like riding a horse," Marlborough said, clinging to a hand-hold on the roof himself. "It gets better with practice."

Trying to distract herself, Lavie looked at her bow, which was lying perched against the driver's seat – the driver being Chief Broyude, late of the *HMS Alexandra*.

"I've been in typhoons that were easier to handle than this," he growled. "This kind of transport will never catch on, mark my words."

"It's a question of the road, Broyude," Striker said, holding on to his Zion University cap. "Once proper highways are laid, motor vehicles will be the wave of the future. You might try suggesting the idea to your father, Miss Lavie, if he's looking to recover those five million dollars."

"Says you," Broyude said, shaking his head.

Lavie giggled. "Oh, dear," she said. "I wonder what Daddy would think about a ride like this!" Her eyes returned to the bow, and to a large, sweet-smelling flower which was tied near its handle, as she remembered how it had got there. It had been earlier that morning...

"Striker, I must have a word with you," Marlborough said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Just one word, then," Striker said, with a laugh.

"You're quite amusing when you try," Marlborough replied. "Look here, Striker – I think this is a bad idea."

"Taking Miss Regale with us?" Striker replied. "Reverend, with all due respect, I disagree. That woman – and yes, she is a woman now – is ready to walk through fire and water to rescue Mr. Eramond, and I don't think Al-Mu'afa is anything as bad as that. I couldn't refuse her with a clear conscience."

"With all due respect, Striker, you're a young man. You probably joined up for all this in a spirit of adventure, and mystery, and derring-do, like young Alexander's Lieutenant Lightning. But do you even understand what you're doing? Suppose you're caught, and Miss Regale and I are left alone, for example. What would become of us?"

"With all due respect, Marlborough, you're a celibate old man, whose family consists of old Itarian and Cosmopolitan scrolls. If you had someone you cared for – a child, a wife, a comrade – you would understand what Miss Regale felt, and you would not stand in her way either."

"This isn't just about Miss Regale, Striker," Marlborough said, solemnly. "There are larger issues involved..."

“Marlborough, let us leave politics out of this,” Striker said, shaking his head. “For the moment, our mission is to rescue young Eramond. And besides, Miss Regale’s a fighter. She’s not the type to pine away and die for a lost love. The most humane thing to do is to give her a chance to fight.”

Behind a door, and able to hear the entire conversation, was Lavie, who was with someone we had earlier met in Galvenia.

“Do I really have to wear this, Naomi?” Lavie said, laughing hard. “I – I mean, my friend Bernadette could probably pull it off, but....”

“Now, don’t complain, young lady, and be grateful I just happened to be passing through at the end of my pilgrimage,” Naomi said, as she fastened the coif around Lavie’s head. “And I must say it’s a good idea. Marlborough’s already told me about it. He and Wolfman will be entering dressed as priests, so it makes sense that you dress as a nun. Though why you want to wear that silly thing under it....”

“It’s not silly, Naomi,” Lavie said, flushing, “and I have my reasons. God, I look like a spectacle. I wish Bernadette could see me now.”

“Thanks to Memory Crystals, that’s now possible!” Tremfein said, and Lavie was blinded for a minute by a flash of light. He handed the Crystal to her. “There you are, Miss, you can show that to your friend whenever you want. Those Republicans are clever. Now, when you rescue Rexford, there...”

“Ryan!” Lavie said.

“Ah yes, Miss. As I was saying, I want to interview him, to write his story for a play. I can just imagine the title already: ‘Randolph Eramond, the Prisoner of Al-Mu’afa!’”

“Look here, Mr. Tremfein, do you do that on purpose?” Lavie protested. “His name is Ryan, not Rexford, or Randolph, or Rhett, or Rigobert, or....”

“Ah, Rigobert’s a good one, I haven’t used it before,” Tremfein said, laughing to himself. “Rhett sounds girly, though. No one would believe in a hero called Rhett.”

“Don’t mind him, young lady,” Naomi said. “My son-in-law’s always silly. Now look at yourself in the mirror, my dear girl, and study those two pleats carefully. Those are the pockets for your bow and arrow.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Goodness, who’s that?” Tremfein said, opening the door. “Well, hello, little girl. Whose treasure are you?”

Phemie giggled. "I'm the daughter of the lady of the house," she said, proudly. "I've come to see – Oh, my goddess! Should I call you Sister Lavie now?" she said, admiring the habit in which Lavie was now clad.

"Phemie, what are you doing up so early?" Lavie exclaimed.

"I came to give you this," she said, shyly, holding a flower out. Lavie sniffed it appreciatively. "Do you like it?"

"It's lovely," Lavie said, enthusiastically. "But why now?"

Phemie looked glum for a moment. "Because Mama said you're going away to save someone, and I don't know if you'll come back," she said, looking down. "I didn't want you to go without seeing you, Sister Lavie. Whenever Papa leaves, I'm always up to say goodbye, even when he has to leave at midnight."

"That's – that's very sweet of you," Lavie said, touched. "What's the flower for?"

"It's a Cosmopolitan rose," Phemie explained, looking rather like her brother Hercules as she took on a 'lecturing' tone. "There's an old story that Mama told me, about a soldier who went off to battle, and before he left, his wife gave him one to tie to his sword. When he and his friends were fighting, they were all caught, except him. It seems the enemy chief liked the flower so much that he spared him, Lavie. Because of the story, soldiers' wives give them to soldiers before they leave for battle, to bring them good luck. Mama always gives Papa one when he has to go. Tie it to your bow, Lavie, and come back to all of us, please. You'll always be my friend." She sniffed.

Lavie felt a lump in her throat. "Phemie, you're a darling," she said, kneeling down and embracing her. "And I know I'll come back. Don't cry, please. I'll come back, and we'll play the piano like we did last night. I'll even introduce you to Ryan..."

"That's Scene One right there," Tremfein said, applauding. "Lovely dialogue by the little girl, though I'll have to polish it a little."

"Tremfein," Naomi said, irritably, "do shut up, and leave those dear children alone."

"We're almost there," Striker said, "and it looks like our friend Shaudat has kept faith with us."

Looking out of the window, Lavie could see a large, white building, with domes that looked like the Temples of the Deity which the Professor had shown her on the way. It was amazingly quiet – besides the sounds of the engine and their voices, the place seemed deserted.

"Calm before the storm, Marlborough," Striker said, as Broyude parked the vehicle.

"Now, do you understand what you have to do, Broyude?" Marlborough said.

“Damned if I don’t,” Broyude said, gruffly. “Our men are waiting a little distance away. If you’re not out in two hours, or if that Deity-worshipping sheep-stealer sends in his goons before that, I’ll fire a flare, and they’ll come and help out. If you need me earlier, use the radio.” He patted the compact receiver in his pocket.

“Excellent,” Striker said. “Come along, Sister Lavender. Our religious duties await us.” He handed her the key. “Do the honours.”

“Good luck, girl,” Broyude said, kindly.

There was a small metal door set in the wall, and Lavie unlocked it without difficulty. It creaked loudly as she pushed it open, and they found themselves in an empty room.

“1003 hours, if you’re keeping time,” Striker said, looking at his watch. “There’s a light down that corridor. Let’s move ahead. Marlborough, stay behind me, and shield Miss Lavie.”

“What if they ambush us?” Marlborough said.

“Do you distrust old Show-Me-Your-Money so much, Marlborough?” Striker said, with a laugh. “It’s the journey *out* that’s supposed to be tricky, not the way in.”

They entered the corridor, where they were greeted by a young man, covered from shoulder to foot in a black robe. “Ah, I see we have visitors,” he said. “You will leave *Al-Mu’afa* at noon. What is your business?”

“We are here to bring spiritual comfort to a prisoner who is ill,” Marlborough said. “I am the Reverend Terence Marlborough, this is Deacon Wolfgang Striker, and this is Sister Lavender, of the Order of St. Mikhail.”

Lavie stifled a giggle. *Poor Sister Miriam, that’s her order! She’d be horrified if she knew about this!*

“Go ahead,” the man said. As they walked forward, they heard a door close behind them, followed by the turn of a key.

“Was – was that supposed to happen?” Lavie said, nervously.

“I have no idea, Miss Lavie,” Striker said, with a wink. “At any rate, we can just shoot the lock out if they try any monkey business.”

Something fluttered past Lavie, and she jumped back, startled.

“A bat?” Marlborough said, curiously, but then he, too, jumped back and ducked. It was a large bird, with eyes whose red glare made Lavie’s seem tame by comparison, and with sharp claws.

“Very nice,” Striker said. “Let me clip its wing.” He fired, but missed, as the bird changed course at the last minute and flew past him.

“Damn it, Striker,” Marlborough said, as its claws brushed his priestly robe, “it seems to be fond of me! What’s that scraping sound?”

“Take that!” Lavie exclaimed, and the bird suddenly burst into flame in mid-air, struck by an arrow. It collapsed to the ground, the fire consuming it and leaving only a pile of ashes and bones.

“I told you so, Marlborough,” Striker said, smiling at Lavie.

“You can be quite insufferable sometimes, Striker,” Marlborough said, rising and dusting off his robes. “How many more of the things are there?”

“Stand back, and let me check,” Striker said, moving ahead down the length of the corridor. “Nothing on this stretch. We can move on.”

They moved ahead, only to find that the passage was barred by a gate.

“Child’s play, as my colleague Burnfist would say,” Striker said, shooting the lock, which did not put up much resistance. He pushed the heavy gate open, and they found themselves in a room which looked like a gymnasium.

“I didn’t know the Republicans went in for gymnastics,” Marlborough quipped. “Isn’t that a Varald specialty?”

“Miss Lavie, look out!” Striker said, pushing her out of the way. A bullet sped past them, missing them narrowly, and striking the wall.

“Wh – There’s no one here!” Lavie said, frightened. “Who shot us?”

“Lie low, Miss Lavie,” Marlborough said.

“Ah, I have it,” Striker said, and fired his pistol. There was the clink of metal on metal, and he made a sound indicative of frustration. “It’s a turret gun, probably aimed by someone in the next room.”

“Through that crack, right?” Lavie said, clambering to her knees. “If you can’t hit the gun...”

“Miss Lavie, be careful!” Striker said, but another arrow went sailing through the air, entering the large crack beside the gun. There was a loud scream of pain, followed by the sound of footsteps.

“Lavie, where did you learn to shoot like that?” Striker said, awed.

“Ah, I see you’ve dropped the ‘Miss’, and that makes me happy,” Lavie said, breathing hard. “The Mann Island Archery Academy, if you must know.”

Striker crept forward, and dislodged the gun from the makeshift stand it rested on. "Always good to have another weapon," he said. "Marlborough, can you shoot?"

"Only pheasants," the Reverend said, shuddering. "And that was quite a while ago."

"Good enough for me," Striker said. "Lavie, stand at the side of that door. There may be something behind it, so I'll shoot out the lock and then we'll take a look."

He listened at the door, then stepped back. "There's something there," he said. "Perhaps a dog. I'll shoot the lock, as we planned, and Miss Lavie, stand back – some of these Republican dogs can jump quite far. Keep a safe distance, and be ready to shoot."

Lavie scraped another arrow against the red bangle on her wrist, and waited at the other end of the deserted gymnasium. Striker fired, and the door fell open, as if the creature behind it had been waiting for that very signal. It was more like a pig than a dog, and its upper row of teeth were a curious greenish colour. It took a few tentative steps, then charged towards Marlborough.

"Good heavens!" the Reverend said, scurrying away.

Striker fired, and the boar – if that was what it was – was hit in the flank. It growled, and began to move more slowly.

"Don't worry, Father!" Lavie said, firing an arrow which struck the creature in the neck. Its skin caught fire, and it began to squeal rather piteously.

"That's a cruel weapon you have, Lavie," Striker said, firing and hitting the boar in the head. The bullet struck it neatly, and it fell over to one side, quivering for a few moments before lying motionless, still burning slowly.

"It was trying to attack the Professor," Lavie protested. "It was him or that piggish thing!"

"Quite right, my dear," Marlborough said. "And on second thoughts, Striker, I think I'll take that weapon."

"Ah, you're older and wiser now," Striker teased, then reached in his sack for a box of matches and a lantern. "The tunnel ahead seems to go down into the prison itself, if what I've been told is true," he observed. "Marlborough, you'll have to be the beacon here, since Lavie and I need our hands free to shoot."

"Is this some sort of obstacle course?" Lavie said, annoyed. "What kind of idiot thought this up? A bird, a pig....what next?"

"Ah, it's an old Republican tradition," Marlborough said, as he picked up the lantern. "In the days of the old Republican kings, it was something of an art form to create labyrinths, usually with various obstacles

– mazes, wild animals, arrows – in which a usurper or an unsuccessful royal claimant would be placed. Few would survive, of course, but anyone who made it through would be considered as destined to be a future ruler, because the Deity-worshippers are fatalistic. This portion of *Al-Mu'afa* is a modern Republican's tribute to their history. Sometimes, I am told, political prisoners are actually made to pass through it, with only a scimitar for protection."

"Ugh," Lavie said. "These Republicans don't sound like nice people at all."

"Could we dispense with the lectures, Marlborough?" Striker said, with a laugh. "Time is of the essence."

"A valid point, Wolfgang," Marlborough said, as he walked forward, between Striker and Lavie. The tunnel began to narrow, and at one point, they had to get on their hands and knees and crawl.

"I'm.....not sure this is such a good idea," Lavie said, fear in her eyes.

"Miss Lavender has a point," Marlborough said, looking at a scratch on his hand nervously.

Striker sighed. "Honestly, I'm not too enamoured of something this claustrophobic," he admitted. "Let me see. Lavie, you and the Professor can move back a little. I'll go as far as I can, and see what lies ahead."

"All...right," Lavie said, perspiration running down her face.

"Tell me, Miss Lavender," Marlborough said, wiping his own face with a handkerchief, once Striker was out of earshot, "don't you think our young friend is a little too ready to take risks?"

"It's his job, isn't it?" Lavie said.

"Perhaps," Marlborough said. "But I wonder...."

"It's a dead end!" Striker's voice called out. "Damn. There must be a hidden exit somewhere, but I can't find it." He clambered back to where his companions were. "Republican kings indeed, Marlborough. Do those legends say anything about blind alleys?"

"Such a door would either be on the roof or the floor of the tunnel, if my memory does not fail me," Marlborough said, "but they would be locked...."

"Ah, I have it!" Striker said, as he knocked on various portions of the ceiling. "Marlborough, bring me the lantern."

"It" turned out to be a thick metal plate with four symbols embossed on it.

"Is this some sort of game?" Lavie said, laughing suddenly, as the comic aspect of the situation struck her. "Let's see. This is obviously a crown, like King Arlbert's. And this looks like a highway. Or maybe a river."

"I think the idea is to press them in the right order," Marlborough said, "but your eyesight is better than mine, Miss Lavender. What else do you see?"

"Hmm, this one is a building, or a house. And the last one is a sceptre," Lavie said, peering more closely, and leaning against the wall of the narrow tunnel for support.

"Ah, I have it," Marlborough said.

"You do?" Striker said. "Darn, I thought I had it first."

"These are traditional symbols for the four ages of mankind's history," Marlborough said. "Wanderers, Cities, Kingdoms, and Empires."

"Hey, Gran told me about that," Lavie said, with a smile. "So we have to press them in the right order, right? Let me try. Wanderers first." She touched the highway and felt it sink in easily. "Then Cities". The house followed suit. "Now which is Kingdoms? The crown, right?"

"You learn quickly, Miss Lavender," Marlborough said, admiringly. "The crown is for kings, and the sceptre for emperors, unless these Republicans don't know their symbols."

"Here we go!" Lavie said, brightly. The crown and then the sceptre sunk in, and there was a *click* as the panel moved slightly upwards.

"It's jammed!" Lavie said. "What do we do now?"

"Ah, Miss Lavender, this is where our old men come in useful. After the Empires comes the Commonwealth. Which encompasses all those four ages. We have to touch all the four together, now."

"All the four? Who came up with this?" Striker said, with a laugh. Working together, all four symbols were pressed down, and the door swung open upwards, leaving the tunnel bathed in blue light.

"Hip, hip, hurray!" Lavie said, standing with her head out of the opening and clapping. "I can see a corridor, and I see what look like cells here! We're closer to Ryan!"

"Then lead the way, Lavie," Striker said, happily, as the three of them clambered up to the next level...

It was now Ryan's seventh week in *Al-Mu'afa*, but he had lost track of time. He had been forced to keep to bed for the last week, as his fever had begun to reach incapacitating levels, and when the old man saw that he could barely stand, he had sent for the doctor – by which he meant, not Anfri Shaudat, but one of his younger assistants.

"Desert fever," he had said, in clipped tones, after completing a cursory examination. "He'll need the usual herbs and some feeding up, but something doesn't feel right."

“What do you mean?” the guard had said, nervously.

“Normally, desert fever shouldn’t have such an effect on a young lad like him,” the doctor said. “Have you been torturing him? I wouldn’t put it beyond you.”

“You’ve examined him,” the guard protested. “He was whipped once, but otherwise, he’s lived a much better life than many of the poor in our cities.”

“Then there’s only one other explanation – his spirit is broken,” the doctor had said, shaking his head. “Something or someone that he believed in has now deserted him, and he has – given up.”

“Don’t be sentimental,” the guard said. “He’s a prisoner. Prisoners are tough.”

“I mean what I say,” the doctor said. “Unless someone or something gives him hope again, I cannot guarantee a cure, even with my medicines.”

“You mean....”

“Yes. I mean you will soon have an empty cell on your hands, guard. Find the man who put him here, and ask him if this is really his design – for if it is not, you will answer for it.” Leaving behind a bottle of medicine, he had turned on his heel and left.

The guard had swallowed nervously, and sent out a wire, but the response did not make him feel much better. He was told to leave things as they were. Despite his chosen occupation, that order sat uncomfortably with him.

That evening, Percival King had come by. Seeing Ryan’s condition, he had not stayed long, and had flipped through the Holy Book he had given Ryan idly. Before leaving, he had spoken kindly.

“Keep up hope, my boy,” he had said. “You might find it profitable to reflect on the Book of Origins, particularly chapter eleven. The Infinity is still mindful of you.” And it seemed to Ryan that he had winked.

Too tired to argue the point, Ryan had waited till supper, and after eating his miserable meal, he had opened the book. It made little sense to him – it was a long and rather pointless story about why God was called the Purpose in ancient days – but what almost made him fall out of his bunk was the bookmark that King had apparently placed there. The front depicted Lord Geraud in his imperial regalia, but on the back, a few words were written – *or am I just hallucinating?* – in a familiar hand.

We’ll be there to rescue you tomorrow, you goof. Stay safe, all right?

Lavie? Lavie?? Ryan thought, as he closed his eyes and clutched his aching head. *I must be really sick. I’m seeing things. This is the end, Mum, Dad....Henrik, Armin.....Marianne.....Lavie.....I’m sorry I couldn’t see you all one last time. I’m tired. I’m so tired....*

And, mercifully, he fell asleep.

The next morning, he could not stand when the guard came to his cell door, and he swallowed the medicine the doctor had left him only with difficulty.

“The chaplain isn’t coming today, boy,” he had said, chuckling. “But he’s impressed by your spiritual interests, and he’s sent a bunch of Italian priests – who want to visit our prison and save souls, the poor idiots – to see you instead. I’m sure you’ll have a lovely time. Did you even hear any of that? Well, enjoy your nap. It might be a long one.”

Too tired to remonstrate, Ryan wondered if the guard had really spoken, or if he was now *hearing* things and not just seeing them. He reached for the book again, but the bookmark fluttered out of it, and the wind blew it away, out of his reach.

I can only reach it if I crawl, he thought. And, Infinity help me, I don’t have the strength for that. So much for doing the right thing. Grandpa...

It was precisely at that moment that Lavie and her companions were climbing up the tunnel.

“Agent Striker...” Lavie began.

“Yes, Lavie?” he said, sympathetically.

“I – I don’t want to sound like a bad novel,” she said, slowly, “but – these prisons aren’t nice places, right? Ryan may be ill, or even....”

A look of understanding passed between Striker and Marlborough – who had spent the previous evening closeted with King, and had emerged looking grave. “Well, Lavie,” Striker said, with a grin, “if something like that had happened, we would have known. Even a man like Shaudat would ensure that. But it is possible that he may be ill. The Republic is a strange place, full of fevers as well as colours and tastes and sounds.”

“I see,” Lavie said, in a trembling voice.

“Now, Lavie, don’t get upset. Remember, whether he’s ill or not, he’s been in solitary confinement for seven weeks. That’s enough to drive a grown man out of his wits. So even if he’s ill, please try not to display too much emotion; it might just exhaust him further.”

“But what if he’s....dying?” Lavie said, wiping away a tear.

“Then you’re permitted to scream,” Striker said, cheerfully, placing an arm around Lavie’s shoulders. “I was jesting, Lavie. Forgive me. I’m sure Ryan will be all right, even if he’s rather the worse for wear.”

“Well said, Wolfgang,” Marlborough said, approvingly, as they moved down the corridor.

“We’ll have to search this block completely, and we need to find Mr. Casales, too,” Striker said. “For now, we can only go this way. Follow me.”

As they walked down the strangely silent passage, they grew aware of a strange clicking sound, which grew louder.

“Goodness, what’s that?” Marlborough said.

“Quick, lie flat on the floor!” Striker said, as arrows began to fly in various directions. The flurry lasted about ten minutes, and then stopped completely.

“Very amusing,” Lavie said, glaring at the now-empty crossbows that – on a closer look – lined what originally looked like simple ventilator grilles. “Just how much more of this place is there?”

“Miss Lavender!” Marlborough cried out, as two more large birds swooped down on them. Lavie, unflinching, and without using the bangle, fired an arrow that hit one of them in the chest, sending it into a tail-spin.

“Don’t mess with Lavie Regale, buster,” she said, as she scraped a second and then a third arrow against her bangle, and fired the first at the second bird, which was about to attack Striker. It burst into flame, and fell down.

“Th – thank you, Lavie,” Striker said.

“A deputy doesn’t complain, Agent,” Lavie said, proudly. “Follow me! Ryan can’t be far! We must find the way!”

They had proceeded into a block of cells, most of which were empty, when Lavie’s eye suddenly caught a glance of a familiar face.

“Juan! Agent, Juan’s here!” Lavie said, happily. And indeed, Juan Casales was sitting in his cell, reading a book. The moment he saw Lavie, he leaped up from his bed and waved his arms excitedly.

“Senorita Lavie!” he exclaimed. “What in the name of the merciful Infinity are you doing here?”

“We’re here to save you, Juan,” Lavie said, cheerfully. Striker fired at the lock, but it remained unyielding.

“Good thing I came prepared,” Striker said, reaching inside his bag. “Stand back, Juan.” As Juan obeyed, still in a happy daze, Striker hurled a grenade at the bars of the cell, and they exploded into wreckage. Juan rushed out, almost leaping for joy. “Senorita, how did you find me?”

“Call it a mixture of money, foolishness, and just dumb luck, Juan,” Lavie said, with a wink. “Now stay with us, we’ll have to get you back to Carmen safely! Do you have any idea where the others are?”

“The guard I had was from San Delas, and he was willing to talk,” Juan said, calmly. “By Saint Franco, it’s good to be out of there! There are two more of us here – a man called Downs in the row just behind, and Senor Ryan near the rear.”

“We’ll get them all,” Striker said, a determined look on his face. “Here, take this, Juan.” He pulled a short sword out of his bag, and handed it to him.

“Thank you, Senor,” Juan said, as they moved forward. Charlie Downs was found with ease, and released in quite the same way. He embraced his fellow soldier gratefully.

“I know where our possessions are, Sir,” he told Striker. “They’re locked away on the level below this. I heard two of the guards discussing it. But we’ve got to find old Ryan first! Oh, if I had my gun...”

“Marlborough, give him yours,” Striker suggested, and Marlborough agreed that this was a capital idea.

However, as they made their way to the last row, they almost stumbled over a bundle wrapped in a blanket. Striker, bending down, noted to his horror that it was their friend, Anfri Shaudat, with a large knife wound in his chest. Lavie shuddered and turned away.

“Striker?” Shaudat said, blankly.

“Shaudat Bey, what happened?” Marlborough exclaimed.

“They were....watching us....” Shaudat said, struggling to speak. “Can’t.....someone.....wants you all gone.....the mercenaries.....surround the building.....”

“And Ryan?” Lavie cried out. “What about Ryan?”

“Let me.....look at you once more, girl.....let me look upon....something pleasant.....before I go to the Deity.....guarded.....four.....armed.....”

His head sank bank, and he remained motionless.

“He’s gone,” Striker said, checking his pulse. “I wish I knew who did this.”

“Poor man,” Lavie said, shaking her head.

“Anyway, we can’t go back, now,” Marlborough said. “We have to make the attempt, even if that means that we die trying, to quote Miss Lavender.”

“Yes, we must,” Lavie said. “And if they try to kill us, we’ll fight back!”

“I’m with you, Miss,” Charlie Downs said, feeling a little envious of Ryan. “Rule Galvenia!”

“Let us move forward, Senor,” Juan said.

"Give me a minute," Striker said, as he removed the radio transmitter from his belt. "I have a couple of calls to make." He adjusted the dial. "Broyude, can you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," Broyude said. "Should we get ready for action?"

"No, Broyude, you're coming in with us. Blow that door open if you need to, follow the open passage, and come on in. We're going to storm this place."

"You're crazy," Broyude's voice said. "What if they encircle the place?"

"I have backup. Broyude, do as I say. If you're doubtful, then send half your men in."

There was a silence at the end of the line. "I'll send Sergeant Burns and ten of the men in, but I'm hanged if I send in more," he said, finally.

"Good enough." Striker broke contact, then adjusted the dial again. "Lieutenant Shemei, do you hear me?"

"Yes," the voice replied. "Is that you, Agent Striker?"

"Indeed. Now listen to me, Shemei. I know your boys are raring for action, and so are you. Move in and encircle *Al-Mu'afa*, and don't let any of those desert scorpions get close. We're organizing a rescue here. Do you understand? Can the ten of you hold the position?"

"Yes, sir!" the voice said, proudly. "We'll be there in half an hour, no less."

"Good," Striker said. "My men are poised for action, and we have support. Let's go."

"I'm ready! Those four armed men are no match for us," Lavie said. "Let me just change into something more appropriate." With a quick motion, she untied the knots that held her nun's habit together at the back, and it fell off, revealing the huntress' dress she had bought months ago.

"Miss Lavender," Marlborough said, as they marched forward, "you certainly have a flair for the dramatic."

Despite his weariness, Ryan could hear the sound of footsteps in the passageway outside his cell.

Someone's coming, he thought. That doctor again.....not that he'll help much. I'm done for this time.

There was a low growl, and then the sound of the same footsteps moving away.

What...was that? I'm....really imagining things here. Or maybe I'm just dreaming.

Suddenly, an image of Princess Carranya came to his mind.

Now I know....how she felt, when she was sick and wounded...., he thought. He tried to prop himself up using his good arm, but could not quite manage to do so.

What was it she said.....a hand that was held out. Marianne's hand. The one she took away.....from me....and I'll never know why....

Turning his head painfully, he looked out of the windows of the cell, then turned away in horror.

Sweet Infinity...I'm going mad. I'm seeing things....Please....let me feel one....hand.....held out, before I.....

And he lost consciousness, again.

"He's almost gone," the guard said, walking away from the cell, in the company of another, younger guard. "Don't ask me why they want us to do these things."

"It gives me the creeps," the younger man said.

"Freeze!"

"What was that?" the guard said.

An arrow soared through the air and struck the hat he was wearing, which burst into flame. His hair soon caught fire, and he began to scream.

"We're close now!" Striker said. "Good shot, Lavie."

"Must you aim at their heads, my dear Miss Lavender?" Marlborough protested.

Charlie Downs knocked the man's hat off his head with the end of his gun. "Where's Ryan?" he demanded.

"The flames...Help me...." the man moaned.

"I can put that out if you tell us where Mr. Eramond is," Striker said, staring at the burning man.

"Behind you...next row.....no good," he said. "The Beast...."

"The Beast?" Lavie said.

"An old name for the Devil," Marlborough said.

"Good enough," Striker said, firing a Chill Cartridge at the man's head, causing his hair and face to literally freeze. Juan could not help laughing.

The younger guard, terrified, drew his gun, but Juan lunged forward and disarmed him.

“Shall I shoot him too, Agent Wolfgang?” Lavie said, looking at the young guard with a red glint in her eyes – a gleam that filled him with an overpowering desire to run. “Take us to Ryan.”

“I – can’t,” the man said, helplessly.

“Would you mind....*repeating that?*” Lavie said, softly.

“The Beast will devour me,” the man wailed.

“Then walk behind us, if you’re scared of birds and pigs,” Marlborough said, mildly. “Just tell us where he is. You have already seen what we are capable of.”

“All...right,” the man said, as he led the five of them towards a corridor. As they turned into it, the guard turned to run, but was prevented from doing so by Striker, who tripped him up and then shot him with another Chill Cartridge.

“There’ll probably be more of those vultures here,” Striker said. “Have your bow ready, Lavie.”

Suddenly, a low growl echoed through the entire hall.

“Wh – what was that?” Charlie and Lavie asked, almost in chorus, and then there was a sudden movement just ahead of them.

“Sweet flaming Infinity!” Striker exclaimed, his large jaw dropping.

“Ohmygosh! *Ohmygosh!*” Lavie exclaimed, her mouth wide open, her arm hanging limply by her side.

In front of them, its fangs bared, was a four-armed beast – a beast unlike any of them had ever seen.

“Damnation, they’re coming! Striker, you fool!” Broyude cursed a little more, as only a sailor can truly curse. “And Burns and her men are now in the prison!”

“We’ll hold the line all the same, Lucas,” Captain Baker said, loading his rifle.

“Never give up, Harold!” Broyude said, with a smile, as he loaded the grenade launcher that was his second favourite possession. With a deft movement, he fired, and the grenade exploded in front of the first three horsemen who were bearing down upon them. Two of them were thrown from their mounts instantly, and the third was left hanging on for dear life.

“Good work,” Baker said. “Now, fire, and may your aim be true, men!”

He raised his hand, and the Marine riflemen fired in rapid succession. Four more horsemen fell, but the mercenaries were now close enough to inflict damage of their own.

“There are.....curses, about forty more of them,” Broyude growled, as he looked into his telescope. He loaded another grenade and fired, and one of the horses was killed instantly.

“That’s a little too many, even with our firepower! Lie low and fire when you can,” Baker commanded. But, just as his men were about to obey, a second cloud of dust emerged in the distance beneath them.

“Imps of the Pits, it’s the Zion men!” Broyude exclaimed. “There are only ten, they’re going to get cut to pieces!”

“Captain, what’s happening?” one of the men shouted. “Bloody hell, it’s a dust-storm!”

“Just what we needed,” Broyude groaned. “Cover your faces, men! Heads down! None of us can see...”

But as he spoke, he noticed that the dust devil was encircling the mercenaries, but left the Zion at the rear and his men in front untouched. There was the sound of frantic shouts and horses neighing, as the mercenary army was completely engulfed in a cloud of dust.

“Fire at will, men,” Lieutenant Shemei shouted, and the four riflemen with him began to fire. The shouts and the neighs slowly became less and less audible, until only the sound of the whirling wind and the dust could be heard.

“Krakens of Meldia,” Baker said, amazed, “what was that?”

The storm lifted almost as soon as it appeared, and lying between the two groups of soldiers were the corpses of mercenaries and horses. A few men, their turbans torn from their heads, stared wildly at the advancing Zion men, and were captured before they could react.

“Good morning, Captain,” Lieutenant Shemei said, saluting. “It’s an honour.”

“Likewise,” said Baker, still thunderstruck by what had just happened. “If you don’t mind my asking, how did that storm come up at precisely the right spot?”

“What Nature can do, Captain,” Shemei said, as he was joined by five of his men, “a wind mage can duplicate, especially out here in the desert. I thought Wolfgang was a fool to ask for wind mages out here, but I was wrong.”

“Remarkable,” Broyude said. “Do you think we should go in now?”

“If Striker wanted us, he’d say so,” Shemei replied. “Let us stand guard here, in the remote event of more of those desert rabbits choosing to bother us.”

Striker, however, was in no mood to use his radio.

“That creature,” he said, under his breath. “Marlborough, would you agree with me that it’s unnatural?”

“It seems so,” Marlborough said.

“Well, let us tackle it. Are you ready, Lavie?” Striker said. “I will fire first, and....”

The beast charged forward, knocking Charlie Downs down, then stood at the opposite end of the corridor, raising two of its arms.

“You!” Lavie said, angrily, firing an arrow at it. It pierced the creature’s skin over what ought to have been its chest, but the wound healed rapidly.

“Unnatural indeed, Striker,” Marlborough said, folding his hands and praying.

“Don’t worry, old chap,” Striker said, firing a cartridge that burst into a flash of light before the beast’s eyes. It stepped back, but then charged forward again, narrowly missing Lavie.

“It is blinded, but still dangerous!” Juan said, charging forward and thrusting with his sword. Again, the beast was wounded – this time in the thigh – but the wound began to close even as Juan withdrew his sword.

“Blast it, it’s magical!” Striker said. “Lavie, use your arrows! The burning ones!”

“Huh?”

“You have a Fire Elemental in your bangle! It’s our only chance!” he said. Nervously, Lavie scraped an arrow against her bangle, but the creature charged them again, knocking her to the ground. It then moved in on Lavie, raising one arm.

“Lavie!” Striker shouted, firing at the creature. The hair on its hide burst into fire, and it let out a low growl.

“Why, you!” Lavie said, and this time, she was able to fire. The arrow struck the creature in one eye, and its orbital socket literally caught flame – it was as if a burning candle had replaced one eye. Lavie picked herself up, and prepared another arrow.

“Lavie, be careful!” Juan shouted.

“Now for the other one,” Lavie said calmly. “For Ryan.” She fired again, and the creature’s second eye caught fire. It fell to one side and began to groan in pain.

“Finish it!” Striker said, firing a burning cartridge of its own at the creature’s throat. It struck its target, and the creature was left with a gaping wound in its throat, which burned even as it healed itself, futilely. In a last ditch, the creature threw itself blindly in the direction of the voices, and Lavie was knocked to the ground.

“Senorita Lavie!” Juan said, rushing forward and stabbing the beast in the throat.

“I’m...all right, Juan,” Lavie said, rubbing her cheek, which had been scratched by one of the creature’s claws in its desperate lunge. Calmly and slowly, she prepared another arrow, and fired it at the creature’s chest. There was a low roar – almost a sob – and then the beast burst into flame, crumbling slowly into dust, until all that was left were its claws.

“What the hell was *that*?” Charlie Downs muttered, rubbing the egg-sized bump on his head.

“If you want a brief summary, probably a wolf or some other desert creature, corrupted by – a conjuration of some sort,” Marlborough said, breathing quickly. “Thank the Infinity that we were able to overcome it.”

“Lavie, are you all right?” Striker said, with concern.

“It’s just a scratch, Agent Wolfgang,” Lavie said, still unable to believe what she had just done.

“Let us find Senor Ryan,” Juan said. “That animal was cursed. Let us not remain near it too long.”

They had only walked a little further when they came to a cell, whose lock was no match for another of Striker’s grenades. Rushing inside the room, Lavie caught her breath and shuddered.

Just like my dream, she thought. Ryan....how pale he looks.

“Professor, he’s not well!” Lavie said. “Ryan, can you hear me?”

The figure on the bunk stirred and groaned. Father Marlborough rushed to his bedside, and made a brief examination.

“He’s ill, Miss Lavender,” he said, solemnly. “Desert fever of some sort, if I’m not mistaken. I’ve seen it often enough when I was working at the missions.”

Suddenly, Ryan extended his hand, and Lavie remembered Carranya’s letter – the one with which she’d convinced her mother to let her go, the one she’d read last night, in which Carranya had told them about Lady Penelope’s words regarding Ryan and his fate. She remembered her grandmother’s words, from those eventful days after Ryan’s return. And she understood.

The hand... she thought. Silently, she walked over to his bunk, kneeling down beside it, and took his hand. She felt his fingers grip hers tightly, and his eyes opened.

“L - Lavie?” he said, wonderingly.

“Yes, you goof,” Lavie replied, smiling through her tears. “You didn’t think your one and only deputy would let anything happen to you, did you?”

“Lavie....you came for me...You came to....I thought....” he said, a blank expression on his face.

“Yes, I did, Ryan,” she whispered.

“Thank....you,” he said, and his eyes closed, though it seemed to her that there was a tear in one of his own eyes.

“Come, Miss Lavender,” Marlborough said, looking first at her, and then at Striker, who was surveying the scene with quiet satisfaction. “The soldiers will search this place for anything else of importance, but we must take him back to safety. And you had better stay with him.”

“Broyude,” Striker said, picking up his radio transmitter, “mission accomplished. Move the men in, and let’s comb this place. In the meantime, Marlborough and Miss Regale will take Mr. Eramond, who is ill, back to the Arnoldus homestead. Get the vehicle ready.”

“Good work, sir,” Broyude said. “I’ll drive them back.”

“Ryan, don’t worry,” Lavie said, softly, holding his hand in both of her own. “We’re taking you home.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE THIRD WAY

*“Blessed are those who mourn:
they shall be comforted.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness:
they shall have their fill.*

*Blessed are the merciful:
they shall have mercy shown them.”*

(Matthew, ch. 5, v. 5-7)

“Gran!” Emily exclaimed, squeezing her grandmother tightly. “Is it all true, Gran? I didn’t know you were such a – such a heroine! My very own Gran...”

“Oh, dear me, Emily,” Lavie said, with a gentle smile on her face, “you’re going to make me blush if you carry on like that. And you mustn’t forget I had help – from that nice Professor and that friendly Agent, not to mention that wonderful Arnoldus family, and the soldiers.”

“Yes, but it was you who killed that beast, Gran!” Emily pointed out. “Weren’t you scared?”

“A little,” Lavie said, and they both began to laugh. “But of course, Grandpa also did some very brave things, and he wasn’t yet finished! For now, though, he was still rather ill, the poor boy...”

The next two weeks, for Ryan, seemed to consist of memories, that came and went like the snapshots taken by a photograph, and which he could not remember in any particular order.

First, there was a cold towel being applied to his head, by someone who was bending over him, and feeding him some sort of broth.

Mum? But the woman did not resemble his mother in the least; she was smaller, and dark-haired. “Mum?” he said, aloud.

“No, my dear boy, I’m not your mother, I’m afraid,” the woman said. “My name is Penelope.”

“Penelope.” Ryan repeated the name, as if it were a new word he were learning. “Lady Penelope?”

“Dear me, no,” the woman said, with a laugh. “See, I don’t even have red hair! Rest a little, now, son. Father Marlborough says the fever can affect your brain, so you’ll naturally be a little confused. Just sleep it off.”

Second, there were voices – the voices of two men, standing at the foot of his bed, talking among themselves.

“Raiding that place was the best idea we could have had,” one of them said, clearly pleased. “Besides rescuing our friends, we’ve freed more than twenty prisoners, obtained all their records, and we have

conclusive proof of that man's perfidy. Not to mention that some of those papers will make *quite* a splash at the Commonwealth. And the Republic can't do anything, because they don't want to admit that such a place exists to begin with. If he had any sense, Josen would give us all medals, beginning with that remarkable girl."

"It was still dangerous," the other voice, older and calmer, replied. "But I think I understand what you said to me earlier. Sometimes, a risk is worth taking. I may be the Professor here, but you've taught me a lesson."

Third, there was a conversation between two women.

"Shh, my dear," the woman who wasn't his mother said. "Don't disturb him like that, he's still quite out of it."

The other woman had then – he blushed to remember it, though his recollections were hazy – kissed him on the forehead – a second time, in fact – and laughed. "Come on, Penelope," she said. "Wouldn't you do the same if you were in my place?"

Fourth, there were the dreams. Or, perhaps, hallucinations. He was being chased – sometimes by guards, sometimes by wild beasts – and Marianne was riding them. He begged her to stop – pleaded with her to trust him, or at least to leave him alone – but she would just laugh. And then, suddenly, the beast would be shot by a shadowy figure – a woman with long hair. He would try to see her face, to ask her who she was, but then he would wake, feeling uneasy.

Fifth was another conversation. Two of the speakers were the women he already remembered, and the third was a man.

"Tonight will give us the final answer, Mrs. Arnoldus," the man had said. "If all goes well, by tomorrow, his temperature should fall, and he should be conscious again."

"But Doctor Rasheed," the younger woman – why did he think of her as younger? – had said. "What if it doesn't?"

"I am not the Deity, my poor child," the man had said, sympathetically, "so I can promise nothing. But He is merciful, and he will soon restore your friend to you."

"Let us hope so, Doctor," the older woman, the one addressed as Mrs. Arnoldus, replied...

Ryan got up with a start, in a bed that was neither his own, nor the prison's – nor even the bunks and mattresses he had used when he was fighting alongside his comrades in the desert.

Where am I? he wondered. He opened his eyes, but looking did not help him. He was in a strange room – a bright, clean, spacious one – and a woman seemed to be sitting in an armchair, either knitting or sewing. He had had the same dream again, and he was still shivering.

Suddenly, he became aware of a young woman approaching him.

“Marianne?” he said.

But he was aware of his mistake even before the word was spoken. The woman was not Marianne. She looked sad rather than vengeful, and her hair was the wrong colour. But she was walking towards him determinedly, and he wondered if he was still dreaming.

“Go away, Marianne,” he said, plaintively. “It’s over. Leave me alone.”

The woman stopped, and it seemed to Ryan that she gasped – perhaps with surprise, perhaps with pleasure.

“Who are you?” he asked. He rubbed his eyes, and his vision cleared....

“Good morning, Mr. Eramond,” Lavie said, kindly. “Were you having a bad dream?”

“Lavie?” The look on Ryan’s face was one of blank surprise. “Lavie, what are you doing here?”

Lavie – if it was indeed her – looked angry for a moment, but then she sat down at his bedside, and Ryan had no doubt that it was indeed her. “Ryan, don’t you remember?” she said, kindly. “You were in prison.”

“God, I remember that,” he groaned, rubbing his right shoulder gingerly. “That turncoat, Gilmore. He must have been in the pay of the Varald. I....didn’t think I would ever leave that place. How did I get out?”

“She rescued you, my boy,” the other woman said, suddenly, putting her knitting down in her lap.

“*You* rescued me, Lavie?” Ryan said, wide-eyed. “Pinch me, someone.”

“You asked for it, Ryan,” Lavie said, mischievously, and gave his arm a most emphatic pinch.

“Ouch!” Ryan replied, shaking his arm. “Well, I can still see you, so I’m not dreaming. Where am I?”

“You’re in my home, son,” the woman with the knitting said, standing up. “My name is Penelope, and I’m the wife of Commander Arnoldus, of the Commonwealth. We are in Marcopolis, in the Fulton Republic. You had come here with the Galvenian Army, to destroy a factory called Turbo Arms. But you were taken prisoner.”

“I remember *that*,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “But what happened, then? It’s all a blur in my mind.”

“The chaplain in the prison sent word to Father Marlborough, who was in Galvenia, and he informed your friend Lavie,” Penelope went on. “She was determined to save you, so she sailed away with Father Marlborough and a Zionsese agent, Wolfgang Striker. They had to fight off many perils, including a cursed beast, but they found you in the end. You were quite ill, though, and it’s only today that your temperature has begun to fall.”

“Let me get this straight,” Ryan said, frowning. “Lavie came all the way from Davenport, on a ship with two strange men, just to save *me*? But why?”

“It was the right thing to do, Ryan,” Lavie said, softly, causing him to blush. “It was something I had to do. I couldn’t have lived with myself if I’d left you here alone.”

“Then Dad was right about you,” Ryan said, wonderingly, as if making a discovery that was both fascinating and alarming.

“Right about what, Ryan?” Lavie said, looking sympathetically at him. *Poor Ryan*, she thought. *He’s still not that strong. He needs time to get better.*

“About – loyalty, Lavie,” Ryan said, struggling to find the right words. “A little before I left, he told me that I’d only meet a few loyal people in my life, and that I should be grateful to them. And – I’m grateful, Lavie, I really am. Thank you.” He held out his hand, and she took it.

“It still seems.....unreal, somehow,” he said, after a long pause, at the end of which he realized he was still holding hands with her, and withdrew his hand, looking embarrassed.

“I know what you mean, Ryan,” Lavie said, brightly. “Now, are you hungry?”

“Now that you mention it,” Ryan said, grinning, “I believe I am. I feel like I haven’t eaten for weeks! And the prison food made your brownies seem quite palatable, truth be told!”

“Very funny, Ryan,” Lavie said, without rancour. “Well, I helped Penelope make breakfast, so you can judge if I’ve gotten better or not!”

“Compared to that sawdust they called bread in my cell, anything would be an improvement,” Ryan said, laughing, as a friendly-looking woman brought in a tray, and perched it on his knees.

“Thank you, Jeshura,” Lavie said, winking at the woman. “Now eat up, Ryan. Doctor Rasheed says you need to build up your strength, especially for the journey back to Davenport!”

“If you’re going to feed me like this, Lavie,” Ryan said, looking at his loaded platter with satisfaction, “that’s not going to take much time.”

“It sounds just like his father,” Constance Juno said, admiringly. “But I must warn you, Mr. Aquary, that my son, Makarov, is a strong-willed boy. Perhaps that is my fault – after he lost his father, I was at a loss when it came to curbing his warrior’s spirit on my own. Give him clear instructions, and I trust he will obey.” She looked at Juno with maternal tenderness, and he glared back.

“Oh, don’t blame yourself, ma’am,” Jonas said, kindly. “I’m sure you did your best. So, Fossen, if I’ve understood correctly, this is the plan: First, Bosley and his men will knock at the door, saying that they have evidence that a minor is being detained illegally there.”

“We don’t think they’ll let us in that easily – at best, they might deny it and fob us off,” Bosley said, “but all we need is a diversion for a few minutes. During this time, Mr. Juno, you will enter the garden, taking advantage of their distraction, and begin searching for Miss Robertson.”

“I still think that this is foolish, old man,” Juno protested, but Fossen’s eyes were looking at him intently, and he stopped. “But it is the way of the apprentice Wanderer to obey, and I shall.”

You have chosen wisely, Juno, the sword said, gently.

“Good, boy. Now, I trust you will be able to get in through the window without making too much of a racket, if I know my sword well. Don’t use too much power, or you might light the window-frame and start a fire. During this time, Mrs. Lancaster – who has been invited by Sir Prescott on that day, or rather, has invited herself” – Fossen winked at Anne, who laughed – “will make use of Aquary’s trinket to find out where you are. She will make the visit along with Julianne, whom she will introduce as a Zionsese noble. Choose a suitable name to avoid suspicion, of course. You might want to call yourself Baroness Lexus von Hohenzollern, or something like that, my child.”

“Dear me,” Julianne said, laughing quietly. “You do think of everything. I think I shall go with something simpler, however.”

“A convenient device, indeed,” Anne Lancaster said. “Though it is a little frightening when one thinks of its implications for privacy, Mr. Aquary.” Her hand went to the compass in her pocket, the back of which was studded with twin red and blue crystals.

“It was originally used by jealous lovers, ma’am,” Jonas said, chuckling into his beard, “but we will be making a more honourable use of it today. Many forms of magic are neither good nor evil – it is the use one puts them to that makes all the difference.”

“I still believe that this plan is foolish,” Juno repeated.

“Be quiet, boy,” Fossen said, kindly. “Now, this is the tricky part. Mrs. Lancaster now has to reach the room where Marianne is, along with Baroness von Hohenzollern....”

“I am not amused,” was Juno’s comment, though everyone else, including the “Baroness”, was laughing quite loudly.

“The simplest way is this: Juno will frighten Miss Robertson, perhaps by shooting up some of the furniture with his orange beam. Even if the poor girl does not scream, he can bang the door a few times to give the signal. Then you can have your fun. If there are any guards – and Bosley’s scouts assure me there are few, besides that half-wit, Gessler – take care of them. In the confusion, Anne and Julianne will make their way to Marianne’s room. If anything goes wrong, Anne will use the signal on her compass to alert me....”

“You, old man?” Juno looked at his trainer with surprise.

“You didn’t think I was going to stay here and let you have all the fun, did you?” Fossen said, mischievously. “And if Anne alerts me, I will move in with my other sword and intervene. Bosley, I know you must keep within the limits of the law, but stay around and help me.”

“I will do anything to destroy the hornet’s nest that The Prince and his handlers have created, Fowler,” Bosley said, sternly. “Count on me.”

“What if Miss Robertson refuses to come with us?” Anne said. “Her mother and I will try our best, but what if Prescott’s men have persuaded her otherwise, by force or fraud? After all, that is what her father did.”

“If that happens, Mrs. Lancaster,” Jonas said, “then you can make use of this.” He handed her what looked like a child’s toy pistol, filled with water.

“Goodness, Mr. Aquary,” Anne said, laughing, “what is this?”

“An infusion of Moon Herbs and Shagath Worm oil,” he explained. “It will put her to sleep and numb her, as gently as possible. And I will be waiting outside to revive her – or to heal any of you, should things go wrong.”

“And, of course, I will remain here, to welcome you all and keep the fires burning,” Constance Juno said, warmly. “I am sure my son will do us proud.”

“It looks like we’re all set to go,” Fossen said, patting Julianne on the back. “Courage, my daughter. Soon, I will not only have a child by adoption, but a grandchild as well.”

Julianne looked at Fossen gratefully. “Fossen, what you say is true. You have been a father to me, more than my own unhappy father, who fell prey to his own political machinations. May the Infinity bless you....my father.”

“And you as well, my daughter,” Fossen said, placing his hand over her head.

“I still do not approve, Fossen,” Juno said, angrily. “I think that woman you call a daughter has turned your head. I think you are letting yourself be carried away by sentiment.”

“And what is wrong with that, Juno?” Anne said, gently. “As I speak, my granddaughter is in the Fulton Republic, risking her life to save a boy just like you. It is not enough to wander the Way, Juno. You must remove all bitterness from your heart.”

“Lady Anne is right, Juno,” Constance said. “Your father would have felt the same way, too. I know you have cause to be angry with those who betrayed your father, and our country. But this is different.”

Juno flushed. “An admirable deed, indeed,” he said, then sneered. “But I do not think the object of her quest is worth it.”

“Boy,” Fossen said sternly, “that’s enough lip from you. Go ahead and get ready, we’re going to take Chuselwock Castle by storm tomorrow morning. And now, it’s time for some soup.”

“Just what I was waiting for,” Bosley said, licking his lips.

“I can hardly wait,” Julianne said, wonderingly. “Marianne, my child....I hope you will come back with me.”

“It’s a lovely day, isn’t it, children?” Penelope Arnoldus said, as she brought two tall glasses out to Ryan and Lavie, who were sitting in the garden, stretched out on easy-chairs. “I’ve brought you some of my trademark lemon juice.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Arnoldus,” Ryan said, gratefully, as he handed a glass to Lavie, then took one for himself. Penelope then walked over to another portion of the garden, where her ever-smiling daughter greeted her with two filled watering-cans.

Lavie, who did not miss the little gesture, blushed. “Your manners have improved a lot since we last met, Ryan,” she said, shyly. “Did they have a teacher of deportment in prison, or something?”

“Very funny, Lavie,” Ryan said, but he was not annoyed. He felt calm and at peace. And after nearly two months of solitude, pain and illness, even Lavie’s chatter was as refreshing to him as his hostess’ juice. “I also must note that your temper has improved a lot. Did you have a teacher of elegant manners on board the ship?”

Lavie giggled. “Well, I had Professor Marlborough, but I’m not sure if he counts.”

Ryan blinked, remembering something. “Sweet Infinity, the book. Did they get the book?”

“What book, Ryan?” Lavie asked, concerned at the seriousness of his expression.

“A valuable book that Henrik gave me, before I set sail. It was about the history of the Journeymen,” he explained. “I had read about half of it, and there was something important in it, but I can’t quite remember. They took it away from me in prison, damn them. It must have cost thousands of dollars.”

“All your possessions were recovered, Ryan,” Lavie said, a little embarrassed, “even the book. I’ve kept it in your room, along with its bookmark. There was only one thing missing....”

“Bookmark? Oh, that letter of yours.” Ryan laughed. “I must say, it was nice that *someone* remembered to send me a letter when I was away,” he went on. “What was missing, Lavie? Must have been my money, though it was only a few hundred dollars.”

“It wasn’t money, Ryan,” Lavie said, a little sadly. “It was....that pendant of yours. The one Marianne gave you, remember?”

“My pendant? Good riddance,” Ryan said, angrily. “To think that she called me a coward.”

“A *coward*? Ryan, how could she!” Lavie said, the red gleam appearing in her eyes. “You’re the bravest person I know. Stupid Marianne.....”

Ryan flushed. “I’m not sure if I deserve that, Lavie,” he said. “Brave, I’ll grant you, but near the end, I *was* – not a coward, exactly, but close to giving up. All I wished for was one last hand, held out to me in friendship, before I....”

Lavie shivered. “Ryan, don’t think of that anymore,” she said, gently, patting his hand. “That’s all over. And look, your wish came true, didn’t it?” She smiled.

“It sure did,” Ryan said, slowly. “Look, Lavie....I’ve been thinking about a lot of things.”

“What sort of things, Ryan?” Lavie said, hopefully.

“About that speech I made on Graduation Day. Do you remember it?” he said, looking at her warmly.

“I remember one line which I really liked,” Lavie replied. “‘Our past determines who we are. It helps shape our present, and guide our future.’ I don’t think I’ll ever forget that line, Ryan, and what it meant for me.”

“Well, I’d forgotten it. Not the line I wrote, but what it meant,” Ryan said, hesitantly. “Sitting there in that cell, moping over why Marianne had decided to chuck me again, I went back to the past, Lavie. To Mum and Dad, to Grandpa, to Henrik and Armin. And to you.”

Lavie flushed again, but did not say anything.

“I realized you’d been a part of my life – for better or worse, sure, but mostly for the better – since we were little kids, Lavie. I began to understand why you treasured the little things we did, even when I pretended to forget them. I understood that even when we fought and disagreed, we were still there for each other, somehow. I – I felt sorry for some of the things I’d said and done, in the past two years. I realized that you weren’t being silly – you were remaining faithful to our past, to what we were, and I’d

never understood. Heaven help me, I even began to think of that dopey teddy bear of yours. Prison can do funny things to a man.”

“Mr. Bear’s not dopey!” Lavie protested, though her heart was beating joyfully with every word.

“And right at the end – just when you rushed into the cell and checked my pulse...”

“It was Professor Marlborough who checked your pulse, Ryan,” Lavie said, embarrassed. “I just, um, took hold of your hand.”

“Whatever,” Ryan said, kindly. “Anyway, at that moment – that split second before I fell unconscious again – I understood. The Princess told me I’d understand someday, and at that moment, I understood.”

Dare I hope, Lavie thought, or is he just apologizing to me and being polite, to show his gratitude? I’m just glad that he’s safe and well, but though it’s foolish of me, I still... “What – did you understand, Ryan?” she said, looking down.

“I understood what you meant to me, you silly girl,” Ryan said, with a laugh. “I understood that your friendship was something precious. I never should have treated it casually. I almost lost it – forever, like Prince Derren did in Tremfein’s play. And I – couldn’t have lived with myself if that had happened, Lavie.”

“Ryan...” Lavie said, her eyes shining.

“And in that split second, I begged the Infinity – if he was listening in the first place – for a second chance. I knew that, even if I survived, it was going to take time. Time for me to let go of what I’d once been, especially my blind faith in...in Marianne – though I should have listened to you, or at least to Dad, much earlier. Time for you to – forgive me, I guess. But I knew that, as long as I lived, I would try to – be what I once was to you, Lavie, even if that meant just being a friend and a neighbour.”

He paused, wondering if he’d said too much, or too little.

“Do *you* understand, Lavie?” he asked, in a low tone.

In reply, Lavie took his hand in both of her own, and smiled. It was a smile that Ryan Eramond would never forget for the rest of his life, even when he lay on his death-bed, an old man.

“Yes, Ryan,” she said. “I do. And as far as forgiveness goes – in that split second when I saw you lying there, and thought you were going to die, I forgave you already. Not that that gives you the license to goof up again, Mr. Eramond!” She burst into laughter, and Ryan did so, too.

“I won’t, Lavie,” Ryan said. “I know it’s too early to – tell what will happen next, but I won’t let you down again. And I will try. Believe me, Lavie.” He looked down at his hand and grinned. “Hey, what are you doing with my hand?”

“Would you believe *measuring your pulse?*” Lavie said, with a wink, and they both laughed again.

“Dear, dear children,” Penelope said, smiling at Phemie, who grinned back at her from underneath a broad-brimmed hat. They were both watering the plants, and observing the above scene from a discreet distance. “I think they’ll do fine now, all things considered.”

“Will they invite us to the wedding, Mama?” Phemie said, humming a Cosmopolitan marriage-song.

“Dear me, Euphemia, you’re thinking very far ahead,” Penelope replied, with a smile. “But, if you want an honest answer from your mother, I think they will.”

“Aww, Gran!” Emily said, rapturously. “That’s so nice!”

“It certainly is on the list of the best days of my old life, Emily,” Lavie said, with quite a similar expression. “Dear Ryan. And he was as good as his word, you know. Of course, there were still times when he’d get annoyed with me – and I with him – but from that day, we remained friends till the day we died. He was as loyal as a man could be, Emily, and as brave. That’s the kind of man your Grandpa was.”

“That makes me happy, Gran....”

“Emily! *Emily!*” Sigmund Regale called out, as he came running up the stairs. “Where are you?”

Emily Regale, her hair still half-combed, emerged on the landing with a look of surprise. “Goodness, dear, what seems to be the matter?” she said.

“It’s a telegram.....from Lavie,” he said, looking stunned, but happily so. “It came by special delivery just now.”

“Lavender!” Heedless of the state of her *coiffure*, Emily ran down the stairs, and soon, they were standing side by side, reading it together.

DEAR MOM AND DADDY STOP. RYAN SAFE STOP. JUAN SAFE STOP. AM SAFE TOO SO DON’T WORRY STOP. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED STOP. LOVE YOU ALL STOP. MORE NEWS TO FOLLOW SOON STOP.

“Goodness, Sigmund!” Emily said, leaning against him for support. “Our Lavender – she *did* do what she said she would, after all. I – I’m lost for words, really. But there’s someone else who ought to be told.” She turned towards the kitchen. “Carmen!” she called out.

Carmen, still wearing a black lace cap in the place of her usual white one, came out of the kitchen, smiling politely. “Yes, Mrs. Regale?”

“We’ve just had a telegram from Miss Lavie, Carmen. Ryan is safe – and so is Juan, she says. We thought you might like to know,” she said, beaming.

“Mrs. Regale!” Carmen rushed over to them, and read the telegram herself, weeping as she did so. “Oh, thank the Infinity! Thank Him! I – still can’t believe it! Juan....oh dear, dear Miss Lavie. Infinity bless you, Miss Lavie.” She fell to her knees and folded her hands, in grateful prayer.

“Infinity or not, that’s a sentiment we can all agree on, Carmen,” Sigmund said, kindly, placing one hand on her shoulder. “I think we’re going to have a celebration here some weeks from now, mark my words.”

A little later, when they had all sat down to breakfast, there was a knock at the door.

“Goodness, who could that be?” Emily said. “Do have a look, Carmen.”

Carmen, opening the door, was greeted with another pleasant surprise. “It’s your mother, Mrs. Regale! She’s got another lady with her,” she said.

“Another lady?” Sigmund said, mildly, as he systematically demolished a piece of toast.

“Mother!” Emily said, as Anne entered. “What a pleasant surprise! And who’s your – Good lord, Sigmund, it’s Mrs. Robertson! What *are* you doing here?”

“Mrs. Robertson?” Sigmund rose and walked up to the newcomers. “Good morning, Anne. What’s this all about?” he said, kindly.

“I received a telegram from Lavie today,” Anne explained, “and it seemed like a good omen for what the two of us are trying to do today. Julianne, this is my daughter Emily, and the learned man there is my son-in-law, Sigmund. Lavender, whom I told you so much about, is their daughter.”

“How do you do,” Julianne said, shyly. Her former life as Robertson’s wife had meant next to no social intercourse, and she only knew the Regales by sight – and by her husband’s contemptuous words about Sigmund. “I’m sorry we couldn’t meet earlier.”

“Think nothing of it,” Sigmund said, in a friendly tone. “Today is a day of rejoicing, and we ought not dwell on such things.”

“Are you quite well, ma’am?” Emily said, as they all sat down in the drawing-room.

“Quite well, Mrs. Regale,” Julianne replied. “Thank you.”

“So what’s this about omens, Anne?” Sigmund asked, curiously.

“Julianne’s new protector has had an idea,” Anne explained. “We’re going to try and rescue her daughter – that poor girl, Marianne – from Chuselwock Manor, where she’s being kept.”

“Marianne!” Sigmund snorted. “If you do that, Anne, please keep her far away from Ryan, or Lavie will never forgive any of us.”

Anne laughed. "You always did have a nice sense of humour, Sigmund," she replied.

"Chuselwock Manor?" Emily exclaimed. "What on Terra is *she* doing there?"

With a little help from Julianne, Anne described what they had learned from Bosley, as well as Fossen's plan. Sigmund and Emily listened with growing incredulity, and when she had finished, they both began to speak.

"Goodness, Mother, are you now taking Lavender as a role model?" Emily said, her mouth slightly open. "That's quite a risk you are taking!"

"It sounds just crazy enough to work," Sigmund added, "except for that boy Juno. He's a loose cannon. An angry young man, with a powerful sword – a sword that may have harmed a friend of Lavie's, at that – isn't exactly the best instrument of justice."

"Harming a friend of Lavie's?" Anne exclaimed.

Sigmund explained what had happened to Bernadette just before her departure.

"And you think it was that boy's sword?" Anne said, wonderingly. "But Mr. Fossen was quite emphatic that it was not an evil object."

"It may have been something else," Julianne said, frowning as if in pain.

Anne looked at her with concern. "What is it, Julianne, my dear?"

"I remember – just before I left town," Julianne said, softly. "My – husband had received a pair of trinkets – pendants of some sort. He was with a man in a cloak, and the man was chanting over them. I thought he was – manufacturing magical objects, to be sold in the black market. Perhaps he – gave one of the pendants to Marianne."

"Ryan was wearing a pendant like that," Emily observed. "Lavie told me it was a gift from Marianne."

"Then that's it," Sigmund said. "Goodness, I *am* getting old. Two cursed objects, even if trivial, can overwhelm a Healer if they're in the same place. It's a consequence of Jopaga's Third Law, one of the few pieces of science that magicians have been able to attach to their spells. I learned it at University, years ago."

"Then my child is wearing....a cursed object?" Julianne exclaimed, a look of horror on her face. "Mrs. Lancaster, we must remove it from her and destroy it!"

"That would be the most prudent thing to do, because wearing such an object for a long time can be injurious to one's health," Sigmund said. "Even the Museum of Science and Lore – or at least their current head, Hernandez – is reluctant to accept cursed objects. A competent light mage, or light-based healer, can destroy it."

“Perhaps Mr. Aquary can help us, then,” Anne said. “Dear me, Sigmund, it’s a good thing we have you around to explain all this.”

“Thank you, Anne,” Sigmund said, gravely. “I wish you well on your quest. Do you want us to help you in any way?”

“Oh, if it comes to that, I’ll let you know,” Anne said, lightly. “Now come along, Julianne. We’ve got a job to do. Enjoy the day, children, and when Lavie returns, we *shall* have a grand feast!”

“You’re so practical, Mother,” Emily said, admiringly.

Juno, do not break faith.

“It is Fossen who has broken faith,” Juno replied, angrily. “He has become soft. I need to pursue Lugner’s masters, especially that villain Trask. I doubt that the Lorean prison will hold him too long.”

Juno, listen to me. I am your friend. But you are not God, Juno. You are wrong about many things.

“Give me an example,” he said, coldly.

Do you remember that boy, Juno? The one you fought, and the one whom I permitted you to defeat, because he was behaving unjustly towards a young girl, and breaking her heart?

“You speak of that fool Eramond,” Juno said. “Yes, I remember the lesson I gave him.” He smiled.

In a vision of the night, it was given me to know that he has changed, Juno.

“What are you talking about?” Juno’s tone – though he was speaking within his mind, as he always did to the girl in his sword – was impatient.

He has gone through the valley of darkness, Juno, and has had a change of heart. He is now faithful. The girl is contented. If you face him again, it will be a fair fight.

“Even shorn of your melodramatic words, I say you lie,” Juno said. “A man like Eramond cannot change. He does not understand loyalty, and will never understand. He seeks pleasure where he can find it. He is a spoiled child of fortune.”

I will grant you the last, perhaps, but you are wrong about the others.

“Let us not debate this,” Juno replied, struggling with his own feelings. “We have a task to complete. Lady Anne and her – friend have already entered Chuselwock Manor, and nothing has happened yet. We need to wait for the Inspector now.”

Why do you dislike that woman, Juno?

“Because she is a distraction,” Juno replied, slowly. “When I chose to wander the Way, it was to serve and protect Galvenia, not to play nursemaid. If you serve justice, you ought to understand that.”

There are many kinds of justice, Juno. And the best kind is tempered by love – and by mercy. You are the son of a just man and a merciful woman. You ought to understand that.

“Foolishness,” Juno said, shrugging his shoulders. “Ah, there is our friend Bosley. Now, kindly refrain from any running commentary, for I have a mission to complete.”

“I’m sure you must be mistaken, Sir,” the butler said, unctuously. His name was Gasper Collins, and the haughtiness in his manner could rival Sir Prescott’s at times. “There is no one of that description here.”

“Nevertheless, we have a warrant,” Bosley said, calmly, “and it gives us the permission to search these premises. If you have a quarrel with that, take it up with Sir Douglas McIverny.”

Collins’ eyebrows rose a trifle. “Sir Douglas?” he said. “He is a good friend of my master’s.”

“All the more reason, then, why you should cooperate,” Bosley said, looking Collins straight in the eye. “Or, if this does not come within your discretionary powers, please call your master, my good man.”

“My master is occupied in the Genealogical Archives, Inspector,” Collins replied, shaking his head, “and cannot be disturbed.”

“Collins, you are interfering with due process of law here, and that is a serious offence,” Bosley said. He was not bluffing – Lady Anne’s intercession had won him the blessings of good Sir Douglas (whom we shall meet soon) and even a cautious approbation from Sir Cornelius, though, if Sir Turbot chose to challenge the warrant, the process would be long and wearying. “Come, now, be a good fellow. Let us examine the premises, and if there is no young girl matching this description, we will leave this moment.”

“What is going on here, Collins?” a voice said, sharply. Bosley looked behind the butler, and saw a greying man in military uniform, looking rather the worse for drink. “Sir Turbot doesn’t want any bleeding tradesmen over here. Throw the man out.” The speaker pushed Collins aside brusquely, and stood staring at the Inspector.

“I’m afraid you can’t throw the Galvenian Royal Police Force out that easily,” Bosley said, contemptuously, for the second man cut a far sorer figure than the stately Collins. “I am Inspector Bosley, and we are searching for a missing person whom we believe may be on these premises. Who might you be?”

"Be? *Be?* I am Felix Gessler, aide-de-camp to Sir Prescott Chuselwock, and Assistant Deputy Commissioner of the Provisional War Office. Do you not recognize me?" Gessler said, indignantly.

"Sorry, I don't remember seeing you on a wanted flyer anytime, my friend," Bosley said, amiably.

"Careful, Bosley," Gessler said, testily. "You have no idea who you're dealing with here."

"Read the warrant before you start screaming, old boy," Bosley replied, handing him a copy. Gessler looked at it briefly, turned pale, and stepped back. "Wh – what is this nonsense? Who told y – I mean, what reason do you have for suspecting anything of this sort?" he said, slowly.

"That is a confidential matter, Mr. Gessler," Bosley replied.

"L – *Lieutenant* Gessler," the Lieutenant said, suppressing a hiccup with difficulty.

"Well then, Lieutenant, are you going to let us on the premises, or not?" Bosley went on.

Gessler's face turned red. "Absolutely *not!* What kind of damn fool question is that! You are unwelcome here, my good man, and I am sure Sir Turbot will raise the question of officious police interference in the House of Lords..."

"He can do that tomorrow, *Lieutenant...*" Bosley began, then froze. Gessler had drawn a revolver, and was pointing it at him.

"You are trespassing on private property!" he yelled. "Leave! Leave now, or I will call..."

"The police?" Bosley said, calmly. "I'm afraid *we're* the police." Two of his men were readying their own weapons, but he stilled them with a gesture. "Look here, Lieutenant, I understand that this is an unusual request, but let's discuss this like civilized men, shall we?"

"That would be prudent, Sir," added Collins – who had silently observed this exchange with mounting alarm. "Chuselwock Manor is no place for vulgar brawls."

"Fine," Gessler said, testily. "Do you have any women with you, to help in this search of yours? I'm not allowing any of you gentlemen to bother a lady..." He turned red, and then fell silent.

Poor fool, Bosley thought. "As it so happens, we have two trained policewomen with us," he said, indicating two efficient-looking women in uniform, one of whom was carrying a notepad. "Surely they would be acceptable to you, Lieutenant."

Gessler groaned. "No, I'm sorry," he said. "It is my duty to protect – this place. Go away!" And before Bosley could react, there was the sound of the door being slammed and locked.

"That went on well enough, Cora," he said, smiling at one of the policewomen. "Time enough for our brave lad, Juno, to do his work. Though I still doubt that fellow."

“Oh, he gives me the shivers, sir,” the woman named Cora replied. “He didn’t say a word all the way, and kept looking at his sword. I wouldn’t want to encounter *him* in a forest alone.”

“Why can’t we do this the usual way?” one of the armed constables complained. “I could have taken the fellow out and combed the place in an hour.”

“Because he’s a blooming Lord, Nick,” Bosley said, “and we can’t just walk in and raid the place. That’s what Sir Douglas said, and we’ve got to abide by that. Now keep calm, because that fool Gessler is drunk, and drunk men are unpredictable. Keep your eyes and ears open.”

“Sir Turbot,” Anne Lancaster said, kindly, as they sipped the last of their tea, “we are most grateful for your invitation. May this old woman trouble you for the permission to – ahem – wash her hands?” The blue crystals on her compass were flashing, indicating that Juno had found the room, and it was on the first floor.

“Oh, certainly, Lady Anne,” Sir Turbot said, beaming at her. “But please leave me the pleasure of your charming young friend’s company. Solitude weighs too heavily on me, now that my son is at war.” He sighed rather exaggeratedly.

A quick look passed between Julianne and Anne. “Why, certainly, Sir Turbot,” Anne replied. “Matilda, my dear, I’ll just be a moment.”

Julianne stifled a laugh at the mention of her assumed name. “Of course, Lady Anne. Now, Sir Turbot, you were telling me about your collection of rare stamps...”

“Ah, Lady Lindemann,” Sir Prescott said, warmly, “you Zionese have such good taste.”

Marianne did not scream – she was not a young woman who screamed easily – but she would be the first to admit to total bewilderment at that moment.

“Juno?” She stared at the window of her room – which seemed to have dissolved by some mysterious process – and then looked around wildly. “What on Terra are *you* doing here?”

“Restoring you to your mother, Miss Robertson,” he said, coldly. “I do not approve, but she wishes it, and she has the backing of powerful persons.”

“Mother?” Her face brightened. Despite the luxury of Chuselwock Manor, Marianne had a good store of common sense, and a few days in Gessler’s company had convinced her that the place, though gilded, was a gilded cage; she had little freedom to move, and was not allowed to leave the premises. She was aware that her father – or his friends – must have arranged this temporary refuge, but its restrictions –

and Gessler's behaviour – both chafed, and the mention of her mother was a welcome one. "But – isn't *Father* the one with the connections?" she asked, hesitantly.

"That is not a question I wish to discuss," Juno said. "Is there anyone here who is looking after you – a companion, a chaperone, someone of that sort?"

"There's my grandmother," Marianne said, making a face, "but she's sleeping upstairs. She usually does that after lunch, when she and that horrible man, Gessler, have a little gin."

Juno wrinkled his nose in distaste. "I see you are not in pleasant circumstances, Miss," he said. "Do you wish to come away with us? Your mother is now staying in a place called Straukpass, where an old man – apparently her sister's father-in-law – has appointed himself her protector."

"Her sister? Aunt Suzanne?" Marianne said, smiling suddenly. "I remember *her*. She was such fun! But she died a little while ago..." Her voice faltered.

"Yes, yes, I know all about that," Juno said, impatiently. *This isn't going the way I expected*, he thought. *She's going to want to come*. "Now, will you come with me? We can guarantee your safety." He paused, weighing the import of his words carefully. "Miss Regale's grandmother, Lady Anne...."

"Lavie Regale?" Marianne said, scornfully. "What does *she* have to do with this?"

Juno, don't!

"She has gone to the Republic to meet Mr. Eramond," he said, "and in the meantime, her grandmother has taken your mother under her wing. She wishes to extend this protection to you, because" – he paused again, to choose the right words – "you are a little girl like her granddaughter."

"Protect me?" Marianne was indignant. "I don't want a favour from Lavie Regale, or from any of her family! My father's often told me that her own father has done – terrible things."

"Terrible things?" Juno said curiously. "What sort of things?"

"He wouldn't say," Marianne replied, defensively. "And besides, it's none of your business!"

"You are right, of course." Juno closed his eyes. "So, will you come with me? Or would you prefer to remain? The choice is yours. Remember that while your mother means well, your father is more powerful, to my knowledge."

I will not let you continue, Juno.

A beam of blue light suddenly flashed from the sword, striking its hinges, and it fell outwards with a loud *thud*.

"You dare disobey me?" Juno said, out loud, startling Marianne.

It is for your own good.

“Good heavens!” Anne Lancaster said, as the door almost struck her. “That boy, I tell you – Ah, how fortunate!” She entered the room and found Marianne staring at her.

How nice she looks, Marianne thought. Not a bit like Lavie. There’s no meanness in her face.

“Marianne,” Anne said, gently, “my name is Anne Lancaster, and I am a friend of your mother’s. I’m sorry she couldn’t be with you now, my dear, but Sir Turbot is rather a bore.”

Marianne laughed harshly. “You can say that again,” she said.

“Ah, you’re quite observant, my dear,” Anne said, with a twinkle in her eye. “Now, I’m sure Mr. Juno would have explained what we’re trying to do here. Haven’t you, Juno?”

“Yes,” Juno said, an annoyed look on his face.

“You’d look much handsomer, my boy, if you didn’t sulk,” Anne said, causing Marianne to laugh involuntarily. *She’s funny as well as nice. And she can’t help being Lavie’s grandmother, I guess!* Juno flushed, but did not reply.

“Now, Marianne,” Anne said, “would you like to come away with us?”

“To Davenport?” Marianne asked, frowning.

“No, dear, not to Davenport,” Anne replied. “If you’d like to stay with your mother, their place in Straukpass is small – but it’s perfectly safe. If you’d like to stay with me for a while, that’s also an option. I live on Mann Island.”

“Why are you doing this?” Marianne said, doubtfully.

“It’s an old tradition, my dear,” Anne said, calmly. “*Noblesse oblige*. A noblewoman is obliged to extend her protection to a fellow noble and her family, if they have fallen on hard times. In this case, I extend my protection to your mother.”

“A *noblewoman*?” Marianne said, her voice growing high-pitched with surprise.

“Didn’t you know?” Anne said, with mild surprise. “Your mother is the daughter of the late Earl of Tulo.”

“She used to say that when I was little,” Marianne said, looking dazed, “but Father always said she was lying, to make herself sound important. He would – get quite angry with her for mentioning it.”

“Well, it’s not a lie, my poor child,” Anne said, gently. “Trust me.”

“Then I’m....” Marianne looked pleasantly surprised, and stepped closer to Anne.

“We are wasting time, ma’am,” Juno said, tapping his foot on the ground.

“We can discuss this later, my dear girl, when we have the leisure,” Anne said, holding her hand out to Marianne. “Come, let us go, if you are willing.”

Marianne’s heart leapt within her, but one last doubt remained. “Mrs. Lancaster, if my mother is a noble – does that mean I’m related to *Lavie*?”

Anne burst out laughing. “Oh, I see where the trouble lies. Well, most of the noble houses are interrelated. You’re even related to Sir Turbot, if you must know.”

“Ugh!” Marianne said. “I’d rather be related to *Lavie* than to *him*. And yes, I will come with you – but how do we get out?”

“Juno will take care of that,” Anne said. “Now come along, we’ll have plenty of time to catch up on the past later. Follow me.”

And Marianne, still dazed, followed as Anne took her by the hand. The pair were followed by Juno, who looked glum.

“Why did you break that door?” he asked, silently.

You were trying to confuse that girl, Juno. That was not part of your mission.

“How little you understand,” he replied.

“What’s happening here?” Gessler screamed.

“Merciful heavens!” Anne exclaimed, as Marianne clutched her hand tightly, frozen by his arrival.

“Do not fail me now,” Juno said, a warning note in his voice.

I will never fail you, as long as you stay upright. A bolt of blue shot out from Juno’s sword, and Gessler was struck squarely in the chest. He toppled to one side, swearing as he did.

“Such language!” Anne said, severely. “And in front of women of breeding, too! Come this way, Marianne.”

However, their passage down the stairs was barred by two men in livery, carrying short swords. One of them lunged forward, but Juno was quicker, and his thrust wounded the man in the arm.

“Goodness, Juno’s wounded!” Anne exclaimed.

“A trifle,” Juno said, impatiently, as he aimed his sword at the second man. Rays of blue and orange shot forth, and the man fell to the ground, squirming.

“Are there any more of them?” Marianne said, despairingly.

“I think not,” Juno replied. “Come, since you wish to.”

“And this stamp bears the image of Uslan Rasheed, of the Fulton Republic,” Sir Turbot said, with a broad smile. “Of course, Rasheed – like all Republicans – is a nomad of the lowest kind, but this particular stamp, printed in C.Y. 274, has a misprint of his name. It is extraordinarily rare.” He beamed at Julianne. “It is fascinating, would you not agree, Lady Matilda?”

“Yes,” Julianne said, stifling a yawn, then stiffening as she heard the sound of voices and falls. “Your Grace, what was that sound?”

“What was what?” Turbot said, sipping his Italian wine. “This is excellent wine, my dear – 252 vintage. Blessed by Pontiff Pious XX himself. Are you sure you wouldn’t care for some?”

“No, thank you,” she replied politely.

“What a pity, my dear lady,” Turbot said, commiseratingly. “And this one, now...”

He was interrupted by the arrival of Lady Anne and Marianne.

“Lady Anne!” he exclaimed, his monocle falling into his glass of wine, unnoticed by anyone except Marianne – who tried hard not to laugh. “And my young guest! How nice to see you’ve become acquainted. You honour me with your presence.”

“Sir Turbot,” Anne Lancaster said, sternly, “this girl is being detained in your house on false pretences.”

“Detained?” Turbot looked dismayed. “But my dear lady, she is here at the request of my son...”

“That is not so, your lordship,” she said, contriving to make the title sound like a simple “Mister” or “Sir”. “She was lured here by that man, Gessler...”

“Gessler!” Sir Turbot began to turn pale. “Gessler is my son’s associate, my lady, and he would certainly have good reasons for doing such a thing.”

“Nevertheless, Sir Turbot, it is against the law of the land. I assure you that Lord Douglas McIverny was *most* upset when he heard of it. I am taking her home to her mother now, and I charge you to watch over Mr. Gessler’s actions more closely in future,” Anne said, her face implacable.

“Dear me,” Sir Turbot said, shaking his head. “Where did my monocle go?”

“It is in your wine-glass, your lordship,” Anne said, winking at Marianne, “and now, I must take my leave. Lady Matilda, would you kindly follow me?”

Julianne, who could barely keep from flying out of the chair and embracing her daughter when she had seen her arrive, rose politely and bowed. “Yes, Lady Anne,” she said, her eye catching Marianne’s and smiling.

“Dear me, this is most distressing,” Sir Turbot said, but Lady Anne carried all before her – literally – and, with Marianne and her mother in tow, she swept towards the front door, where Collins (who was quite unaware of the scene upstairs, but had listened to the conversation, and detested Gessler) opened the door to her respectfully.

“Well, that’s the first step, my d...” Anne began, and then stood perfectly still, as she nearly collided with a man who stood directly in her way. Marianne and her mother, equally surprised, crowded behind Anne.

“Lady Anne,” the man said, with satisfaction. “What a pleasant surprise. Tell me, where are the three of you headed?”

“To Straukpass, Sir Prescott,” Anne said, firmly, concealing her surprise at his sudden appearance. “We wish you a good day.”

“Oh, not so fast,” Prescott said, as his lips curved into a smile. “The young lady is my guest, and I would not wish to have her removed from my hospitality so soon.”

“Nevertheless, it is what we intend to do,” Anne replied. “The young lady, Sir Prescott, belongs with her mother.”

Prescott took a step closer, moving in Marianne’s direction, but Jonas Aquary, emerging from behind a bush, suddenly raised his hand.

“Step away, Lady Anne!” he shouted. “That man intends to use the.....”

“Silence,” Sir Prescott said, drawing his sword, and placing his arm over Marianne. “Who are you, old man, and why do you intrude on my premises?”

“Didn’t your mother teach you manners, boy?” Fossen said, amiably, appearing behind Jonas and raising his weapon. A beam of yellow light flashed forward, and Prescott’s sword fell from his hand. Glaring at Fossen, he released Marianne –

“Now, Juno!” Fossen cried out. In a flash, Juno – who was waiting behind the building – raised his sword and a beam of blue light flashed towards Sir Prescott. It seemed to strike him in the chest....

...and Sir Prescott stood in front of them no more. Even the blue beam, which had lit up the sky moments ago, seemed to disappear.

Jonas shook his head. "This is terrible," he said.

"What the hell was *that* about?" Bosley said, as he and his men encircled the area.

"He was trying to – Sweet Infinity, this is disastrous."

"Did he just – vanish?" Marianne said, wonderingly. "Oh, Mother....I *am* glad to see you." She leaned on Julianne's arm for support.

"Don't waste time here!" Fossen said, sternly. "Juno, stay at the rear. The rest of you, follow me through the streets, and we'll head out through King's College! That man could try his tricks any time soon, and we may not be so fortunate this time!"

"What did he intend to do, Mr. Fossen?" Anne said, gravely.

"No time to waste, my lady," Fossen said, pointing towards a narrow street. "Let's head back home as soon as possible, and then I'll explain. As Aquary says, this is very bad news indeed." He shook his head.

Silent and sombre, the party made its way back to Straukpass.

If you had not wasted time, they might have left before Prescott arrived. We only saved the girl by the skin of our teeth.

"Spare me the editorials," Juno said. "Besides, Prescott might have been waiting for us."

He was not, Juno. Your desire to prove yourself wiser than others will be your downfall someday. But now, defend your friends bravely, for that man has now allied himself with a great evil.

"Then this mission was not without use," Juno said, briefly.

You were the only one who believed otherwise, Juno. I hope you've learned your lesson.

"Penelope," Lavie said, as she and Mrs. Arnoldus – along with Agent Striker – sat in her drawing room, listening to Phemie's piano lesson, which could be heard from the music-room upstairs, "I'm worried about Ryan."

"Worried, my dear?" Penelope said.

“He’s – he seems concerned about something, these past few days. And he no longer seems eager to go home, as he did before. He snaps at us at times, and though he’s kind the rest of the time, his mind seems to be on other things,” Lavie said, a serious expression on her face.

“An excellent observation, Lavie,” Striker said, stroking his chin. “Now, let us see if your analytical powers match your vision. How would you explain our friend’s conduct?”

“He might still be ill, Agent Wolfgang,” Lavie said, worried. “I remember the doctor telling me that his illness could affect his brain...”

“Perhaps he’s just thinking about Marianne,” Striker said, with a wink. “Now, don’t look at me like that, Lavie. I am merely jesting.”

“I’m sure it’s more than that,” Lavie replied, “though, like you, I can’t help having doubts.”

Penelope reached out and patted Lavie on the head. “Now, dear, it’s true that men can be like that sometimes. But we must give him the benefit of the doubt. He’s just been through a long illness, you know. Doctor Rasheed said there was no sign of brain damage, and he’s the best we have. Give him time.”

“I actually agree with Lavie,” Striker said. “Mr. Eramond isn’t the type to let a purely personal matter disturb him. There must be something more to it.”

“But what could it be?” Lavie said, looking confused. “If it’s not Marianne – Ohmygosh! Was he tortured in prison? Is he – reliving those experiences? I’ve heard that it can happen to soldiers...”

“There was no sign of that, Lavie,” Penelope said. “We asked Doctor Rasheed to check carefully, because we know what sort of a place he was in. But no. He was under-fed, but that was it. Perhaps he’s just grown used to solitude, and finds keeping up a conversation difficult. You’ll have to teach him again, my dear.”

Lavie smiled. “I’ll do it, Penelope. But are you sure that’s all there is to it?”

“Well, Miss Lavie,” Striker suggested, “you could just ask him. Sometimes a simple question gets a straight answer.”

Lavie laughed. “You know, that’s not such a bad idea!”

“What’s not a bad idea, Lavie?” Ryan said, walking into the room absently. “That girl’s almost as good as you. Have you been giving her lessons?” He pointed vaguely in the direction of the music-room.

“Oh, you’re too kind, sir,” Lavie replied, making a little bow. “No, she has a teacher of her own.”

“Good, good,” Ryan said. “Mrs. Arnoldus, if you don’t mind, can I make use of your library for a while? I just need a place where I can sit quietly for some time.”

“Of course you may, son,” Penelope said, kindly. “It’s sound-proof, if it’s my daughter’s scales that are bothering you. You can also read Hieronymus’ books, though they’re mostly military and political texts. There are plenty of books that belong to the children, too, but I doubt you’d care for them.”

Ryan frowned. “Quite so, quite so. All right, then, we’ll meet at dinner-time.”

“Happy reading, Ryan,” Lavie said, grinning at him.

“Hmph,” was Ryan’s only reply, as he headed in the direction of the library.

“I see what you mean, Lavie,” Penelope said. “And, if my years as a wife and mother are any guide, I *don’t* think this is about a girl. Something’s weighing on his mind, and as the Agent said, it must be something serious. I think you ought to ask him about it in person.”

“Me?” Lavie said.

“In statistical terms,” Striker said, calmly, “the odds of success – or at least, of finding out something interesting – are the highest if you try. I am a poor second, and Lady Penelope a distant third.”

“Very amusing, Striker,” Penelope said, with a laugh. “Try it and see, Lavie. At worst, he’ll refuse to answer and grumble a little, and that’s perfectly normal. He might say that it’s something he has to do alone; that’s a standard excuse.”

Lavie was about to reply, when a thought suddenly came to her, and she remained silent for a moment before speaking of other things.

Later, when dinner had been eaten (the highlight of that night’s experience was an argument between Irene and Sophia over the future of skirt lengths in Cosmopolitan fashion), Lavie stole quietly to Ryan’s room, and knocked on the door.

There was no reply, so she pushed the door open. Ryan was sitting at his desk, reading a book by the light of a rather dim table-lamp, and shaking his head every now and then.

“Ryan?” she said, softly.

Ryan jumped up from his chair, as if unpleasantly surprised. “Lavie,” he said, in an annoyed tone, “what are you doing here?”

“Ryan, we’re worried about you,” she said, taking a few steps inside the room. Ryan closed his book, and turned to face her.

“Lavie,” he said, rather wearily, “there’s nothing to worry about. I’m just trying to clear up something here. I’d appreciate a little calm and silence, if you don’t mind.”

“Ryan,” Lavie said, smiling at him and sitting down on a chair, opposite him, “we’re willing to give you all the calm and silence you need, okay? But we’re not going to let you carry a heavy load by yourself.”

Ryan stared at her. “Geez,” he said, raising his eyebrows, “did you hear me talking in my sleep, or is it *that* obvious?”

“We’ve known each other for a long time, Ryan,” Lavie said, holding out her hand to him. “I know you’re not the kind of person who’d mope around about something silly. But whatever it is, you can tell me. I’m not going to get scared. And I’m there for you, just as I was in that prison. You can trust me.”

“Lavie...” Ryan hesitated, then shook his head. “There are some things that a man has to face alone.”

“Death and taxes, right?” Lavie said, with a laugh. “Don’t mind me, Ryan, that’s just one of Daddy’s jokes.”

Ryan smiled – a tired smile. “And prison,” he said, “though that isn’t what’s bothering me. But it’d take too long to explain, Lavie, and I’m sure you’re tired too.”

“Ryan,” she said, gently, “I’m willing to listen. Please. Even if it’s something.....hard for me to hear, I can take it. Even if it’s about.....Marianne.” She closed her eyes.

“Marianne?” Ryan laughed, but it was a mirthless laugh. “No, Lavie, that chapter in my life is closed – and I’m not saying that just to please you. I appreciate your concern. But....Look, Lavie, you’ve already done so much for me. I don’t want to bother you with this, not now.”

“Ryan,” Lavie said, leaning forward, “is this about what the Princess said? The vision she had?”

Ryan, startled, dropped the book-mark he was holding. “How did you know about that?” he said, nervously.

“Simple, Mr. Eramond,” Lavie said, with a light laugh. “She told Mom and I about it just before I left. But she made us promise not to tell anyone else, unless you allowed us.”

“I see there’s little you don’t know,” Ryan replied, half admiringly, half grudgingly. “Very well, Lavie. For some reason, and against my better judgment, I’m going to tell you about it, but first, I want you to do something.”

He picked up the book on the table, flipped through the pages impatiently until he found what he was looking for, and replaced the book-mark there. “I’m not too good at telling stories, Lavie,” he said, kindly, “and this story, unfortunately, goes way back.”

“That’s not true,” Lavie said, tenderly. “I still remember the war stories you used to tell me, when we’d sit in that Outpost in Davenport Park, and you’d pretend to be a general. They were pretty cool.”

Ryan smiled. “Ah, the Outpost. How – how far away that all seems, now.” He shook his head, regretfully. “And my old Army cap, the one you gave me for my eighth birthday. I don’t have it anymore – I’m afraid the moths got to it – but I still remember it. It was one of the coolest things I’d owned as a kid.”

Lavie flushed with pleasure. “Then you *do* remember....I thought you’d thrown it away,” she began.

“I didn’t, Lavie,” Ryan said with a laugh. “All right, Deputy, here’s some homework for you. I want you to read this book, starting at the page I’ve marked, right up to the end. As soon as you’re done, report back to me, and” – he sighed – “I’ll tell you what I *think* is going on.”

“A boring *book*?” Lavie laughed. “Are you sure this isn’t some sinister plot between you and Daddy to get me to read more? But never mind, a deputy doesn’t complain!”

“Not guilty,” Ryan said, softly. He took her hand in both of his, and held it for a moment. “And now, I think I’d better get some sleep. Good night, Lavie. And – thanks. Thanks for the support.”

“You know that’s what I’m there for,” she replied, smiling at him as she slowly released her hand and picked up the book. “Good night, Ryan.”

Ryan watched her go, not without regret, and with a smile not unlike Henrik’s “goofy grin” on his face. Then his expression stiffened.

She’ll have to know, he thought. But how will she take it? Nothing may ever be the same. God, why couldn’t this have waited until....

“I still can’t quite believe it all, Henrik,” Bernadette said, looking out at the Itarian Sea, which was slowly receding from their vision.

“But you have the proof around your neck, my love,” Henrik said, pointing to the medal that hung there. “You’re an honorary member of the Order of Saint Mikhail.”

“As you are, Henrik,” Bernadette said, reaching up to push an unruly lock of hair from his forehead, and laughing. “Goodness, I wonder what Sister Miriam would say to it all.”

Already, their last audience with the Pontiff and his Council – including the now-recovered Legrand – seemed to have taken place years ago. It was the capstone of an eventful stay in Itaria, for much remained to be done even after the defeat of Gharon. The Warp Cannon – which, as it turned out, was located in the basement of the Museum of Saint Pious II – was easily located and destroyed, and showed signs of having been used recently. Sergeant Burnfist had used it to return to Zion just before it was completely consumed, leaving Lieutenant Shin and his men, along with the earlier Zion regiments and the Itarian Guard, in firm control of the whole of Itaria up to the once-besieged cathedral of Lorenza. Sporadic riots were reported, but without the support of the higher-ups – and the weapons

that Gharon had, apparently, helped smuggle in through the warp – they were dying a natural death, and though the notion of a peaceful Itaria had taken a few bumps, it was far from broken.

For our young friends, there was much that they would never forget - besides travails in the tunnels, there were the many small moments they shared with each other and their companions, in the convent and in the Pontiff's palace. Above all, there was the liturgy that had accompanied the re-dedication of the Cathedral. Prior to the celebration, the entire Galvenian contingent had been invested as lay members of the Order of Saint Mikhail – a memorable moment enough, made unforgettable by Aline's tripping over her robes and then patting the Pontiff on the back as a sign of approbation. But it was the rites that followed that remained etched in their memories – the sight of almost every man, woman and child in the city, crowding into the massive dome, their voices raised in prayer and song as they celebrated their deliverance.

However, they both knew that the troubles that plagued Terra were far from over.

"Five mages," Henrik said, looking out at the surface of the water. "Three of them have been eliminated: Gharon, the man in Zion who kidnapped the Royal Family, and the Republican whom Legrand's men questioned. And a sixth, who will appear in the new Janwen."

"I've been thinking about that a lot, too, Henrik," Bernadette said, looking down and smiling at his reflection. "First of all, we're still not sure where the *old* Janwen is. And even if what the archaeologists say is true – that it's in Northern Galvenia or Southern Zion – how does that help us?"

"Quite right." Henrik took her hand in his, and she let it rest there, feeling a calm come over her despite the topic of their discussion. "Besides, what would 'new' mean in this context? A new city built over the ruins of the old one? But in that case, why not just say 'Estrana', which is the name of the city built over Janwen's ruins, in the days of the Man of Regret?"

"Speaking of regret, it was a master-stroke to ask Aline to keep the Sword of Regret with her, darling," Bernadette said, affectionately. "Only you could have thought of that. We don't have to worry about it for the entire journey, because she never lets it out of her sight."

Henrik looked down. "That's kind of you, but it was just a lucky guess. I figured she'd be so fascinated by its unusual properties that she'd be the best guard, and I was right."

"Thank the Infinity that all our friends are safe," Bernadette added. "Just imagine – Ryan being imprisoned for so long, and Lavie being the one who helped rescue him. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed with pride about my friends – both you and Lavie, Henrik."

Henrik smiled. "I must admit I found it hard to believe, too. And to think that Sir Prescott has been betraying our country, on top of it all. I'm only glad Ryan escaped. But I wish Prescott could be brought to justice, somehow."

“That’s another mystery,” Bernadette said, looking up at the sky. “We know from Radio Unity that he reached Unity Isle, shortly after the news from Zion came in, but except for the first day, no one seems to have seen him.”

“Perhaps he’s still hiding there,” Henrik suggested. “Unity Isle has a pretty old history as Chespa Isle – the Meldians used it as a prison colony and a place of exile. He could easily be skulking around there. Unfortunately, if he’s working with someone as powerful as Gharon – or, worse, *more* powerful – then it would be quite a job taking him down. And that’s where....” He shook his head. “I wish we could discuss this with Ryan, face to face. With what he’s been through, I don’t know if he’s even had the time to take the hint I gave him.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Henrik,” Bernadette said, with a smile. “Lavie’s taking good care of him, from what I can see. And knowing Lavie, she’s probably enjoying every minute of it!”

Henrik laughed. “I must say I benefited a lot from your care after that second fight, my Bernadette.” He rubbed his left side with his hand. “Thank the Infinity that Gray was a lousy shot. Gharon, however...”

“Henrik,” Bernadette said, softly, “I know you’re trying to make light of the whole thing to cheer me up. But honestly, when Gray shot you the first time, I was.....I know it sounds trite to say so, Henrik, but I didn’t know what....”

“What you’d do if something happened to me?” Henrik smiled and drew her to his side. “Believe me, I felt exactly the same way when you fell ill that night at the docks. Lavie said I was ‘silly about you’ then, and believe me, that’s a good kind of silly in my book.”

“In mine, too,” Bernadette said, and they embraced.

“Hey! You there! Derren and Penelope! Wait till you hear what I’ve found!” Aline said, excitedly, running on the deck just as they were drawing apart. “Oh, sweet lands, *this* one is worth writing up!”

Henrik turned and smiled at her. “Be careful with that sword, Aline,” he said. “The way you’re holding it, you could easily do to me what the Zion did to Prince Derren!”

“Henrik,” Bernadette said with mock gravity, “that isn’t funny.”

Aline laughed. “Goodness, the two of you will be the death of me! Anyway, here goes. I’ve been fine-tuning my Aura Detector, and I’ve found out something interesting about the Sword. It can potentially store thousands of auras – enough to populate a town, in fact – but there’s a very thin crack in its inner structure, which means that it’s lost that capacity. Instead, it can only store one – or at best a few – of them, all of which need to be of a particular type.”

“Do you mean it can only kill a particular type of victim?” Bernadette said, curiously.

“No, that’s not it! After all, it’s a sword. It can kill anyone. But that crack intrigues me. It seems quite old – almost as old as the sword – but it’s too fine to have been the result of an accident.”

“An act of the Infinity, then?” Henrik said, teasingly. Like Sister Rosemary, he knew that such a comment would invite a heated rejoinder from Dr. Sheldon.

“Perhaps,” Aline said mysteriously. “But that’s not all! When I picked up the sword, I was able to – how do I put it? – sense some of the auras that were stored in it. It was almost as if the pattern of my own mind matched those that the sword contained. Perhaps one of my ancestors owned this sword at some time!” She beamed at them. “Now wouldn’t that be nice? Perhaps *I’m* the one who should wield this sword against the forces of evil, Mr. Henrik!”

“That would be quite a fearsome sight, Aline,” Bernadette said, laughing.

“Oh, it’s naughty of you to laugh, Miss Bernadette,” Aline said, patting the younger woman on the back. “But I’m quite serious. I’ve even started studying the mental science books that I’ve brought with me again, and it all seems quite plausible!”

“When you say you ‘sensed the auras’, Aline, what exactly happened?” Henrik asked.

“Oh, I just heard a voice – not a hallucination, but more like a thought in my mind: ‘We are the generations who have owned this sword, and we fight beside you’. Or something like that. Then I felt the sword grow lighter – I mean, I’m not a crate lifter or anything, and the sword felt heavy when I first picked it up, but then it felt light!”

“Quite remarkable,” Henrik said. “Aline, would you mind if Bernadette and I just discussed this for a moment? We won’t take long.”

Aline winked at him. “Oh, you two! Well, far be it from me to interfere, so have fun, *mes amis!*” With a friendly wave at both of them, she disappeared below the deck, swishing the Sword of Regret in the air as if it were a plaything.

“Now *that’s* confusing,” Bernadette said. “Unless....”

“Unless they’re related in some way. But it seems so unlikely. Aline and *him*.....it makes me wonder if we haven’t been barking up the wrong tree. But everything else hangs in place. Even the second sword can be explained on the basis of the one tradition we have. Even if we confirm it, though, what do we do with this knowledge?”

“Dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, affectionately, “let’s face that when we reach Galvenia. For now, let us be grateful that we’re all safe – the city of Itaria, Ryan and Lavie, you and I. There’s still time.”

To understand the sudden appearance of Sir Prescott on his own doorstep – when he was presumed missing, or perhaps hiding on Unity Isle – it is necessary to trace the man’s own tale in the months that followed the Royal Family’s rescue from Inderness.

As might be expected, there had been opposition from the House of Lords to any formal punishment, despite the proofs of his treason that both Galvenian and Zionese intelligence agents had collected. Renaud’s allegation that he was making suspicious broadcasts could not be substantiated, but the charge of illegal arms trading had stuck, and Sir Douglas McIverny – the Intelligence chief, and an old rival of Sir Turbot’s – had investigated the matter vigorously. Sir Cornelius had issued a formal condemnation of Prescott’s actions, but the King – despite the insistence of his daughter – had hesitated, making the valid point that there was nothing to link Trask’s betrayal with Sir Prescott.

Then the news had emerged. Sir Prescott had reached Unity Isle, and had met the members of the Commonwealth Council. He spoke of a conspiracy, engineered probably by the Varald, to discredit him and weaken the alliance between his forces and the Zion. This had met with angry denials from Commissioner Jansen – who had enough troubles of his own – and then, almost as quickly as he had appeared, he had seemingly vanished.

The day before this happened, he was in one of the Council’s side-rooms, with Jedda of the Republic and his own fellow-citizen, Lord Lucan.

“What do we do, Prescott?” Lucan said, testily. “You were the one who assured us that there would be no troubles.”

“Indeed, if you have a suggestion to extricate us all from our problems, I would welcome it,” Jedda added, his expression angry. “Prescott, we are men of business. But, as representatives of our respective countries, we have appearances to keep up. As businessmen, we know that weapons and ammunition are merely commodities, to be traded like any other. But as statesmen, we cannot appear to be helping those who, for political reasons, are our enemies. We left the matter to you, and you assured us that our trails would be covered, but now the secret is out in the open. Your countrymen are attacking you openly, and Josen is displeased with me; he even threatens to have me removed and replaced by someone from San Delas.” He frowned. “Where did you go wrong, Prescott?”

“It seems to me,” Prescott said, resting his hands on the glass-topped table, “that you have been equally at fault. Lucan, I charged you with restraining the enthusiasm of that starry-eyed girl, and your words had no effect on the King.”

Lucan winced. “Prescott, while I understand your position, do not insult the Crown Princess of Galvenia. Your plan was supposed to work independently of what she chose to do, or chose not to do. And there are rumours that I am unwilling to believe. That the three of us hold the majority of the stock in Tur...”

“Be still, Lucan,” Jedda said, harshly. “The Zion and the Itarians may be eavesdropping, especially that officious evangelist, Schliemann. Do not mention names. You, Prescott and I were – partners in a

business enterprise. On seeing the way affairs in Terra were going, we saw, shall we say, a business opportunity. And we asked you to promote this – opportunity in as discreet a manner as possible, without alerting the concerned authorities. Instead....”

“Oh, hang it, Jemma. Based on Arlbert’s latest snivelling” – he held up a letter with the King’s seal, and waved it angrily in the air – “the Zion already know, and they have the Royal Family on their side, especially after what happened at Inderness. Prescott, give me your word of honour as a gentleman that you had nothing to do with that – incident.”

“I did not,” Prescott said, shaking his head. “I am a loyal Galvenian, just as you are.”

“Very well. Let us not mince words. We were offering ammunition. The Zion-Varald war gave us an opportunity to enrich ourselves, at the expense of our enemy and our overbearing ally. Prescott undertook to fan the flames of war, so that our profits would be maximized. But what is this sinister story about the sinking of our ships off the Republican coast?”

“What sinister story, Lord Lucan?” Prescott said, uneasily.

“That the Varald used the new weapon that we manufactured – a weapon that was meant for Galvenia alone. That you revealed the position of our ships to the Varald, allowing the attack to occur, so as to fan the flames further. And, worse, that there are survivors who know of what happened.”

“There were no survivors,” Prescott said, with a smile. “Come now, Lucan, this is but war propaganda on the part of the Varald. They see themselves on the losing side, and they wish to create disunity among us.”

“I would not be so sure of that myself,” Jemma said, drawing a letter from his own pocket. “Apparently, the survivors sought refuge with a Commonwealth official, and he has been bothering General Finkel and Premier Josen with the story. Worse, they have chosen to believe him. Prescott, you must withdraw your forces from there as soon as possible, before Josen starts asking questions.”

“They are not *my* forces, Jemma. They were sent there by Sheffield,” Prescott replied.

“You are still their Commander. Order them to withdraw,” Jemma said. “And extend that order to those survivors, whoever they may be. Offer them safe passage on the ships Sheffield has sent, and stop playing the soldier in our country. It is unsafe.”

“I will see what I can do, gentlemen,” Prescott said. “Now, have you arranged for a safe transmitter and receiver in my room, as I asked you?”

Lucan nodded.

“Then give me a little time, and I will soon have this sorted out. Trust me, I know what I am doing.”

"I hope so," Lucan said, with a gloomy expression. "Good day, Sir Prescott."

"I adjoin my hopes to Lucan's," Jedda said, frowning. "Remember, if this affair becomes any more public than it is now, we all fall together."

Sitting in his room, Prescott remembered an old saying of the Zion Emperor, Johan – a saying that was one of his favourites.

"If people hear a lie once, they will reject it. A few more times, and they will doubt the truth. A little more, and they will believe that truth and lie are both valid opinions, to be weighed and respected, to be given equal importance. Only a little more, and the lie becomes the truth. Statesmanship is nothing but the practical application of this fact."

"Johan was a fool," Prescott said slowly to himself, "but his little proverb is not without relevance to me."

He sighed. "It was foolish of me to refuse them, when they approached me last year. I thought I would manage on my own, and I did not want to dabble in what seemed like cloak-and-dagger theatrics. But now I am exposed, while they remain well concealed. And yet, I still find it hard to believe."

Switching off the transmitter, he began to undo his cravat. The news on both fronts – Galvenia and the Republic – was far from encouraging. Someone was attempting to release his prisoner from *Al-Mu'afa*; he was sure they would fail in the attempt, but the idea itself offended him. Sheffield and Carranya had the King's ear – and they would probably oppose him at every step.

Still wearing his formal attire – except for the coat which lay discarded on his chair – he lay down in bed. His manservant had been sent in search of an evening meal, which would be far from satisfactory if he was not mistaken.

"The ways of fate are strange. My would-be allies conduct their affairs in the most foolish way – banditry, pirate attacks, assassinations – and yet, they remain safe. I conduct my affairs with discretion – investments here, a sunk ship there – and yet, I am the one exposed. It seems strangely unfair."

With which reflection – for Sir Prescott was fond of such monologues, delivering them to no one if Gessler happened to be absent – he stretched his limbs out and yawned.

Suddenly, there was a sound of broken glass, and the light in his room went out.

"By the House of Chuselwock," Prescott said, "does even the bulb above my head conspire against me?"

"You speak well, Sir Prescott," a voice replied. "It is a pity that neither Galvenia, nor the Commonwealth, nor the women you court, seem to appreciate that."

Sir Prescott sprang to his feet. "Who are you, and why do you bother me with your petty comments?" he said, haughtily.

Suddenly, the room was bathed in red light, and he could make out the figure of a man in a cloak. His face was so obscured by the light that Prescott could only make out the outlines of a nose and chin, but he seemed tall and strong, with fair hair that protruded beyond the edge of his hood.

"How quickly we forget, Sir Prescott," he replied. "Not a moment ago, you were asking for my help, and now you pretend that you do not know me. If this is how you treat your friends, I shudder to think how you would treat your enemies. But perhaps the prisoner of *Al-Mu'afa* could tell us about that."

Trembling with fury, Sir Prescott reached for his sword, only to find that his interlocutor had picked it up, and was admiring it absently.

"Galvenian steel," he said. "Fine material, but quite unsuitable for the purposes I have in mind. Perhaps that is true of you, too."

"You devil," Prescott said, angrily, reaching for his pistol, "who are you?"

"My name does not matter, Sir Prescott. Remember a day in March, last year. One of my friends approached you at the Academy, and asked if you would be willing to – assist us in a certain task. You refused – not out of any goodness or kindness, I'm sure, but because you had plans of your own – and, I am sad to say, you refused quite rudely. And now, let us look at the present day. We have taken care of Koketsu, of Wilhelm, of Andreyev, of Kievan, even of that fool Mazarus, and Itaria will fall soon. We have lost no one, except some of our foolish allies – and if it had not been for their folly, we would have disposed of the Galvenian Royal Family as well. You, on the other hand, have *nothing*. Your house of cards is about to fall quite spectacularly."

"Even if what you say is true," Prescott said, trembling, "what do you propose to do about it?"

"It is simple, Sir Prescott. You had the audacity to use one of *our* men – not a valuable one, of course, but still ours – for a petty vengeance of your own. He has been captured, but that is no loss to us – he has been a petty crook for most of his life, and we merely used him for convenience. Nonetheless, it was presumptuous of you to do so. We are not a group to be trifled with, Sir Prescott."

"Your 'Third Way' did not impress me last year, intruder," Prescott said, trying to recover his courage, "and I must say it does not impress me now. What do you gain by your assassinations? Do you not realize that even if you eliminate every leader in Terra, others – equally incompetent, and equally foolish – will arise to take their place? At worst, you could bargain with them. No, my friend, it is you who have nothing. At the end of it all, there will always be another Kievan, another Wilhelm, and another Koketsu."

“How little you understand,” the man said, with a smile. “Assassination and war are but the means to an end – an end that you are hardly fit to hear about now. But despite your deplorable rudeness, I have consulted my own Council, and they have authorized me to make you an offer.”

“What kind of offer?” Prescott said, lowering his pistol.

“Simple. We still have work to do in Galvenia. Even as you speak, your prisoner is being released, and we want that prisoner for reasons of our own. The Princess is still safe. You are a Galvenian, and you can serve us well there. Join us, Prescott, and you will have no cause for regret; reject us, and you will fall just as the Tulors did on the day of Chespa Bay.”

“Serve *you*?” Prescott almost screamed. “Sir Prescott is not your servant, my man.”

“I am giving you a last chance.” He drew his own sword, slowly. “I could, of course, merely abandon you to your own people, and that would be amusing. But our code is clear. You interfered with Robert, and now we have lost him. Though he is not yet dead, he counts as such in my eyes. A life for a life, Sir Prescott.”

The edges of the man’s sword gleamed a dull red.

“D – do you mean to k – kill me?” Prescott said, a look of terror on his face. All attempts at a brave façade were gone, and he began to back away into a corner of his room.

“It will be quick and merciful, Sir Prescott. Quite unlike what you did to that young man,” the man in the cloak replied, and he was still smiling.

“Very well, then! I shall serve you, but spare my life!” Prescott said, reluctantly.

“Ah, you have chosen wisely,” the man replied. “Come with me, for I must instruct you, first....”

...and when Sir Prescott’s manservant entered the room, a few minutes later, it was empty. There was no trace of either his master, or of anyone else having been there.

“Goodness,” he exclaimed. “Just what the bloody hell is going on?”

And, sitting down, he began to eat his own meal calmly.

Lavie put the book down on the dresser beside her bed, and shivered.

Ryan wasn’t kidding, she thought. It’s awesome in a way, but it’s frightening.....terribly frightening. I understand why he didn’t want to tell me.

Looking at herself in the mirror, her expression grew resolute.

And yet, if that is the way he has to walk on, I will – follow him. That’s what I need to do. That’s what I want to do. I want to be with Ryan – or die trying. That’s....my Way.

Sitting down opposite the dressing table, she opened the book again, feeling as if this was all a dream, and she would soon wake up in Davenport, with her mother smiling at her side, and asking her why she seemed so frightened.

There is no doubt, then – at least given the state of our knowledge now, in C.Y. 200 – that we can safely date the tragedy of Koroth to around C.Y. 115, or at latest 116. Only four men have ever known the truth, and they have chosen to remain silent. Kaleb and Samath, of course, have gone to their final reward (or, in the case of Samath, punishment), and Nealus, as the leader, decided to suppress specific details.

There remains the curious story of the fourth person: Kevin the World Chronicler (so named because of his passion for history, and his role as the Journeymen’s official historian), who was Kaleb’s younger brother (or, according to some traditions, his half-brother). Modern scholars have doubted that he existed, but it seems clear that the traditional story of Kaleb, “A Hero’s Tale”, was written by him, and edited by his followers over the years. There seems even less reason to doubt that Kevin was at Koroth with Kaleb and Samath, and that it was he who received Kaleb’s dying words – and his weapon – and recorded the final events in Kaleb’s own journal. This has struck some scholars as painfully obvious, for a dead man cannot complete his own journal. As to why Kevin did not interfere in the battle and assist Kaleb, we do not know. It is surmised that Kevin either played a defensive role, preventing harm to the inhabitants of Koroth, or suppressed his own role in the battle out of modesty (a trait he and Kaleb shared; had Kaleb lived, it is doubtful that “A Hero’s Tale” would have ever been published.)

What is clear, however, is that after Kaleb’s death, and the rise of the so-called “Followers of Samath” (their most popular name), Kevin was instrumental in rallying those of the loyalists who adhered to Nealus’ original principles, and followed neither Horam in nor Samath. He did this bravely, until he was murdered by one of Samath’s followers (and most of his chronicles destroyed) in C.Y. 144. His son, a grown man and a trained mage, did not wish to follow his father’s path. He initially considered a monastic life, but the best tradition has it that he married a Zionese girl, and settled down in the eastern part of Zion. He left Kevin’s most important legacy – his sword, which he had received in turn from Kaleb – in the hands of a fellow mage, who handed it to the Pontiff of Itaria. Sean, son of the World Chronicler, served Zion as a soldier, making use of his own father’s sword – which was renowned for its strength, though it lacked the magical powers of Kaleb’s.

None of Sean’s descendants rejoined the Order, which was tragically destroyed at Inderness in C.Y. 156, but a tradition exists that, should the disciples of Samath – or any other group of mages wielding demonic powers – ever re-emerge, then Kevin’s descendant would be the one to wield Kaleb’s sword. (There is no reliable tradition of Kaleb’s ever having married or left any lineal descendants.) In doing so, he would avenge Kevin and Kaleb, and would also serve the Deity (see “The Prophecies and Sermons of Horam in” in the next chapter.) Some of the more fanciful versions of this legend have this event occurring “seven score and five” years after Inderness (see “Horam in’s Last Followers” in the final

chapter), that is, in C.Y. 301. But this figure should not be taken too literally, as 145 was the legendary head-count of the original Journeymen founded by Nealus.

In gratitude for the gift, the Pontiff granted Sean an honorary title of the sort popular in Itaria – “Count World-Age”. Sean, a humble man like his father, refused the honour but adopted the surname (the use of surnames was not popular among the Journeymen – even Nealus Hessen is still remembered only as “Nealus”), using it in the original Itarian. Thus, he became known as Sean Eramundum (‘age of the world’, in archaic Itarian), and his descendants, who emigrated to Galvenia following the Inderness conflict, continue to use a modified form of this name. They are the Eramonds, a quite unremarkable, if respectable, military family, with no apparent magical abilities.

At the time of writing, when the author spoke to them, none of them knew much about the family legend except in a vague oral tradition, which was frustrating, but which was to be expected, given the veil of secrecy that covers most of the Journeymen’s deeds. However, if a descendant of Kevin and Sean should, someday, emerge and perform remarkable deeds, old Horamin would probably smile and tell us that he had foretold it all.

Lavie felt the book slip from her hands, feeling her fingers grow numb, as she did the first time she had read these words.

Ryan, she thought, conflicting emotions at play within her. Ryan is....a Journeyman’s descendant? He’s some sort of ‘Chosen One’? Tell me I’m dreaming, please. Please.

Suddenly, a thought – a rather incongruous one – came to her, and she could not help bursting into laughter.

That’ll be my claim to fame, she thought. I was the only one who dared to call the Chosen One a jerk and a dope. Not that he didn’t deserve it at times, but....way to go, Lavie Regale!

There was a knock at her door – two raps, firm but gentle.

Ohmygosh, it’s Ryan! What do I tell him? Think, Lavie!

“Lavie, may I come in?”

Lavie heaved a sigh of relief – the voice belonged to Wolfgang Striker, and not to Ryan. Hurriedly, she shut the book and placed it in a drawer of the dresser, then snatched up her brush. “Just a minute, I was brushing my hair!” she called out, and after a few desultory strokes, she opened the door.

“Good evening, Lavie,” Striker said. “You seem quite cheerful today.”

“Oh, just remembering an old quarrel Ryan and I had,” Lavie said, stifling a giggle. “It didn’t seem funny at the time, but *now*, I guess it does.”

Striker smiled at her indulgently and smoothed down his hair. "How true," he said. "Did you have any success at extracting the truth from Mr. Eramond?"

Lavie flushed. "Er – it was – I asked him about it, and he told me he was still thinking about prison!" she said, lightly. "Apparently they only gave them romance novels to read in there! That must have been terrible, especially for a guy like Ryan!"

"A romance novel, like the one you're reading there?" Striker said, pointing to the book on her table, and picking it up. "*The Gamekeeper's Daughter*, by Roxanne Winters. I believe my mother may have read that one. Is it any good?" He chuckled.

"Pretty good," Lavie said, with a smile. "But then, I know you guys don't like reading that sort of thing."

"Perhaps," Striker conceded. "But wouldn't you agree that real life sometimes outstrips the novel, as far as such things are concerned? There still are people who go on heroic quests, who brave dangers, and who conceal secrets, to be with the ones they love. They exist, even if their stories are never told."

Lavie blushed with pleasure. "Aww, Agent Striker, you're a charmer! Though it's true, hey, maybe my life *would* make an interesting novel, who knows? But I'm not concealing any secrets here, even if I did have to face a few dangers!"

"Oh, I was merely speaking of common literary devices, Lavie," Striker said, smiling back at her. "But I must admit that my statement was based on our little trip to *Al-Mu'afa*. However, let me return to the point. What was Mr. Eramond concerned about?"

"Er, I told you, remember...." Lavie began.

"My dear Lavie," Striker said, closing his eyes, "you may be a brave and devoted huntress, but you're a terrible liar. Let me outline what must have happened. Mr. Eramond probably told you something – or gave you enough information to guess at it – and now you, as well as he, realize that it is something that should not be widely known. In other words, having penetrated his secret, you now feel obliged to keep it. Am I correct?"

Lavie was on the verge of losing her temper, but then she remembered an evening on the *Empress Sylvania* – and a certain photograph in her companion's watch – and she was silent. "It looks like I'm keeping a lot of secrets these days, all right," she said, slowly. "And it's not that I don't want you to know, Agent Wolfgang, but – it's not my secret to reveal. If Ryan wants to tell you about it, I'm sure he will."

Striker smiled. "I think we understand each other perfectly, Lavie. Would you do me the courtesy, then, not to speak of my own little skeleton in the cupboard to Mr. Eramond? I don't think he would mind knowing, but I would rather keep my peace for now, until things are clearer."

“He wouldn’t mind, if I know him,” Lavie admitted, “but you’re right. It might make things complicated. I’m sorry, Agent. Ohmygosh, this is so....” She shrugged her shoulders, helplessly.

“I know what you mean, Lavie,” Striker said, kindly, “and I appreciate your sympathy. But I will urge you to do one thing, and that is to stand by Mr. Eramond, whatever happens. I may not always be there to help you, but I know that I leave him in good hands. At this moment, you have his friendship, and probably more than that. Follow him, and make sure he does not do anything foolish.” He laughed.

“I will,” Lavie said, passionately. “You can trust me! But...” she paused, “what about you?”

“Oh, Lavie, don’t pity me,” Striker replied, looking amused rather than annoyed. “I made my choices long ago, and I have to abide by them.”

“The Way of Justice?” Lavie said, wonderingly.

“Or the Deity Path, as some call it. It has its satisfactions, even if they are rather cold and bloodless ones. Follow your way, even as I follow mine.” They shook hands, and he turned and left.

That’s what the Princess said, Lavie thought. Poor Ryan. Poor Agent Wolfgang. I wish there was something I could do for both of them, now. And I will – or die trying!

“Disappeared?” King Arlbert looked at the Prime Minister with consternation. “Sweet Infinity, man, this isn’t a fairy tale! Men do not disappear in that way.” He shook his head uneasily, thinking of Inderness.

“I am afraid it is true, Your Majesty,” Lionel Bainbridge said, stuffily. “Weeks of careful searching have turned up no clue. Even the manservant is completely ignorant of what has happened. Sir Prescott has vanished into thin air, for lack of a better phrase.”

“What was he doing on Unity Isle in the first place?” Sheffield asked, sharply.

“That is a question I can answer,” Lord Douglas McIverny – looking vigorous despite his seventy-five years – replied. “As you know, Sire, I have been involving myself more and more in my official work these days, at the request of both Sir Cornelius and some of my dear friends. It is certain that Prescott, fearing exposure, travelled to the Commonwealth to defend himself, perhaps to allege that he was being framed by the Varald. That is what Lucan has told me, and Lucan is an honourable man.”

“Did Lucan believe his tale?” Bainbridge asked. He was no fan of Lucan, whom he considered woefully out-of-date and pompous.

“He did not, Prime Minister. However, there have been strange happenings at Sir Prescott’s residence. I have learned, through a friend of mine who visited the place recently, that a young woman was being detained there for unknown reasons. Some of the woman’s friends tried to bring her away to safety, and

succeeded, but as they did, they saw something mysterious – an apparition, or image, of Sir Prescott, which seemed to threaten them. Most remarkable.” Lord Douglas smiled – it was a largely toothless smile, but an engaging one.

“A Memory Crystal, perhaps?” Sheffield suggested.

“Or some sort of conjuration,” Princess Carranya said, slowly. Everyone in the room – including her father – turned to look at her, shocked.

“Carranya!” Arlbert said, wishing that he had not brought her to this meeting.

“Father, do you not remember how we were spirited away from Issachar to Inderness?” Carranya said, calmly. “If we are facing opponents with such powers, denying the truth does us no service.”

“You have a vivid imagination, Princess,” Sheffield said, laughing.

“Don’t laugh, Sheffield. We old men remember the days when such things were more common,” Sir Douglas replied, rubbing his hands together mischievously. “Anyway, here’s the *coup de grace*, as our Zion friends would say. The young lady in Prescott’s place was none other than the daughter of the infamous Robert, who is now in our custody.”

“Robert?” Sheffield looked at Lord Douglas as if questioning his sanity.

“That loathsome fellow, Alex Robertson, or The Prince,” Sir Douglas said, patiently, addressing Sheffield as if he were addressing his grandson, aged six. “Her mother, who has also suffered at his hands, is the daughter of the erstwhile Earl of Tulor.”

“Good heavens!” Arlbert exclaimed.

“Robertson’s daughter – and Sir Prescott,” Carranya said. “Somehow, it doesn’t make sense.”

“Leaving petty criminals aside, I have received communications from our Zion allies,” Sheffield said, “which are far more disturbing. Apparently, some of our forces in the Republic were captured by the enemy, and held in an illegal prison at the Fulton-Ghetz border. The Zion raided the place, for reasons of their own, and will be helping the prisoners of war to return to Galvenia shortly.”

“What about our own forces in the Republic, Sheffield?” Bainbridge asked.

“They have been asked to hold their position till now,” Sheffield said, “but I think, in the light of the latest ship movements among the Varald, I shall ask them to return the way they came. Our mission in the Republic is over, and the Varald’s land troops have faced serious losses.”

“Lyzhnov’s reign of glory isn’t lasting long,” Arlbert said, with a snort. “Already, there are people rising in support of Kievan and against the military regime. If they lose internal stability, they will be forced to surrender, and then we will have peace at last.”

“That’s a big ‘if’, Sire,” Sir Douglas said, with an exaggerated bow. “The question is, what should we do now?”

“First of all, with even the Lords turning against Prescott, it is time to cut him loose, Lord Douglas,” Sheffield replied. “We will publicly announce that he has been stripped of his post for dealing with the enemy, and we will appoint a capable man – General Ferguson, for example – to lead the land troops in his place. The naval efforts will remain under Wells, of course. And we will go over Chuselwock Manor with a fine-tooth comb, and detain his *aide-de-camp*, Gessler, who is residing there.”

“The Lords...” Arlbert began, anxiously.

“We have put this proposal to them, Your Majesty,” Bainbridge said, “and they have voted in favour of impeachment and strict sanctions, by a majority of fifty-three to twenty-seven. Lord Douglas is one of those in favour. They are saddened, but find his actions treasonous and unacceptable.”

“Very well, then,” the King said, heavily. “But make sure they treat old Sir Turbot kindly, and do not subject him to undue hardship.”

“Quite so, Sire,” Sir Douglas said, frowning. “Quite so. There is one more matter, isn’t there, Sheffield? The fact that the illegal prison in question was privately owned, and one of the owners was Sir Prescott.”

Sheffield winced. “Where did you hear that?” he asked.

“Oho, I mustn’t betray confidences, my dear Minister,” Sir Douglas said, with a wink, “especially when they come from a charming lady.”

“Very amusing, Sir Douglas,” Sheffield said, irritably. “Anyway, let us not flog a dead horse. Prescott will be punished, and we will get to the bottom of this matter.”

Carranya laughed. *It must be Lady Anne*, she thought. Ever since Lavie had informed her of Ryan’s rescue, Lady Anne had been in touch with her, informing her of all the news that came in from her granddaughter.

“Does something amuse you, Princess?” Sir Douglas asked.

“I was merely wondering, Sir Douglas,” Carranya said, roguishly, “who the charming lady might be.”

“Dear me, Princess,” Sir Douglas replied, twinkling, “between you and her, I feel quite young again.”

“That was unnecessary, my friend,” General Lyzhnov said bitterly, looking at the now-dead form of his fellow ruler and companion, Admiral Kholmov, which lay still on the ground, a look of despair on his face. “Are you going to betray us, now, after bringing us this far?”

The man in the cloak – whom the gentle reader may remember as being present on a similar inauspicious occasion, involving the late Lev Andreyev – merely smiled, as if the rebuke was meant to be a jest. “I beg your pardon, General – but to speak of betrayal, we must presuppose loyalty on your behalf. You failed us, and now we have to pronounce sentence.”

“How have we failed you?” Bromfeld said, angrily, getting up from the table, at which he had been sitting before the chessboard. It seemed impossible to him that just a few minutes ago, he and Kholmov had been playing a quiet game – with Lyzhnov *kibitzing*, as the Old Republicans would say – when the man had suddenly appeared and, without a word, slain his friend with a bolt from his sword.

“Oh, do not pretend to be innocent, my secretive friend,” the cloaked man said, walking over to the chessboard and tipping over the white king – Kholmov’s king. “Our agreement was simple. You would seize power in the Directorate. In return, you would win the war against the Zion, and you would also lift restrictions on the practice of the Itarian religion. Not that I have any love for it – oh, no – but simply because we also had allies there, and did not wish to offend them.”

“Had?” Lyzhnov said, nervously, looking at the newspaper in front of him – which, on its front page, carried the full details of the suppression of the Itarian rebellion. “Have you betrayed them too, then?”

“My good General, do not try my patience, unless you wish to join your friend there,” the man said, pointing to Kholmov’s remains casually. “The fact is that you fought your war like the dunderheads that you are. We could have provided you arms, but you chose to buy them from some Galvenian idiot in the Republic instead – an idiot who, ironically, has now sought refuge with us. We could have given you powers, but you insisted that your mighty divisions would win the war on their own. You are a fool, Lyzhnov, and I am not sure if I should have helped you overthrow Kievan in the first place.”

Lyzhnov swore loudly and colourfully in his native tongue – to call someone a *dumkopf* is a mortal insult in the Varald Directorate, and he was not going to take it lying down – but it had no effect on the man.

“We are not responsible for the fact that the Zion used their vile mages. But you, my cloaked friend, promised us victory. Do you not care what happens to the Varald?” Bromfeld shouted, knocking over the chessmen with an angry sweep of his arm. “Do you understand the consequences of a defeat by the Zion? If you can do anything, my friend, do it now!”

“There is no need to excite yourself,” the man said, as calmly as ever. “Listen to me. We can still save you, if you are willing to be saved. First of all, you must allow us to eliminate Kievan.”

“Kievan?” Bromfeld shuddered. “That would be suicidal, given the current uprising of his supporters. Besides, the man has a child. She is not responsible for her father’s evil deeds, and depends on him.”

“We will take both of them, then.” The man’s expression, despite the words he had just spoken, still suggested amusement. “Did you demur when we first explained that we would be taking Wilhelm, Koketsu and Mazarus down?”

“They are not Varaldians,” Lyzhnov said, firmly. “Besides, what good would Kievan’s death do? It would merely serve to rally his supporters, who grow more vocal, and who exist even in the Army and the Navy.”

“Very well, then. You leave me with no alternative. I shall spare Kievan, but in return, you must allow me access to the Palace of Gyrus.”

Both Lyzhnov and Bromfeld – despite being tough career men, who had served the Directorate and their country unflinchingly – blanched at this. “The – Palace? What in Ghetz do you want to do there?” Lyzhnov said at last.

“That is none of your concern, except that it is your salvation, both from the Zion and from Kievan’s supporters.”

“My dear man,” Bromfeld said, uneasily, “for the past one thousand years, even before the Great Zion-Varald War, the Directors of the Varald have decreed that that place be kept locked for ever. None have dared transgress this order. The Palace itself is surrounded by armed guards, who have standing instructions to shoot anyone who approaches the entrance on sight, unless he is the Director himself. And one of the oaths that any Director takes, on assuming office, is to leave the Palace untouched. Only Director Putschov, in the year after the Zion-Varald War ended in a stalemate, ever violated that oath, and he was found dead outside the entrance, his face unrecognizable, that very day. No one knows how it happened. None have ever tried again, even the most powerful Directors.”

“Nevertheless, it is what you will do, Lyzhnov. You are the Director, and I will accompany you. Nothing will harm you, if you do as I say.”

“You merely condemn me to a slower death,” Lyzhnov said. “Can you not enter the place yourself, without me? I will.....give you the key, if you wish. As for the guards, if neither Bromfeld nor I can shoot you, they surely hold no terrors.”

“That would be satisfactory,” the man said.

“But what will you....find there?” Bromfeld said, shaking his head slowly. “This is insanity. A great evil lies within that place. Kievan himself was afraid if anyone even mentioned the place.”

“Old wives’ tales, Bromfeld,” the man replied. “Come, Lyzhnov, give me that key.”

“Lyzhnov, think twice!” Bromfeld began, but before he could say anything more, the man’s sword flashed red, and Bromfeld fell back in his chair, stunned.

“You murderer!” Lyzhnov roared, drawing his pistol.

“He is not dead, merely stunned as punishment for his incessant chatter,” the man said. “Do not emulate him.”

Slowly and unwillingly, Lyzhnov led the man into an inner chamber, unlocked a complicated mechanism, and took out what seemed to be a simple iron key.

The man pocketed it with satisfaction, smiled, and then disappeared, leaving the General prey to an unfamiliar emotion – fear.

“You seem pensive, my dear Miss Lavender,” Father Marlborough said, as he came upon Lavie in the library. “May this old man ask you why, if I am not being indiscreet?”

Ohmygosh, that book of Ryan’s belonged to him! He must know – or at least suspect. Was that why he sent Bernadette to look for....ohmygosh! I’ve understood it all. No. No.....

“You seem displeased to see me,” Marlborough said, apologetically. “I seem to elicit that reaction from young women, somehow, simply by saying the wrong thing accidentally. More proof of the Infinity’s sense of humour, I say.”

“It – it isn’t that.....Professor, can I ask you some questions?” Lavie said, the words escaping her in a rush. “And will you promise that you’ll answer me? It’s very, very important.”

Marlborough sat down beside her, and looked at her kindly, as if he were about to administer the formula of forgiveness. “My dear Miss Lavender, I would never willingly conceal the truth from anyone, unless there were strong reasons to. And considering that you saved my life in that dreadful prison, I am doubly committed to answering you honestly. Speak, and I shall answer.”

In answer, she pulled the *History of the Journeymen* from under the book she was reading - *The Story of Inderness* - and handed it to him.

Marlborough winced, as if he was truly experiencing pain. “Miss Lavender,” he said, “did Eramond give you that book?”

“I – sort of forced him to, actually,” Lavie said, sadly. “I couldn’t bear seeing him look tired and alone, as he did these past few days, so I asked him to confide in me. He gave me the book, and told me to read it first before he could say anything more.”

Marlborough shook his head. “Then you know,” he said. “An intelligent young woman like yourself must have understood it all now, especially since you are also a friend of Miss Aquary’s.”

Lavie nodded, feeling the lump rise in her throat again. “Ryan....and the sword, isn’t it? You needed Ryan safe, and you wanted the sword so that....”

“So that he could wield it?” Marlborough sighed, and seemed to age in a moment, becoming a frail man of eighty rather than the good-humoured King’s College don that Lavie knew well. “I’m afraid it’s

nothing quite so devious as that, my dear. I suspected the truth for long, but I only received this book recently, from the Zion. Then I knew. Unfortunately, I could do nothing. I wish I could spare you this.”

“The Zion?”

“One of my superiors, an Archbishop Legrand, first discovered evidence of a conspiracy of mages last year. He alerted us – I was on the Pontiff’s Council at the time, and Pious is an old friend and protector – and the Zion, especially my ward, Prince Wilhelm. Ever since then, I have been in correspondence with the Zion’s Director of Intelligence, a man named Ferzen. It was he who kindly lent us the services of Agent Striker for this mission.”

“I remember Carranya telling me that – that you were Wilhelm’s tutor,” Lavie said. “Did he also know – about Ryan?”

“I think he may have suspected it before I did, frankly,” Marlborough replied. “I have had thousands of students in my lifetime, but I don’t think I will ever regret losing one of them the way I mourned Wilhelm. He was – another Geraud, or at least one in potential. There are many students whom I consider my own children – your friends, Bernadette and Henrik, for example – but Wilhelm was different. He had the soul of an Emperor – not just the title, as his father does. I was his tutor, but honestly, I learnt much from him.”

Lavie shook her head. “Poor Princess,” she said. “Did she tell you – about Wilhelm?”

“I’m afraid so,” Marlborough said. “Dear me, that was most unfortunate. But let us return to the matter at hand. From what Legrand said, there are five leaders of these mages – one in each of the countries of Terra – and three of them have already been defeated at Itaria, Zion and Fulton. That leaves...”

“The Varald,” Lavie said, slowly, “and...Galvenia. But – who are these mages? What do they want? Why are they – tearing our lives apart like this?” Her voice rose in anger, and a red glint appeared in both her eyes.

“They call themselves the Third Way – or so Legrand deduced from the dying ravings of the one he met,” Marlborough said. “You surely know what that means, since you are the Princess’ friend. The way of evil, and of power. And, quite simply, that is what they seek. The wars, the assassinations, are not their main goal. They want to rule Terra, as that madman Samath did. And do to this, they are playing chess – human chess, in which the pieces are rulers, ministers and generals.” Sensing that Lavie wanted to learn more, he told her the story of Thomas Perrin and the Infinite Revival, in a few short sentences. She listened to him in horror, the red in her eyes growing deeper as he spoke.

“That’s – terrible!” Lavie said, indignantly, acutely conscious of how inadequate the word sounded, but unable to think of an alternative. “How can anyone be so wicked.....Professor, we have to stop them!”

“Fortunately, the first steps have already been taken,” Marlborough said. “Three of them are dead. The other two must be faced, and then, we shall have to deal with their leader.”

“Their leader?” Lavie shuddered violently.

“We do not know who he is, Miss Lavender,” Marlborough said. “But it is traditional among such groups to have a powerful and cruel leader – and before his untimely demise, Prince Wilhelm had found some evidence that this was, in fact, so. This leader, whose location is unknown, would emerge only for two reasons.”

He paused, choosing his words carefully.

“First, if his five followers were successful, and had become the powers behind the rulers of each country. Second, if his followers failed, and he had to take matters into his own hands. We are – hoping for the second alternative, though it is still a terrible one.”

“But who will face the – Ohmygosh!” Lavie exclaimed, as she noticed Ryan standing opposite them both, and looking at them with a resigned expression on his face. “Ryan, we....”

“Never mind,” Ryan said, sitting down and facing Lavie directly. “In a way, Lavie, I’m – I’m glad you know. There can’t be anything worse than this, right?” He laughed weakly. “Perhaps that’s why I’m putting off the trip home, though I’m quite all right – I don’t know how I’ll react when you hand me that sword, Professor. I – know what has to be done.”

“Ryan Eramond,” Lavie said, seriously, “listen to me. You’re not doing this alone. We’re all on your side, remember?” She smiled at him. “And, more importantly, I am on your side.”

“Lavie, I....” He paused, and when he spoke again, it was with an effort. “It’s strange. When I was lying in bed, sick and recovering, I wondered if I’d ever hear something like that from you. I hoped, but I thought it was a..... futile hope. And now, I have to ask you.....not to say that, Lavie. I have to do this – alone.”

“No, you don’t,” Lavie said, firmly. “Does he, Father? I mean, look at your hero, Kaleb! He tried to fight his final battle alone, and he won, but it cost him his life! Look at Prince Derren, who asked Lady Penelope to leave him before the Zion attacked Lorean! Look at.....Thomas Perrin, who tried to fight his battle alone! I could – never do that, Ryan. Whether you win or lose, I’ll be – beside you.”

“Lavie....” Ryan’s voice was a whisper. “That’s impossible. Even if I win, I’m not greater than Kaleb! I don’t mind doing it, if it has to be done” – Lavie had to lean close to him to catch his last few words – “but I can’t bear the idea of – leaving you behind, like Kevin was. Like Thomas’s....girlfriend was. Like Lady Penelope. I can’t – hurt you that way, Lavie. Please try to understand....”

“Ryan,” Lavie said, her face pale but her voice determined, “I know what you mean. But – if that’s the Way I have to take in life, I am ready for it. *Nothing* is more important to me than being with you, you.....you dope!”

“Lavie!” Somehow, on hearing the familiar and friendly insult, Ryan’s expression relaxed, and he found himself able to smile a little. He held out his hand, and she grasped it.

Father Marlborough laughed. "You do have a way with words, Miss Lavender," he said. "Now, my dear children, since the two of you are together, listen to me. There *is* a way that may not necessarily entail your death, Ryan, but I cannot promise you anything. I am still unclear about some of the details. But what we need to do, first, is to return to Galvenia as soon as possible."

"To Galvenia?" Ryan said, shaking his head. "To practice with....the Sword, right?"

"Not quite, my dear Ryan," Marlborough said. "To meet your good friends, Mr. Spenson and Miss Aquary, who hold key pieces of the puzzle I am trying to solve. And who, incidentally, fought beside each other in the tunnels of Itaria, and saved each others' lives more than once. Take heart from them, my friends, for it is in contemplating their deeds that I found the key. It is still only a hope, but to quote Lady Penelope, what Galvenia needs today is hope. Do not give up hope, my children."

"We won't," Lavie said, placing her other hand over Ryan's. He looked at her intently, the beginnings of a hundred sentences trembling on his lips, but remained silent.

"I suppose you're right," he said, after a long pause, feeling his hands grow cold, and grateful that Lavie's were still warm. "I think we ought to – go back. We can't be holidaying over here any more if we've got to.....save Galvenia, right?"

"Not just Galvenia, my young Journeyman," Marlborough said. "Since you are both determined, I shall ask our friend Wolfgang, and my charming friend, Kyria Arnoldus, to help you prepare for the departure. In the meantime, if there is anything you need to say to each other in my absence" – he coughed discreetly – "please do so, for it is also part of my plan."

"Huh?" Ryan said, but before he could speak any further, Father Marlborough had left, closing the library door behind him. "What was that all about?" He looked at Lavie, and an idea came to his mind.

"I wonder myself, Ryan," Lavie said, smiling at him. "So...um....is there anything you want to say, Ryan?"

"H – how about that rain we've been having lately," Ryan began, looking out of the window, but as Lavie began to reply, she saw that his eyes were twinkling.

"Spring showers," she said, slowly, with a smile. "You know what they're like." *Hmph, trust him to joke at a time like this!*

"Yeah," Ryan replied, feeling his own heart beat faster. *Hope*, he thought. *That girl in front of me threw me a life-line when I was drowning. That's what Lavie means to me, though it took me ages to realize it. Hope. Lord Geraud didn't die for the Commonwealth, and I don't have to, either. That old man must know something. He's testing us.*

"So how are....things?" Lavie said, looking into his eyes.

“Good, good,” he began. “Especially...” he leaned closer to her, “since you got here.” He chuckled. “Threw you off script there, didn’t I?”

“Well, it’s very romantic of you to re-enact our date – if you could call it that – in Glendale, Mr. Eramond,” Lavie said, a smile on her lips. “And if you must know....things are good for me, Ryan, since that night Doctor Rasheed told me you were out of danger.”

“Lavie, I...” he began, then hesitated. “I’m not that good with words, you know. There are a million things I want to say, but I’m afraid they’ll come out wrong.”

“Pish posh!” Lavie replied with a laugh, as she felt the warmth return to Ryan’s hand. “What about that speech you gave us on Graduation Day?”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Ryan said, with a wink, “but I spent a week preparing that, even before our results came out. Don’t tell Henrik, especially. He’ll kill me.”

“I’ll never let him – or that dope Samath, or whatever his name is – kill you, Mr. Eramond!” Lavie said, fervently. “Never. I’d rather...”

“Don’t say it, Lavie,” Ryan said, gently. “I don’t even want to think of.....Damn it, where are the smooth speeches and phrases at this time?” He shook his head.

“Do you want Armin’s guidebook to help you, or something?” Lavie said, laughing as she leaned even closer. They could not have drawn closer at this point without either colliding, or overturning the table between them.

“Not at all,” Ryan said, as he leaned a little closer – close enough to feel her breath, to smell the Cosmopolitan rose in her hair - and made his decision. *No time for speeches.* His arm reached around her, and she raised her head to meet him as their lips joined.....

“Emily, dear,” Lavie said, laughing, “there’s no need to applaud!”

“Yay!” Emily said, continuing to clap. “Hurray for Grandpa and Gran!”

After what seemed like a mere moment to both of them, they drew apart, and Ryan noted, to his consternation, that Lavie was wiping one eye with her handkerchief.

“Lavie?” He looked at her with concern. “Lavie, I’m sorry....”

“Sorry for what, you goof?” She beamed at him. “Ryan, I....”

Ryan placed a finger over her lips. “Let me say it first, Lavie.” He paused, and for a moment, Sean Eramundum and his ancestors were just legends, nightmares to be forgotten. “It’s taken me a long, long time to understand, but today, I finally do. Lavie Regale, I....love you.”

And, like Father Marlborough, let us now withdraw, and leave our friends to themselves, and to the wonder of the moment.

“A Warp....Cannon?” Constance Juno said, wonderingly. “Are you sure, Mr. Aquary? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Quite so,” Jonas said, gravely. They had decided, for caution’s sake, to meet in his house, as Sir Prescott – who was still missing – now knew that they were based at. The arrest of Felix Gessler, in a surprise Special Services raid on Chuselwock Manor, had been the talk of Galvenia for a week now, but though it had confirmed everyone’s suspicions, it still left them with no clues of his whereabouts. “It is a magical device of the greatest antiquity, dating back to the age of the Kingdoms. They used to be much more numerous, but they were corrupted during what historians call the Second Demonic War, and most of them were destroyed.”

“Demonic War?” Marianne said, sharply, raising her head up from the oven, where a kettle was boiling.

“A literal war between humans and demons, dear girl,” Jonas said. “It was eventually won, thanks to Prince Ryle of Factoria and his band of friends, though the Itarians tend to gloss over the Prince’s role. Anyway, after the war, it is said that only six of them were left functioning, and that when the new nations were formed, each happened to have a Cannon within its boundaries, which was intact but not useable. The location of the sixth remains a mystery.”

“That sounds suspiciously neat, Aquary,” Fossen said, shaking his head. “But given the recent events in this tired old world of ours, I suspect it may be true all the same. How exactly do they work?”

“According to legend,” Jonas replied, “they could be used by any mage. Unfortunately, they were misused by the demons, and by those mages serving them. After the Second War, King Dyss of Factoria ordered them sealed, except for the six I mentioned. Legend has it that it was an Aquary who helped seal them, though her name is lost in the mists of history. After their sealing, they remained dormant for thousands of years. About a century and a half ago, the disciples of Samath, the rogue Journeyman, tried to unlock them, but failed. Whoever has done so now must be a mage of great skill.”

Fossen nodded, but said nothing as Marianne placed cups of tea in front of all of them – her mother, Jonas, Constance, and, of course, himself. Marianne seated herself comfortably next to her mother, and listened intently.

“From what I’ve learned, the principle is this. A Warp Cannon can take you to any location within a country, or the sea around it, provided you have seen that location at some time in your life. It can transport you between countries, too, though the procedure for that is a little complicated, and I’d have to ask our Zion friends about it. Once it’s unlocked, any mage with the right training can use it; once it’s destroyed, it does not lose its powers instantly, but remains active for about a day or two. There is no limit on the distances you can cover, except the mage’s own skill; however, even if one mage can’t do it,

a group of them working together can travel very far indeed, literally from one end of Terra to the other. However, the energy expended would be huge, and would leave them drained and weak for a long time.”

Marianne frowned. “Mr. Aquary,” she said, “if that’s what Sir Prescott was using that day, does that mean he’s a mage?”

“Not necessarily, my dear. He certainly has mage allies, at the very least. Even you could use a Cannon if you knew the right mages, and decided on a pick-up spot beforehand. He could be anywhere now, depending on how powerful and numerous his allies are.”

“What does one of these Cannons look like?” Julianne asked. “Do they resemble actual cannons?”

“No, by the Infinity,” Jonas said. “The name is a fanciful one. The objects are large boxes, made of a particular metal, and about the size of that wardrobe there. There are two small projections, one on each side, which look like small cannons, and which is where they get their name from.”

“From this, we deduce that there are powerful mages – or at least one – in Galvenia right now,” Fossen said, “and that’s bad news. I’ve asked Juno to scout around the northern parts of Galvenia, and to report back to me if he finds anything.”

“I’m worried about Makarov,” Constance said, sadly. “If he’s up against a powerful enemy like that...”

“My dear lady, please be comforted,” Jonas said kindly. “That sword of Juno’s – Fossen will correct me, if I’m wrong – can probably detect a nearby Warp Cannon field, and can block attempts to warp its owner. As long as your boy holds on to his sword, he is safe.”

“Thank you, Mr. Aquary.” Constance looked at him with gratitude. “You’ve been very good to me. Life can be lonely in Lorean sometimes, waiting for my son to come back...”

“Call me Jonas. And I understand what you feel, dear lady,” Jonas said, sympathetically. “I’m waiting for my own girl to come back. Dear Bernadette. You’ll like her, I’m sure. She’s in Itaria right now, and from what she writes, she’s been through a good deal. I know it’s vain of me, but I’m terribly proud of her – and I might just tell her so. She and that fine young man, Spenson, are doing us Galvenians proud.”

“Your daughter?” Constance smiled. “I remember her. She came around to my home last year, with some pamphlets about children’s protection. I’m afraid we didn’t speak much, but she was a nice, kind girl. She doesn’t look much like you, though.”

“Hmm, she takes after her mother, that way,” Jonas replied, with a chuckle. “I’m the ugly one in the family, you see!”

“You’re hardly ugly, Jonas,” Constance said, laughing herself. “But what if Makarov can’t find any trace of the Warp Cannon?”

“There are other ways to find one,” Jonas said, “but I’d like to put that off for a couple of weeks, till my daughter returns. From what she says, there was a Warp Cannon working in Itaria, and some of the Zion mages managed to put it out of action. She might have some ideas, too.”

“I hope so,” Marianne said, shaking her head. “I’d be glad to see the end of this whole war. It’s brought nothing good to me, that’s all I can say!”

“Now, dear,” Julianne said, affectionately, “we now know that Sir Prescott can’t be trusted, so don’t take anything he told you too seriously. Let’s just see how things unfold.”

“You’re probably right, Mother,” Marianne said, absently, her mind on other things – particularly on a certain letter, which she now wished unwritten, and which she hoped had not reached its destination.

The conclusion of Sir Prescott’s remarkable journey, until the moment he found himself on the doorstep of his own home, is easily told. He had blinked, and in a moment, he saw that he was in a room, dimly lit by torches on the walls, which glowed red rather than the expected orange or yellow. In the room was a simple table and three chairs, and on one of its walls was a large bronze plaque, bearing three circles. Within each circle was a stylized figure – one of a man, the other of a woman, and the other of some sort of wild beast. Two of the chairs were already occupied by men – one of whom was Sir Prescott’s recent acquaintance. The other man resembled him, though he was shorter and more sturdily built, but he also wore a dark cloak.

The only other object in the room was what looked like a large box, about the size of a wardrobe, with two short antennae (he could not think of a better word) on each side.

“Please have a seat, Sir Prescott,” the first man said. “Welcome to the Third Way. We trust that you will not regret your decision.”

“You seem polite all of a sudden,” Prescott said sullenly. “What, may I ask, is this place?”

“It is one of our temporary meeting-places,” the second man replied. He spoke fluently, but there was the trace of a foreign accent, perhaps Old Zionese, in his voice. “Now, let us be brief. You have much to learn, and you must be willing to accept your own shortcomings. But first, there is a service you must render us.”

He threw an object at Prescott, who caught it with the reflex expertise of a collegiate cricket player and looked at it curiously.

“That, Sir Prescott, is a Warp Module. We do not distribute them lightly, but today, the situation is urgent. An attempt to rescue Miss Robertson is being made. We do not want this attempt to succeed, for we wish to strike at the man Eramond through her.”

"You old plagiarist," Sir Prescott replied, scowling. "That was *my* idea. And besides, it may not work. I have broken Eramond's spirit by pouring poison into that girl's ear, and she has written him quite an irate letter – shall we say, a 'Dear Ryan' letter?" He laughed loudly. "My friends in the Republic tell me that he fell ill with a desert fever the very next day, and that the end is near."

"How little you know, Prescott. As you speak, that man is in a safe place, being tended to," the first man said.

Prescott started. "That is impossible. No man or woman alive, even if they paid the bribe, could make it past the traps that I have ordered to be placed at *Al-Mu'afa*. In fact..."

"Impossible is an unwise word to use for a fallible man like you, Prescott," the second man broke in, with a laugh. "Anyway, some of his friends have rescued him, and he is on his way back to Galvenia. He will reach in three weeks, Sir Prescott. Perhaps his fondest hope is of reconciling with that girl. If we seize her, we can hold him a virtual prisoner, for his foolish code of honour will lead him to protect her even at the cost of his own mission."

"His *mission*?" Prescott said, doubtfully. "And what might that be?"

"That is a detail that you do not need to know, at least not yet," the first man replied. "What matters is that your puny plan to eliminate Eramond has come to naught. We cannot lay our hands on him for three weeks..."

"Can you not use your 'Warp Module', or whatever that contraption is, to attack him on his ship? I presume that is what you did to Koketsu," Prescott said, with a smile.

"A Warp Device cannot reach a moving object, Sir Prescott," the second man replied. "Besides, we have used our powers extensively in these past months, and we need to replenish them. We can only strike him once he reaches Galvenia, and that is too late. We need that girl."

"She is safe at Chuselwock Manor, my friend," Prescott said, gaining in confidence. "I will keep her there for as many weeks as you require."

"Prescott, Prescott," the second man said, laughing loudly, "you are truly a fool. As you speak, some of your enemies are busy spiriting the girl away. You need to make haste."

"My *enemies*?" Prescott glared at the men. "You are toying with me..."

"I assure you we are not. Now listen to me," the first man said, barely controlling his laughter. "Use the Device. All you need to do is wish yourself at Chuselwock Manor. We do not require much power for a translocation of that sort. Once you are there, you merely need to come close to the girl, close enough for contact. You need not grab her – a simple brush is as good as an embrace." He chuckled. "And once you do this – which should not be a problem for a lady-killer such as you..."

“Enough!” Prescott grumbled.

“...you need merely wish yourself back with us, and we will manage this. If you are foolish enough to come under attack, then withdraw using the same method, and we will try again later. But I urge you not to fail us, Prescott. One failure, perhaps, is pardonable. Two are unforgivable. Do you understand?”

Prescott nodded, though his expression was more indicative of a desire to strangle his two companions.

“Very well, then. Have a nice journey, Your Lordship. As for my friend, he must return to the Palace of Gyrus, to secure our victory. Good day.”

Prescott saw his surroundings whirl, and before he could realize it, he was in front of Anne Lancaster – the sequel of which encounter we have already witnessed above. As he retreated, feeling a vague pain from the blue beam of Juno’s sword, a sick feeling of apprehension came over him. His new masters, whoever they were, would be far less forgiving than Arlbert and the Lords, and he would have few chances.

The journey home, for Ryan and Lavie, was a pleasant one, and gave them many opportunities – for confidences, reminiscences, and simply the pleasure of each other’s company. Marlborough took his role as ‘chaperone’ – and the attendant ribbing from Agent Striker – as lightly as possible, trusting in the discretion of his young friends, and it must be said that they quite repaid his trust. Though the period was tinged with apprehension at what would await them in Galvenia, both of them would look back at those days on board ship with fondness, even when Ryan was a grandfather himself.

“I remember him telling me about it once, Gran,” Emily said, with a grin, as Lavie tucked her into bed. “It was nice!”

“Why, what did he tell you, Emily?” Lavie said, curiously.

“It was last year, when we he’d taken us to the Palace Gardens, Gran. You and Mummy were admiring the flowers, but Grandpa was feeling tired and he sat down,” Emily replied. “I’d been to Sunday school the week before, and I asked Grandpa what Heaven would be like.”

“And what did he say?” Lavie said, softly.

“He said that whenever he thought about Heaven, he thought of something he’d remembered, when he was a young boy. He said he was sailing on a ship, going back home, and it was a lovely day. He was sitting on a chair, reading a book. Suddenly, he saw you running down the deck towards him, your arms stretched out, wearing a white dress and calling his name. He said Heaven must be something like that, except that it lasted forever.”

Lavie swallowed hard. "Dear, silly Ryan," she said tenderly, reaching for her handkerchief. "It would be like him to remember that, even after all those years..."

"Ryan! What are you up to, hmm? I was looking for you!" Lavie called out.

Ryan turned and smiled. "Would you believe, reading a *romance novel*?" He held up his book – *The Gamekeeper's Daughter* – rather sheepishly. "I'm afraid *Al-Mu'afa* has ruined me for life. I was waiting for you, Lavie, and Marlborough said you were helping Sergeant Burns in the mess, so I thought I'd kill some time. He gave me this book, and said that it was well-written. I didn't know old priests had a sentimental side."

"You know," Lavie said, mischievously, sitting down beside him, "there's a story behind that book."

"Really?" Ryan said, admiring her hair as it fluttered in the spring breeze, and the simple white dress that she'd worn the night she'd saved him – yes, *saved* was the right word – from that idiot, Juno. It was a warm day, and she needed no jacket over it. "Did you write it, or something?"

"Ryan!" Lavie laughed. "That's actually funny, buster. And that's a pretty good guess. Let me tell you a little story."

Ryan grinned. "As long as it's not about prisons, dark mages and four-armed creatures, I'm listening."

"Once upon a time," Lavie began, as if she were reading a story to a young child, "there was a young couple who lived in a town in Galvenia. They were happy together, and they even had a little boy of their own."

"This isn't about Juno, is it?" Ryan said, with alarm.

"Be quiet, you goof, and let me tell this my way," Lavie said, slapping his hand playfully. "There was only one thing that troubled them. The man dreamed of starting his own business...."

"He sounds just like Dad," Ryan said, miming a yawn. "Dad always loved business, though Grandpa wanted him to be a soldier."

Lavie giggled. "But he didn't have the money to do it. He asked his friends, but though they were kind, they had no money either. His wife wanted his dream to come true. So she decided to raise some money *her way*."

"She pawned her jewels, right? That sounds like the novel I'm reading, Lavie," Ryan said. "Maybe you *did* write it."

"Oh, you!" Lavie said, with mock exasperation. "It so happened that in the country where they lived, there was a young girl, of noble birth, who dreamed of being a writer. The trouble is, she was a *terrible* writer, worse than Sir Chucklehead himself!"

Ryan laughed out loud. "Oh, mercy," he said, "it does me good to hear you call him that. I didn't know Prescott was a writer, though! Have you read any of his stuff?"

"Only a *lousy* love poem he sent me for my eighteenth birthday," Lavie said, with a scowl. "I was going to burn it, but Mom suggested I keep it to mock with my friends! I'll show it to you when we get home, Ryan. Anyway, this young girl's mother hit upon an idea. She would ask others – people who needed money, and who could actually write – to tell their stories, and publish them under her daughter's name. Everyone would win, because the actual writers would get half the money. The daughter wasn't too happy, but she agreed, figuring that half a brownie was better than no cakes at all."

"What brownies are we talking about here, Lavie?" Ryan said, with a wink.

"Don't start imitating Armin, okay?" Lavie said, teasingly. "Besides, you know I've gotten better at cooking! Anyway, the businessman's wife heard about this young girl, and she decided to write a book of her own and try her luck. So she whipped out her TypeMatic 200..."

"That's a nice machine," Ryan said. "I keep asking Dad to get me one, but he refuses."

"...and wrote a book, which was partly based on her own girlhood, but with a lot of fictional stuff thrown in too. The noble girl was delighted with it, the book was published, and the woman earned enough money for her husband to invest in a little business of his own. He succeeded, and they all lived happily ever after. That's the story of the book you're holding. Isn't it cool?"

"A little," Ryan said, patting her arm and grinning. "So did she write any more books?"

"Not really. She didn't have the time, because her son grew up to be quite a dope, and required her constant care and supervision," Lavie said, bursting into laughter. "His name was...." – she paused dramatically – "Sir Cool, also known as Ryan Eramond. Now you know."

"Lavie!" Ryan exclaimed. "You mean *Mum*..."

"Yes, my son'," Lavie said, mimicking Sheila's voice. "'My darling boy, reading my very own book! I am so proud of you, Ryan!'"

"You're kidding!" Ryan protested. "Sure, Mum *was* a gamekeeper's daughter, or something of that sort, but....Geez, this is funny. I sure hope Armin doesn't get hold of it, though." He looked at the book again, and burst out laughing himself.

"And now the moral of the story, Ryan: We women do all kinds of crazy things for the men we love. And you guys had better be appreciative! Got that, buster?" Lavie said, poking him in the side.

"Lavie," Ryan said, letting her head rest against his shoulder, and running one hand through her hair, "I'm not sure which of you is the craziest here: you or Mum. And I *am* appreciative. But don't go writing any books about *me*, okay?" He chuckled.

“That depends,” Lavie said mysteriously, looking up and giving him a peck on the cheek.

“Depends on what?” Ryan said, flushing.

“On what sort of *business* you want to start once this is all over!” Lavie said, and they both laughed again.

A few days after this conversation, when they were nearing Galvenia, Lavie came upon Marlborough, who was sitting at the desk in his cabin, looking worried.

“What’s the matter, Father?” she asked. (Somehow, she had slipped into calling him ‘Father’ rather than ‘Professor’, perhaps because he was so grand-fatherly himself.)

“Oh, Miss Lavender,” Marlborough said, looking up briefly and smiling. “Please do come in. I would welcome a little diversion here.”

“You seem preoccupied, Father,” Lavie said, smiling back. “Is anything the matter?”

“I am considering the question of dark magic in general,” Marlborough said, gravely. “The opponents we will have to face are masters at such things, and part of the art of war is to know the enemy.”

“Do all men talk about the ‘art of war’?” Lavie said, curiously. “Even Daddy talks like that, when he’s discussing business strategies.”

“I’m afraid we men are warlike creatures, even when we serve the cause of peace, my dear,” Marlborough replied. “And dark magic isn’t a cheerful topic. Perhaps *you* could help me with the puzzle I’m facing.”

“Me?” Lavie said. “Uh, I don’t know much about magic, except from that book on the Journeymen, and from stories that Daddy and Ryan told me. I might not be much help.”

“Sometimes an unbiased mind is a valuable gift, Miss,” Marlborough said. “Please do sit down.”

Lavie sat down on Marlborough’s bunk, noting with pleasure that it was made neatly, unlike Ryan’s. *He must be used to tidying up himself, since he lives alone*, she thought. “So what’s this puzzle of yours, Father?” she asked, kindly.

“The question is this. Our enemies are using powerful spells – the Warp spell, which can transport a mage from one place to another, even across countries, depending on the energy they use. My friend from Itaria, Legrand, says that they are also using shield spells, which can protect an entire building from attack, and spells that can change a person’s appearance.”

“*That* would be popular with the beauty salons,” Lavie said, with a laugh. “Do those things really work? I mean, I’ve read fairy tales as a girl in which you take something from a person, like a bit of hair or a toenail clipping, and cast a spell to look just like that person!”

“Those are children’s stories, Miss Lavender,” Marlborough said, feeling a little lighter. “To successfully cast a spell to change one’s appearance to another’s is very difficult – it requires various other conditions, such as the second person’s remaining away from the imitator, a demonic conjuration, the survival of the one casting the spell, and an immense amount of energy. Even the most powerful dark mage couldn’t do more than one such transformation in, say, forty or fifty years. And for some reason, it’s easier to do with the elderly than with children or adults.”

“That’s reassuring,” Lavie said. “I wouldn’t want a Devil Lavie running around and doing evil!”

“Well, poor Legrand had that experience, but he was able to break the spell. Now, the question is this. There are, of course, ‘good’ spells, which do not require any demonic assistance. These generally use the basic elements – wind, fire, water, earth, and so on – and can be cast by anyone born with the gift.”

“Fire? Like my bangle?” Lavie said, holding out her wrist. Marlborough examined it for a moment, curiously, then smiled.

“That’s merely an Elemental, my dear. It can be used to add a little punch to your arrows, but it doesn’t make you a mage, though it *is* pretty.”

“Why, thank you, Father,” Lavie said, with a bow. “You sound just like Daddy.”

Marlborough laughed. “Now, the trouble with the good spells is that, with few exceptions, they work best when used by a team, like the Zion mage battalions. And even then, it’s not sure that they can defeat or overcome a *really* powerful dark spell.” He shook his head, looking sad. “And though I keep thinking that there is a way, and am inching towards a solution, neither the Zion nor I can find a definite answer. I am convinced that Miss Aquary could help me, but that may just be the fondness of an old professor for a bright student. Do you have any ideas, my dear?”

“Wait a minute,” Lavie said, after a moment’s pause. “Can those spells be used *only* by – ‘dark’ mages, Father? Can’t we – I mean, the Zion mages, and people like Carranya – use them too?”

Marlborough smiled at her. “That’s a very perceptive question, Miss Lavender. Fifty points to you. But the answer is, probably no. Of course, there are legends. Prince Ryle of Factoria, who existed, but who became the subject of hundreds of myths, could apparently use the Warp spell, and even used it to run a package delivery company.”

“Package delivery? Oh dear, that sounds like Ryan’s dad,” Lavie said, with a laugh.

“Indeed it does! Why, I’d quite forgotten about Eramond Delivery Services.” Marlborough chuckled.

“Then again, there are stories of light mages who could cast fairly large shields – an ordinary light mage

can shield a person, or even a group, but hardly a building, my dear. And there are shadowy stories of people who've used magic, without demonic conjurations, to change their appearance. Now I'm not saying it can't happen – Jopaga's Second Law says that, in theory, any of these are possible. But even if we could, how would it help us? We'd just keep warping away from each other, shielding ourselves, or disguising ourselves. And there's another problem."

"What's that, Father?" Lavie said, interested. "Gosh, this is pretty interesting. I understand why Daddy enjoyed the subject when he was in University, now!"

"Did he? Well, it's a matter of morals, my dear. You see, to use strong dark magic, the evil in a man's heart is insufficient – which is why you have to summon demons. But to use *good* magic of a similar power, you can't involve demons. You would need an extraordinary force in your heart to even think of pulling it off. Immense courage, deep devotion, love without limits. And I'm afraid that's beyond the scope of most of us, my dear." He smiled. "Though, as I say, it's not impossible. After all, you did rescue young Eramond from that prison, and that was extraordinary enough. Dear me, you remind me of Renaud."

"Duke Renaud from Zion?" Lavie said, blushing at Marlborough's praise. "The Princess told me about *him* when she came back. In fact, we were both supposed to go and meet you, to discuss those pendants of Marianne's, but she was busy with her duties at the Palace and we never made it. She said he was quite kind to her when they were imprisoned."

"That would be his style," Marlborough said, closing his eyes. "He always was nice to fair young women. Anyway, Renaud was interested in magic. Unfortunately, the poor boy had no innate abilities, and he couldn't read Old Italian, so he never got far in his studies. Wilhelm used to tease him about it – none of the Valtemonds ever had the ability, and he thought Renaud's absorption in the topic was quite silly. It was just a hobby for him, and when he grew up, he acquired a taste for political rather than magical power." He smiled. "But if you want my opinion, Miss Lavender, you ought to discuss this with your friend the Princess. I still pin my hopes on young Bernadette, but having this chat with you has been very helpful, and Carranya may have ideas of her own."

"Really?" Lavie said, gratefully. "Thank you, Father. That's nice of you. I'm looking forward to meeting Carranya once I get back!"

"You're welcome, Miss Lavender. And now, I must return to my studies, and try to clear the mists a little before we land. Good day to you." They shook hands, and he looked after her affectionately as she turned to leave, walking away with a bounce in her step.

Eramond's a lucky man, he thought. And if I'm right, he'll stay lucky. So will Spenson. If only I could be sure of the third...

As we passed over the solemn occasion of Socius' funeral, we must also pass over – in a few short sentences – the safe return of our friends to Galvenia. By a strange coincidence, the *Empress Sylvania*, carrying Ryan and Lavie, and the *Saint Guibert*, carrying Henrik, Bernadette and their companions, arrived within a day of each other, and all their family and friends had joined hands in an impromptu two-day celebration and banquet to welcome them, held at Casa Regale. Conspicuously absent from these proceedings was Alphonse Spenson, who – while not angry at Henrik, whom he still believed had gone on an academic trip and nothing else – did not want to be involved in anything connected to the military. Of the happy reunions of Ryan and Lavie with their parents, and of Bernadette with her father, little needs to be said, except that they were joyful indeed.

The arrival of Anne Lancaster – who noted the new *entente* between Ryan and Lavie with much approval – was a further occasion for the narration of the four friends' adventures, and Aline found a kindred spirit in Sigmund Regale, who allowed her to read his collection of books on science, swords and sorcery to her heart's content. As a final surprise, the Royal Family arrived on Galvenia the day after, and Captain Baker's men – who had scarcely thought that they would see their country again so soon – were all decorated and rewarded generously. There was much to be told, much to be shared, much to be laughed and wept over, and at the end of the three days, our friends, though still aware of the gravity of their situation, felt heartened and ready to take on the tasks that lay ahead.

On the next day, before the Princess and her parents were scheduled to return to Lorean, the friends were gathered in Lavie's music room, talking animatedly. Missing from this discussion were Agent Striker, who had been recalled to Lorean by his superior; Aline, who was completing her final studies of the Sword; and Father Marlborough, who had to return to King's College, where he would be followed the next day by his two students.

"Five mages, and a sixth," Carranya said, pensively. "It all fits. When Archbishop Legrand warned the Pontiff and Wilhelm, he also informed an old Healer who was a teacher of mine. This man wrote to me, but he himself doubted the story. When I heard of the way.....Wilhelm died, I suspected that it was them, and not the Varald, but I had no proof."

"I'm sorry, Princess," Ryan said sympathetically. Lavie had told him the story of Francis one cool evening aboard the *Sylvania*, and though he was initially surprised, his heart went out to her. "When Lavie told me about it, it made me – all the more certain that I had to carry on with this whole thing."

"Dear me, Lord Ryan," she said, with a smile, "I appreciate your concern, and admire your resolve. But let us proceed one step at a time."

"Lord Ryan?" Bernadette said, with a laugh. "Could Henrik have a title too, Your Highness? He deserves it, for his many acts of bravery."

"Sir Henrik Spenson sounds nice," Henrik said, with a laugh. "But now, the question is: how do we take care of the mages in the Varald and Galvenia? We can handle Galvenia – after all, Bernadette and I didn't do that badly in Itaria, did we, my love?"

Bernadette beamed at him. “We did it together, dear Henrik,” she said, “and that’s what matters.”

“Aren’t they sweet?” Ryan whispered to Lavie, who giggled.

“But remember, Legrand also told you that they would grow more powerful with each defeat,” Carranya said. “Dr. Sheldon will soon finish her studies of that sword, and then you will have to see how it suits you, Ryan.”

“I wonder if Dad even knows about this Kevin story,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “I’ve told him everything about the Republic, but I’m keeping this back for now.”

“Don’t worry, Ryan,” Lavie said, warmly. “I haven’t told Mom or Daddy about it, either. Whoever knows about this may be in danger, and there are already many of us who do – the five of us, Father Marlborough, that wacky Aline and her sister, and all the men who fought with you in Itaria, Bernadette. Let’s not involve anyone else unless we have to.”

“It might be useful to tell Agent Striker, too,” Carranya observed. “He is a brave man, and he has saved us on numerous occasions; besides, he is a Zion, and Zion is closer to the Varald than we are.”

Lavie looked at Carranya with approval. “Not to mention that he’s gone beyond the call of duty, in helping me in that awful prison,” she said. “I think we should let him in on whatever we know, too.”

“Tell him about the five mages, sure,” Ryan said. “But about *me*? He’ll think we’re pulling his leg.”

“I doubt that, Ryan,” Carranya said, gently. “Remember, your illustrious ancestors were Zioneese, and Striker could easily look up the same book as Marlborough and find out for himself. There’s no harm in telling him.”

“I guess you’re both right, but I still have my doubts,” Ryan replied. “Now, what can we do about the Varald, as Henrik said? There is no known community of mages in the Directorate, at least from all that we know. Their government is in serious trouble, going by the radio reports – one of the ruling group, Admiral Kholmov, was shot by his two colleagues – and their sea offensive hasn’t yet taken off. There’s even news of insurrections, which are being led by supporters of Kievan. Entering the Directorate may be very difficult.”

“Unless we use the Warp Cannons that Bernadette’s father told us about,” Henrik pointed out. “Only a mage can operate them. To reach Varald, we need to find the one in Galvenia, first. Do you know how to operate them, my love?”

“I can learn,” Bernadette said, brightly. “Father knows how to, at least in theory, and he can help me.”

“I also could,” Princess Carranya added, “and, in fact, I have studied them briefly when I was a little younger. But even if we find the Warp Cannon and use it, where in the Directorate should we look? Varald’s a huge country.”

"I have an idea," Lavie said. "Wasn't the Varald Directorate once called the Kingdom of Gyrus? Daddy's told me a lot of stories about Gyrus. He could help us with that, though it might invite embarrassing questions!"

"Wait a minute, Lavie," Carranya said, closing her eyes. "One of my old tutors spoke to me about a place called the Palace of Gyrus, which is actually an old ruin, like Ozunhold."

"Ozunhold?" Ryan perked up. "You know, Princess, Henrik and I have been to Ozunhold, and – it's not a bad place to look for a magical artefact, like that Warp Cannon. It's full of creatures, though Henrik and I took care of most of them. Perhaps we should start by looking around in those ruins. There were a lot of inscriptions there, which we sort of ignored because Sir Cornelius only wanted us to unlock the barriers. Maybe they contain a clue."

"That's an excellent idea, Ryan," Bernadette said, nodding. "I could help with that, because thanks to Father, I can read both Old Common and Old Zioneese to some extent. Or we could ask Father to help us."

"Ozhunold's a good possibility, sure," Henrik said, "especially since we didn't comb the whole place back then. But what's this about the Palace of Gyrus, Your Highness?"

"I've never seen it, except in books," Carranya replied, "but there are legends about it. It's said to be cursed, or haunted, depending on who's telling the story. The Directors of the Varald have to take an oath, when they assume office, that they won't violate its sanctity. A Director named Pustchov did, and died in mysterious circumstances, though the Varald are naturally tight-lipped about it. The worst versions of the legend state that a summoning pit exists beneath it."

"A summoning pit? Carranya, that must be it!" Lavie exclaimed. "Remember, Bernadette and Henrik fought that man, Gharon, near a summoning pit. Calling up demons – ugh!" She shivered, and Ryan patted her arm consolingly.

"That's going to be hard to reach, then," Ryan mused. "First of all, if it's taboo, it must be heavily guarded. And second, none of us know how to get there. From what your dad said, Bernadette, you need to *know* the place you want to reach, even assuming we can use the Warp Cannon in Galvenia."

"That's right," Bernadette replied, "and none of us have been in the Directorate, as far as I know – have you, Princess?"

"I'm afraid not, Bernadette," Carranya said, shaking her head. "Though my mother's family, the Traznovs, have roots in Varald, neither Mother nor I have been there."

"Anyway, Ozunhold is as good a place as any to start, in my opinion," Ryan said. "The question is, who should go?"

"What do you mean, Ryan?" Lavie said. "Of course *we* must go."

“Lavie, I’m technically still in the Galvenian Army,” Ryan said, with a laugh. “Unless you want me to – er – chuck it all, like Marianne did!”

“Ohmygosh, I completely forgot!” Lavie said, embarrassed. “Then you’ll have to go back to the Academy, right?”

“First thing tomorrow morning, Lavie,” Ryan said, forcing himself to smile. “I’ll be going back with Captain Baker, Sergeant Burns and the rest of the men, and I’ll have to wait for my next assignment.”

“Well, I can always talk Sir Cornelius into sending you to Ozunhold, Ryan,” Carranya said, winking at Lavie. “He’s rather fond of me.”

“Very funny, Princess!” Lavie said, with a giggle. “And, of course, you two will have to go back to King’s College. By the way, is your dad giving you too much grief about the trip to Itaria, Henrik?”

“Not really, though he is giving me grief about other things,” Henrik growled, casting a protective, gentle look at the girl beside him. “Don’t worry, Bernadette. If I could protect you from those rogues of Gray’s, I can certainly shield you from him. Did I mention that I used a certain issue of the *Davenport Herald* to shine my shoes, wrap my fish and chips in, and light a fire in my room?” He placed an arm around her shoulder, causing Carranya to smile at them indulgently.

Bernadette laughed. “Dear Henrik,” she said. “You are so good to me, despite your tendency to joke about anything serious.”

“Then I shall speak to Sir Cornelius, as well as to Father Marlborough,” Carranya said, “and, if all goes well, some of you will be taking a trip to Ozunhold shortly.” She smiled. “But now I must go, my friends. Let us wait and watch, for we do not know how things will unfold.”

“You’re right, Carranya,” Lavie said. They all bid farewell to the Princess, whose carriage – the same one that had taken Lavie to the Palace, many months earlier – was waiting outside the Regale home, and then went their ways – Henrik and Bernadette to Davenport Beach, Lavie to her father (who had asked to speak to her separately, as soon as their little meeting broke up), and Ryan to his home, where he rested in his room, lost in thought.

“Sire,” General Rohmer said, bursting excitedly into the throne room, before remembering himself and saluting, “I bring you strange news indeed.”

Emperor Charlemagne straightened himself with difficulty, stifling the groan that came to his lips, and sat upright in his throne. “We live in strange days, Rohmer,” he said. “What news do you have?”

“Sire, Ferzen has just confirmed the death of Valentin Kholmov, Admiral of the Varald Fleet, at the hands of his military colleagues. Though there is some ambiguity in the story, it is clear that Kholmov is dead.”

“The Varald are devouring each other, now that they have failed to devour us,” Charlemagne said, slowly. “There is nothing strange about that.”

“That is not the strange news, Sire. Soon after Kholmov’s death, the bulk of the Varald fleet has departed, and will reach Imperial waters in a matter of days! It is fortunate that Yatsu has already mobilized his forces.”

Charlemagne rose from his throne, as quickly as he could. “Already!” he exclaimed. “Damnation. He was right.”

“Who, Sire?” Rohmer asked, discreetly.

“Never mind, General. Listen to me. Yatsu already has his orders, and I will add mine to them. Order the ships that are in Itaria to withdraw at once, and to intercept the Varald fleet from the rear before they can do any damage.”

Rohmer would never challenge an order from the Imperial Throne – he was too consummate a soldier-noble for that – but he permitted himself a gentle raise of the eyebrows. “And what of the Assault Corps men in Itaria, Your Highness?” he asked, softly.

“Order them to stay put, and to assist our Itarian friends in keeping the peace. We will fetch them when the time has come. The Varald are making a last-ditch attempt, and this is our opportunity to end the war quickly.”

“You are right, Sire,” Rohmer said. “The Varald defences on the western front have fallen, and if all goes well, we will have recaptured the entire frontier before summer is done.”

“Excellent, Rohmer,” Charlemagne said. “Please ensure that all is done as I say, and bring me any further news that you have, as soon as possible.” With a bow, the General left, and Charlemagne sat down again, painfully.

Renaud, he thought. Renaud did well at Issachar, and the Galvenians are now beginning to understand. But is it enough? Will he make a good ruler, even if...

“Sire,” the new Chamberlain, Cauvin Reinhart, said, politely, “Professor Fujiwara to see you, along with a colleague of his.”

“Fujiwara?” The Emperor started from his seat again. “Send him in immediately, Reinhart.”

The Professor – a short man with a wrinkled face and prominent front teeth, giving him the appearance of a chipmunk, entered, adjusting his round glasses as he did so, excitement writ large on his face. Beside him was a grey-haired lady in a lab coat. They both knelt before him and bowed, then rose.

“Your Highness,” Fujiwara said, “may I introduce my colleague, Sandra Hernandez of Galvenia. She has been sequestered here in my laboratory for several months, while we endeavoured to unravel the mystery of the three Memory Crystals – two found by the Galvenian youth, and the one given to us by the Itarians. As a scientist, I am glad to say that we have penetrated their mystery – but as a loyal citizen of Zion, I tremble.”

“You interest me, my good Professor,” Charlemagne said, kindly. “Please continue.”

“If you will recall my earlier communications, all three were found under strange circumstances. The first was found by a boy and girl who were, in all probability, taking a romantic walk along the beach at Davenport.” He chuckled. “The second was found, most amusingly, by the same couple, whom our Itarian friends apparently hired to do some detective work. And the third was left by a Galvenian boy, now dead – the plot thickens – to his sweetheart, who did not realize it was a Memory Crystal until a wiser head informed her about it. Quite a story, except that it happens to be true.”

“As Professor Fujiwara says, we acquired these quite strangely, but their contents are even stranger, Sire,” Hernandez went on. “As you well know, Memory Crystals are controversial objects, because of the information they contain. You may recall the case of the Crystal of Sylvania’s Necklace, which threatened to seriously embarrass the newborn Commonwealth, and which took Lord Geraud’s most valiant efforts to bury.”

Charlemagne groaned. The Crystal of Sylvania’s Necklace was something that no Zion Emperor enjoyed hearing of. Found by her confidante, the Countess of Meldor, following her death, it preserved a long, intimate conversation between her and her lover, Yuri Jenkin of the Directorate, detailing their plans to reign jointly. It had been a lasting embarrassment to Geraud – who was their son – and to the Commonwealth that he championed, as the other nations of Terra had accused him of being first a Varald lackey, and then a man under his mother’s thumb, whose Commonwealth was seen as a thin cloak for her expansionist ambitions. It had taken all Geraud’s tact, diplomacy and patience, as well as his innate Valtemond ruthlessness, to suppress the Crystal and salvage the Commonwealth.

“It is hardly courteous of you to mention that, Professor,” Charlemagne said sternly, but the Professor returned his gaze without flinching. A Darington woman who had relocated to Lorean following the annexation, she did not have a very high opinion of the Zion Empire, but enjoyed working with Fujiwara, who had been her teacher.

“My apologies, Sire,” she said, calmly. “What I mean to say is that, given the content of these Crystals, we had to spend a lot of time checking their authenticity. If the material on them is true, as my colleague said, the consequences are grave indeed. We debated whether to inform the Commonwealth, but in all fairness, we thought you ought to see them first.”

“I understand,” Charlemagne replied. “Would it be possible to view them here?”

“Ordinarily, no, but given the delicacy of the situation, we have been working on a device” – Fujiwara opened the box he was carrying, to reveal an object about the size of a small radio set – “that would permit this.”

“Reinhart,” the Emperor said, “wait outside until we are done.”

“Very well, Sire,” the Chamberlain said, bowing politely as he withdrew.

Hernandez opened the device. “First, let us begin with the Crystal that was found on the beach. It is a copy of an old recording, but it is clear enough.” She inserted it into a slot at the back, locked it into place, and turned a dial. The three-dimensional image that appeared in front of Charlemagne seemed grainy at the edges, but its contents were still unmistakable. Charlemagne watched the recording – which lasted no more than fifteen minutes – holding his breath for the most part, and shaking his head.

“It is as I suspected,” he said, sadly. “You have told no one of this, I trust.”

Hernandez shook her head. “On my honour as a scientist, a Galvenian, and a student of Professor Fujiwara, I have not. As for the Professor’s integrity, it is beyond question.”

“Thank you, Sandra,” Fujiwara said, with a polite, Old Zionese bow.

“And the second?” Charlemagne asked.

“It is brief, but to the point. The first three minutes are programmed to repeat themselves, but the Professor was able to override the instruction,” Hernandez said. The recording was much newer and clearer, and it lasted only ten minutes this time. Charlemagne winced, and placed one hand over his forehead.

“Who was he?” he said, when it was over.

“The young man through whose agency we obtained the third Crystal. And now, Your Highness, please be seated, for this one is the longest of the three.”

The third clip was a little older than the second, but long. Working skilfully, Fujiwara adjusted the dials on his machine to increase the sound, which was faint – perhaps deliberately so. At the end of half an hour – perhaps one of the longest half-hours in Charlemagne’s life – he lowered his head.

“There can be no doubt, then,” he said. “I had known of this earlier, but – Infinity forgive me – I still doubted, even till now.”

“Do you wish us to submit this to the Commonwealth, Your Highness?” Fujiwara said, gently.

“Do *you*, Professors?” the Emperor said. “I know that you are men of science, and that the state of Terra and the Empire may mean less to you than to me. That is as it should be; you are not called to reign, any more than I am to decipher the secrets of metals and crystals. If you ask me to, I shall respect your

views, and let Terra handle this, for to tell you the truth, I grow weary. At this moment, you are not speaking to the Emperor of Zion, but to an old man who misses his son, and who wishes that he could forget his throne, and go to be with him. Unfortunately, that option is not open to me. If you request me to submit this to the Commonwealth, I will. If not, you have my word of honour, as a father and a man, that we will do all we can to set things right.”

“Your Highness, you honour us by speaking so frankly,” Fujiwara said, “Given the contents of the third crystal, I would not wish to involve the Commonwealth either, and Sandra shares my views. But I must ask you, as a scientist and a man, what you intend to do about this. Whatever you say to us is in the strictest confidence. We may be men of science, but we also wish for peace and security in the world, and the reason we have come to you first is that you may act decisively, whereas the Commonwealth almost certainly will not.”

“The wheels are already in motion, Professor,” Charlemagne said, moving uneasily in his throne, “and now that we know the truth, I will inform my men, both here and in Galvenia. The Third Way shall be stopped, no matter at what cost to me or to my nation. Pray that it may not be too late.”

“So what exactly are we looking for, Ryan?” Charlie Downs said, as the small band entered the ruined gates of Ozunhold.

“Inscriptions, Charlie,” Ryan said, his hand going to his sword, as he heard a grunting sound nearby. “The people who started the rebellion in Itaria, and who were responsible for the murder of the Prime Minister, are apparently hiding somewhere in Galvenia. We have reason to believe that they’re either hiding here, or that this place has clues to where they are. Keep your eyes peeled for any inscriptions.”

“That’s right, Private,” Jonas Aquary said. “My daughter wanted to come along, but the Princess insisted that she needed to get ready for other tasks, so she stayed behind at King’s College. If you see anything, I’ll tell you what it says.”

“This one here is easy, Senor Aquary,” Juan said, with a laugh. “It says: ‘Welcome to Ozunhold, Stranger’.”

Jonas laughed. “Constance warned me that it would be a snipe hunt, but I’m not complaining; an old man like me enjoys feeling useful.”

“Look out!” Ryan said, as a Garaknod came towards them. Jonas scurried out of the way, but Charlie aimed a swift slash at it, and blinded it in one eye. In a split second, Ryan aimed three rapid strokes of his sword at it, and its shell was broken open.

“Good work, Senor Ryan,” Juan said, as he struck once more, and the large spider-like creature lay still.

"I thought we'd cleared them all out the last time, when Henrik and I came down," Ryan said. "I didn't know the darned things would come back so fast!"

"Very fast," Charlie said, nervously, as four more of its companions came scurrying towards them, claws bared. "Damn it, Ryan, we're outnumbered!"

"Not if I can help it," Ryan said, drawing his pistol and shooting. One of the Garaknods was struck in the head, and collapsed on the spot.

"Let me help you boys," Jonas said, raising his staff. The Garaknods' progress appeared impeded, as if they were blocked by an invisible wall.

"What have you done, Senor?" Juan said, admiringly.

"It's an old trick, my boy," Jonas replied. "A shield can work both ways. It's a weak shield, of course, and your weapons can pierce it, but those creatures aren't too bright, and once they feel a bump, they'll step back. Finish them off, now!"

With this encouragement, the three soldiers fell on the remaining Garaknods, and made short work of them. They proceeded further, moving slowly and conscious of the uneasy silence.

"I don't remember seeing too many inscriptions on the east wing," Ryan said. "Juan and Charlie, go ahead, it's not far. If you see anything that looks interesting, fire in the air."

"You got it, hero," Charlie said, mockingly. A little over half an hour, they returned, shaking their heads.

"Nothing but rubble there," Juan said. "Come, Senor Aquary. Let us search the east, and if that does not work, we will explore the central building."

"You know", Jonas said, as the four of them inched their way through the east wing of the ruined fortress, which had few nuisances except the occasional Crawler, "there are traditions that there used to be a pretty important Factorian temple here."

"A temple?" Ryan said. "What sort of temple?"

"Look out, Ryan!" Charlie said, as a bird swooped down on them, and then moved away. "Infinity, what was that?"

"Looks like a Crowled Eagle," Ryan said. "Henrik and I fought a bigger one earlier. This one's just a kid."

"Might as well take it down, lads," Jonas said, ducking its second swoop. "It means business!"

"You got it, Mr. Aquary," Ryan said, aiming and firing. One of its wings was hit, and as it began to spin, Juan's sword transfixed it neatly.

“Anyone for roast eagle today?” Charlie joked.

“Count me out, chum. I don’t eat things that try to eat me,” Ryan replied, with a laugh. “Ah, what’s this?” He pointed to a stone plaque, with writing that he could hardly read.

“Let me see,” Jonas said, stepping up and adjusting his glasses. “You’re lucky you have me along. It’s Old Itarian, and I’m better at that than Bernadette is, though I know you boys would rather have a nice girl along.” He chuckled. “It says, ‘Justice, Love and Power’. The Three Ways. Standard stuff in a noble’s palace.”

“How exciting, Senor,” Juan said, pretending to yawn, then smiling.

There were further inscriptions along the way, but most of them seemed to be family inscriptions, recording births and deaths among the Marksmith family.

“The Marksmiths were an ancient noble house, so I’ve heard,” Charlie said. “My old man used to keep the gardens and hunting grounds for one of them, and we all grew up in a lodge.”

“Did you have a sister who wrote romance novels?” Ryan said, with a grin.

“Huh? Why on Terra would you ask that?” Charlie said, with a look of incomprehension.

“This side seems to have been the residential area,” Jonas said, as they reached the end. “We need to explore the main block now. Come along, we don’t have all day.”

“You seem to be in a hurry,” Ryan said, surprised at the speed of old Jonas’ stride.

“Hey, you young things aren’t the only ones who want your evenings free,” Jonas said, with a wink. “I have an appointment with a lady friend at...”

“Stop right there.” The voice was calm and cold, but it was an interruption, and they stopped in their tracks.

“Huh?” Ryan looked up from the inscription he was reading, which was in Old Galvenian: *‘To the birthe of younge Emerald of Marksmithhe’*, and as he looked at the speaker, his face hardened.

“Look here, Juno,” he said, “we’re here on a mission from the Galvenian Army. If you want to take a stroll here, go right ahead, but don’t bother us.”

“Silence, Eramond,” Juno said, angrily.

“Boy,” Jonas said, “does your mother know you’re here?”

Juno did not reply, but glared at him. “I am investigating Ozunhold,” he said, “and I would appreciate it if you all withdrew and left me to my taks.”

“Well, that’s too bad, Juno,” Ryan said sarcastically, “because, unlike you, we’re soldiers, and soldiers don’t disobey orders. Sir Cornelius told us to comb Ozunhold, and we’re obeying. Go eat a doughnut, or something.”

Charlie chuckled. “And read a romance novel, too.”

Juno glared at him. “Silence, fool!” he muttered.

“Who are you calling a fool, wise guy?” Charlie said, the colour rising to his cheeks.

“Look here, Juno,” Jonas Aquary said gently, “these boys are telling the truth. Just go your own way.”

“Not yet, old man,” Juno said, drawing his sword. “There is an account to be settled, first. You and I, Eramond. One on one. I have already humiliated you in front of Miss Regale, and now, I shall do so in front of your friends. Are you man enough, or will you hide behind your friends?”

“I’m not afraid of you, Juno,” Ryan said, evenly. “And I’ll trouble you not to keep talking about Lavie. It sounds creepy coming from you.”

“Fool!” Juno said, angrily. “Do you think that is all there is to life, Eramond? To use a person, and then dispose of them at your convenience? Miss Robertson, Miss Regale....who will be next?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, Juno,” Ryan said, glaring and drawing his own sword.

“Guys, go on ahead. I’ll take care of this loud-mouth first.”

Do not worry, Ryan. This time, you can prevail.

“By gum,” Jonas said, “who was it who just spoke?”

“I didn’t hear anything, sir,” Charlie said, and Juan shook his head as well.

Without waiting, Juno lunged forward, and wounded Ryan in the forearm. Ryan stepped back, frowning.

“Juan, Charlie,” Jonas said, “go ahead into the central complex, and fire if you come upon anything. I’m staying here in case this gets out of hand.”

“You asked for it, Juno,” Ryan said, parrying Juno’s blow, and then pushing him up against one of the walls with a quick thrust.

“It’s not that easy, Eramond,” Juno said, ducking Ryan’s second blow and feinting to the left.

For over a quarter of an hour, the two men fought ferociously, each inflicting numerous minor wounds. Finally, Juno raised his sword, and closed his eyes. The blue beam issued forth, but Ryan brought up the flat of his sword, and the beam was deflected back onto Juno, who staggered.

“Curse you, Eramond,” Juno said, aiming a second blow – but before he could do so, Ryan feinted to the left and then used his triple attack, disarming Juno and pinning him against a wall.

Continue to make her happy, for that is your Way, my friend.

“Looks like you’ve lost again, Juno,” Ryan said, stepping back. “Now, will you leave us alone and stop tagging along like you’re Charlie’s retriever, or something.”

“This is not the end, Eramond,” Juno said, swearing as he reached for his weapon. “Your day of reckoning is at hand.” Before Ryan could retort, he had turned on his heel and walked away.

“Goodness, Constance really needs to take that boy in hand,” Jonas Aquary said, shaking his head. “Come, Ryan. But – did you hear that voice, too? A woman’s voice?”

“I heard it the last time I fought Juno, too,” Ryan said, smiling gratefully as Jonas closed the more superficial of his wounds. “What does it mean?”

Jonas winked at him. “Let’s finish this job, and I’ll tell you all about it, my young friend. Are you and the Juno boy rivals in love, or something?”

“Goodness, no,” Ryan said, alarmed. “At least, I don’t *think* so. But if that’s the case” – he paused, and laughed – “poor Lavie! First Sir Prescott, and now *Juno*? But I think it’s absurd, Mr. Aquary. Juno only loves one thing – showing off and proving that he’s better than others. I don’t think women even register on his radar, even his mum.”

“I must talk to his mother about it,” Jonas said, disapprovingly.

As they proceeded further, they came upon Charlie and Juan, who were standing in front of a long row of inscriptions. “What happened, Senor Ryan?” Juan asked.

“Oh, a couple of tough spots,” Ryan said, calmly, “but in the end, I prevailed. What’s this you’ve got here?”

“This is interesting,” Jonas said, adjusting his spectacles. “Listen to this, boys. It’s very archaic Common, but I can read it all right. *‘This portion of the Fortress of Ozunhold was built on the ruins of the ancient Temple of the Trial of Runes. It has been preserved as a historical treasure on the orders of King George, and is guarded by the men of the house of Marksmith. Do not trespass.’* Looks like we’re in for some fun!” He rubbed his hands together.

“Runes?” Charlie said, rubbing his large nose. “Isn’t that some sort of...um...fairy tale writing?”

“Perhaps,” Jonas said. “On the other hand, it could be something quite challenging. There’s an archaic word, ‘rhone’, which means a fighter or warrior.”

“The Temple of the Trial of Warriors?” Ryan said. “I don’t know how good an idea this is, guys, but I agree with Mr. Aquary, this might be challenging.” They headed for the main entrance, near the spot where he and his friends had initially fought the Crowled Eagle. The way was partly blocked by a heap of rubble, a little too high to step over.

“We may have to do some digging, Senor,” Juan said. “Fortunately, we have come prepared.”

The three soldiers removed shovels from their knapsacks, and began to dig. They made short work of the obstacle, and the entrance stood before them, glowing slightly.

“What’s that glow, mate?” Charlie said, drawing his pistol.

“Let’s head inside and see,” Ryan said. He took a step forward – then was thrown backwards, his entire body tingling, as if he had been stung by a hundred wasps.

“Senor!” Juan said, walking over to him and helping him up.

“Careful, son,” Jonas Aquary said. “What happened?”

“Some sort of.....damn it, an electric shock,” Ryan said. “I didn’t know they even had electricity in those days.” He hopped from one leg to another, grimacing with pain.

Jonas walked forward, and probed the entrance with his staff gingerly. “Ah, very nice,” he said. “A Lightning Elemental. It’s a combination of wind and fire. Very ancient, but very effective.” He chuckled.

“I’d hardly call it ‘nice,’” Ryan grumbled, still rubbing his hands together. “Is there any way through?”

“Stand near me, boys,” Jonas said, as they gathered around him. “A simple shield will keep it out. It must have been more powerful years ago, but it’s lost most of its sting. You were lucky, Ryan.”

“If this is luck, you can keep it,” Ryan said, darkly. Jonas raised his staff, and Ryan was conscious of a dim light surrounding them.

“Now follow me closely,” Jonas said, and they followed him through the entrance. The inside was dark, except for the dim glow of the walls.

“Are you all in a conspiracy to get me to read more?” Lavie said, smiling, as she sat in the visitors’ lounge of King’s College. “I came here as fast as I could, and it was to tell me to read a *book*? Don’t tell me Daddy’s roped you in too, Bernadette.”

“Not quite a book, Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette said, blushing and speaking hesitantly. “It’s something....I wrote once.”

“Really?” Lavie said, impressed.

“Something,” Henrik said proudly, “that won her a scholarship at King’s College, awarded by the Pontifical Council of the Evangelium itself. That’s fancy Itarian jargon for the Pontiff and his friends, Lavie, if you want it translated into barbarian Common.”

“Wow!” Lavie said, taking Bernadette by the hand. “That’s great, Bernadette. You know I’d love to read anything you’ve written. But why now?”

“Father Marlborough wouldn’t say, Lavie,” Bernadette explained. “As soon as we got back, he spoke to me for a while, asking me a lot of questions about what had happened in Itaria, especially with Gharon.” She shivered slightly, and instinctively, Henrik drew closer to her. “He was particularly interested in your father’s present.”

Lavie beamed. “I still can’t believe *Daddy’s* device saved your lives,” she said. “He was so happy when I told him, you wouldn’t believe it! And....er...” – *Oops, Daddy told me not to tell her yet. He wanted to be the one who broke it to her!* – “he wants to you to drop by at our home the next time you come to Davenport, and have a nice chat with you!”

For Sigmund, after much soul-searching, had decided to tell Lavie the truth about his sister – even telling her about the man he always referred to as ‘Alex Bloody Robertson’. Lavie, who was as generous as she was impulsive, and who was genuinely fond of her father, proved as willing to forgive as Emily. Though she did shed a tear at her unknown aunt’s fate, she rejoiced that she and Bernadette were now bound by an even closer tie.

Bernadette smiled. “How kind he is,” she said. “Sometimes I feel he sees me as another daughter. You aren’t jealous, are you, Lavie, my sister?”

“As far as I’m concerned,” Lavie said, linking her arm with her friend’s, “I’ve sort of always wanted an elder sister, someone a little less giddy than I was! I’m terribly glad I’ve found one. And I’m glad Daddy feels the same way, too.”

“Thank you, Lavie,” Bernadette said, affectionately. “We must return to our classes now, but we will return to Davenport if Ryan can find anything at Ozunhold. May the Infinity bless you, and may He protect Ryan and Father on their mission.”

“*Au revoir*, Bernadette,” Lavie said, embracing her friend and putting the small book she had received in a pocket of her jacket, before returning home.

Later that evening, after she had eaten rather well, Lavie retreated to her room, took the book out and began to read by the light of her table-lamp, with Mr. Bear keeping watch over her. We have already read some of what she was asked to read, so we will only reproduce the latter half:

To begin with, I shall examine the concept of the Three Ways, which is frequently found in the classic literature of the Zion Empire. Broadly speaking, these ways are linked to old traditions that predate the Itarian tradition, but have been enriched by it. These Ways – the Way of Justice, the Way of Love, and the Way of Power – also called the Deity Path, the Angel Path and the Warlock Path – have had a tremendous influence on the culture and mores of the Zionese, and their brothers, the Galvenians.

There followed a discussion of the Ways and the symbols representing them, which brought memories of her grandmother to Lavie, but written in a more scholarly manner, with theological notes. Though engagingly written, it was slow going for Lavie, who had little knowledge of theology and had to look up the footnotes one by one. It was only when she came to the last two paragraphs that she found the words striking a chord with her:

The pessimistic interpretation of these symbols, which has been frequently highlighted in traditional Itarian literature, is only one possible interpretation. The image of man and woman holding each other – and the beast – at bay, though ‘realistic’ (in the common sense of the word), is not the end of the story. In this connection, the passage from Saint Integra’s writings, quoted above, becomes especially relevant: “The true meaning of the Ways is unity, not division. The Way of Justice and the Way of Love must embrace, if they are to overcome the Way of Power. Deity and Angel must cooperate, if the Warlock is to be overcome and cast out.” In this, she anticipated the conclusions of the famous “Symposium of the Ways” of Caledonia, in B.C.Y. 45, which in turn was applied to human society by Saint Geraud in the Commonwealth Charter.

But there is a simpler, more homely application of this doctrine. If the Ways can symbolise human virtues, they can also be taken literally, in a sense. Modern Itarian theology, such as the works of Paul Mazarus, has emphasized this, and it can be taken to its logical conclusion. The union of man and wife, from the earliest days of the Church of Infinity, has been recognized as being blessed; and the virtues of justice and love, from the earliest days of the Zion Empire, have been identified as masculine and feminine. Combining these symbols yields a rich, but simple meaning: the union of man and woman, blessed by the Infinity and His saints, is itself a miracle, and can overcome the beast. Together, they can accomplish what neither could do on their own – in their homes, in their communities, and even in society at large. Perhaps it is here that the allegorical meaning of the Three Symbols of Janwen truly lies.

Lavie closed the book of essays, and shut her eyes.

I wonder why Father Marlborough wanted me to read this, she thought. Sure, it’s nice, and Bernadette is awesome, but....wait a minute.

She began to think.

The union of man and woman. Ryan and I. Henrik and Bernadette. Is that what he’s trying to say? That, working together, we can defeat the rest of those.....Third Way mages?

She shook her head. *It can't be as simple as that, she thought. After all, apart from Bernadette, none of us can use magic! Does it mean that each of us has to use a particular weapon – my arrows, Henrik's sword, Ryan's sword, and her magic? Or is there.....something else? I must ask Gran, and I must ask Carranya, too. I'm sure they can help. I'm sure there is a way.*

She stretched her arms and yawned. Opening the window of her room to let the breeze in, she lay down, and soon fell asleep. And as she slept, she dreamed, again. She dreamed that she was lying in bed, feeling calm and at peace, while people walked around her and their voices echoed in her ears...

"I can try," the strange man said. (Why did she think of him as strange? Lavie wondered.) "But I cannot promise anything."

"You have to help us," Ryan said. "I.....can't....Not on my own."

"Perhaps I could be of use," Agent Striker suggested. "After all, I have chosen my Way."

"Dare I hope?" Princess Carranya said, and she was laughing. "Lavie, my dear friend, wake up."

"Shhh, Carranya," Bernadette said, as she tied a bow-tie around Henrik, who looked rather pleased. "Don't wake her up, please. It's not yet time."

"Very well," the strange man said. "I will help you...."

Lavie woke up, and as she sat up in bed, resting her chin in her hand and smoothing down her hair, she thought that maybe her mother *did* have a point: too many pastries at bedtime did give rise to the strangest dreams.

Returning to a moment earlier that day, our friends were still investigating the so-called Temple of the Trial of Runes....

"What the hell do we do now?" Charlie Downs said, nervously, looking for the nearest exit.

"Senor Ryan," Juan began, looking rattled for the first time since Ryan had met him, "this is not good."

"I'm with you, Juan," Ryan said, reaching for his sword. "But we must go ahead."

"We can't fight ghosts!" Charlie complained.

"They may not be ghosts," Ryan said, looking at the apparitions in front of him. They certainly *resembled* ghosts – or, at least, the popular storybook depiction of ghosts – but though their eyes glowed a menacing red, they made no sign of moving further.

“Quiet, all of you,” Jonas said, raising his staff and closing his eyes. A ball of light shot forth from its end, passed through the five ghosts, and struck one of the walls harmlessly.

“Huh?” Ryan said. “What’s going on?”

“Very cute,” Jonas said, laughing out loud. “It’s just an illusion, boys. Probably generated by a very primitive Memory Crystal, or some such device. Follow me.”

And, to their amazement, Jonas walked through the seeming wall of ghosts, and stood behind them, waving his hands.

“Come on, it’s just lights and shadows,” he said, as the three of them followed him. “I think we just passed a test.”

“Very funny,” Charlie muttered, as he passed through.

“We’re coming to the end of the passage,” Ryan said, as he saw a wall stand before him. Before he could move any further, there was a loud explosion just ahead, and a man stood before him – a man Ryan had already met and fought, long ago.

“Not you again!” Ryan said, indignantly.

“We meet again, you Zin boys!” General Easton R. Stokel said, whistling the tune of “I Wish I Was In Trinden” to himself. “Once more, you interfere with things that are not yours! Rule Galvenia!”

“We’re Galvenians, you old donkey,” Charlie said. “And who are you?”

“Henrik and I fought him last year,” Ryan said, wearily. “He’s a crazy old coot who thinks he’s a General from the Galvenian War of Independence.”

“That is no way to address a superior officer!” Stokel said. “And while your tall friend may have taken my sword, I still have other weapons!”

“Look, can’t you see our uniforms, Senor?” Juan said. “We are Privates in the Galvenian Army.”

Stokel looked at Juan suspiciously. “You don’t look Galvenian to me, boy. Now, I know what you want. You want the Box. The Box that it is the privilege of a true warrior to guard!”

“We don’t want your old box,” Charlie said. “We’re looking for inscriptions and clues here.”

“Inscriptions? There’s one inside the box, boy,” General Stokel said, calmly, “but you’ll have to get through me to get it.”

“Enough foolery,” Jonas said, raising his staff and firing. The beam of light caught Stokel squarely in the chest, knocking him off balance.

“Zin invader! I’ll get you!” Stokel said, angrily.

“I’m Galvenian too,” Jonas said, calmly.

“You lie! You’re Zionesse, right down to that ugly blue tunic of yours! Now watch as I defeat him, boys, and you can take his remains back to his lamenting wives and daughters!” Stokel replied.

“Don’t make me get angry, Stokel,” Jonas said. “Who died and made you a general, anyway?”

“Stop chattering, and start fighting!” Stokel said, drawing an iron sword and slashing at Jonas, who dodged the blow. Ryan moved in, and they duelled for a few minutes, before Stokel looked at Ryan closely, then stepped away, aghast.

“The son of Kevin,” he began. “What are you doing here?”

“My dad’s name is Theodore,” Ryan said, calmly.

“I can’t fight you, boy. Take the box, if you want. It belongs to you. Make good use of it, but I warn you, I cannot help you anymore. Galvenia shall rise again, as long as men like you belong to it...”

And, with these words, Stokel disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“Wh – what happened, Senor?” Juan said, anxiously.

“If you want an educated guess, he was an old war hero, whom the Infinity permits to return from time to time to test the worth of younger warriors,” Jonas said. “Now let’s have a look at that inscription.” He opened the box, which was made of heavy wood, and found a folded piece of paper inside it.

“It’s a map,” he said, as he unfolded it. “Looks like Straukpass....and the coast just behind and above the mountains there. There are names, but they’re in the old script. Let’s get some light in here, my old eyes are failing me.”

Charlie, eager to help, held out a lantern.

“Ah, thank you, boy. That’s Straukpass, all right. North of that is....El Town. And northwest, there, by the coast.....Koroth.”

“El Town? You mean Alton,” Charlie said, with a chuckle. “Is that how the old-timers spelt it? I’m an Alton man.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Ryan said, examining the map himself. “That’s Alton. And....did you say *Koroth*? But there’s nothing there, Mr. Aquary, just an open field!”

“Lands, boy, don’t you know where Koroth is? It was the fishing village where Kaleb and Samath...fought their last battle. According to the map, Koroth was northwest of Alton.”

“We’ve got to head there, after informing our superiors,” Ryan said, slowly. “Come, let’s go back.”

“Well said, boy,” Jonas said, consulting his pocketwatch. “We might even be back for tea!”

As they walked back, Ryan was deep in thought.

Koroth. Kaleb and Samath....and Kevin. It would be too much of a coincidence if the Warp Cannon was there too – or is it? Koroth.....

“Dear me,” King Arlbert said, rather grumpily, “this is most irregular. Carranya, my child, I wish you would not arrange these meetings at such short notice.”

“I must beg pardon on Her Highness’ behalf,” Sir Douglas McIverny said, kindly. “It was I, after discussions with Captain Raienji, who convinced her of the urgency of the situation, and it was only when I became persistent that she generously offered to ask you for an audience, Sire.”

“Besides, Father,” Carranya said, with a smile that even he found hard to resist, “I’m sure Sir Turbot will wait for a minute.”

“We have finished an extensive interrogation of all the prisoners concerned – Samuel Talmadge, Trask, Robertson, and Gessler,” Sir Douglas said, looking strangely cheerful. “Two of them – Trask and Robertson – have proved very stubborn, and since our code of honour forbids torture, we could not force a confidence from them. Talmadge was only too willing to turn King’s evidence when we explained the situation to him, though he had been silent earlier, and Gessler has given us the complete details of Sir Prescott’s activities, though he swears he is ignorant of his master’s current position. The bandits working with Robertson have all agreed to testify against him, in exchange for a reduced period of penal servitude. But I am sure my report on the matter has already reached you, Sire.”

Arlbert scowled. “Don’t remind me, Douglas,” he groaned. “Lucan, of all people....”

“Lord Lucan and the Honourable Edgar Burns, the Galvenian envoy to the Fulton Republic, have both confessed to owning shares in the Turbo Arms Factory. Lucan has sent us his letter of resignation, and only asks that he be spared the disgrace of a public trial. Burns has written most repentantly too, asking us to consider the honour of his family, especially since his daughter is wearing the Galvenian colours. He is willing to resign his post and accept exile in the Republic.”

“Poor Anastasia,” Carranya said, shaking her head. “Lavie spoke most highly of her.”

“This leaves us with two matters to settle,” Sir Douglas said. “First, there is the question of a replacement for Lord Lucan. The Commonwealth is still in turmoil – Josen has apparently recalled Jedda, but Jedda insists he is being slandered and refuses to withdraw. Besides, the civil war in the Varald

Directorate is now reaching alarming proportions. Jansen requested CPF intervention, but he was outvoted by Schliemann, Kanoi and Lucan. We need a reliable man there.”

“Lucan, by the Infinity,” Arlbert said.

“My King,” Queen Katarina said, in a soothing tone, “do not weep for Lucan. We have to protect our own interests.”

“Very well,” Arlbert said. “Whom would you suggest as a replacement, Sir Douglas? Sheffield is a good man, but he has been called away by the Zion for an emergency meeting at Darington, and besides, he cannot hold both the War Minister’s office and be our representative.”

“I was thinking of Sir Cornelius Fairfax, Sire,” Sir Douglas said. “He is young, but not too young. He is loyal. And he has distinguished himself in this regrettable affair. Another Interior Minister can easily be found, such as Breckenridge.”

“Not that fool Breckenridge,” Arlbert said. “Bainbridge keeps talking about ‘bi-partisanship’, and even plays golf with Breckenridge, but he would be a disaster. I know you are an ardent Conservative, Douglas, but please curb your enthusiasm.”

“There are others, too, Father,” Carranya said, gently. “General Reed...”

Arlbert looked at her gratefully. “Reed is a good man,” he said, “but I would prefer to keep my officers with their men, and not behind a desk. I think I have it.” He frowned. “Sir Douglas, *you* will represent us at the Commonwealth.”

“I?” Sir Douglas said, blandly.

“Yes, you. You have distinguished yourself in this affair, too, and sometimes an older man is a good choice in times of crisis. As soon as Lucan’s resignation has been ratified by Parliament, you will receive your order of appointment, and you will set sail for Unity Isle.”

“You honour me, Sire,” Sir Douglas said, bowing. “Now, for the second matter, I hand over the floor to Captain Freya Raienji, our envoy from the Zion.”

Freya, who was seated next to Katarina and watching the proceedings with a smile on her lips, now spoke. “Your Majesty, it is official. The Varald have launched what is perhaps their last effort – a naval thrust all down the Zion coast, aiming to capture Checkpoint Bravo. Admiral Yatsu, the supreme commander of the Zion fleet, has already anticipated this, but the Emperor has requested reinforcements from you, Sire, to strengthen Bravo if some of them evade our navy and reach that far.”

“What good would that do?” Arlbert said, looking puzzled. “Bravo is a long way from the Directorate.”

“It would be prudent, Sire. It is the Emperor’s express request, both in word and in writing” – she handed a scroll to the King – “and it would protect your own country from a Varald incursion, should they reach that far. I have discussed the matter with Admiral Wells, and he agrees that it is a good idea.”

Arlbert was reading the Emperor’s missive slowly, and it was a while before he answered. “Very well, Captain,” he said. “I shall instruct Wells accordingly. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, Sire,” Freya said, calmly. “We have received final confirmation, through Memory Crystals recently deciphered by our scientists, that the rogue mages who are helping the Varald still have two strongholds – one in Galvenia, and one in the Directorate. The probable location of the Galvenian stronghold has been uncovered by some of your soldiers, and both locations have been confirmed by the Crystals.”

“Fairfax has informed us of this already,” Arlbert said, shaking his head. “I must confess, Captain, that I am not familiar with things magical. What is to be done?”

“It is simple, Sire,” she replied. “There are devices at both these strongholds, which can be used by the enemy to transport men and weapons across countries. We need to destroy them.”

“Infernal devices!” Arlbert thundered. “I remember the one at Inderness. How can they be destroyed?”

“Sire, we need to attack the one in your kingdom first. It is located in a wasteland, northwest of Alton. Once we locate it, the Princess and I...”

“Carranya?” Arlbert exclaimed. “What does she have to do with this?”

“Allow me to explain, Father,” Carranya said, slowly. “Once we locate the Warp Cannon in Galvenia, Freya and her allies, with my help, will use the device to access the second one, which is in the Palace of Gyrus in Varald. This palace cannot be entered either ordinarily, or even by a Warp Cannon, because it is protected by a cursed lock. The only way to unlock it is for two members of the House of Gyrus to enter the Palace simultaneously.”

“The House of Gyrus?” Sir Douglas said. “I’ve heard of *them*. A rum lot, indeed, with their floating city in the sky.” He chuckled. “But where can we find two descendants of the House of Gyrus, after all these years?”

“Right here, Father,” Carranya said, and Arlbert – his jaw dropping – looked at the three women seated opposite him, who suddenly all had bare heads – Raienji had removed her helmet, Carranya her veil, and Katarina her crown. Seen side by side, their resemblance was so striking that, had things been otherwise, it would have been rather comical. “Freya, Mother and I are all descendants of Princess Esmeriah, the last legitimate successor of the House of Gyrus.”

“Carranya, I forbid it!” Arlbert said, feebly. “Captain, do you not have any other relatives? Are there no more of you red-headed soldiers in Zion, that you should ask for my only daughter?”

“Father, listen to me,” Carranya said, and for a moment, Arlbert felt that it was not his daughter speaking, but Lady Penelope or even the legendary Esmeriah. “A ruler cannot hide in her palace, and hope that troubles will cease on their own. I am a light mage, and without me, neither Freya nor any of her families can destroy the Cannon.”

“Carranya, you are *not* a ruler yet,” Arlbert protested. “Let the Zion find a light-wielding sorcerer of their own.”

“Father, dear father,” Carranya said, passionately, “remember your promise. You promised me that, if a brave action would secure the safety of our kingdom, you would not stand in my way. Do not let the current lull lure you into a sense of false security. The evil still exists, and now may be our only chance of destroying it forever. I am forever grateful to you for your wish to protect me, but I can hide no longer. The evil has already claimed Prince Wilhelm’s life, and I would rather die fighting it, than be cut down without even making the attempt. Please, Father.” Though she had spoken these words bravely and without pause, Katarina noticed the tears that came to her child’s eyes when she spoke of Wilhelm.

“My king,” Katarina began, noticing Arlbert’s hesitation.

“Remember *your* promise, Carranya,” Arlbert said, almost pleading, despite the harshness of his tone. “You promised me, my child. Nothing rash, nothing imprudent. To wander into enemy territory, without a defence....”

“Oh, no, Sire,” Freya said, laughing. “Hardly without a defence. Princess, could you give me a light?”

“Do you smoke?” Sir Douglas said, with alarm. “I’ve always found it a nasty habit, Captain, especially for a lady.” Freya laughed.

“Oh dear,” Carranya said, as Freya held up a Memory Crystal. “I see what you mean.” She raised her hand and bowed, and as the ray of light struck the Memory Crystal, an image appeared. It was a most remarkable image – it seemed, for a few minutes, that the room was filled with Carranyas and Katarinas, and male versions thereof, almost forty in number.

“The Raienji family may have surrendered its noble privileges thousands of years ago,” Freya said, affectionately, “but we are ready to protect our kinswoman, especially if she is a Princess and a future Queen. *Noblesse oblige*. Once we unlock the palace, they will enter, and they will defend Carranya with their own lives.”

“Dear me, how delightful!” Sir Douglas said, admiring the younger women in the picture.

“You’re amazing, Freya,” Carranya said, admiringly.

“Do none of them possess this – light-based magic?” Arlbert said, torn between admiration and reluctance.

“The gift of light is a rare one, Sire,” Freya said, with a maternal look at Carranya. “Men possess it but imperfectly. It is seen in its most perfect form in women with a noble heart – women chosen for a special role by the Deity himself. Your own Queen would perhaps possess the gift herself, were she not unfortunately ill, Sire.”

Arlbert could do nothing but stare for a few moments, as the image from the Crystal slowly faded.

“Carranya,” he began, but found himself unable to continue.

“If you wish me to stay, Father, I am bound to obey you,” she said, quietly. “But that would mean that the Varald would grow strong once more, and the war would continue. I cannot allow that to happen, Father. Please understand me. I do not ask this for myself, but for Galvenia, for Zion and for Terra.”

And for Wilhelm, Katarina thought, but she remained silent, looking anxiously at her husband.

Arlbert spoke suddenly, his voice unsteady. “Captain Raienji, is this – enterprise of yours approved by the Emperor as well? Answer me honestly.”

“Sire, as a soldier and a servant of the Emperor, I must tell you that it is.” She handed him a second scroll, which he opened and read in total silence.

“Very well, Captain,” Arlbert said. “I understand what Charlemagne wishes. Please tell him that his wishes will be honoured to the letter. And now, if you please, kindly leave me. I have things I wish to say to my daughter, and I must say them to her alone.”

“As you wish, Sire,” Sir Douglas said. Freya smiled and bowed – an old, elaborate Zion bow – and left, leaving the Royal Family alone in the Throne Room...

“Father,” Bernadette said, “may I speak with you for a while?”

“Of course, my child,” Father Joaquim said. They were both leaving the tiny Chapel of St. Hilda at Davenport, and Joaquim locked the door as they left, hanging the large key on the belt he always wore over his priestly robes. He then turned to the small pair of rooms behind the chapel, which had been his only home for the past eight years, and unlocked the entrance with a smaller key. He sat down in the small room that served as both hall and dining-area, and beckoned to her to do the same.

“Father,” she said, sitting down and removing her hat, “there are things that I am...troubled about. I know I ought to speak to my own father, or perhaps my friends, about them, but I wonder if that would be wise.”

“Don’t worry, Bernadette,” Joaquim said, adjusting his glasses and looking at her more closely. “Child, you look more and more like Orubia of legend, somehow. Your mother would have been so proud of you.”

“Orubia?” Bernadette said, wondering what significance the unfamiliar name had.

“Oh, she’s way before your time, my girl. She was a legendary priestess in the Kingdom of Factoria, in the days before Old Republicans existed, let alone the Church of the Infinity. He opened a book on his table – *Myths and Legends of the Old Zionese* – and found the illustration he was looking for. “Look at her.”

Bernadette was forced to acknowledge that, apart from the longer length of her own hair, the resemblance was striking.

“What was she famous for, Father?” Bernadette asked, with a smile.

“Oh, plenty of things. Being a Healer. Being a Mage. Being an overall good person, who helped found what was perhaps the first ever orphanage on historical record. Though she lived before the Church, she was as good as any saint in our Missal.” He chuckled. “Fancy theologians like Mazarus, Infinity rest his soul, would probably have a term for that, such as ‘Anonymous Infinitus’.”

“An anonymous Infinitus?” Bernadette laughed. “I believe I’ve heard the term, Father, though our Rector used to say it was nonsense. I do believe I know some myself. Lavie Regale, for example.”

“Miss Regale? I wonder what Mazarus would say to that.” Joaquim laughed. “But that’s not what old Orubia was famous for, child. The legend says that she helped Lady Fina defeat the Lord of the Pits.”

“The Lord of the Pits...” Bernadette shivered, remembering Gharon. “That is part of what troubles me, Father. When Henrik and I began our mission in Itaria, we thought we would be doing a good deed – and so we did, or at least I hope so. But I came close, very close, to a dark mage – a man who was attempting to use a summoning pit.”

Joaquim almost jumped up from his chair. “A summoning pit? Sweet Infinity. I thought Marlborough was making fun of me, but you wouldn’t lie, girl. I suppose it was something to do with those renegade Lifters.”

Bernadette nodded. “It was under the ruins of their Guild.”

“It’s a mercy you survived, my child,” Joaquim said, kindly. “So what is it that’s bothering you?”

“Father, I don’t know how to put this, but...ever since we descended into that pit, I have been troubled by doubts.”

“Doubts?” Joaquim frowned. “Doubts about the Church? That isn’t surprising, considering what that reptile Gray tried to do. Even a Saint would have doubts when she saw what some of my clerical colleagues tried to do in Itaria.”

“No, Father,” Bernadette said sadly, bowing her head. “Doubts about....myself.”

Joaquim’s voice was kind. “What sort of doubts, if I may ask?”

Bernadette took a deep breath, then began, softly. “Father, you’ve known my family. You know both Father and Mother wanted me to be a scholar, and it was my dream, too. When I joined King’s College, especially after meeting Henrik Spenson, it seemed.....like a dream that had come true. I could almost feel Mother looking down from heaven and smiling at me, Father. But ever since I came out of that pit, I wonder. I wonder if all my learning is of any use. I wonder if I’m burdening my father with the expenses at King’s College, though my scholarship covers a lot of them. I wonder if a danger hangs over my friends, especially my dear friend, Lavie. And I wonder....if being with Henrik is the right thing to do.” She covered her face with her hands. “Forgive me, Father. I shouldn’t be bothering you with something as trivial as this.”

“Now, my dear,” Joaquim said, after a few moments, “let’s reason this out, as the Zionese are fond of saying. Now, it’s true that certain people tend to find an encounter with evil – especially supernatural evil – quite unnerving. This applies particularly to those who have a certain quality, which is hard to put into words. Innocence isn’t the right word – what captures it best, my child, is a kind heart. You faced something totally alien to your nature, and your nature – revolted, at least a little.”

Bernadette blushed. “Father...” she began.

“Now let’s take your worries one by one, and dispose of them,” Joaquim went on. “It’s perfectly natural for scholars to wonder what use their learning and wisdom is. But you’re young, child, and you have the rest of your life ahead of you. There’s still plenty of time for you to find an area that you’re truly passionate about, and to work at it. It needn’t be theology, though you’re as good a young theologian as any seminarian in Itaria. It could even be music. You do have a good voice, though I’m biased.”

“Thank you, Father,” Bernadette said.

“Next, your scholarship. Well, I know King’s College is expensive. But I know Jonas, too, and I’m sure he wouldn’t send you away if he was going to be ruined. He’s a clever man. If you’re really worried about it, talk to your father, and I’m sure he’ll set your mind at ease. If you’re *still* worried, write a few more of those nice papers of yours for our local journal, the *Galvenian Church Reporter*. I’ll pay you fifty dollars per piece, a hundred if it’s something outstanding.” He chuckled.

“That’s possible, Father,” Bernadette said, finding herself smiling all of a sudden.

“Next, your friend. That’s quite natural, too. After all, you’ve been through a life-threatening experience yourself, my child, and so has Miss Regale – it’s the talk of the town, and even I’ve heard of how she

helped save that young man from a dungeon. Tell me, Bernadette, is it really true, or just gossip? It sounds just like a novel..”

“It’s true, Father,” Bernadette said, thinking of Lavie and smiling. “Lavie told me so, as did Father Marlborough.”

“Quite incredible, my child. Anyhow,” Joaquim went on, “after experiencing danger at first-hand, some anxiety is quite normal. I remember the time Marlborough and I tried a motor vehicle in the Republic, when I was much younger – talk about sleepless nights!” He laughed.

“I sometimes have a vision of her, Father – almost a daydream,” Bernadette explained. “The two of us are running through a field of Paramekia Roots, and she suddenly falls, and I have to lift her up and help her stand.”

“A summoning pit, even if empty, can play tricks on one’s mind, my child,” Joaquim said, gently. “Don’t let an image or a fantasy ruin your peace of mind. Pray for your friend, Bernadette, and may the Infinity protect her as He preserved you. If it makes you feel better, I shall, too.”

“Thank you, Father.” She blushed, and her fingers twisted together nervously.

“Now, the last thing. I’m a celibate old buffer, as Saunders is fond of saying. But if I may be a little impertinent, I think the reason you worry about Spenson – who’s a brave lad himself – has little to do with the summoning pit, and everything to do with that old mule of a father of his. Am I right?”

“Father!” Bernadette exclaimed, turning slightly pale. “How did you...”

“Now, don’t be surprised, my dear. I *do* read the papers, you know, and I *do* have faithful parishioners who fill me in on the latest gossip – Miss Herrera, for instance. Frankly, though we priests are supposed to be patient, I find it hard to apply that virtue where old Spenson is concerned. I tolerated him for his wife’s sake while she lived, but we had our share of arguments after that, and I was relieved when he decided to stop coming to the chapel. And what he said was hard to forgive. I wish I had the courage to give him what-for, as Sigmund Regale did.”

“Mr. Regale?” Bernadette said, surprised.

“You didn’t know? Regale went to Spenson’s house one day, speaking quite well of you, and telling him to stop behaving like a cad. Apparently the whole thing ended in a heated argument, and Regale stormed out looking angry, while Spenson was quite rattled. Serves him right, I say.”

“Mr. Regale did that?” Bernadette said, flushing a bright red. “Sweet Saint Integra, I wonder if it was *Lavie*...”

“So you see, my child,” Joaquim said, patting her hand paternally, “whatever Spenson may say and think about you, he’s in a minority of one. If an old reprobate like Regale can say that Spenson is being unfair,

then the whole of Galvenia can probably say it. I know it's hard for a young girl like you, who's grown up surrounded by kindness, to listen to hurtful words, especially from the father of the boy you're fond of – though 'fond' may be an understatement, am I right?"

"Yes, Father," Bernadette said, shyly.

"There you go, then. And I know you'd like to be on good terms with a potential father-in-law, but believe me, I'm not sure even the *Infinity* can be on good terms with old Spenson for long." He laughed. "Just my little joke, child. Anyway, you know what they say, Bernadette. Sticks and stones. Don't go walling yourself up in a convent, just because that man called you plain or stupid. Beauty's in the eye of the beholder, and if young Spenson's sheepish looks are any guide, he certainly does *not* share his father's views." He laughed again, and beamed at her.

"I *am* plain, Father, but if it pleased the Infinity to make me that way, so let it be," Bernadette said, smiling and shaking her head. "And thank you very much. Thank you for your time."

"Oh, that's my job, child," Joaquim said. "Come, I'll pray with you a little."

They prayed together, and Joaquim noted the relief on Bernadette's face with pleasure. "And now, I suppose young Spenson must be waiting for you! Is there anything else, Bernadette?"

"Just one more thing," Bernadette said, feeling quite herself. "It's nothing troubling – it's just something I find puzzling."

"I love puzzles, especially of the crossword variety," Joaquim said. "Tell me about it."

"There's a dream I keep having, Father," Bernadette said. "I'm in a chapel, and I have to light candles. For some reason, I have to light six of them. I light the first two, and place them on a stand, and they burn brightly, their flames almost joining each other. I light the next two, and place them a little further away, and they burn brightly, too. But then, when I have to light the last pair, I can't find one of the candles. I light the one that I have remaining, and it burns for a while, before....flickering and going out. I don't understand what it means, but I feel it's important, somehow."

Joaquim, who had begun listening with an indulgent smile on his face, now seemed to Bernadette to be, not exactly worried, but certainly thinking deeply. "Six candles?" he asked. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Only five, but somehow, I know there must be six," she said. "It's one of those feelings you have in a dream, though you can't explain it. Does it mean anything much?"

"Bernadette, my child," Joaquim said, "I'd like you to keep this to yourself for a little while. I need to pray and think over it a little, myself. It's nothing that should alarm you, but it could be important."

"Important in what way, Father?" Bernadette asked.

"I wish I could answer that right now, Bernadette," Joaquim said. "However, I need a little time. Come and see me at the end of, let's say, a week, but in the meantime, keep it in your heart, as the Holy Book says. Good fortune to you, my child, and peace be with you."

"Peace be with you, Father, and thank you again," Bernadette said, walking away still a little puzzled, but with the spring in her step quite returned.

That old fool, Marlborough, Joaquim thought, as he watched her leave. Could he possibly be right about...Or has he hinted at it to Bernadette, so that she remembers it in a dream? And yet, it's – a pipe dream. A fairy tale. It's ridiculous....but then, the line between the ridiculous and the miraculous is thin. Infinity, forgive me, but I need more evidence.

A few days later, in a makeshift military camp at the edge of Alton, two young women were having a conversation that was anything but martial.

"Lavie, my sister," Bernadette said, helpless with laughter and almost falling out of her little chair, "listen to this."

"It can't be any worse than mine," said Lavie, who was in a similar state of hilarity, "but let's hear yours first." The pages of a manuscript lay spread-eagled on the bed between them.

"As you wish," Bernadette said, and read out the following in a dramatic tone.

"When he kissed her, Seraphina was lost in a wilderness of new sensations. It had never felt like this, warm and wonderful, exciting and right. None of the old rules applied."

"Meet the new rules, same as the old rules!" Lavie said.

Bernadette laughed, then went on.

"She forgot everything she had ever learned from the Varald. She was dry ground soaking in a spring rain, a flower bud opening to the sun".

"She must be a gardener's daughter, judging by the metaphors," Bernadette said, rendering Lavie helpless.

"Willoughby..."

"Willoughby?" Lavie exclaimed in disbelief.

"Willoughby, my sister," Bernadette said, biting her lip.

"...knew and gently coaxed her with tender words flowing over her like the sweet nectar of a King's Tear healing her wounds. And she flew, Willoughby with her, into the heavens."

Lavie laughed until tears came to her eyes. "Willoughby? I can just about get all the sugar, but *Willoughby*? What was the author *thinking*? And what *did* poor Seraphina learn from the Varald?"

"How to *hate* the rest of us!" Bernadette said, between peals of laughter. "Oh, it *was* good of Father Marlborough to give us this entry from the Galvenia Bad Writing Contest. When I grow up, I want to judge the contest, just like him!"

"So tell me, Bernadette, my sister," Lavie said, with a wink, "why did you pick that particular passage? Does Henrik kiss like that, poor boy? Are you casting him in the role of the mysterious *Willoughby*?"

"Henrik," Bernadette said, with a prim expression that did not fool Lavie in the least, "does not resemble that horrible man, my sister. He does not kiss like a Willoughby, but like a true scholar. Slowly, deliberately, but with a definite passion for the subject." They both began to laugh, until the Galvenian soldiers outside their tent wondered what exactly was going on.

"Aww, that's sweet," Lavie said, wiping her eyes. "Now try this." She began to read slowly, exaggerating her pronunciation, and speaking in a parody of a noblewoman's "Lorean" accent:

"Seraphina hated her life."

As she read this, Lavie pantomimed the act of crying, reducing Bernadette to helplessness.

"Cheerful stuff, isn't it?" Lavie said. "There's more!"

"She hated the Director's wife. She hated Kyrgyzhnov."

"Did you just sneeze, Lavie, my sister?" Bernadette asked, looking at Lavie innocently with her blue eyes.

"Bernadette," Lavie said, resting her head on the arm of her chair and laughing until her side ached, "you'll be the death of me." When both of them had calmed down a little, Lavie read on:

"She hated her own wretched helplessness."

"As opposed to *non-wretched* helplessness," Bernadette said, adopting her 'Father Marlborough' tone.

Lavie chuckled. "And it's her very own helplessness! It's not yours or mine! All Seraphina's!" Bernadette laughed, and then Lavie continued:

"Most of all she hated the Varald soldiers for their relentless quest for glory. She gave them her favours, but not a particle more. Maybe there wasn't any more. She didn't know. And that didn't seem to matter to any of the men. All they saw was her beauty and nobility, a flawless veil wrapped around a frozen heart, and they were enthralled. They looked into her angelic eyes and were lost."

“Now we know how the Varald lost the war, the Zion sent Seraphina to distract them!” Lavie said, and they both began to laugh again.

“Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette said, rubbing one side and still laughing, “perhaps we should go and meet the others now. It’s almost sunset.”

“Oh, just one more, Bernadette! Please! Ooh, this one’s about *you*, naughty girl. Let me read it out.” Lavie began to read, slowly and portentously.

“He had fallen head over heels for a devil...”

“Very amusing, my sister,” Bernadette said, with a smile.

“... with blue eyes and waist-length blue hair...”

“No!” Bernadette protested, between laughs. “You’re making that up, Lavie!”

“I wish I were,” Lavie said, giggling. “But it’s what she wrote, my sister! And listen to this:”

“... and a face that would tempt a man into apostasy and heresy.”

“Is that all?” Bernadette said, wiping her eyes. “What a lot of compliments that author’s paying me, Lavie. Perhaps I should change my name to Seraphina. Seraphina Aquary. I wonder what dear Henrik would think of it, though!”

“Moral of the story, Bernadette,” Lavie said, laying her page down. “If you want to save the Varald, send in a handsome missionary like Willoughby to charm all the generals’ wives, like Seraphina! Who needs the Zion Army, when you’ve got...”

“Willoughby!” they said in chorus, then leaned forward on to the bed, laughing helplessly.

“Goodness, what *are* you girls up to?” Ryan said, peering in at the entrance to the tent. “You seem to be having an uncommonly good time.”

“Hi, Ryan!” Lavie said, rising with a quick movement and waving at him. “Father Marlborough gave us something to read, and it was so funny! Want to have a look?”

“A comedy of some sort?” Ryan said, smiling at her.

“No, silly, an entry from a contest that Father Marlborough runs every year! It seems there are people who submit religious novels to him and his friend, Professor Towers, at King’s College. The good ones get published by the College press, and the really awful ones enter the Galvenia Bad Writing Contest!”

“Bad Writing Contest?” Ryan chuckled. “Perhaps I should throw in a few references to the Infinity in that book I wrote in eleventh grade, and submit it myself!”

“Oh, you mean ‘The Commonwealth is greater than us both’? Come on, Ryan, it wasn’t that bad,” Lavie said, loyally. “At least your hero was just brushing the heroine’s cheek, and not flying with her to Paradise!” This set them both off again, leaving Ryan puzzled until Bernadette handed him the page about Willoughby and his King’s Tear nectar. Ryan read it, stared dumbly for a few minutes, then laughed out loud himself.

“Geez, who reads this stuff?” he said, finally. “I must tell Armin to cover this contest for his newspaper, the next time I see him. That boy’s been missing for quite a while.”

“So how do you feel about tomorrow, Ryan?” Bernadette said, gathering the pages together.

“Er, it’s hard to say, actually. It’s certainly not like flying into Heaven, but I *hope* it’ll be better than Al-Mu’afa,” he said, with a wink, thinking back to the surprise visit he’d received at the Academy, the evening before.

“Hey, Ryan, your folks are here!” Charlie called out, as he headed to the sparring ring. “Have fun!”

Mum and Dad? Ryan thought. They were in his room, looking at him anxiously.

“Hey, what’s up?” he had said, trying to sound casual. “Nice of you to come by.”

“Ryan, my son,” Sheila had said. “Be careful, all right? I know you’re a soldier, and you have to go where the King tells you, but – we almost lost you in the Republic.” Her lower lip trembled. “I’m always proud of you, Ryan, and I wish this war were over soon.”

Ryan cast his mind back to the few days he had spent with his parents, after returning from Fulton. They had been pleasant ones, though the spectre of the Eramundum legacy hung between them, unspoken. His mother had been demonstrative, his father quietly appreciative, though both, in their own way, were immeasurably grateful that he had come back safe. Sigmund Regale had told them the truth soon after they had learned it, and only they knew what they had endured over those two months – and how indebted they felt to Lavie.

“Son,” Theodore said, after a pause, “what’s that sword you’ve got there, next to Father’s?”

Damn, I should have kept it somewhere out of sight! Ryan thought, flushing with embarrassment. “Er, it’s a sword that Henrik and his friends brought back from Itaria. Apparently...” He paused, uncertain about what to say next.

“Ryan,” Theodore said, looking at him curiously. “Would that happen to be – an old family possession, by any chance?”

“Dad!” Ryan exclaimed, wondering what this was leading to.

"Oh, I'm not surprised, Ryan," his father said, calmly. "Ever since you began training with Whitworth, I had – a feeling that this day would come, somehow. I gave you Father's sword last year, Ryan. In a couple of weeks from now, you'll be of age. I think the time has come for you to have this."

Ryan took the book that his father handed him. It was old and bound with bolts, and the gold leaf on its cover was fading, though the title could still be read: "The Legend of Kaleb: A Hero's Tale".

"Our ancestor wrote this, Ryan," Theodore said. "When you read it, you read the deeds of the first of the Eramond men. I don't know by what strange circumstances you managed to retrieve our ancestor's sword, but it belongs to you by right. Live and fight as he did, Ryan, my son. And remember that the Eramond men fight beside you, whatever the battle may be."

"Dad..." Ryan felt an uncommonly large lump in his throat, and did not know quite what to say.

"Are you all right, Ryan?" Lavie said, concerned. "You looked a bit...weirded out, there." She took hold of his hand.

Ryan grinned. "Just thinking about dear old Dad, Lavie. Apparently....he knows, too. Or at least he guessed. He gave me a copy of....Kevin's book."

"Ohmygosh!" Lavie exclaimed. "And what did he say?"

"He was quite cool about it, actually," Ryan said. "Just told me to keep up the honour of the family name, but not to do anything silly. Typical Dad." He laughed, and squeezed her hand. "So how did you convince your dad to let you go? I can understand Bernadette, because...."

"What's this about understanding Bernadette?" Henrik said, bustling into the room with his now-trademark goofy grin quite apparent. "I thought that was my subject, Mr. Eramond!"

"Very amusing, Henrik," Bernadette said, beaming at him.

"Ooh, looks like someone's jealous!" Lavie said, teasingly. "Here, Henrik, try reading this out. I'm not sure if this is supposed to be you or Ryan, though! Or maybe Agent Wolfgang!" She handed him a page of the manuscript.

Henrik took a look at it and raised his eyebrows, then laughed. "Ah, jolly old Father Marlborough! Let me try this with the right intonations." He began to read in a booming bass voice:

"Willoughby Eliseus was a quiet man, but there was nothing weak about him."

"What a guy, eh?" Ryan said, winking at Lavie. "Armin has nothing on him!"

"There was something in his eyes that made men, even the Geheimpol, treat him with respect. It wasn't just his height or the strength of his body, which were both impressive enough. It was the clear steadiness of his gaze."

“That’s Henrik all right,” Ryan said, laughing.

“Stuff it, Ryan,” Henrik said, affectionately. “Who wrote this stuff, anyway? This is *beyond* Bad Writing Contests, in my opinion. This should be used to torture Sir Prescott and his minions in jail! Besides, it sounds more like that Striker bloke than me, old bean.”

“Armin had some weird ideas about Striker,” Ryan said, grinning. “Would you believe, he thought Striker was courting *you*, Lavie!”

“Me?” Lavie’s eyes widened, then she smiled. “Oh, dear. I’m sure he’s got a nice girlfriend of his own somewhere in Zion, though!”

“One last passage, now, before we head to meet the Princess and her guards,” Ryan said, flipping through the pages. “Here’s more stuff about you, Henrik.” He burst into laughter, then began to read:

“Willoughby couldn’t take his eyes off her. His heart beat faster and faster as she came near.”

“And then he has a heart attack and the Varald win?” Henrik asked, in the same ‘innocent’ tone with which he had baited the late Father Grey.

“Henrik,” Bernadette said, patting him on the shoulder and smiling, “that’s not supposed to happen! This is an inspirational romance, so the hero always wins!”

“Henrik’s dad would love that,” Lavie said, with a giggle. “He thinks happy endings are for dopes.”

“Dope himself,” Ryan said, with a laugh. “Now, this is supposed to be the voice of the Infinity. Looks like our Willoughby’s got a hotline to God himself!”

“This one, my precious child!” he read, in a squeaky voice.

“Does God really talk like that?” Lavie asked, winking at Bernadette.

“Willoughby felt a rush of blood to his head, mingled with joy. Sweet Infinity! Sweet Infinity!” Ryan laid down the pages, then looked at Henrik with a mischievous expression. “Now tell me, Henrik, isn’t that how you felt when you first met Bernadette, old pal? Didn’t you hear a voice from the Infinity itself?”

“I’m afraid not – and don’t throw anything at me, Bernadette,” Henrik said, grinning.

“Dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, affectionately. “As if I would throw anything at you.”

“Actually, the first time I met you, I felt sorry for you – because Dopey Dad had made you wait out in the backyard,” Henrik said, remembering the day they had first met. “The voice in my head came later – I think it was when we walked through the King’s College gardens, darling.” He smiled, and she moved closer to him.

“Ohmygosh, it’s eight o’clock,” Lavie exclaimed, looking at her pocketwatch, which lay open on her table. “We’d better head over to Carranya’s tent! She wanted us over for dinner, and for a last-minute discussion!”

“Fine with me,” Ryan said, linking his arm to hers as they headed out, followed by Henrik and Bernadette, who were still smiling as they relived their first walk together. None of them noticed the man who was lurking on the edges of the camp, looking at them with a small pair of binoculars, out of sight of the guards at the gate. He was not wearing a cloak or disguise of any sort – he was immaculately dressed in a suit, and had anyone stopped him, they would have found no cause to question him at length.

“Prescott is an idiot,” the man said to himself. “But never mind. I think I have the perfect idea.”

“What was that?” Carranya said, waking with a start. Shaking her head slowly, and looking around to see if she was not dreaming, she could only make out the dim outlines of Lavie and Bernadette’s sleeping forms, in the large tent that she was now occupying.

“Huh?” Lavie said, getting out of her sleeping-bag – she was not quite asleep – and turning to one side. “What happened, Princess?”

“I thought I – heard something, or someone, moving outside,” Carranya replied. “It sounded very close. It was as if someone stepped on a branch, or something.”

“Let me take a look,” Lavie said, pulling her jacket over her and peeping out of the entrance of the tent. Officer Jeffries, the head of Palace Security, looked at her with surprise.

“Miss Regale? Is anything the matter?” he asked.

“The Princess heard something, so I thought I’d just see what it was,” Lavie replied, blinking.

“Oh, that’s just Sheffield’s men making their rounds,” Jeffries explained. “His Majesty asked him to have an extra detachment of his own men around, just in case. They passed by here just now, and now they’re patrolling the fence.” He pointed towards three uniformed men, who were just visible in the moonlight.

“I guess that’s all right, then,” Lavie said, returning to the tent. “Thank you, Officer.”

“Sheffield’s men?” Carranya said, surprised, when Lavie told her. They spoke in whispers, not wanting to wake Bernadette, who was fast asleep, though her expression suggested that her dreams were far from peaceful. “Really, Father can be *too* cautious sometimes.”

“Carranya,” Lavie said, “are you really sure about doing this?”

"I have to do it, Lavie," she replied. "The Emperor wants it. The world needs it. And I have to do something – to honour his memory. It was hard convincing Father, though."

Lavie smiled. "I'm surprised that Daddy let *me* come, too. Ever since I got back from the Republic, he looks at me as if I'm some sort of war heroine. And though he wasn't exactly *happy* to let me come with Ryan, he and Gran both said that they understood, that they knew it was something important. Daddy even said this was part of – my destiny. They seem to get on a lot better these days! Mom was worried, but I guess that's natural. And Father Marlborough helped, too, when he told Daddy there was a better chance of success if we all went together."

"It *sounds* simple, of course," Carranya said. "Tomorrow, we move ahead, and the soldiers, along with Ryan, Henrik, Bernadette and you, will comb the area. It was good of General Reed to promote Ryan to Corporal, so that he could lead the soldiers. As soon as they find the Cannon, Freya and I will make our way there, and they'll encircle it and protect us. The only trouble is if a dark mage is actually guarding the Cannon."

"And what happens then?" Lavie whispered anxiously.

"Ryan and his men will have to fight him off, and there's a second group of soldiers who will be standing by, under Sergeant Burns' command. Freya's brought a friend of hers along, a Sergeant Burnfist who's a fire mage, just in case the mage proves too powerful. And of course, I will fight as well."

"Me too, Carranya," Lavie said, taking hold of her friend's hand.

"Thank you, Lavie," Carranya said, smiling at her. "Once Freya and I use the Warp Cannon to reach the Palace of Gyrus, the rest of you can return to Lorean, and go home from there. Of course, it's possible that the mage may appear while we're trying to use the Cannon, or after it. In either case, if he's a single guy as in Itaria and Zion, you should still be able to defeat him."

"Carranya," Lavie said, lowering her voice, "be careful, okay? I know I'm here to fight beside Ryan, but I'm also there to fight beside you. If things get difficult...."

"Then I can count on you, and on all our companions, Lavie, my friend," Carranya said, squeezing her hand. "We can cross that river when we come to it. Try to sleep a little, we will need our strength for tomorrow." Within a few minutes of saying these words, the Princess was asleep. But Lavie lay awake, staring at the shadows in the room, at the sleeping figures of her two friends, and wondered what lay ahead.

I don't know what exactly's going to happen tomorrow, she thought. But I know it's important, I just know it! I can't explain why. Something terribly important is going to take place....and I hope Ryan is safe. I'll fight beside him.

"It's strangely calm out here," the newly-promoted Corporal Ryan Eramond observed, as the group of fifty privates combed yet another area of the barren fields northwest of Alton. All they had encountered were a few unfriendly forest creatures, which had provided them some sport, but nothing else.

"Sergeant, are you able to detect anything?"

"Hold your horses, son," Rebecca Burnfist said, as she adjusted a dial on the device at her belt. "There's a dim signal – so the Cannon is *somewhere* around – but it's not here. Show me that map again."

Ryan took the map from his pocket and handed it to her. Burnfist squinted at it for a few minutes, then nodded with obvious satisfaction. "Flaming fires, they've done a good job, son. Now, you Galvenians wouldn't know much about it, but this is elementary school stuff for us. Do you see this symbol there?" She pointed to a circle on the map, some distance south of where they were standing.

"That's a castle or a tower, right?" Ryan said.

"Ah, the joys of being a layman," Burnfist said, with a wink. "In an ordinary map, you'd be right, Corporal. But in an old map like this one, a circle like that indicates a tunnel."

"A tunnel to where?" Sergeant Burns said, walking up and joining the two of them. "Hello, Burnfist, it's been a long while since that Commonwealth stint, hasn't it?"

"Burn you, Burns," Rebecca said, affectionately. "Aren't you supposed to be guarding the perimeter?"

"I just received instructions from the Princess to help you with the search," Burns explained. "And besides, I was feeling bored out there. So where's the tunnel?"

"It'll probably be concealed by a magical lock or trap of some sort," Rebecca explained. "Once we reach the area, the field-detector" – she tapped the device she was holding – "should be able to find the entrance, but we'll need to be careful all the same."

"All right, that's good enough for me," Ryan said. "We're heading south, boys."

As they proceeded, they were followed by Henrik – who, though not holding a rank, was being sent as a "recorder" by the Department of History at King's College, as well as Lavie and Bernadette, who brought up the rear, and amused themselves by mimicking the soldiers' rigid marching style.

"Lavie, my sister," Bernadette said, with a smile, "it's hard to march that way with a long skirt. I almost envy you those shorts, though I wouldn't dare wear them myself."

"Oh, you wacky Itarians," Lavie said, grinning back. "Gosh, it's quite hot for a spring day. Good thing I brought Uncle Vincent's hat!"

"Ryan just radioed me," Henrik added. "It seems they've found a possible entrance to where the Cannon might be. I think you ought to tell the Princess to get ready."

“You got it!” Lavie said brightly. “Now, let me see if I remember how this radio thing works...”

Fortunately for her, she did, and in less than an hour, the Galvenian contingent were at the spot indicated on the map, with Carranya, Freya and the Palace guards not far behind.

“This is the place,” Burnfist said, looking at her gadget with satisfaction. “But something’s amiss, mark my words.”

“What’s the matter, Becky?” Anastasia Burns said, slapping her fellow soldier on the shoulder.

“Burn you, Stacy,” Burnfist replied. “Look at this. A magical trap or device should register as a constant signal, but this – comes and goes, like a wave on the shore.”

“What could that mean?” Ryan said, shaking his head.

“I have an idea,” Bernadette said, suddenly.

“Oh, clever girl,” Burnfist said, looking at her as a teacher would look at a smart toddler. “What do your famous Aquary brains have to say about this?”

“It’s possible,” Bernadette said, “that there’s something or someone inside who is trying, but not succeeding, to neutralize the trap. Two opposing spells or elements would give a pattern like this. At least that’s what Henrik says, from what he remembers of his mathematics lessons.”

Burnfist raised her eyebrows. “Girl,” she said, “a few more lucky guesses like that and you can change your name to Orubia Aquary, because you look as soft as her, but you’re just as sharp.”

Bernadette smiled. “It was a team effort, Sergeant,” she replied, beaming at Henrik, who reciprocated.

“You really *are* an Orubia,” Burnfist said, shaking her head. “And who’s the childhood sweetheart?”

“Very funny, Sergeant,” Henrik said. “If what we guessed is true, though, we’ll need to be very careful.”

“Why?” Lavie asked, with a frown.

“Because it means they might have a prisoner in there, someone who has magical skills and is trying to escape,” Henrik replied. “If we rush in there, we might end up hurting someone.”

“Isn’t it possible,” Ryan said, “that the mages in there could be fighting?”

“Possible,” Sergeant Burns replied, “but not very probable. I think the tall boy’s explanation makes the most sense. Becky, can you get more details?”

“This lousy old model isn’t the best at that,” Rebecca grumbled, “but let me try. Come here, Aquary. You’re going to help me. First of all, look at that spot.” She pointed to an area just next to where she stood.

“I see it,” Bernadette said, calmly.

“Flaming fires, girl, you’re....oh, I forgot, I’m *not* your superior officer. Now, which elements can you use? I’d guess light and water, like old Orubia. Now what you need to do is simple. Aim a little water – not too much, it’ll blow the device – at that spot. Then we’ll try light.”

“I’m a Light Healer, but I can’t use light myself,” Bernadette explained. “The Princess is a light mage.”

“A Light Heal will do, girl, it contains enough light. Start with water.”

Bernadette closed her eyes and leaned close to Henrik. A thin jet of water shot forth from the device at her own belt, and struck the ground.

“No dice, Orubia, and there’s no need to get all sent – oh, you’re using one of those amplifiers. Never mind me, boy.” Burnfist said. “It’s neither fire nor water, or it’d have shown up either as a crest or a trough. Now, give me a light.”

Lavie giggled. “Are you going to smoke here?” she asked.

“Hmph, typical Galvenian humour,” Burnfist retorted. “Just a little, girl.”

A ray of light shot forth from Bernadette’s hand, and Burnfist looked at her device with a large grin on her face. “It’s light all right, girl. Not necessarily a light mage – a light mage could probably fight her way out – but either a Light Healer, or even just an ordinary healer. Which means that....”

“Good heavens!” Bernadette said, suddenly perturbed. “Father!”

“Your father? Is he a healer, too? Goodness. But surely there are others in Galvenia...How old is your father, girl?”

“Sixty-one,” Bernadette said, trembling a little.

“Then let me try this again. Give me another Light Heal, right there.”

Bernadette closed her eyes again, and after a pause, another ray of light struck the spot. Burnfist looked at the girl with compassion. “It’s someone old, all right – or at least, if what I know is right. We’ll have to be careful, Orubia. It could be your father in there.”

“Don’t worry, Bernadette,” Henrik said, placing his arm around her. “We’ll rescue him.”

“But how could they have captured – Damn it!” Ryan exclaimed, angrily. “This must be another of Sir Prescott’s schemes. Curse him.”

“But Ryan,” Lavie said, “how could Prescott have managed it? He’s on the run himself!”

Ryan shook his head. “Good point, Lavie. It must be – no, unless he’s hand-in-glove with the mages himself! But that doesn’t make sense. If he was working for the mages, then he could have killed me anytime, rather than throwing me in prison.”

“Perhaps he’s gone over to them recently,” Henrik mused. “After all, he’s *persona non grata* in Lorean, so it makes sense that he’d try to join other rogues.”

“No time to talk, now!” Burnfist said, impatiently.

“What seems to be the matter, Lavie?” Princess Carranya said, as and Freya walked up to the group, noting the alarm on their faces. Ryan explained the situation briefly.

“I see,” the Princess said. “Well, the first thing to do is to break that lock with low power, so that our chances of being detected are minimal. Freya, cover us in case anything tries to jump us from outside.”

“As you wish, my child,” Freya said with a bow.

“Now come beside me, Bernadette. If we strike two low-energy blows in rapid succession, it should do the trick. Don’t be frightened now.” Taking hold of Bernadette’s hand, she bowed her head and chanted. They both raised their other hands, and two beams of light shot forth, forming a V that coalesced exactly at the spot Burnfist had indicated. There was a slight tremor of the ground beneath them.

“It’s broken,” Burnfist said, with satisfaction. “Great work, girls. Now to excavate a little. Freya, we’re doing this the usual way, aren’t we?”

“Why not, Caris,” Freya said, as she drew her wand. Aiming it at the same spot as Burnfist’s sword, she raised it slowly, and a large rock began to come loose.

“Amateurs,” Freya said, with amusement. “They weren’t counting on the Omega Wave.”

After replacing the rock some distance away, Freya looked into the tunnel. Its walls glowed red, and there were a series of steps leading down.

“Red light,” Carranya said. “There is at least one dark mage down there. Perhaps even a summoning pit, if such things even exist in Galvenia.”

Bernadette nodded mutely.

“We need to move as a group, and watch our rear,” Ryan said, drawing the Sword of Regret as his men lined up. “Princess, I’ll go in first with a few of soldiers. Next, Captain Raienji and Sergeant Burnfist will

follow. You'll accompany the Captain, surrounded by the Palace guards, and Henrik will guard the rear, along with Sergeant Burns and some of her men. The rest will all stay back and form a circle in case anything funny happens."

"Dear me, Lord Ryan," Carranya said, affectionately, "you seem to be an excellent planner."

"A lousy planner, you mean," Lavie said, making a face. "What about *us*, Ryan?"

"Oh, you?" Ryan looked at Lavie and grinned. "You're coming with me, aren't you, Lavie? Bernadette will stay near the Princess, in case she needs any help, and also because she can use her shields at full power if she's near Henrik."

"I thought you'd never ask, you goof," she replied, scraping an arrow against her bangle and keeping it ready. "Let's go in and save your dad, Bernadette!"

"And find a certain Warp Cannon," Freya said, with a wink.

They had not travelled very far when they felt a rumble, which shook the walls of the tunnel.

"What was that?" Carranya said, nervously.

"Watch out!" one of the soldiers said. Standing before them, motionless but glaring, was a large beast. It resembled a dog standing on its hind legs, but was much larger, and had a horn that gleamed menacingly in the dim red light.

"Argh!" Ryan said. "Take it down, men!" He aimed the Sword of Regret at the beast, and remembering what he had been taught by Marlborough, released a beam of blue light. It struck the creature in the chest, and it howled.

"It's getting angry!" one of the men said, nervously.

"Let me handle this!" a voice cried out. An arrow struck the creature in the throat, bursting into flame and halting it in its tracks.

"Lavie, my sister," Bernadette said, in an awe-filled voice.

"Thanks, Lavie," Ryan said, nodding as he aimed the sword once more. *Full power*. A larger, broader blue beam struck the beast in the throat again, expanding into a burst of light as it did. The beast quivered, and lay still.

"Ugh," Freya said. "That has to be the ugliest piece of magical kludge I've ever seen in my life. Our opponents have *no* idea how to use the El Metal properly."

“Anyway, it’s gone,” Lavie said, with a grin. “Let’s move ahead. Are you having second thoughts about bringing me along, Ryan?”

“I never did, Lavie,” he said, smiling back at her. “But we can chat later. Let’s move ahead.”

“Ohmygosh!” Lavie exclaimed.

Hovering ahead of them were four creatures, which had wings like birds, but which were spherical in shape. Their surfaces were studded with sharp, thorn-like outgrowths, and their yellow beaks looked doubly menacing in the red glow. Despite this, the overall effect would have been comic had the creatures not been obviously glaring at them.

“Flying....landmines?” Henrik said, shaking his head.

“We must destroy them soon!” Sergeant Burnfist said, nervously. “You, Ryle! Get that one!”

Instinctively, Ryan slashed with his sword, and the creature above him flew back, hesitantly. Given a few minutes’ respite, he aimed a blue beam at it, and it collapsed on the ground.

“Lavie, watch out!” he cried, as the second creature swooped down. Lavie shot another arrow at it, which missed, but which hit the third. Its skin burst into flame, but it still flew.

“Duck!” Henrik said, as the burning bird – if it was a bird – seemed to literally shoot a spike from its skin in the direction of Sergeant Burns. He brought up his sword and parried it, allowing Burns to draw her rifle and shoot, sending it into a dive.

“Filthy creatures,” Freya said cheerfully, blowing them back with a gust of wind. “Here, Lavie, this one’s yours.”

“You got it!” Lavie said, looking intently at the bird she had just missed and firing her bow. The arrow struck the creature in the eye, causing it to fly around helplessly, emitting sounds that sounded like a dog’s barks.

“Careful, Henrik!” Bernadette cried out, as the fourth creature swooped down on him. She raised her hand and cast a shield, off which the creature bounced, making angry grunts.

“Thank you, my love,” Henrik said gratefully, as he raised his sword and slashed. However, the creature evaded him, and made straight for Ryan, flying at a surprising speed. Carranya fired a beam of light at it, causing it to miss him.

“Damn it!” Ryan said, aiming the Sword at it. His attack caught it squarely below its eyes, and it fell to the ground.

“Girl, shield us all!” Freya called out, as the remaining creature, still burning, began to swell up.

“Yes!” Bernadette said, taking hold of Henrik’s hand as the device at her belt glowed. Before the shield could reach its full power, though, the creature exploded, sending sharp spikes in every possible direction.

“Are there any more of them?” Lavie said, as the sound of the explosion died out. One of the spikes had grazed the side of her head, and she rubbed the injured spot, making a face.

“I’d say not,” Rebecca Burnfist said. “Goodness, you Galvenians really *should* carry rifles instead of swords. I didn’t know Blowbeaks lived in tunnels, though.”

“Blowbeaks?”

“According to legend, they live in the Pits themselves, and come to the surface only when the link between the underworld and ours is somehow disrupted. You’ll find them in your Holy Book, Orubia.”

Bernadette smiled. “Yes, I remember. Does anyone need a little healing? I’m all scratched up!”

“You could start with me,” Henrik said, closing one eye and grimacing. “Darn thing aimed right for the eyes.”

Fortunately, none of the injuries were serious, and the group proceeded further, until they came to a door.

“This must be the place,” Carranya said. “Is anyone able to sense anything?”

Bernadette had turned slightly pale. “There’s.....something cursed there,” she said. “It can’t affect me like it used to, since I’m now a Light Healer, but I can feel it.”

“That must be either the Warp Cannon itself, or the mage’s weapon,” Freya observed. “Corporal Eramond, do the honours.”

“Go, Ryan!” Lavie called out cheerfully, as he aimed his sword at the door’s hinges.

“Very funny, Lavie,” Ryan replied, but as he attacked, the door swung open. It had never been locked.

“How silly...” Burnfist began, but as they looked into the door, they all stopped short, lowering their weapons at the sight before them. In one corner stood the Warp Cannon, glowing red at both its cylinders. Standing before them was a man in a dark cloak, with Sir Prescott next to him, both wearing suspiciously innocent smiles. And in the other corner of the room – surrounded by what seemed like bubbles of red light – were Jonas Aquary, Sister Miriam, and Marianne.

“Welcome,” the man in the cloak said, holding out his hand to them. “We were just waiting for you to arrive, weren’t we, Prescott?”

“Father!” Bernadette cried out. Jonas’ lips moved, as if he were trying to speak, but there was no sound.

“Lavie, be careful,” Ryan said, placing a gentle but restraining hand on her arm as she stepped forward. This elicited a scowl from Marianne behind her bubble, but Ryan was in no position to notice.

“What *is* going on here?” the Princess demanded.

“Allow me to explain, Your Royal Highness,” the cloaked man said, smoothly. “First of all, allow me to congratulate you all on your perspicacity. This is, indeed, the Warp Cannon that was sealed by Prince Ryle of Factoria, many years ago. But Prince Ryle was rather a ‘dope’, as you Galvenians put it, because what one man can seal, another can unseal.”

“What do you intend to do?” the Princess said, coming to the front of the group and looking at him intently, her green eyes flashing with anger.

“To let you use the Cannon, Princess,” the man replied.

“Huh?” Lavie exclaimed.

“You see,” the man said, “you have fallen into our trap. My colleague in the Palace of Gyrus has more than enough means to destroy you, Princess. You were all too eager to go there, ignorant of what it holds. And once that is done, the last ruler obstructing us on Terra will be gone forever.”

“I do not fear your colleague,” Carranya said, calmly. “My friends and I will face whatever odds you choose to pile up, and do not be confident that you will prevail.”

“Ah, I forget,” the man said calmly. “You *do* possess the gift of light, though I consider it vastly overrated. But I am prepared for that. My Varaldian colleague, though skilled, can be a little vain at times, and it is possible that you and your Zion friends may defeat him. Which is why I have invited three more people to this party. Prescott, kindly explain to the Princess why they are here.”

“With pleasure, master,” Prescott said. He was wearing civilian clothes, except for the armour he wore – armour whose shoulder-plates glowed a bright red. He spoke woodenly, without his usual vocal affectations, and his expression was blankly cheerful. “You may decide, Princess, to be a heroine, and to enter the Cannon despite the chances that you will fail. Of course, we expected that from you.” He grinned and paused.

“What’s up with Sir Chucklehead?” Lavie whispered, nervously. “He sounds different.”

Ryan nodded, but said nothing, looking at the Warp Cannon intently.

“That is where our friends come in,” Prescott said, with a formal, submissive bow, such as a butler might use. “The Warp Cannon is magically linked to the field around the three of them. If you use the Warp

successfully, they will die – and die quite slowly and painfully.” He smiled. “Somehow, I doubt you would accept that, Princess, even if they mean nothing to you.”

“You monster!” Lavie cried out. “Though I once wanted to slap her silly, even *Marianne* doesn’t deserve to die that way! I’ll break that Cannon of yours!”

“Wait, Lavie,” Ryan said, looking at Sir Prescott carefully. *God! The armor! I think that’s – if only I could be sure*, he thought. *It’s our only chance to buy some time.*

“You can trace the link,” Freya whispered to Burnfist.

“I need a little more time, damn it!” she whispered back.

“Thank you, Prescott. So which will it be, my friends?” the cloaked man said, still in a friendly tone. “I am not inhuman. Turn around and leave, and I will spare you all, except Her Highness.”

“Fat chance we’ll ever do that!” Ryan said, heatedly.

“We – we do not believe you,” Bernadette said, pale-faced, as Henrik leaned forward to catch and support her. “Why would you spare us?”

“Because, as long as you leave us alone, you are of no concern to us. It matters little to us, once Carranya is gone, for she is the only one who can foil us. Once we have disposed of her, it matters not a whit if the Zion defeat the Varald, or *vice versa*. The Varald are merely pawns, moving across the board of a plan that neither you nor they will ever understand. Return to your towns, and enjoy the little time that you have before our plans come to fruition. Leave, and I shall spare you.”

“Your plans? What are you quacking about?” Sergeant Burnfist said, heatedly.

“The establishment of the Way of Power over Terra, girl,” the man said. “It is not necessary for you to know more than this.”

“We’ll never let that happen!” Lavie said, taking Ryan’s hand with one of hers, and the Princess’ with the other. “We’ll fight you!”

“I’m afraid that would be foolish. We have learned our lessons from Gharon’s folly, and I will not be washed away – not by light, not by water, not by fire. This is not the place for you, foolish child. Return to your little world, to your little home.”

Suddenly, Ryan drew his sword.

“That sword will not help either, boy,” the man said, contemptuously. “You may fight me, but I have no wish to fight you. I will merely warp away, and then return, until you grow weary.”

“You think it’s all about you, don’t you?” He raised his sword and aimed it at Sir Prescott’s shoulder, and a blue beam shot forth. There was a sound of glass and metal shattering, and Prescott’s expression changed. It was contorted with fury.

“You!” the cloaked man said, furiously, his hand going to his belt. “How did you?”

“I’ve read of such things,” Ryan said, calmly. “A device to control one’s mind, and make you docile. That’s what you were using on Sir Prescott, weren’t you? He would never behave that well otherwise. How does it feel to be some commoner’s lackey, Sir Prescott? Is he really your master?”

Prescott flung himself on the man he had called his master, drawing his sword. “You low-born villain!” he screamed. “How dare you insult the honour of the House of Chuselwock in this manner?” The mage, taken by surprise, was flung to the ground, where he and Prescott grappled furiously.

The distraction was enough for Sergeant Burnfist to raise her device in triumph. “Princess,” she shouted, “and you, Orubia. Aim there.”

“There?” Bernadette asked, but before the words were out of her mouth, she saw what the Sergeant was pointing to with her sword. Now visible, like a thread or a wire, was a thin line of red that joined the Warp Cannon to the bubbles holding the three captives.

Prescott had managed to wound the mage in one eye, and he now struggled to his feet, while the mage clutched his face, groaning.

“Yes, there! Full power, before he can get up!” Instinctively, Henrik drew close to Bernadette and encircled her protectively. Beams of light and water struck the red line, which began to melt away before their eyes.

“At last,” Sir Prescott said, kicking the mage in the head viciously. “Now, you are in *my* power. Hand over Miss Regale, or I will destroy this entire place!” His hand reached out for Lavie’s arm.

“You’ll never lay your dirty paws on her!” Ryan exclaimed, as he struck Prescott in the face with the hilt of his sword. Prescott staggered back, spitting blood, while Lavie fired an arrow at the mage, whose cloak caught fire.

“Now! Princess, now!” he cried out. Carranya and Freya rushed forward, and there was a blinding flash of light as the Warp Cannon activated. The three prisoners watched in amazement, then slackened with relief as they realized they had been spared.

“You’ll regret that until the day you die, boy,” Prescott said, as he drew a pistol from his belt and fired. The bullet went wide, as Henrik dived forward and knocked him down. With a shout, Burns and her soldiers rushed forward and pinned Prescott to the floor, before disarming him.

“You destroyed my father’s honour with your machinations,” Burns said, angrily. “You lied to him, and now he is a broken man. Give me one reason why I should let you live....”

But the mage, who had extinguished the fire with some difficulty, was now ready to fight again, and he drew his sword. A stunning beam stuck Sergeant Burns in the throat, and she fell to the ground, breathing with difficulty.

“Sergeant!” Lavie cried out. “Sergeant Burns, no!”

“I’m...all right,” the Sergeant said, defiantly.

“You foul...” Sir Prescott began, but with a swift movement, the mage aimed a second beam at him, and he collapsed, lying motionless except for shallow breaths. He now stood, still bleeding from one eye, but his former calm had returned.

“I must say I am impressed, son of Kevin,” he said. “Perhaps there is something to the old legend. But I am afraid we have reached the end of the line here. I will repeat my offer. The Princess is as good as dead, unless a succession of hundreds of miracles takes place. Leave.”

Ryan lunged forward, but as he aimed another blue beam at the mage, he found that he was battling with thin air.

“Huh?” Henrik said.

As suddenly as he had disappeared, the mage reappeared. “You fence well, son of Kevin. But you will grow weary fencing with the air. Leave, or I will do what poor Prescott boasted he could. This tunnel will collapse, and as you remain buried underneath it, I will warp away, leaving you entombed, as all good heroes are.”

“Then we’ll destroy your Cannon,” Ryan said.

“Ryan, wait!” Lavie said.

“Do you intend to frighten me with that toy, foolish child?” the mage said, laughing as he looked at Lavie’s bow.

Sergeant Burnfist aimed a bolt of fire from her sword at the Warp Cannon, but it bounced off harmlessly.

“The Cannon is shielded by my very own aura shield, girl,” the mage explained. “You will have to defeat me to destroy it, or to lower the shields around your friends. And since you cannot defeat one who is swifter than the wind, you must admit defeat. I am giving you one last warning.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Lavie muttered. “Bernadette, shield us! All of us except me.”

“Lavie, my sister...” Bernadette began, then looking at Lavie, she raised her arms, and the party was shielded.”

“Now!” In amazingly rapid succession, three arrows, each burning, struck the spot where the mage stood. He began to disappear, but strangely, he remained in place...

“I understand!” Burnfist exclaimed. “The water, Orubia! Full power! Full power!”

Still resting against Henrik’s arm, Bernadette raised her hand, and a wave of water struck the area that had just been struck by Lavie’s arrows. There was a sound of something tearing, and the mage looked at Ryan, wide-eyed and frightened.

“You really shouldn’t make fun of archery like that, buster,” Lavie said, replacing her bow. “Mr. Evens was right, the Arrow Flurry can break shields, even warp shields!”

“Damn you, foolish....child!” the mage spluttered. “Damn you!”

“Now it is a fair fight,” Ryan said, pointing his sword at the mage’s throat. A blue beam shot forth, and the man fell to the ground, helplessly.

“Now! Quickly, before he regenerates it!” Bernadette exclaimed, protecting her friends with another shield. Ryan’s sword attack struck the Warp Cannon, and it began to rumble.

“Die!” Burnfist yelled, and her beam of fire struck the machine, which began to bulge on one side.

The mage struggled to his feet. “Kill them!” he screamed. He aimed his sword at the first of the bubbles, and Jonas’ face began to twist in pain.

“Father, no!” Bernadette cried out, as a second wave of water struck the mage, sending him back. Ryan’s sword beam, in the meantime, struck him on the wrist and disarmed him.

“The Warp Cannon is damaged beyond repair,” Burnfist said, looking at her device. In the meantime, Lavie fired an arrow at each of the bubbles, and they shattered like glass.

“You will....suffer!” the mage said, scrambling for his sword.

Now is the time, Ryan.

“I understand,” Ryan said. Closing his eyes, he aimed the Sword of Regret at the mage’s head, and it struck him squarely, felling him.

“We’ve got to leave here!” Burnfist said. “He may try to bring the whole place down!”

“You...take you down.....” The mage aimed his sword at Sister Miriam, and a red beam shot forth.

“No!” Ryan exclaimed, bringing up the flat of his sword. The beam was deflected, and struck the roof of the tunnel, causing it to vibrate again. There was the sound of a *thud*, and then the sound of someone falling.

“Lavie, my sister! No!” Bernadette said, despairingly.

“Lavie?” Ryan turned around, and saw to his horror that the roof of the tunnel had collapsed where the beam had struck it – and a loose rock had fallen directly on Lavie’s head. She lay unconscious at Bernadette’s feet, a jagged cut parting the waves of her hair.

“Lavie, *no!*” Ryan said, rushing over to her and kneeling beside her.

“Ryan?” Lavie’s voice sounded small, as if were the young Lavie of his school days, his old playmate, who was speaking to him. “Ryan....my head.....help me, Ryan, please.....I’m...drowning...”

“Lavie, we’re going to get you out of here...please, Lavie, hang on,” Ryan said, brokenly, as he cradled her head, trying to stem the bleeding from her wound with his tunic. “Lavie...”

“Destroy....you...all...” the mage said, crawling as he raised both his hands. The walls of the tunnel began to rumble.

“Eramond, finish him!” Burnfist cried out. “I need to hold this together, but he can counter the Omega Wave until he’s finally dead! He’s dying, but he may linger on unless you...” She stopped, looking at the disconsolate Ryan and the fallen Lavie.

“Ryan, I will tend her,” Bernadette said gently, coming over to him. “You must finish this.”

“Ryan, I....” Marianne began. Ryan looked up briefly, then shook his head.

“Lavie...” he whispered. As Bernadette gently removed his arms from around her head, he rose to his feet and aimed his sword at the mage’s chest. “I’ll never forgive you...and I’ll never understand,” he said, softly, as the blue beam struck the man’s heart, and the rumbling finally stopped. The mage slowly began to turn into a fine dust, until only a small heap remained to testify to his existence.

“Good work, Corporal,” Burnfist said approvingly. “Flaming fires, a one-woman Omega Wave is hard.”

Then the rumbling began again.

Bernadette looked up, and shook her head, tears coming to her eyes. “Dear Henrik, dear Ryan....”

“Is she....” Ryan said, not wanting to even think the word.

“She is alive, but not for long,” Bernadette said. “We need to remove her from here immediately, or these walls will collapse!”

“But he’s dead,” Henrik said, dully.

“He must have used an earth-based spell just before he died, or charmed the entire tunnel,” Burnfist said, in clipped tones. “We need to use that Warp Cannon.” She walked over to it, then turned away after a few seconds, her face red with anger and frustration. The vibrations had grown stronger.

“Curses! Flaming lands! Flaming fires of Janwen! Flaming....lands!” Burnfist screamed. “He’s blocked it somehow! There’s some sort of instruction written here, but I can’t read it! Aquary, do *something!*”

Leaving Lavie with Ryan, who seemed almost like a dying man himself, Bernadette examined the remains of the Cannon. “It’s badly damaged, and he’s blocked it using a dark spell, which we can only reverse with light...” She shook her head. “I could try, but...”

“Please, Bernadette,” Ryan said, in a choked voice. “Try. We have to save Lavie.”

“Even if I used all the energy I had....Wait a minute!” Her expression did not brighten, but it grew less serious. “Dare I hope... Ryan, come here! Henrik, help him to bring Lavie here too, and let the rest of the men also come close!”

“I will carry her,” Ryan said, shaking his head as Henrik drew near. Lifting her up, he walked to the device.

“Ryan, the inscription here says that this Warp Cannon has been blessed by the Infinity, to respond to the prayers of a true Journeyman. Even the mage’s dark spell could not overcome it. Pray to the Infinity, Ryan.”

“Pray?” Ryan said, bitterly. “Is this some sort of joke?”

“Ryan,” Henrik said, patiently, “I’ve heard of such things. If Bernadette can sense something of that sort, she’s probably right.”

“Then pray for me,” he said, leaning closer to Lavie. “I....can’t.”

“Try, Ryan. Even if you are not mindful of the Infinity, he is mindful of you. You are the descendant of Kevin. I will use my powers, but you must help me,” Bernadette said.

“You have to try, Ryan,” Henrik said, gently.

Great, Ryan said, feeling Lavie’s arms slacken, and trying desperately not to weep. How do I even do this? Look here, Infinity, I.....

The rumbling grew stronger, and rocks began to fall, striking the ground. His lips moved, slowly, though no one could hear what he said.

Infinity, please.....save Lavie....save her.....please don't let her die this way, not now....now that I have understood....now that I love...

A rock struck Ryan on the head, and he remembered no more.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: DESTINED TO BE

*“Before I formed you in the womb
I knew you;
before you came to birth
I consecrated you..”
(Jeremiah, ch. 1, v. 5)*

“Ryan, help me! I’m drowning!”

Ryan turned around, his eyes fixed on the well outside the Lancaster residence. He looked around, but he could not see Lavie anywhere.

“Lavie!” he called out. “Lavie, where are you?”

“I’m....down here!” a voice replied, tearfully. “I slipped and fell inside!”

“Good grief!” Ryan said, and as he looked into the well, he saw his friend looking up at him, with a helpless expression. The well outside the Lancaster house was a shallow one, but its walls were slick, and though Lavie was in no danger of drowning, she could not get out on her own. In a flash, he began to take off his sports jacket and his shoes.

“Lavie! Hang on a minute! I’ll save you!” Thinking quickly, he lowered the rope, until the heavy bucket had reached the bottom of the well. “Lavie, I want you to climb on that bucket and stand on it, okay? Flip it over so that it’s easier, if you can.”

“On the bucket? It’s too small!” Lavie wailed.

“Do it, Lavie!” Ryan said, forcefully, looking down at her. Feeling the water come up above her waist, she stumbled, but managed to climb on top of it.

“Now take my hand, Lavie,” he said, leaning into the well. He caught hold of her wet, cold hand, and with a sudden effort, managed to lift her almost out of the well. He had almost done so, and she was climbing onto the edge of the well under his encouragement, when she suddenly slipped, and the two of them fell backwards.

Ryan was the first to get up, shaking his head. “Oof! You need to lose weight, Lavie, you nearly knocked the stuffing out of me there!”

Ordinarily, Lavie – even at the tender age of ten – would have objected a comment about her weight, but she was crying with relief, and clinging to Ryan’s arm as he sat up. “Ryan, you saved me! You’re....a hero, Ryan!”

Ryan flushed with pleasure – for praise is never unpleasant to a boy of eleven. “There now, Lavie,” he said, offering her a rather used handkerchief, with which she wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “Everything’s all right. You’re safe. All we need to do now is head back in, and get you out of those wet clothes before you catch a cold! I’m sure your Gran will light a fire to get you warm. Come along!”

Beaming and blushing herself, Lavie accepted Ryan’s hand, as they walked towards the door...

Ryan opened his eyes, and the first thing he was aware of was a pair of blue eyes, looking down at him.

“Where....am I?” he asked. “Who are you?” Then he remembered. The tunnel. The Warp Cannon. *Lavie*. “Lavie!” he said, despair in his voice.

“We’re in Davenport, Ryan,” Bernadette said. “It seems your prayer was heard. To the Infinity be the glory.”

“Where’s Lavie?” he asked, but as he looked, she was lying on the ground, next to him. The wound on her head had stopped bleeding, and she was breathing, but unconscious.

“Flaming fires, boy, that is *some* parlour trick!” Sergeant Burnfist growled.

“We need to get a doctor!” Ryan said, anxiously. “Lavie, please...Wake up, Lavie.”

“Henrik’s gone to fetch one,” Bernadette said. “We ought to take her home and put her to bed. She isn’t bleeding, but there may be an internal injury. Are you all right, Ryan?”

“What sort of fool qu...” Ryan began angrily, but then realized that his own head was throbbing, and that Bernadette was looking at him with concern. “Bother. It looks like one of the rocks got me too.” With a sudden effort, he stood up. “Well, I can stand and talk, so I’m good to go.” With Bernadette’s help, he gently lifted Lavie into his arms, and began to walk, as fast as he could, to Casa Regale.

“I....” Ryan began, as they approached the threshold.

“You saved us all, Ryan,” Bernadette said, softly. “Even Father. He’s still stunned, but he’ll be all right, thanks to you. He’s resting in the chapel now.”

“Somehow,” Ryan said, looking at Lavie, “that doesn’t comfort me much now.” Bernadette knocked at the door, and Sigmund Regale – who was in a good mood, having recently obtained a first impression of the Zionsese translation of *Krieg der Gotter* – called out. “Who is it?” he asked.

“It’s me, Bernadette,” she said, hesitantly.

“Bernadette!” Sigmund said, clearly pleased. “You’re always welcome here, you know. But who is....”

As he spoke, he opened the door, and his eyes fell on Lavie. Ryan's head was bowed over her, and he did not say a word. After a single glance, Sigmund fell backwards, as if struck by a bullet.

"Lavie....Victoria....oh, no...." he said, tottering and leaning against the wall, then crying out. "Emily! Carmen! Come soon, for Infinity's sake! Lavie, Lavie...."

After seeing Sigmund settled in a chair, where he sat in silence, his face hidden by his hands, Ryan and Bernadette silently carried Lavie up to her room. They were soon joined there by Emily, who sat down beside Lavie's bed.

"Ryan....what happened to her?" she asked, after a long silence.

"Mrs. Regale, I...." Ryan began, but he could speak no further. Hanging his head again, he began to weep silently, for a few minutes, before starting again. "We....helped the Princess find the way to the Varald Directorate. However, there was a man, a mage, guarding the place, along with Sir Prescott..."

"Sir Prescott?" Emily said, shaking her head sadly.

"There was a fight. Lavie helped to defeat him, and I...." *I killed her. Or at least, I almost did*, he thought. *If I hadn't tried to block that beam, the roof wouldn't have fallen, and Lavie would be safe and well.*

"Ryan," Bernadette said, softly, "let me explain." In a few words, she described the battle in the tunnel, Lavie and Ryan's roles in defeating the nameless mage, and the accident that had wounded Lavie. Finally, she narrated their escape. Emily, who was in tears herself by the end, shook her head.

"Lavender," she said. "Thank the Infinity you were able to bring her here safely, Ryan."

"Mrs. Regale, I nearly....if I hadn't blocked that attack, I...."

Emily shook her head. "Ryan, it's not...."

At that moment, Henrik rushed into the room, with Doctor Feldman in tow. He was a fussy little man, not unlike King Arlbert in appearance, except that he was slightly shorter and older, and carried his black bag in front of him. "Who is the patient, my lady?" he asked, as he snapped the bag open.

"My daughter, Lavender," Emily said, softly. "She was struck on the head by accident..."

"Tsk, tsks," Feldman said. "Now, please leave, except for you, Mrs. Regale. Shoo!" With an impatient gesture, he chased Ryan, Henrik and Bernadette out of the room, though Ryan left slowly and reluctantly. He closed the door behind them, and began to examine Lavie, slowly and painstakingly, shaking his head several times. When he had finished, he looked up at Emily.

"Mrs. Regale," he said, "this doesn't look good. Fortunately, she hasn't lost much blood, but her vital signs are all topsy-turvy." He frowned. "We need a surgeon here."

“A surgeon?” Emily said, opening her eyes wide.

“I can’t swear to it, but she’s bleeding internally – inside that little head of hers, ma’am,” the doctor said, nervously. “A pity, really. You need a good surgeon, perhaps an Army man. And fast.”

“Where could we find a surgeon?” Emily said, helplessly.

“Well, you could try Lorean,” he said, shutting his bag. “The Military Academy. Try a telegram or something. In the meantime, keep her quiet, and don’t excite her.” He shook his head again. “Good day, ma’am.”

As he left, Bernadette re-entered, followed by Ryan.

“What did he say, Mrs. Regale?”

Emily repeated the doctor’s words, numbly.

“An Army surgeon...” Ryan passed a hand over his reddened eyes, then moved forward suddenly. “I know an Army surgeon in Glendale.”

“In Glendale?” Bernadette said. “We’ve got to hurry there, then!”

“I’ll go get him,” Ryan said, firmly. “Stay and....look after her, Bernadette. Damn it, can’t you do anything for her?”

“I can try, Ryan,” Bernadette said, drawing closer to Lavie’s bedside and placing her hand over her friend’s head. There was a flash of light, and then she looked up, still worried.

“The doctor is right, Ryan,” she said. “I’ve stopped the bleeding temporarily, but it won’t last long.”

“Then I’ll go to Glendale,” Ryan said, firmly. As he climbed down the steps, he was interrupted by Sigmund Regale, who looked lost and regretful rather than angry.

“Ryan,” he said, too low for anyone but them to hear, “how – is she? What did the doctor say?”

Ryan explained the situation. “And there’s a doctor in Glendale who’s an old Army surgeon. He’s...quite a grouch, but I’m sure we can bring him over in a carriage or something.”

“I shall come with you, then,” Sigmund said, something of the old steel returning to his voice. “Carmen! Get the carriage ready at once. We need to fetch a surgeon for Miss Lavie.”

Carmen, who was crying quietly into her cap, looked up for a moment and then ran down to where the Regales’ carriage was kept safely. In a few moments, they were both on the road to Glendale, not saying a word, but looking uneasily at each other. Finally, it was Ryan who broke the silence.

“Mr. Regale, I....” And, before he could stop, he found himself telling Sigmund about the battle, and about how Lavie had been injured. “It’s my fault, really. If only....oh, Lavie.”

“Son,” Sigmund Regale said, gently, “it’s not your fault. In a way, it’s mine. I....my past has caught up with me, Ryan.”

“What do you mean, sir?” Ryan asked.

And, to Ryan’s surprise, Sigmund told him about his own sister, in low tones, anxious lest the driver overhear him. “I thought Lavie would....escape, somehow,” he said, when he had finished. “I thought...she would live, unlike poor Victoria. But now....well, don’t blame yourself too much, Ryan. Perhaps this is some sort of....family curse.”

“I...don’t think so, Mr. Regale,” Ryan replied.

Sigmund was silent for a while, then something occurred to him. “But how did you get to safety? Alton’s a long way from home.”

“Actually, sir, it’s – rather strange,” Ryan began, and – despite Sigmund’s disbelief – he explained what had happened with the Warp Cannon. As they spoke, the carriage drew to a halt.

“Ryan,” Sigmund said when he had finished, “I’m not sure how far I can believe that story, but – Perhaps the Infinity *does* have a sense of humour. Let us hope that it extends to restoring my child’s life after he has finished with his act.” They climbed down hurriedly, and began to head for the place Ryan remembered.

“Dr. J. Mellon, I see,” Sigmund said, looking at the board. “How do you know him, Ryan?”

“It’s a long story,” Ryan said. “He treated one of Dad’s employees, who had been attacked by bandits, but I don’t know him otherwise.” He sighed.

“C – Courage, Ryan,” Sigmund said, patting him on the back. “Let us hope.”

Ryan knocked on the door, and after a couple of minutes that seemed like hours to both of them, the door opened.

“Oh, it’s you, boy,” he said, recognizing Ryan. “In the Army, I see. Still tracking bandits and their victims? I never forget a face, you know.....”

But then he paused, staring at Sigmund. Sigmund, who looked equally taken aback, was staring at Doctor Mellon with trembling hands.

“Good Lord!” Sigmund said. “You?”

“Sigmund?” Doctor Mellon said, removing his glasses and shaking his head, looking quite dismayed. “What the hell are you doing here? I thought I’d seen the last of you ages ago.”

“This is a beautiful place, Freya,” Princess Carranya said. They were in the entrance hallway of the Palace of Gyrus, which had proved surprisingly easy to unlock. “I wonder how our friends are doing, though.”

“Obviously, no one’s been here for ages,” Freya said, admiring the stately paintings of long-gone rulers, many of whom shared their peculiar shade of red hair. “It feels like a family mausoleum, almost. And I’m sure they’ll do all right, especially if they have Eramond with them. Striker always spoke highly of him.”

“I sometimes wonder about that Agent Striker,” Carranya said. “He seems to have a knack of being in the right place at the right time.” As they advanced, their attention was caught by the imposing vault above them, which was studded with crystals.

“Well, that’s his job, Princess. Though he’s young, people are impressed by his efficiency, and besides, old Ferzen has a soft corner for him. I must say this place is massive,” Freya replied. “Our ancestors certainly built things on a grand scale.”

“It’s going to take us quite a while to search the entire Palace,” Carranya said, thoughtfully. “Do you have a detector like your friend Rebecca, Captain?”

“Only my wand, but it will serve the purpose,” Freya said. “It’s not glowing, so there’s nothing here.” As they moved forward, they were struck by the two statues that stood in the centre of the large hall. ‘Statues’ was, perhaps, an inaccurate term – they were three-dimensional representations that looked as alive as the two women, but they were solid to the touch, as if carved in stone. They depicted two men – a brown-haired young man who stood upright, looking defiant, and a smiling, red-haired man, who had been transfixed by a sword and was kneeling.

Freya raised her staff, whose end was now glowing orange. “I’m getting something here, Princess, but it’s not very strong,” she said.

Carranya, who had been admiring a painting of Princess Esmeriah, turned around rather guiltily and joined her companion.

“Can you read the Varaldian script?” Freya asked. “There may be something inside – or even underneath – these statues, but I’m afraid my knowledge of languages ends at Common and Zionese.”

“A little,” Carranya said, kneeling down to examine the inscription, then smiling. “How interesting,” she said. “It’s Itarian, Freya, though written in the Varaldian letters. It seems to be an old legend, dating back to primeval times. Listen to this.” She read the words out, slowly.

“This Palace is dedicated to the only true Friend of the Man of Regret. When the Man was being possessed by the spirits within his Sword, and was handed over to the Angel of Vengeance for punishment, his Friend made the highest of all possible Sacrifices, killing himself with the Sword and slaying the Beast within – for even the Beast could not kill an innocent man. Thus, he saved the Man of Regret and, through him, all of mankind. The Friend left behind children, who married the descendants of the Man of Regret, and it is their lineage that forms the noble and glorious House of Gyrus. May the blessings of the Purpose be ever upon them.”

Carranya rose to her feet. “Somehow, I have a feeling that this is important. I’ve heard of this legend – Mother told it to me when I was but a little girl – but I never knew that he was the ancestor of the House of Gyrus. I thought he died childless.”

“Well, that’s sweet, but I don’t think Great-Great-Grandpa is really going to help us much here. Unless...Princess, it’s definitely stronger here! Near his statue, and not near the brown-haired boy’s!” Freya exclaimed, as her staff glowed brighter.

Carranya examined the statue of ‘the Friend’ more closely, and found that the sword piercing it was also glowing.

“The sword?” she said. “Do you think it’s – a real sword, Freya?”

Freya reached for it and pulled, then withdrew her hand with a grin. “It’s real, all right, but it’s not a real sword. It’s a channel for wind magic. Someone in here is using a powerful wind-based spell, and I mean a truly powerful one. A wind strong enough to move mountains. Though wind is one of my own elements, I’ve never encountered this much power at a – Damnation! Damnation!” She suddenly began to shake her head.

“What is it, Freya?” Carranya asked.

“Oh, those clever Varald,” she said. “They plan to win the war, or at least try to win it, this way.”

“With a wind spell? How would that help?” Carranya replied, shaking her head.

“Reason it out, girl, as I always used to tell Caris. Use that nice little head of yours, Princess.”

Carranya thought for a while, then stepped back in alarm. “Infinity, no....the Varald fleet? The sea invasion?”

Freya nodded darkly. “Exactly, my child. As long as this spell works, those ships – or at least those of them which bear a magical carrier, such as a bit of El Metal – are going to move like the wind. They could reach Zion faster than the speed of sound, and from there...”

“Checkpoint Bravo!” Carranya shivered. “Freya, we have to destroy this now!”

“That would just weaken the spell a little. In fact, they may have put this here to taunt us. We need to find the mages who are casting the spell, and defeat them. Otherwise...”

“Lands of Zion!” Admiral Yatsu exclaimed. “We could not even *touch* those ships! What in Terra is going on?”

He watched, helplessly, as the fleet of over twenty Varald ships sped past his own, evading the Zion cannonballs with ease.

“I’ve never seen a ship move that fast in living memory, Sir,” Captain Ritter said, shaking his head. “And there are – Infinity! More of them!”

“Fire at will!” Admiral Yatsu ordered, and the Zion fleet obeyed with alacrity. This time, thanks to the early order, three of the Varald ships were hit, but twelve more sped past, outracing the Zion.

“This is some sort of new weapon, Sir,” Ritter said.

“Thank you for stating the obvious, Captain,” Yatsu said, irritably. “It looks like Charlemagne and that annoying man were both right. Transmit the orders to every fleet along the coast to open fire as soon as they see the traces of ships, and inform Bravo. It’s the only way of stopping them.”

“But Sir,” Ritter said, with a smile – he knew Yatsu and the Chief of Intelligence, Ferzen, were not the best of friends – “even if we do that, some of them will reach Bravo.”

“I know,” Yatsu said, looking worried. “I only hope Raienji’s mission to the Galvenians was a success. If they have strengthened Bravo, then we may still be able to hold the position.”

“I shall verify this immediately, Sir,” Ritter replied.

“Good man. Now, do one more thing for me, Ritter. Put me in contact with Commander Arnoldus, at Bravo. If the worst comes to the worst, he will have to lead the defence there.”

“Yes, Sir,” Ritter said, as he began to adjust the dials on the radio.

Damnation, Yatsu thought. What manner of weapon is this? Now both we and the Galvenians are in danger.

“Be brief, Sigmund,” Doctor Mellon said, sternly, as he removed the cigar from his lips. “I have little to say to you, and I doubt you have much more to say to me. I will listen for the sake of this young man here, who is serving His Majesty’s Army. Now, boy” – he turned to look at Ryan, a little more kindly – “tell me what you want.”

Slowly and stammeringly, Ryan told the Doctor the story of the battle in Koroth, and of Lavie's injury. When he heard of Lavie's role in the battle, his eyes took on a far-away look, as if he was travelling back in time.

"That's a brave girl you've got there, boy," he said. "I knew a woman like that once. Unfortunately, this world doesn't let them stay around for long – instead, it allows the cowardly to survive."

Sigmund made a sudden movement, but said nothing.

After a pause, Ryan went on, speaking of how he had brought Lavie back – though he glossed over the way he had activated the Warp Cannon – and how they had carried her home.

"You carried her, did you, boy?" Mellon said, looking at Ryan with what seemed like admiration.

"Goodness. This does bring back.....memories."

Finally, when he heard Doctor Feldman's verdict, Mellon's expression – which had veered between pity for Ryan and contempt for Sigmund – turned angry. "That old buffoon," he said. "He's the King Arlbert of doctors, boy. The only thing he got right is that your girl, Infinity save her, needs a surgeon. But tell me now, why did you have to bring Sigmund Regale along with you?"

"Mellon – if that's what you're calling yourself now," Sigmund said, softly, "Lavie is my daughter."

Mellon raised his eyebrows, then seemed about to laugh, but checked himself on seeing Ryan's expression. "Your *daughter*, Sigmund? Heh. I suppose what the ancients say is true. History repeats itself. The serpent bites its own tail. The bandit falls into his own trap. Tell me, Sigmund, do you think we're going to be any luckier this time?"

"Doctor Mellon, please," Ryan said, lowering his head. "I don't – Good God, I understand. You must be...."

Mellon turned to face Ryan. "He's told you, has he? That's not bad, Sigmund, not bad at all. You ought to have done that years ago. I know how you feel, boy, and if it were just you and me, I would try to help you. But...."

"Here is her photograph," Ryan said, suddenly drawing a snapshot from the inside of his uniform. It had been taken the day before they got off the ship, and depicted him and Lavie standing against one of the deck rails and laughing.

"That's nice, boy, but – Infinity!" Mellon sprang to his feet. "No. This....." He covered his face with his hands, and for a moment, his entire frame shook. Then he raised his head, looking at Ryan with determination, and handed the picture back.

"Boy," he said, "I will try to help you. I can't guarantee anything, but I will try. We need to get back to Davenport as fast as possible."

"My carriage is waiting," Sigmund said, slowly.

"Sigmund," Mellon said, giving him a look that would have frozen lesser men. "Don't get any funny ideas. I'm not doing this for you, but for a fellow soldier, and for that girl who looks just like her...."

"You see it too, don't you?" Sigmund said, looking at him squarely. "But I suppose I deserve that."

"Damn right," Mellon said, taking Ryan by the hand. "Come along, boy. Let's see if you are more fortunate than I am. Sigmund has a history of bringing bad luck, but we doctors aren't superstitious."

Commander Arnoldus stared at the radio set, wondering if he was dreaming. His cloak flapped around him chaotically in the breeze, but the confusion in his mind was far greater.

"Defend Bravo?" he said, finally.

Yatsu's voice at the other end was firm. "Yes, Commander. The Emperor has been in private communication with General Finkel, the Supreme Commander of the Commonwealth Special Forces. You will make use of the Galvenian ships you have, as well as our reinforcements near the checkpoint. For the moment, you are their commander. It is almost certain that the Varald will try to capture it, if your forces fail. From there, they will push into Galvenia. You must stop them."

"But this new weapon.....What if they evade us?" he replied

"They have no reason to evade you once they reach their target, Commander. Besides, their fleet is not an excessively large one. Good luck."

"Wait!" Arnoldus said, but there was no transmission at the other end.

"Commander," the Galvenian officer beside him said, "what are we to do? His Majesty has sent us here on a fool's errand, it would seem."

"A wise remark, Lieutenant Ross," Arnoldus said, "and yet, we are sworn to defend the Commonwealth. We have ten of your ships, and twelve more from the Zion, in addition to the five small Commonwealth cruisers under my direct command. It all depends, Lieutenant, on the size of the Galvenian force."

"And this weapon, Commander?" his radio officer, Hopkins, said, nervously. "We have intercepted all the Zion broadcasts, and they all speak of ships moving at a tremendous velocity."

"Presumably, it's more of Sir Prescott's infernal weaponry," Arnoldus said. He was silent for a long while, then suddenly looked up, remembering something. "It might just be worth a try," he said. "And yet."

"Sir?" Ross said, a look of alarm on his face.

“Ross,” the Commander said, speaking calmly, “these are the orders for now. I want you to take the Galvenian ships and remain near the rocks, just north of here. The Zion and I will hold Bravo, and you will remain in reserve until we need you?”

“Will that work, Sir?” Ross said. “If the Varald are too numerous, we ought to face them together.”

“Listen to me, Ross,” he said, and then began to explain what he had suddenly thought of.

Ross nodded. “It might work, and I know these waters well, Sir. But it’s still a risk.”

“It’s perhaps the best way, Ross. You have your orders. Go, and may the Five Angels protect you.”

“Yes, sir,” Ross said, saluting as he left.

“Hopkins, inform me about any further transmissions,” the Commander said, as he watched his Galvenian ally leave. “I will be in my quarters.”

“Yes, sir,” Hopkins said, saluting as Arnoldus slowly walked away, deep in thought.

“Carranya, watch out!” Freya shouted, as a strong gust of wind began to blow through the room, knocking them both to their feet. They positioned themselves behind the statues for support.

“What – manner of spell is that?” Carranya asked, looking at the sword on the second statue, which was glowing a brighter orange. Instinctively, she raised her hands, and aimed at the handle. Her beam of light struck it, and it broke, turning into a simple piece of stone as it fell. The wind was still blowing, but it was a gentle breeze, now.

“Good work, Princess,” Freya said. “They’re probably using the spell, and you’ve weakened it a bit, but we still need to find the source. Not to mention the Warp Cannon.”

“What about our allies, Freya?” Carranya asked. “The ones you told my father about?”

“They should be on their way...” Freya said, and suddenly, the room was filled with red-headed men and women, who began to form a line and march towards Captain Raienji in an orderly fashion. One of them, who was about Carranya’s age but slightly taller, walked up to Freya rather shyly, holding a wand of her own.

“It is good to have you here, Mother,” she said.

“Likewise, Thora, my daughter,” Freya said, beaming at her. “Thank the Infinity that Charlemagne listened to us at last. I was afraid we had failed to persuade him.”

“I do not think it was we who persuaded him, Mother,” the girl replied. Freya smiled, then raised her eyebrows at the sight of the man who was walking up behind her – a man who, unlike the rest, was yellow- rather than red-haired, and had a jaw that could be spotted a mile away.

“Who speaks of persuasion here, Raienji?” he said.

“Striker!” Freya said, looking both amused and exasperated. “I ought to have known it was *you*, or rather your master Ferzen, acting through you. What are you doing here? You’re not a mage. This place is dangerous.”

“Ah, my master,” Striker said, with a laugh. “Well, Freya, with all due respect, I don’t think I did too badly at Inderness, and besides, my master is ever-curious. He fiddles, and I dance to his tune.”

“Oh, do be serious,” Freya said. “Carranya, meet my daughter Thora.” The two girls shook hands. “You’ll be working together from here, so I hope you’ll get along.”

“I’m sure we will, Thora,” Carranya said, kindly. “Are you a wind mage, like your mother?”

“Wind and water,” Thora said, brightly, remembering her manners and bowing. “It is an honour to meet a light mage, Princess.”

“Now that we’re all here, let’s divide up our work. There are two wings to the Palace, and things would go faster if we searched them both. I hope your wand is up to scratch, Thora.”

“Mine is, Mother,” a red-headed boy about Ryan’s age said proudly, holding up a rather thick piece of wood, which resembled a cudgel rather than a wand. “I will lead one of the search parties.”

“Very amusing, my son,” Freya said, looking at the cudgel and chuckling. “Princess, meet my foolish boy, Baldur. His idea of magic is clubbing fellow mages on the head, though he can use fire quite well.”

Baldur laughed loudly. “Foolish is as foolish does, Mother.”

“Very well, then,” Freya said. “Baldur, take ten of us and explore the main corridor, and don’t get into fights unnecessarily, you silly lad. Thora, take ten more, and explore the west wing. Striker, you can go with her if you want something useful to do.”

Baldur made a comical bow towards the Princess, then began to assemble his group, as did Thora.

“Very funny, Freya,” Striker said.

“Carranya, come with me, and the rest of the clan will follow us to the east wing. Whoever finds something first, please alert us – and don’t make too much of a racket, by Johan’s bones.”

“Onward!” Baldur roared.

“Did you even listen to what I said?” Freya said, shaking her head.

“Never mind him, Mother,” Thora said, affectionately. “Come, let us finish this search as soon as possible.”

As they began to march, the light around the statues dimmed.

“What’s happening?” Carranya asked.

“I don’t like the look of this,” Striker said, with a frown.

There was a flash of light, and suddenly, they found themselves unable to move any further.

“Flaming fires! Summoning Pits of Janwen! Kava kura! The Infinity’s socks!” Baldur exclaimed. “Some idiot has cast a room-sized shield. We’re stuck here.”

“Baldur, remember your manners,” Freya said, sternly. “Don’t swear in front of women of breeding.”

“What do we do now?” Carranya said, then stared in horror at what was appearing in front of her....

“Where is she, boy?” Mellon said, as he and Ryan alighted from the carriage, followed at some distance by Sigmund, who had a rather exasperated look on his face. He had had to endure Mellon’s sarcasm for the entire journey, and only the thought that the man would save his precious child kept him from retaliating.

“Upstairs!” Ryan said, taking Mellon by the hand as they both raced up the steps, past a surprised Carmen. Ryan knocked at the door to Lavie’s room.

“Mrs. Regale, I’ve...brought the surgeon,” he said, breathlessly.

“Thank the Infinity,” a gentle voice replied, and the door opened. It was Mellon’s turn to step back, stunned, as if he had seen an apparition.

“Good evening, Doctor,” Bernadette said. “I believe I’ve seen you before, but I can’t remember where.”

“By King Richard,” Mellon said, groaning. “First Victoria...and now Laurette. This house is full of ghosts.” He turned to Ryan accusingly. “Who is this girl?” he asked.

“My name is Bernadette Aquary,” she replied, apparently heedless of the man’s manner, “and Lavie is one of my truest friends. Please hurry, Doctor. I feel she is fading away.” She shook her head.

“Aquary?” Mellon shook his head. “Of course, of course. You’re her daughter. Do you remember the last time I saw you, girl? I don’t think you did. You were too busy mourning.”

Sigmund, who had climbed up the stairs by this time, stared at the scene before him – Ryan grave, Mellon staggering, Bernadette speaking calmly, and Lavie, with Emily at her bedside, lying quite still.

“Confound it, Sigmund,” Mellon said, weakly. “What do you mean by dragging me into this haunted house of yours?”

“I thought you weren’t superstitious, Julian,” Sigmund said, sharply. “And I believe that you’ve come here to exorcise some of those ghosts.”

“Julian?” Emily said, rising to her feet. “Good Lord, Sigmund, is it....”

“We’ll have the explanations later,” Mellon said, walking over to Lavie and shaking his head as he measured her pulse. He turned to look at the rest of them, with a stern expression. “This will be touch and go,” he said, “and I cannot promise anything, but I will try. Girl” – he turned to Bernadette – “are you a Healer, like your mother?”

“I am,” Bernadette said, looking at Lavie sorrowfully. “And if you need my help, I will do the best I can.”

“That might make a difference,” Mellon replied, exhaling softly. “Mrs. Sigmund – if that’s who you are” – he went on, looking at Emily – “I need boiling water, plenty of it. Clean sheets and towels. And I need all of you to leave this room. Only the girl and I will remain, and if you believe in an Infinity, ask him to help us as much as he can.”

I have to believe, Ryan thought. He was the one who got us back home safely, or at least I think so. “Yes, Doctor,” he said, as he and the Regales filed out of the room.

Infinity, if you’re somewhere out there, save her. Don’t let her....leave me.....

He repeated the same words, over and over again, well into the night.

“What an ugly mug,” Baldur said, raising his cudgel with one hand, which was trembling slightly.

“Sweet Infinity!” Carranya exclaimed. “What manner of beast is that?”

It was a fearsome sight indeed. It was the size of a large lion, but its claws extended for several inches beyond its massive paws, and its teeth were as large as daggers – and as sharp. It did not move, but looked at the occupants of the room furiously.

“Thora, shield us,” Freya said, pointing her wand at the beast. A gust of wind struck the creature in the face, and it growled furiously.

Carranya bowed, raised her hand and fired a beam of light at it, but the creature met it unflinchingly.

“That’s only going to make it angrier,” she said. “Baldur! Over here, boy. Let’s see what you can do.”

“As you wish, Mother,” the boy said, and a burst of flame issued from the tip of his cudgel, striking the beast. Its mane flickered with flames for a few minutes, and then they were quenched.

“Johan’s rotten bones! Empress Sylvania’s swimsuit!” he swore. “That didn’t even scratch it!”

“Let me try, brother,” Thora said, calmly, raising both her hands. A wave of water arose in front of the beast, blocking it temporarily, and it growled again.

“That hurt a little, I’d guess,” Striker said. “To think that I’d always dreamed of being a big-game hunter.” He raised his pistol and fired, and the cartridge turned the wall of water into ice, temporarily trapping the creature.

“Good work, Striker,” Freya began, but the creature, with a swift movement of one paw, shattered the wall of ice. Chunks of it flew in all directions, one of which struck the Princess in the face, knocking her off balance.

“Carranya!” Freya exclaimed, as Striker helped her to her feet. “Are you all right?”

Carranya’s hand went to her lip, which was split open. “Thank you, Agent,” she said, raising her hand and leaning against him for temporary support, as she stood up. A ray of light shot forth, and the creature’s skin split open over one flank, creating a bleeding wound.

“Good heavens, how did you do that?” Striker said, moving away and aiming his weapon once more. He fired a second Chill Cartridge, which formed a mask of frost over the lion’s face. However, the frost melted almost as soon as it had formed.

“Group attack, girls!” Freya shouted, and ten women behind her raised their wands simultaneously. “First, the Omega Wave.” The beast moved a few inches upwards, then landed again, with a soft *thud*.

“It’s not working!” Thora said, frantically. “It’s not moving anymore!”

“Kava kura, let me kill it!” Baldur said, rushing forward with his cudgel and striking it on the head. The beast growled, as if it had felt slight pain, then brushed the boy aside with a swift movement of one paw. Though the movement was slight, Baldur flew against one of the walls of the shield around them and lay there, motionless, a large gash on his face.

“Baldur, my son!” Freya said, rushing over to him. “Baldur, answer me! Boys, it’s your turn now!”

Fifteen of the men raised their wands – some of which were similar to Baldur’s – and aimed at the creature, striking it with a curving beam of fire that formed a circle around it.

“Good work,” Thora said, sighing with relief.

“Flaming lands,” Baldur said, rising to his feet and raising his own wand, “that hit hard. Don’t fret, Mother. It will take more than a mountain lion to stop me.”

The lion moved forward, and with a swift swing of one paw, it tore through the circle of fire, bearing down on Thora. Carranya moved swiftly, raising her hand, and a beam of light struck the lion in the face, causing it to miss its target.

“Thank you, Princess,” Thora said, raising her wand and pointing it at the wound Carranya had managed to inflict. Water began to spill from it, and the creature began to moan.

“Here, let me help,” Striker said, shooting a Flare Cartridge at the wound, whose edges burst into flame.

“We need to pierce it again in a vital spot!” Freya said. “Damnation! Aim for the throat, Baldur!”

Baldur raised his wand, and a line of fire struck the creature in the throat, but only a faint scratch was inflicted. Carranya produced another beam of light, striking it in the other flank, but there was no wound this time. It growled and leaped forward, knocking down two of the women mages, before Thora cast a shield around them.

“Kava kura, Princess, how did you do it the first time?” Freya exclaimed. “Use more power! This thing is just toying with us!”

“I don’t know,” Carranya said, slowly, bowing her head. Two discs of light shot forth, and the creature flinched, but its thick hide remained unbroken.

“Full power, girl!” Freya said, then turned to see the creature heading for her. Striker, turning quickly, fired a Flash Cartridge in the direction of its eyes, blinding it temporarily.

“Now! Full power! Boys and girls, together! For the Empire!” Freya said, rising to her feet and raising her own wand. A beam of many colours – blue, red and yellow light, with an edge of flame – shot forth, rising to the dome of the shield that still surrounded them, and then striking the beast over the heart. The beast let out a loud cry, and fell to the ground, a large wound over its chest.

Freya looked at the fallen creature, panting. The other mages looked tired, but proud. “Excellent work, my Raienjis, excellent. Now let’s tackle that shield...”

But as she spoke, her expression turned to one of shock. The wound over the creature’s heart was healing – though the one on its flank remained open – and it rose to its feet, seemingly in no discomfort.

“Flaming *fires!*” Baldur exclaimed, fear on his face. “Charlemagne’s pyjamas! That attack could kill a creature of the Pits itself! How in Zion could it resist?”

“Thora, slow it down! Attack the wound!” Freya said, nervously.

Thora aimed her wand, and a gust of wind struck the wound on the creature's side, widening it slightly. However, despite pausing for a moment, the beast continued to charge forward, attacking first two of the men – one of whom was wounded – and then heading straight for Carranya.

"Princess, no!" Striker said, pushing her out of the way and firing, causing her to strike the floor awkwardly. He fired a second Flash Cartridge, and the creature stopped for a moment, blinded.

"Princess, are you well?" Thora said, turning and observing the look of pain on her face.

"I think I've...twisted my ankle," Carranya said, forcing herself to smile. Striker offered her his arm, and she slowly rose to her feet. Raising her hand, she aimed a beam of light at the creature's chest, and it struck home.

The room shook, and the creature emitted a high-pitched wail, quite unlike any sound it had made before.

"Sweet lands, you've..." Freya said, staring at the beast in disbelief. The skin and bone over its heart were torn asunder, and showed no sign of healing.

"It's broken! Princess, I don't know what you did, but.....All right now, boys, aim for the heart! Use *whatever* you have left! Girls, help them channel it right at that spot!"

Another beam of many colours rose from the men's wands, and struck the creature squarely in the heart. There was a spurt of blood from its side, and the creature collapsed, slowly crumbling into dust.

"Good work, Princess. Can you stand on your own?" Striker said, a curious expression on his face as he let go of her arm.

"I – believe I will need a little support, Agent," Carranya said, trying to stand, and then gratefully accepting the Agent's hand.

"Thora, help her," Freya said. "Sweet Infinity. I don't know how you managed to do it, Princess. I thought we were all going to keep waiting until we ran out of power, and then...."

"The shields are down!" Baldur announced, triumphantly. "We can explore the rest of the palace. Let's go!"

"Wait a minute, Baldur, my boy," Freya said. "I'm still not sure I understood what happened."

"The Princess wounded it with light magic," Baldur said, cockily, "and then we taught it a lesson. What's not to understand, Mother?"

Freya shook her head. "It's not that, son," she said. "It's...."

“A trap? I doubt it. At any rate, we need to find the Warp Cannon before the Varald use it further, Mother,” Thora said. “Come, let us proceed. Princess, take my hand.”

“All right, then!” Freya said, suddenly. “Let’s regroup. Thora, you and Carranya can go together, since she needs support. Head west, and try to heal her if that ankle is too painful. Striker, come with me, and we will head east as planned. Baldur, go ahead.”

“Yes, Mother,” the brother and sister said in chorus, looking at Carranya with admiration.

With an expression of amazement on her face, Carranya mutely accepted the girl’s hand, and the groups went further into the Palace.....

Bernadette looked up at the Doctor. “How is she?” she whispered.

“You did well, girl,” Doctor Mellon said, wiping the sweat from his brow. “It would have been much harder to close skin and bone if you hadn’t been around. You really are your mother’s daughter.” And despite the tense, even desperate nature of the past few hours, he found himself smiling.

“I remember you now, Doctor,” Bernadette said, taking Lavie’s cool hand in hers and sighing. “It was Mother’s funeral, wasn’t it? She spoke to me of you, sometimes.”

“With bitterness, I presume,” Mellon replied, looking at Lavie’s face, peaceful in sleep. “It couldn’t have been easy for a girl like her, living alone in Hartridge after I left.”

“Mother was never like that,” Bernadette said, gently. “She spoke of you with regret, not with rancour. And, soon after, she met Father, and she was happy.”

“That was luck, girl,” Mellon said, not meeting her steady gaze. “Or the will of the Infinity, as she would say. Do you still live in Hartridge?”

“I’ve lived there all my life,” Bernadette said. She was still unsure how she should address this man – who was her own mother’s brother, though she had never truly met him until this day. “It’s only lately that I’ve seen more of the world. I went to high school at Alton, then to college at Saint Nealus’.”

Mellon frowned. “Don’t tell me you’re one of *them*. Shouldn’t you be in college now?”

“I earned a scholarship to King’s College, where I met Henrik,” she explained.

“That tall boy outside?” Mellon asked.

Bernadette nodded. “It was while I was there that we learned of the conflict at Itaria, and set sail there. Thankfully, we were able to defeat an evil man there, though it was....very close.” She shivered. “Terra is still not safe, Doctor Mellon. And, besides my own personal motives of friendship with Lavie, who is as a

dear sister to me” – her voice trembled – “I believe that she has been chosen by the Infinity, to help us defeat the evil that still threatens it. It is why I believe that she must be saved.”

“Sweet lands, girl,” Mellon said, whistling. “You almost sound like I used to, with your talk of destiny and defeating evil. I envy you your dreams, though I cannot share them.”

Suddenly, he moved towards the door.

“Stay with her, Bernadette,” he said, brusquely. “Let me tell the others what is likely to happen now.”

As he descended and entered the hall, he almost collided with Ryan, who was pacing up and down nervously, shaking his head. Henrik stood near a wall, looking grave, and Emily was sitting on a sofa, leaning against Sigmund, who was speaking to her softly, endeavouring to comfort her.

“Doctor!” Ryan said, stopping in his tracks. “Is she....”

“Let me explain this to you, son,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ve stopped the bleeding, and removed the clot that was pressing on her brain. That girl helped me close the wounds quite nicely. Her pulse and blood pressure are returning to normal, which is good, but...”

“But what?” Sigmund said sharply.

“Sigmund, Infinity help me, I worked hard. I tried my best. Working beside that girl, I even had the foolish notion that, in helping your daughter, I was undoing what – had happened, all those years ago. But listen to me, before you get your hopes up. If all goes well now, Lavie will live. But you can never tell with an injury to the head. She has not yet regained consciousness, and that’s not a good sign. She may have lost her memory, or even her mind. She may live, but be crippled. I wish I didn’t have to say this, not even to you, Sigmund, but I’ve seen too many such injuries in the Army to be optimistic. I’m sorry.”

“Lavender...” Emily said, then started to sob again.

“Is there *nothing* we can do?” Sigmund said, slowly.

“Nothing, as far as modern medicine is concerned,” Mellon said, nodding. “But that girl there tells me that you reached here by magical means, or at least she believes so. Perhaps another miracle will take place.”

“Is that the best you can do?” Ryan said, insistently. Mellon looked at the boy regretfully, but before he could think of an answer, the door swung open.

“Good heavens, I overslept,” Jonas Aquary said, brightly. “I do believe I’m needed here. Where is that poor child, Ryan?”

“Over here!” Thora exclaimed, before sending off the signal to her mother and brother’s amulets, indicating that their presence was required. “We’ve got a very strong presence here.”

They were in a large, exquisitely carpeted room, with a skilfully carved double-bed and a large bookcase.

“I suppose the Warp Cannon is behind the bookcase,” Carranya said, walking with a limp but managing to smile. One of the Raienji cousins had managed to heal her partly, but she had broken a bone, and the pain, though lesser in intensity, was still nagging.

“No, Princess,” Thora said, with a laugh. “The signal is weak that way. In fact, under here is where it’s strongest.” She swept her wand across the floor, and its glow when it was placed beneath the bed was enough to illuminate the entire room.

“Good work, my daughter,” Freya said approvingly, as she and Striker entered the room, followed by her group and then Baldur’s.

“Hmph, you are lucky, sister,” Baldur grumbled. “If I had been asked to search the west, we would have found it earlier.”

“With that blunderbuss of a wand, dear brother,” Thora said, gently, “you would probably have destroyed much of the furniture on the way.”

“Now don’t squabble, you two,” Freya said, calmly. “The entrance is around that bed. I need some able-bodied men to move it around.”

“Shall we try, young Baldur?” Striker said. Baldur nodded, and the two of them moved it aside, revealing a large stone slab, with another inscription on it.

“It’s sealed with some sort of charm,” Thora said, tapping it with her wand.

“Oh, for Horamin’s sake,” Baldur groaned. “Is this one of those secret passages locked by a code, or something?”

“How perceptive of you, my son,” Freya replied, affectionately. “Unfortunately, I can’t read this. Princess, could you help me again?”

“Of course, Freya,” Carranya said kindly, as she knelt on the floor and began to decipher the words:

*Below you lies the ancient crypt of the House of Gyrus.
This sacred place contains the relics of the Friend, and of his noble House.
Only the one who will make the same sacrifice as him,
and who will continue its noble lineage,
may enter, once the Friend’s last words are spoken.*

*Stand here and speak, but know that, once you do,
you have chosen your destiny.*

“That sounds like you, Carranya,” Freya said, slowly. “You’re the only one who will continue a noble lineage among us, right, Striker?”

Carranya felt a sudden chill. “But....what does it mean by a sacrifice?” she said, wonderingly.

“Princess, you’ve already made more than enough sacrifices to get to this place,” Striker said, calmly. “I’m sure the inscription speaks in general terms. Now, what are the Friend’s last words? I wish I’d paid more attention to my history lessons.”

“As it happens,” Carranya said, standing up and looking at the rest of the group with determination, “the words are given in the first book of the *Evangelium Infinitate*.”

“I remember,” Thora said. “‘A life for a life, father’, or something like that.”

“You’re good, young Thora,” Carranya said, smiling at her. “Some modern translations render ‘father’ using an affectionate diminutive, such as ‘Dad’ or ‘Daddy’, to reflect the Itarian.”

“In what language should you speak them?” Baldur said, scratching his head. “None of us can speak Varaldian, as far as I know.”

“I don’t think they spoke Varaldian in the earliest days of mankind, my clever son,” Freya said. “Itarian should be good enough, since that’s the first language the words were recorded in.”

“Let me try,” Carranya said, standing over the slab. “*Animam pro anima, pater*.”

The slab trembled, but did not move, and it emitted a strange sound – almost a chuckle.

“Looks like you almost got it right, Your Highness,” Striker said. “Oh, those wacky Gyrusians.”

“Wait a minute, Carranya,” Freya said. “You said the modern translations used a more affectionate term. Maybe they’re the more accurate ones.”

Carranya laughed. “Dear me, Freya, I wish Professor Marlborough were with us,” she said. “But what could...” She clapped her hands. “Ah, I have it! Listen to me, you stone. *Animam pro anima, papa*.”

“*Papa?*” Baldur said, chuckling. “Does the stone speak baby-talk, now?”

The stone began to move slowly, and as Carranya stepped off it, it slid away completely, revealing a passage whose walls glowed with a red light.

“Yes, my son,” Freya said, chuckling to herself. “Now you can tell your *papa* all about it when we get back. But for now, let’s head down. Striker, you and Baldur ought to lead the way, in case there are any rats and spiders down there.”

“I don’t like spiders,” Carranya said, nervously.

“Well, that’s what my good-for-nothing son is there for, Princess,” Freya said, ruffling Baldur’s mop of hair. “Go ahead, boys. Next, Thora, take the girls with you. Carranya and I will bring up the rear with, say, five of us.”

“Onward!” Baldur said, enthusiastically, as he and Striker began to climb down. They were followed by the rest of the mages, then Freya, then finally Carranya, who stepped down slowly, the stone’s last words echoing in her mind...

You have chosen your destiny.

“Commander, the Zion lookouts have sighted the Varald fleet! They’re about forty strong, and if they continue at their current speed, they should be here in less than two hours! It’s...unbelievable! We’ve sent word to the Commonwealth News Service, as you ordered...” Hopkins said, bursting into the room.

“Very good, Hopkins,” Arnoldus said, turning to face him. “We shall leave in precisely ten minutes. I shall be on board our flagship, the *Lord Geraud VII*. You will come with me, of course. Tell our men to get ready.”

“Yes, sir!” There was only a minute’s hesitation, before Hopkins answered, and he then saluted and left.

Arnoldus looked at the portrait in front of him. He studied the faces of his wife and children, lovingly painted by a friend of the family’s.

Penelope, he thought. This may be the last battle I fight, Penelope, unless we’re both extraordinarily skilled, and extraordinarily lucky. I never thought it would come to this, though I always had my misgivings when the Varald coup took place. Well, if it had to happen, it did. I only wish I could have seen you all, one last time.

Then he smiled. There’s a fatality in names, isn’t there? Women named Penelope and men who fight hopeless battles – I’m just keeping up an old Galvenian tradition. At least if I go down, I go down bravely, not like poor Athena’s husband, the fool. I wonder how she and Anastasia are bearing up. I hope they’re still allowing her to wear her uniform.

His eyes went to the last letter he’d received from her. He knew it by heart – and he had been both amazed and pleased at the news of Lavender Regale’s adventures – but his eyes wandered to its last two lines, and to the two tiny objects, now faded and frail, that had been enclosed along with it.

Euphemia insisted on sending you a Cosmopolitan rose, since she said it brought good luck to Lavie. And, after much thought, I decided to enclose one too, for myself. These are strange days, Hieronymus, and a man like you needs all the good fortune he can have. We all stay brave for your sake – even Aristotle, who has come home on furlough – but we all wish that, like Lavie, we could hold out our hands and bring you home safely.

May the Infinity protect you.

*Ever yours,
Penelope*

“It’s time to go,” he said, to no one in particular. Pocketing both the roses, he marched down and out of Bravo, to where the *Lord Geraud VII* was waiting for him.

“Ryan?”

Ryan woke up with a start. For several hours, he and Bernadette had joined the Regales in an anxious vigil at Lavie’s bedside, and he had somehow fallen asleep, his head resting near Lavie’s hand, which he was still holding loosely.

“Huh?” he said, shaking his head in surprise as he entered the no-man’s land between sleep and wakefulness. *Maybe I’m dreaming*, he thought. *Maybe I’ll wake up, and this was all a nightmare. There was no Kevin, no mages. Just me and Lavie, on the deck of that Zion ship....*

He opened his eyes. “Wh – Armin? What are you doing here?”

“I might ask the same question, Mr. Eramond,” Armin said, calmly.

“Shh, keep it down, Armin,” Ryan said, anxiously. “You might wake her up.”

“Isn’t that sort of the point, Ryan?” Armin said, with a chuckle. “You’re all waiting for her to wake up, aren’t you? Stop moping around here. That Mellon dude – apparently his real name is Ellis, but you didn’t hear that from me” – he winked – “has done a good job, and so has Henrik’s future dad-in-law and his goofy herbs. Come on out and look at the sunshine, or something.”

“Is it already morning?” Ryan said, slowly.

“Yes, it is, Ryan,” Armin said, laughing. “Mrs. Henrik, Mrs. Sigmund and Mr. Sigmund are all waiting outside, wondering when to wake you up, so I thought, hey, let’s do them a favour, Compadre.”

Ryan stood up reluctantly, straightening his neck, which now felt stiff and painful.

“Ryan,” Armin said, more kindly, “at this point, y’know, we just have to wait and see. Come on down, there’s someone waiting to see you.”

“Someone?” He frowned. “Is it....”

“Geez, Ryan, you’re all about the dames, aren’t you?” Armin quipped. “No, it’s not Marianne, she’s been taken back to stay with her mom. It’s my head honcho, Sir Cornelius.”

“Sir Cornelius!” The words had an effect on Ryan. Suddenly, he was Ryan Eramond, Corporal in His Majesty’s Army. He climbed down the steps, and found Sir Cornelius sitting in the drawing-room, along with Lavie’s parents, his own father and mother, Sergeant Burns, Doctor Mellon and Jonas Aquary.

“Good morning, Corporal,” Sir Cornelius said, kindly. “We’ve been waiting for you. Sergeant Burns has been telling me a most extraordinary tale, but I’d like to hear it from you, too. Please do have a seat. And in case you’re worried about your duties, your superiors have been notified, and you will return when I give the order, not before that.”

Still in a daze, Ryan sat down, uncomfortably conscious of his crumpled and torn uniform, his mind still on the girl in the room above him.

“Now, Corporal Eramond,” Sir Cornelius said, “tell us exactly what happened, and omit no detail.”

Slowly, Ryan began to tell his tale, from the time they had set out to the moment he woke up in Lavie’s room, moments ago. It was not easy, and he broke down several times, but the Regales’ encouraging looks, and the presence of his own parents, helped him continue. When he had finished, he sat leaning forward, his head bowed.

“Most....remarkable,” Sir Cornelius said, “though that’s quite an inadequate word. You’ve done your country a great turn, Corporal. Who knows what infernal designs that mage had. As for Prescott, we have him in custody. He is currently on the road to Lorean, where he will be detained along with others who are suspected or convicted of treason.”

“You saved her life, son, even if you don’t realize it,” Jonas said. “No ordinary prayer would have worked there, you can take my word for it. A magical device, especially one that has been cursed, needs something extraordinary to activate it. Of course, that doesn’t mean you have magical powers. It just means you worked an everyday miracle, so as to speak.”

“An everyday miracle?” Sheila Eramond said, softly.

At that moment, Henrik and Bernadette came down the stairs, looking tired but pleased. “Good news! We just looked in on Lavie, Father,” Bernadette said, “and she’s even better. She’s started moving a little, and she turns to me when I call her name, but she still can’t speak.”

Mellon nodded, a smile briefly appearing on his lips.

“Excellent, my dear daughter,” Jonas said. “Please come and join us. I was just telling Ryan about the miracle he pulled off.”

“What are you talking about?” Ryan said, dejectedly.

“Ryan,” Emily Regale said softly, “Jonas and Bernadette explained it all to us. We know it wasn’t your fault Lavie was injured; you were trying to save Sister Miriam. And believe me, she is immensely grateful to you. But he also told us that you couldn’t have worked the Warp Cannon unless...” She looked at him, and surprisingly, she smiled. “Unless you truly loved Lavender, and wished her to be safe – not out of some sort of heroism or altruism, but because you wanted to be with her for the rest of your life, and beyond...”

“Dear me, Mrs. Regale,” Jonas Aquary said, “you do blush most becomingly.”

“I – I do,” Ryan said, slowly raising his head. “But still, I – put her life in danger, and it was my actions that led to her getting hurt. I can’t....escape that, even if I – even if...”

“Accidents are accidents, Ryan,” Theodore said, kindly. “You did your best, remember that.”

“Oh, nonsense, boy,” Mellon said. “Look, you were fortunate. I wasn’t. And if there’s one thing my sister told me, it’s that the Infinity – though I still haven’t the foggiest idea what he’s up to at times – doesn’t do things in halves. I’ve examined her again today, and there are no deficits. I’ve never seen such a change take place overnight, in all my years as a surgeon. She may take time to recover, but we have every hope of a full recovery.”

“But yesterday, you said....” Sigmund began.

“Don’t interrupt me, Sigmund,” Mellon said, sternly. “Look, I’m a doctor and an Army man, and I can be as hard-headed as the next man. I’ve seen dozens of head injuries. But when I look at how your child was yesterday, even after I operated, and when I see her today, I realize that I’m also that girl’s uncle.” He pointed at Bernadette. “Sure, we all did our parts. You carried her. Sigmund had a carriage. I did the surgery. Old man Aquary had the herbs, which Bernadette happened to have picked up some time ago. But in the end, I still believe it was something else that cured her. Call it destiny, or fate, or the Infinity, but there was a purpose behind it all, boy.”

“Doctor,” Ryan began, but Mellon motioned to him to remain silent.

“She’ll be all right, boy,” he said. “Believe me....”

“Mrs. Regale, ma’am!” Carmen burst into the room, flushed and excited. “Miss Lavie’s started speaking! I couldn’t quite make out what she said, but her lips were moving, and she opened her eyes for a little while. Oh, Infinity be praised!”

“Lavie!” The word came suddenly, almost involuntarily, from Ryan. Without waiting any further, he rushed up the stairs, and soon, he was at Lavie’s side again.

“Lavie,” he said. “It’s me, Ryan. Lavie, can you hear me?”

Lavie opened her eyes, and slowly, her head turned towards him. Her lips moved, but there was no sound.

“Lavie?” For a moment, he felt afraid. She was looking at him, but her look was blank. *Suppose she’s lost her memory. Suppose she’s forgotten....*

Then the look in her eyes changed, and she smiled.

“Of course I can hear you....you goof....” she said, faintly. “You...pulled me out of the well, didn’t you? You’re....a hero, Ryan...”

She tried to lift her hand, but could not do so fully, and Ryan caught hold of it.

“My head hurts,” she said, and again, Ryan was struck by how young she sounded.

“Lavie...” he began. “Oh, Lavie, I’m sorry....”

“It’s all right, Ryan,” she said, closing her eyes, the smile still on her face. “A deputy.....doesn’t complain.”

“You did good, Deputy,” Ryan whispered, a smile coming to his own face, as he wiped his eyes.

He looked at her again, but she was asleep, and the look on her face spoke of a pleasant dream. Unknown to him, all his recent companions from the drawing-room were standing at the door. There was scarcely a dry eye among them, except Armin Tamas, so it is only right that he be allowed to speak.

“Geez,” he muttered. “This is *so* silly. But....hey, maybe Ryan digs being silly from time to time. And as the frog in my throat is saying right now, there are worse things than that.”

“Is the circle formed?” Commander Arnoldus called out, standing on the bridge of the *Lord Geraud VII*.

“Yes, sir,” Captain Baker replied, from the *Victory of Straukpass*. A minor flaw in one of the Commonwealth ships had rendered it unfit for the role the Commander had in mind, and it was relegated to joining Ross’ fleet. In exchange, Baker’s ship had moved forward, and was now within speaking distance – or, rather, shouting distance – of the Commonwealth flagship.

“Sir, the Varald are approaching. They’ve broken through Imperial waters already!”

“Order Ross and his men to fire,” Arnoldus called out. *If this works, we still have a chance.*

There was a not-so-distant sound of cannons booming, as Hopkins worked frantically at the radio.

“Sir, one of the Varald ships has been sunk,” he called out. “The remainder are proceeding in our direction.”

“Baker, close the circle!” Arnoldus called out. At his command, the *Victory of Straukpass* moved away, and the remaining ships that had remained near Bravo began to draw closer.

“Sir, the – the Varald have slowed down!” Hopkins called out, staring at the range detector.

“As per plan. Tell Ross to move in,” he said. *They’re playing into our hands.*

“Sir! Five Varald ships are moving directly for the circle!” Hopkins’ voice was frantic. And, indeed, five ships were moving directly towards Bravo, heedless of the obstacles in their way, in an almost suicidal manner.

“Fire!” Arnoldus called out, and the circle of his ships opened fire, striking two of the Varald ships. As they were struck, they exploded with tremendous force, scattering the entire circle that Arnoldus had formed so carefully.

“Damnation!” Arnoldus said. “What manner of insanity is this?”

“Commander, look out!” an ensign shouted. “They’re heading straight for us!”

“Starboard, now!” Arnoldus said, moving to the helm himself and steering the ship out of the way. The third Varald ship narrowly missed them, and struck one of the small Commonwealth ships. As they collided, the Varald ship exploded, sinking its counterpart at once.

Arnoldus, white-faced, looked at the ship as it disappeared beneath the waves. Two more Varald ships were heading their way, in a similarly reckless fashion.

“Reform the circle,” he called out. “Fire again. Do not interrupt until I give the order.”

The Commonwealth ships fired repeatedly, and both Varald ships were struck. This time, the explosions were more vigorous, and one of the Zion ships was damaged below the waterline as it was struck by the burning wreckage of one of the Varalds.

“Tell them to abandon ship, and send them across in lifeboats!” Arnoldus commanded, then surveyed the scene of the battle. The circle had been scattered again, and the steering mechanisms of two ships had been damaged.

“Commander, they’re retreating!” Hopkins said.

Arnoldus looked ahead, but could see no Varald ships within his line of sight. "What does the range detector say?"

"The bulk of their fleet is moving away, now that the circle is broken," Hopkins replied. "They're still within range, but they seem to be moving away all right."

"Tell Ross' men not to pursue them," Arnoldus said, baffled. "They're making suicide attacks, and now they're moving back? This is insane. Break the circle, and regroup into two wings. Let's not be taken unawares by another of those floating landmines."

But as he looked forward, he saw something coming towards him at great speed, and it was not a ship.

"The more the merrier, eh, Mother?" Baldur said, laughing as he impaled a blue spider with a fire beam from his cudgel-wand. "Don't worry, Princess, that's the last of them." They were deep in the Vault of the Friend – for such was its name, according to a large inscription they had passed as they entered it – but had encountered nothing except coffins and sarcophaguses of various kinds, along with an array of venomous spiders and Garaknods.

"This way!" Thora said, as her wand began to glow orange. "There's something here."

"That's strange," her mother said. "I can't sense anything myself – Oh, very clever, you Varald boys. Very clever." She opened one of the coffins, to find that it contained no bones – only a small box. "Here's another amplifier for the wind spells. It was cleverly hidden, and even my wand almost missed it. Do the honours, Princess."

Carranya fired a ball of light at the box, and it shattered.

"That ought to slow down our windy friends," Striker observed. "But we still need to find their chief – who is probably a wind mage of great power – and the Warp Cannon."

"It's stronger this way, Mother," Baldur said, as he joined Thora. "Look, it's one of the few times Sis and I agree on *anything*."

"Very witty, Baldur, Let's see what you children have uncovered – Stand back! Move back, Baldur!" Freya said, suddenly.

There was the sound of something creaking, as if a gate were opened.

"What's going on?" Thora said.

"Out of the way!" Something large and hairy scurried past them all, knocking Baldur to the ground, and standing face to face with Freya, whose face was twisted into an expression of disgust.

“N – no,” Carranya said, looking away and trembling. It was a spider – or at least, it had the appearance of one – but it reached up to her companion’s waist, and its legs occupied half the width of the tunnel.

“We’ll have to take this down slowly,” Freya said. “Thora, shield Carranya.”

“Yes, Mother,” Thora said, looking as unnerved as the Princess was.

“Let me do the honours,” Striker said, firing at one of the spider’s legs. It buckled, and the creature swayed slightly, then recovered its balance. The leg was bent at an awkward angle, and seemed dislocated if not broken.

“That’s an idea!” Baldur said, enthusiastically, rushing up to the spider and clubbing one of its legs. There was a sound of splintering wood, and the creature swayed to one side.

“One at a time!” the boy cried out, swinging his cudgel again. Suddenly, a red mist issued forth from the side of the spider, and Baldur fell to the ground, coughing violently.

“My son, no!” Freya said. “You loathsome creature!” She raised her wand, and a gust of wind pushed the spider several yards back in the tunnel. She ran up to Baldur, who was having difficulties breathing.

“Mother...” Baldur said, weakly. His skin had turned pale.

“Princess, I need your help,” Freya said. “He’s been poisoned!”

“N – Nobody gets to beat on Baldur, except me!” Thora said, angrily, as she aimed a burst of water at the spider’s eye. It was temporarily blinded, then started to scurry forward, heading for Baldur.

“Stop right there!” Striker said, firing a Chill Cartridge at the eye that Thora had just attacked. The water dripping from it began to freeze, and the spider moved hesitantly to the other side.

Carranya, in the meantime, was bowing her head and chanting over Baldur, who was slowly recovering his colour. “I think that ought to do for the moment...” she began, but the spider charged towards her, and one of its legs knocked her to the ground.

“Burn it!” Freya shouted, as the creature tried to pin the Princess to the ground with two of its legs. Four of the male mages aimed their wands at the spider’s other eye, and it burst into flame. Blinded, the creature retreated a few steps.

“Princess,” Thora said, helping her rise, “are you all right?”

“Let me....try,” Carranya said. With trembling hands, she aimed a ball of light at the spider, opening up a large wound on its belly, which began to drip with a thick, black fluid.

"I think we can finish it now," Baldur said, scrambling to his feet. "Burn forever in the Pits!" He aimed a bolt of fire at the fresh wound, and there was a nauseating smell of burnt flesh as the spider collapsed on one side.

"Good work, boy," Striker said. "Now to finish...."

As Striker spoke, the entire room began to fill up with a red mist.

"Flaming fires!" Baldur swore, as he began to cough again. "Kava kura, it intends to....poison us all...."

"Not if....I can help it," Princess Carranya said, unsteadily, as she cast a shield around the spider, preventing the fumes from emerging. The mist began to dissipate, and after a few coughs, the group found that they were able to breathe again.

"Now how do we reach it?" Freya said. "If you lower that shield, Princess, it will try to poison us again. It is wounded and dangerous."

"Its wounds are healing slowly," Thora said, shaking her head. "And we cannot remain here indefinitely. We either have to run, or find a way to defeat it here."

"Running's no good, Sis," Baldur growled. "There's still a long way to go, and it can keep releasing more poison."

"I have an idea," Carranya said, leaning against the wall of the crypt for support, and grimacing. "Thora and Freya, listen to me." She spoke to them softly, and Freya nodded her head in satisfaction.

"An excellent idea, Princess," Freya said. "Striker, if you wanted big-game hunting, this is your moment. Aim for the head."

"Hold on to your hats, everyone!" Freya called out.

Carranya lowered her hand, and the shield around the spider fell. With a swift movement, Freya and her daughter raised their wands, and a strong wind began to blow the red mist away.

Striker whistled. "Here we go!" He fired two Flare Cartridges at the spider's head in rapid succession. One of them struck its other eye, and the other buried itself in what would have been its forehead. Its movements slowed to a crawl.

"Now, Carranya!" The Princess raised her hand, and two circles of light struck the creature across the wound in its trunk. There was a flash, and it collapsed.

"Well played," Freya said, heaving a sigh of relief. "Now, Baldur, you and the fire mages can have the task of finishing it off."

“With pleasure,” Baldur said grimly, remembering the bitter taste of the red mist. He and five other fire mages raised their wands, and a beam of fire struck the creature, whose insides now burst into flame. It collapsed and remained motionless, burning until it was reduced to a heap of ashes.

“Princess, are you all right?” Thora said, looking at Carranya, who was trembling like a leaf, and looked nauseated.

“I – it’s just that I’ve never....cared too much for those creatures,” she replied. “I’m not sure if I can....”

“Give yourself a pat on the back,” Striker said, kindly, walking across to her. “I doubt they could have done it without you. Talk about armour-piercing weaponry. Now, don’t be afraid. The spider’s gone. It’s a pile of dust now, and may it burn in the Pits forever. We’ve got to move ahead, if we want to save your Kingdom – and my Empire, and Terra, if it comes to that. Isn’t that right, Freya?”

“Absolutely,” Freya nodded. “The Emperor allowed us to come here on that understanding, and we have to complete our mission.”

Carranya nodded. “Thora, help her,” Striker said. “Don’t worry, Princess. I don’t think there’ll be any more of them. Come, we must go now.”

Wiping the perspiration from her brow, the Princess began to move forward, along with the rest of the group. They walked a little further when they came to a door, which was locked.

“Looks like we need a key,” Baldur said. “But there’s no keyhole. What kind of a fool door is that?”

“Is there anything....written on it?” Carranya said, slowly and falteringly, as she hobbled up to it.

“Not as far as I can see,” Freya said. “But wait.” Her wand was glowing orange, but there were waves of red encircling it. “There’s something huge behind this, probably the Warp Cannon, but there’s something lesser in front. There’s probably a charm on this door.”

“How do we get through it?” Striker asked.

“With a club,” Baldur suggested, aiming a powerful blow at it. It shook, but remained standing.

“Very clever, son,” Freya said, shaking her head.

Help....me....

“Did you hear that?” Carranya said, startled. She jumped back and stumbled, and Baldur and Striker caught her before she fell to the ground.

“A voice,” Striker said. “A woman’s voice, probably. It was calling for help.”

"I didn't hear anything," Baldur said, shaking his head. "And what's the matter with your pendant, Princess? By Lady Penelope's slippers, it looks strange."

"Baldur," his mother said, affectionately, "mind your tongue."

"My pendant?" Carranya looked down at the sun-and-moon pendant around her neck, the birthday present she'd received from Kievan and which Ryan had returned to her on the *Paradiso*. It was glowing red, and its rays of light moved towards the door, causing it to shine.

"What's going on?" Thora said, shaking her head.

"It's something to do with that pendant, or with the jewel it contains," Freya said. "It might hold the key to getting through that door."

"Let me listen at it," Striker said, standing near the door and placing his ear against it.

Please....help me.....help the.....Commonwealth....

"I heard it again," Carranya said. "She sounds.....frightened. And she mentioned the Commonwealth."

Striker shook his head. "I didn't hear anything this time, Princess."

"Let's try a standard attack, first," Freya said, aiming her wand at the door. A strong gust of wind struck it, but it remained immovable.

"All right, boys and girls. Try all the elements, one by one, and if that doesn't work, Princess, you'll have to use light. High power, now."

A little while later, they were all shaking their heads. "It doesn't budge, not with fire, earth, water, or even light. If only it had a keyhole, we could try that pendant of yours, Princess."

"I have an idea," Carranya said, suddenly. "Perhaps it needs a combination of attacks! Perhaps that's why she mentioned the Commonwealth."

"Five elements, working together?" Freya laughed. "All right, let's try that." They all aimed their wands together, and the Princess bowed and raised both hands, but though the door trembled slightly when struck by all the elements, it stood unyielding.

"The sun and the moon..." Thora said. "Princess, I have an idea. Perhaps we should use a combination of magical and non-magical attacks. Traditionally, that's what the sun and moon represent in Zion armouries!"

"She's right," Striker said, nodding in approval. "It might just work."

Freya struck her forehead in annoyance. "How could I forget that?" she said. "Striker, do the honours."

“With pleasure,” he said. “Back me up, Raienji.” He fired at the door, and as his bullet struck, Freya’s wand sent forth another wave of wind. The door creaked, then opened.

“We’re very close,” Carranya said, softly. “Let us proceed without delay.” Stepping forward, though she was still limping, she pushed open the door, then stepped back with a gasp.

They were inside another magnificently furnished room – it would almost have been a throne room like her father’s – except for the two incongruities. One was the wardrobe-like object in one corner, from which a strong wind blew, pushing them back. Another was the young girl, her hands and feet bound, in another corner. As soon as her eye caught Carranya’s, she struggled vainly against her bonds.

In the centre of this all, observing them with satisfaction, was a man on a throne. He wore a black cloak, but his head was bare, revealing a greying head, and he was smiling at them as if they were welcome guests to a luncheon or a tea party. The wand in his hand seemed almost like a sceptre, both in size and shape, though it was made out of wood.

“Welcome, my friends,” he said, in a surprisingly deep voice. “I trust we will be able to discuss this like civilized people.”

“Fall back!” Commander Arnoldus said, tight-lipped, as he stared at the sea. A wave of fire was advancing in front of them – a wave as broad as the waves that broke upon a shore, rolling out like a carpet, which the waters seemed to feed rather than to quench. The ships moved out of the way as fast as they could, but one of the Zionese ships failed to do so on time, and it caught fire at the waterline.

“Hopkins, tell them to abandon ship and make for Checkpoint Bravo in the rafts!” he called out. As the rest of the ships parted, the wave struck the shore of Bravo, slowly fading away.

“They can keep us at bay forever with that weapon, or at least until they run out of it.....What on Terra!” he said, as he saw three more Varaldian ships, sailing on the flames and untouched by them. They were making for Bravo at a slightly slower speed, and they began to open fire.

“They’ll destroy us!” Hopkins said, looking up from his screen with alarm.

Arnoldus held his breath for a moment, then exhaled as he walked up to the radio. “This is Commander Arnoldus. Move as close to the fire as possible, and then open fire at will. It is the only chance.”

This is it, he thought. If they can use the weapon again, and if their ships can resist it somehow, all is lost. Walking up to the helm again, he began to steer the *Lord Geraud VII*, quickly and deliberately, to meet the oncoming assault.

“Who are you, old-timer?” Baldur said, looking at him with amusement.

“I will forgive your manners, stripling,” the old man said, smiling benevolently. “Let me tell you a story.”

“We are not here to listen to stories,” Striker said, firmly. “Answer the boy’s question. Who are you?”

“My name,” he said, “would mean nothing to you. We of the Third Way surrender our names, until the day when we are ready to assume them in triumph. Does that mean anything to you, Agent Striker?”

Concealing his surprise at being addressed by his name, Striker lowered his weapon. “Perhaps it does,” he said.

“Who is that girl, and why is she being held captive?” Carranya said, indignantly, looking at the tears in the child’s eyes. She was barely fifteen, with the face and features of a Gyusian noble, except for her dark hair.

“Why, Princess,” the man said, amiably, “that is my dear niece. The world knows her better as Olga Kievan, daughter of our late and unfortunate Director.”

Freya moved forward, instinctively. “The *late* Director?”

“Why, of course, my child. Kievan is dead. It was difficult convincing those two dreamy idealists, Lyzhnov and Bromfeld, that such an act was expedient, but in the end, they listened to me. Since Kievan is dead, she is under my protection, and under Varaldian law, I have the right to discipline her.”

Carranya glared at him. “What manner of discipline is this?” she said, throwing her head back. “It seems more like ill-usage to me.”

“Ah, it’s for her own safety. It’s dangerous out there, Princess, especially with the riots that are raging – and, as she has foolishly tried to escape, I had to bring her here. But enough of my personal life. You are here, I presume, for the Warp Cannon.”

“And the wind elementals,” Thora said, calmly.

The man looked at her appraisingly. “My, aren’t you a clever girl,” he said. “Now, listen to me. My foolish ally in Galvenia tried force and threats rather than persuasion, and he has failed. I am the last leader of the Third Way remaining. Let us discuss terms. Why should anyone lose their lives foolishly?”

“You lie,” Carranya said. “What about your master? The new Janwen? We are not ignorant of your designs.”

“Ah, so you know,” the man said. “Let me explain things to you. Our master, as you call him, remains concealed. For all intents and purposes, it is with me that you will have to negotiate, if you so wish.”

“What is there to negotiate?” Freya said, angrily.

"It is simple. I am offering you the possibility of an alliance with me. If you agree to this, I will immediately call off the Varald attack on Checkpoint Bravo, which is on the verge of victory. And I will take you to meet my master. You are young, Princess, and you would make a good ruler. Poor Olga would, too, once she grew up. And even you, young man.....you could always serve us."

"We are not your playthings," Carranya said, calmly.

"I am a loyal servant of the Zion Empire," Striker added, "and your offer is ridiculous and insulting. I will serve Charlemagne, or Renaud, but I will not serve you."

"Go boil your head in Varaldian liquor," Baldur added, "and while you're about it, take that wand of yours and...."

The man shook his head and sighed. "You are not merely foolish, but exceedingly so." He raised his wand and aimed it at Olga. "Very well, Olga. It seems they do not want to accept. You know what that means, do you not? It means I have no further news for you."

"You scoundrel!" Thora cast a shield around Olga, and the man's beam of red light bounced off, harmlessly.

"Ah, my child, it seems you have some fine friends," the man said. "Perhaps I should..."

In a swift movement, Baldur had rushed forward, and struck the man on the head with his cudgel. He winced with pain, then raised his wand, and a red beam struck the boy, who lay still.

"Baldur, *no!*" Freya cried out, rushing to where her son lay prone.

"Tsk, tsk," the man said. "He is not dead, Captain Raienji, but he could soon be. I regret having to use force, but you leave me with no alternative." He drew a sword from his belt, and laid his wand on the throne, nonchalantly.

"You will not succeed," Carranya said, bowing and raising her hands. A beam of light struck the mage over his wrist, causing him to almost drop his sword. Taking advantage of the distraction, one of the Raienjis drew a dagger and cut away Olga's bonds.

"Do not touch my niece," the man said, aiming a beam at him.

"Burn you!" Thora said, shielding both of them.

"That shield will wear out eventually, girl," the man said. "Do you have any other ideas?"

"Of course I do, you infernal rogue," Freya said, raising her wand. "Baldur, do you have any power?"

“A...little, Mother,” he whispered, raising his cudgel though he was still lying face down. All at once, Olga and the man rose in the air, still protected by Thora’s shielding bubble, and flew swiftly to where the rest of the mage battalion was.

“Hide behind us, child,” Carranya told the white-faced girl, as Thora lowered the shield.

“An Omega Wave,” the man said, musingly. “I should have thought of that. Very well. If you want to take the girl and return to where you came, I permit you. It would only make life harder for all on Terra – once Kievan’s supporters regain power, they would view the kidnapping of the Director’s daughter as an act of war, of course.”

“We’re not leaving,” Baldur said, trying to lift himself up.

“Now you’re truly annoying me, boy. You’ve disposed of my pets” – he shook his head regretfully – “and now you want to fight me? Very well!” He raised his sword, and all at once, they felt themselves being first blown away, then pushed back. A steady wind blew against them, forcing them to make an effort to even maintain their positions.

“Johan’s tombstone! He’s shielded himself completely!” Freya exclaimed, looking at her wand. “We have to break it, somehow. That sword is the source of the Wind Elemental that’s driving the Varald ships!”

“Ignore him, Mother! Aim for the Warp Cannon!” Thora whispered.

Carranya raised her hands and fired, but her beam was deflected harmlessly off the cannon. Suddenly, she felt as if she were being choked, and she fell to her knees.

“Princess!” Freya exclaimed. “Men and woman, full power against that shield!”

The entire Raienji clan pooled their forces, and the shield was breached. A fire ray from Baldur struck the mage in the chest, and he fell back into his throne, groaning.

“That’ll teach you,” Striker said, firing through the now-visible gap in the shield. His Flare Cartridge found its mark in the mage’s throat, but the shield began to reform before his eyes.

“Carranya, answer me!” Freya said, softly. The Princess was now sinking, making a valiant effort not to fall by using both her hands to support herself.

“Damn it, Freya, don’t you see it?” Striker said, pointing to Carranya’s pendant, which was glowing red.

“You clever devil!” Freya said. With a swift movement, she ripped the pendant from the Princess’ neck. Carranya gasped, then slowly began to rise to her feet.

“Well spotted, Striker,” Freya said. “Princess, destroy it.”

Shaking her head, Carranya aimed a beam of light at it. It was faint, but it was sufficient to shatter the large red sun-shaped crystal, and instantly, the wind that blew through the room died away.

“Now! Omega Wave, everyone! It’s our best chance!” The mages raised their wands, and a curious thing happened. The man on the throne did not move, but the flickering shield around him seemed to rise in the air.

“What is this! You...” the man spluttered.

“Carranya, use everything you have now!”

“Can’t...stand,” Carranya said. “Thora, help me...”

Thora rushed over to the Princess, but the mage, taking advantage of the pause, aimed a beam at Olga. Baldur, with a roar, quickly cast a shield around her, but the mage fired again, knocking Thora to the ground.

“Thora!” Carranya exclaimed.

“There’s no time, Princess,” Freya Raienji said, shaking her head sadly. “We can hold it up there for a while, but not for long. I can’t move, because I’m coordinating the Omega Wave. Please, try to stand. Men, help her.”

Without a word, Baldur and two of the men swiftly lifted her to her feet. The Princess raised her hand, still breathing with difficulty, bowed and raised one hand. A circle of light struck the shield, and it shrank, but did not disappear.

“Both arms, now! Come *on*, girl!” Freya said, frantically.

“Can’t...move...” Carranya said, her right arm hanging loosely at her side.

“Here, let me give you a hand,” Striker said, as he and one of the mages, supported her arm with their own. Carranya closed her eyes, and two rays of light shot forth – then she slowly slipped out of their grasp, and fell to the ground once more. There was a deafeningly loud sound, much like glass shattering but far harsher, and suddenly, the room was dark.

“You...” the man said, faintly.

“We....did it,” Thora said, faintly, scrambling against a wall for support.

“You...cannot escape your destiny, Princess,” he said, falling from his throne and to his knees. “The destiny....of the Friend...the Sacrifice.....my Master will prevail, unless you surrender your very....own.....life...”

Striker raised his gun and fired, and the man collapsed. He slowly began to crumble into dust, and there was a sudden stillness in the room.

“Yes, Thora,” Freya said, quietly, “we did. Coordinate the beams against the Warp Cannon, while I look after the Princess.” She walked up to Carranya, and lifted her up gently.

“Freya,” Carranya said, with a smile, moving her right arm slowly. “What exactly happened to that pendant?”

“A charm must have been cast on it long ago, Princess,” one of the older male mages explained. “A charm that would make it serve as a channel, though it was not cursed. Our late friend” – he pointed to the dust on the ground – “was drawing energy from you to strengthen both his shield and the Wind Elemental he was using. It was a clever trick, indeed.”

“But what if I had not been wearing the pendant?” Carranya said, softly.

“In that case, he would have used the little girl’s,” the man replied, pointing to Olga, who was leaning against Baldur and shivering. “He targeted you because you were more powerful, and could provide him with more force. It’s a common enough design in Gyrus and in Varald, honestly.”

Thora raised her wand, and a strong beam of blue and orange light shot forth, striking the Warp Cannon. “We’ve disabled it quite easily,” she said. “We must go, now.”

Carranya stood motionless for a moment, deep in thought. “Perhaps we should take that sword,” she said, pointing to the now-dull blade that lay near the mage’s remains. “I could sense – something unusual about it.”

“Good idea,” Striker said. “We can ask Professor Fujiwara, the Emperor’s best scientist, to study it when we get back. But we must go now. Thank the Infinity we’re all safe.”

“A little worse for wear, sure,” Baldur said, “but the important thing is that we’re alive, by Director Jenkin’s Memory Crystal, and by all his putrid love poems.”

“Where....are we going?” the girl said, frightened.

“Somewhere safe, little sister,” Baldur said, patting her on the head, then bursting into laughter.

“What are you laughing about, young Baldur?” Carranya said, with a smile.

“I’m thinking, Princess,” he said, “of the shock that awaits those Varald tubs. They’re in for an unpleasant surprise, by the Empress’ swimsuit.”

They all huddled around the Warp Cannon, and there was a flash of light. When Carranya opened her eyes, though, she looked around in disbelief...

“Commander!” Hopkins called out, excitedly. “The Varald ships are dead in the water, every last one of them!”

Arnoldus shook his head. “You’re joking, Hopkins,” he said, but as he looked ahead, he found that his radio officer was speaking the sober truth. The Varald ships remained motionless, amidst a wave of fire that was slowly ebbing away.

“By the Five Angels!” he exclaimed. “Is this some sort of trap?” He looked ahead, but though the Varald ships were still firing, they remained still. Only the waves of the sea pushed them gently, but otherwise, they were completely motionless.

“A signal from Lieutenant Ross!” Hopkins shouted, leaping to his feet. “The Varald rearguard is also dead! They’re trapped near the rocks!”

“No time to ask questions now,” Arnoldus said, under his breath. Then he raised his hand. “Fire at will! Keep a safe distance, just in case they’re trying their explosive stunt, but don’t let up until I give the order.”

“Sir, Lieutenant Ross says the Varald ships are drifting towards the rocks,” Hopkins said. “It’s – it’s a miracle!”

“Tell Ross to show no quarter,” Arnoldus said, steadily. “The Varald shall not pass. Even the spirits of the winds aid us, it would seem.”

What followed was, perhaps, the most one-sided naval battle in the history of Terra. The Varald ships fired madly and quickly, but they were no match for their opponents, for they were unable to move – even their regular steering mechanisms seemed to have jammed and failed. Less than two hours later, all of them had sunk beneath the waves, and the Commander was left shaking his head.

“What do you suppose happened, Arnoldus?” Baker called out, as the *Victory of Straukpass* drew near.

“I wish I knew, Baker,” the Commander replied. “Perhaps their new weapons weren’t quite ready for battle.”

“I’ve seen that fire before, when we fought near Ghetz,” Baker said. “But whatever they did to their engines, it didn’t do them much good, poor souls.”

“Perhaps, Baker,” Arnoldus said, turning to face Checkpoint Bravo. *Perhaps the Varald just overestimated their new weapons. Or perhaps – he looked at his pocket and smiled – perhaps it was just the wishes and prayers of a little wife and her little girl. And their roses, Infinity bless them.*

“Where are we?” Carranya said, shaking her head. They were in another vault, much like the crypt beneath the Palace of Gyrus, but brightly lit by torches. Its walls were lined with the portraits of Zion Emperors and Empresses, and at one end, there was another device that, by now, she knew all too well.

“Another Warp Cannon?” she murmured.

“Ah, Princess, I see you’ve been let in on our little secret,” Striker said. “I presume that, by now, you’ve heard of the five Warp Cannons scattered over Terra, and which we’ve – somehow or the other – put out of commission. This sixth is a well-guarded one, and its location is known only to the Zion Emperors, and to the mage battalions who are loyal to them.”

“Johan’s bones, that’s right,” Freya said, with a laugh. “You’re probably the first Galvenian to come here since our two kingdoms took their differences to the Family Court at Lorean.”

Despite the weariness she felt, and the thoughts that were weighing on her mind, Carranya could not help smiling at Freya’s description of the bloody Galvenian War of Independence, whose tide had turned at the Battle of Lorean Castle.

“One question remains, Freya,” she said. “What do we do with the little girl? Her father is dead, and I don’t know if she has any surviving relatives.” She walked over to Kievan’s daughter, who was still hiding behind Baldur, and knelt down.

“Who are you?” the girl said, wide-eyed with fear. “Where are you taking me? Is *he* gone?”

“Olga, listen to me,” Carranya said, kindly. “You’re safe now. I am Princess Carranya, of the Kingdom of Galvenia. We are in the Zion Empire. That man was going to kill you, so we had to take you with us and keep you safe.”

“The Zion?” Olga shook her head. “Why should the Zion want to save me? We are fighting the Zion.” She trembled. “That man – took away my father. Where’s my father?”

Slowly, placing her arms around the child, Carranya explained what had happened. Olga listened with wide eyes, but did not cry – not until Carranya had finished, when she leaned against the Princess, struggling to speak.

“That man....I don’t know who he is, I promise....Father had sent me to stay with my aunt, because he was very busy,” Olga said. “Last week, when I was coming back from ballet school, he – caught me, and took me away....Please, Princess, don’t let him find me again...”

“Poor child,” Carranya said, shaking her head. “Freya, do you think it would be better if I took her with me to Galvenia? It would be less politically embarrassing, I suppose, and we could look after her at Lorean Castle.”

“It sounds like a very reasonable idea, Princess,” Striker said.

"If she's willing, I see no harm in it. At any rate, I need to return to Lorean myself, as I have not yet been relieved of my duties as envoy," Freya replied.

"Olga," Carranya said, "would you like to come with me and stay in my palace for a little while? We'll get you back to your own country as soon as we can, but it isn't safe now. The war isn't over yet."

Olga looked up at the Princess gratefully. "Would you really do that?" she asked, shaking her head.

"Yes, I would, child," Carranya said, with a smile. "Come, Freya, let us return. I need to rest this ankle of mine, and I wish to see my friends again. I only hope they made it back safely from Koroth."

"Are you leaving so soon, Mother?" Thora said, reproachfully.

"It'll only be a little while, my daughter," Freya said, embracing her daughter, and giving Baldur an affectionate slap on the shoulder. "Now behave yourselves and listen to your father, all right? If I'm not mistaken, I should be home in time for the Dances of Malava."

"Goodbye, Mother," the brother and sister called out in chorus, as Freya, Carranya and the child stepped towards the Warp Cannon. There was a flash, and a second later, the three were on their way to Lorean Castle.

"Wow, I don't know what to say!" Lavie said, sitting up in bed and wiping one eye. "I'm just – overwhelmed! Thank you so much, all of you!"

"Aw, you're such a softie, Lavie," Lina said, though her own eyes were suspiciously bright. "Look, I even brought you an outfit to wear once you're better!"

Lavie looked at the pink dress, with its accompanying white gloves, and laughed. "Goodness, Lina, I'm going to look like Carranya if I dress that way! How many dollars and cents do I owe you?"

"War heroines get freebies, Lavie," Lina said with a wink. "And look what Cathy and Jaina brought you."

"What a perfectly lovely hat!" Lavie said, beaming as she perched it on her head. "Did you make it yourself, Cath?"

"I did, Lavie," Cathy said, with a grateful smile. "I was just so relieved when I heard that you were all right. Those two days were awful, Lavie, I didn't even feel like running the old Rumour Mill! So Jaye and I worked at it two days and two nights, making sure we got it right. Do you like it?"

"It's awesome!" Lavie said. "Thank you, thank you, both of you!" she said, leaning across to embrace them both. "I'm only sorry I can't clap, my right hand's still a little weak."

“The doctor says it’ll be all right soon, Lavie,” Lucille Bann, her friend from Mann Island, said brightly. “And as soon as you get better, you’re going to teach me all about the Arrow Flurry!”

“And you can also be helping me with Level 5, Miss Lavie,” Dina Kaleem said, grinning.

“Dear me,” Lavie said, laughing and crying at the same time as she looked at all her friends, “I must look like a human rainbow, now!”

“Good morning, Lavie,” Anne Lancaster said, walking briskly into Lavie’s room and removing her bonnet. “I see your friends have made themselves quite at home, here!”

“We’re just so glad that Lavie’s safe, ma’am,” Cathy said, enthusiastically. “So we thought we’d all come and say so in person!”

“Merciful heavens, that’s not such a bad idea,” Anne said, sitting down at Lavie’s bedside. “Now, dear, how are you coming along today?”

“Quite good, Gran!” Lavie said, beaming at her. “Though I must say that this ‘following the Way’ stuff is a lot harder than it sounds on paper! Not that I’m complaining. I’d do it again if I had the chance.”

“That is the true young woman power, Miss Lavie,” Dina said approvingly.

“Dear me, young lady,” Anne said, smiling at Dina, “that is *such* a nice way of putting things.”

“Lavie!” Bernadette walked into the room, her expression brightening as she beheld the scene within. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come earlier, I was just with Sister Miriam. Are you well, my sister?”

“Quite so, Bernadette – quite so. All thanks to you and that nice doctor, of course,” Lavie replied, with a smile. “He’s quite sweet, actually! He pretends to be all grumpy, but I guess blood will tell!”

“Indeed it will,” Bernadette said, happily, as she sat down beside Anne. In the aftermath of Lavie’s injury, she too had heard the entire tale, both from Sigmund and from her uncle, and her reaction had been quite as Sigmund had predicted.

“Why should I mourn the past, Uncle Sigmund,” she had said kindly – and he had thrilled to be addressed thus – “when now, the tie between me and my friend Lavie is stronger than ever? Your gift saved not just my life but the Church of the Infinity, and nothing can overcome that. It was in your home that I found shelter, when I was sick myself. It is almost as if we were fated to meet, and you and Aunt Emily have been a blessing to me.”

Mellon himself had softened, and though he did sharpen his wit on Sigmund from time to time, he was far less bitter. He was staying at the Davenport Inn, where he had promised to remain for another week, to keep watch over his patient. “And where’s Ryan? Sister Miriam wanted to thank him.”

Lavie's expression clouded over momentarily. "It's strange, Bernadette," she replied. "The first three days after I...woke up, Ryan was always there with me when he could, and we'd spend hours talking – at least until I grew tired. But the last couple of days, he's hardly been around, and he doesn't say much. I wonder what the matter is."

"Sir Cool! Taking on the troubles of the world, one day at a time!" Cathy said, cheerfully. "Don't worry, Lavie, once he's finished his latest quest, he'll be back."

"He hasn't gone back to the Military Academy, has he, dear?" Anne asked Lavie.

"No, he hasn't," Lavie said. "I hope....he's not taking this too hard, Gran. I mean, I know it was an accident, and Mom explained how....he saved me." She smiled. "Maybe he also needs a little time to recover, before we go on our next adventure!"

"Lavie, my sister," Bernadette said, with feigned sternness, "I think we have had enough adventuring for the moment, and the Doctor agrees with me."

"Sheesh, Lavie," Lina said, reproachfully, "quit trying to be the Twin Huntresses rolled into one! Stay with us, girl, and don't go dashing off somewhere to fight some bozo in a black cloak!"

And with this remark, good humour was restored for the moment.

Ryan, at this moment, was walking along Davenport Beach, looking down at the sand before him. He walked alone for a long time, ignoring the children who were building castles, or playing hide-and-seek behind the rocks and the booths.

Always do the right thing, he thought. That mage was trying to hurt Sister Miriam. So I dashed forward, and I tried to be a hero. But....look what happened.

After the initial relief of knowing that Lavie had recovered – during which they had spent the better part of three days together, days he looked back on with fondness and regret - the dreams had grown worse. Sometimes it was Blackheart holding Lavie; sometimes it was the mage; and sometimes it was Sir Prescott. The dreams always ended the same way – with his accidentally shooting her in the head, then watching helplessly as she drew her last breath.

I know that's not how it happened, he thought bitterly, but it's how it might have been. Everyone, even her parents, even Lavie herself, is treating me like a hero. They think I saved her. But I wouldn't have had to save her if I hadn't got her hurt in the first place. That's what doing the right thing gets you.

He became aware of another figure – no, a pair of them – strolling along, and he winced.

It could have been me and Lavie, walking along here, without a care in the world. Now she's.....If I'd prevented Lavie from coming....But then, who knows? Could we have beaten them if Lavie hadn't broken the guy's warping system? Was this all....meant to happen, somehow?

He laughed harshly. Now I know why all of them went it alone – Kaleb, Kevin, Prince Derren, heck, even Thomas Perrin. Because it just – hurts that much, to know that you could endanger them, even if it was just an accident. Lavie'd already done enough by saving my life. Why did I take her along with me? I know she's alive, and well, and happy now. But knowing what I know about myself – about Kevin – can I keep her....beside me? Even if she's willing to risk it – and, damn, Lavie is brave, braver than most men I know – would I be willing to risk it? Could I live with myself if I placed her in a situation where I'd end up standing by and watching her hurt, bleeding, dying, even?

He frowned. And yet – I know something extraordinary happened that day. I love Lavie, whether old Mr. Aquary was right about a miracle or not. I need her. The hand that was held out to me. Carranya's prophecy. Those days in the Republic, and on the ship back, seemed like a dream come true....Oh, Lavie. I can't leave you, but I can't keep you with me, either. Perhaps I should just....explain this all to her. Or maybe I should just quietly go back to the Academy, and ask to be sent into battle somewhere. Give her some time by herself. I don't know....I don't know.

"Ryan," a voice said, softly. "we were looking for you."

Ryan looked at the speaker with an expression that was both tired and annoyed. "What is it, Bernadette? I'm not feeling particularly sociable now, if you don't mind."

His tone was far from friendly, but Bernadette smiled. "Ryan, Lavie was asking about you. She wanted to know how you were. You haven't been seeing her too often, these last days."

"I have my reasons," Ryan said, digging one shoe into the sand, and turning away.

"Ryan Eramond," Henrik said, sternly, "turn around, look at us, and stop acting silly for a moment."

Ryan turned to face Henrik, and scowled. "Look here, Henrik, there's no need for you to take that tone with me, all right?"

"There's no need for you to take the approach you're taking with Lavie, either," Henrik said. "Look, Ryan, we understand what's going on. We knew about Kaleb and Kevin long before you did, and we hesitated a long time before giving you that book. Lavie knew about it too, didn't she?"

Ryan nodded, but didn't speak.

"So listen up. We all knew what we were signing up for when we decided to fight with you, all right? I'm sure the Zion know, too – after all, that book you read was from Zion. Heck, Lavie and her mother have even told us about the Princess, and that vision she had. Ryan...." He sighed. "I know I'm going to sound like the biggest cornball in Galvenia for saying this, but you guys belong together, okay? Just like

Bernadette and I...belong. Lavie needs you as much as you need her. She's recovering from a major injury, and if you think you're going to make it easier on her by walking away, you deserve the Armin Tamas Award for being the biggest dope in Davenport. Or the biggest goof, as Lavie would say."

Bernadette laughed – a light, pleasant laugh. "Dear Henrik," she said, "that was a very manly sermon indeed."

Ryan shook his head. "Maybe you're right, Henrik. But even if I walk into her home today, and take her by the hand, and stay beside her, what happens next? What happens when I have to fight that sixth mage, wherever or whoever he may be? What if he tries to target Lavie?"

"Lavie can take care of herself, Ryan," Bernadette said, gently. "She has proved it, time and again. Besides, remember our own battles in Itaria. If there is anyone who should be feeling guilt now, about being responsible for hurting the one they love, it should be me and not you, Ryan." She shivered. "Ronald Gray used me as a diversion to wound Henrik, and it was because of that wound that Gharon could target him when we faced each other. I know that for a fact. And yet, I could never leave Henrik, no more than he would willingly leave me."

"Besides, Ryan," Henrik said, firmly, "even if someone's going to attack Lavie, don't you think the best way to defend her by staying close by, along with that Sword of yours?"

"I...wish I could believe you two," Ryan said, forcing himself to smile. "But I'm still...haunted, I guess, like Mr. Regale was about his little sister. I – dream about accidentally hurting Lavie. I see her, lying unconscious, then telling me that her head hurts..."

"Didn't she also call you a hero, as soon as she woke up?" Bernadette said, innocently.

"Awww!" Henrik said, grinning at Ryan.

"You two guys are funny, I'll give you that," Ryan said. "It's just that....I'm afraid, I guess. There, I said it out loud. The descendant of Kevin is afraid. Those Third Way blokes would have a good laugh if they could see me now."

"Ryan, we're all afraid, not just you. Henrik is. Lavie is. Even Princess Carranya is. But the way to face one's fears is to confront them, not to run away from them," Bernadette said. "There were hundreds of times when I felt terrified in the tunnels of Itaria. I wasn't feeling particularly heroic most of the time, even when I fought that Gorn Jabola. I just – made myself do it. And Henrik helped me."

Ryan was silent.

"Ryan, can I tell you a story?" Bernadette said.

"Go ahead," he replied, after a pause. "Infinity knows I could use some distraction here."

The three of them sat down at one of the benches on the embankment just above the shore, and Bernadette began to speak, slowly. As she spoke, Ryan and Henrik felt that she was literally travelling back to the dawn of human history, watching the story unfold.

“A long time ago, when mankind first began to live in cities, the world was a very different place – and a very cruel one. Some men wandered from town to town, never settling; others built mighty settlements, and prospered there. Yet, they were not happy. For religion, they had a corrupt entity, called the Guided; instead of noble heroes and warriors, there was a cult of trained killers, the Blood Lyn, who were trained from childhood to be as bloodthirsty as they could.”

“One day, a man began to travel from town to town, wandering the world. He claimed that he was on a mission – to find the woman he had loved since childhood. He found no trace of her. As he continued his journey, a warrior – a man who had left the Blood Lyn, sickened by their ways – accompanied him and often protected him. And as he continued to wander, he met two women – one a former warrior, and another the daughter of a town elder – who both fell in love with him, though he did not return their feelings at first. But as he stayed longer in the elder’s town, he and the girl developed feelings for each other, and he began to forget the quest he had set out upon.”

“I think I read something like this in your *Holy Book*,” Ryan said, “but those days in prison are a blur.”

“What the man did not know was that the sword he was carrying, a sword he had owned since childhood, had somehow come under the control of a demon, a creature of the Pits. This creature misled the man and led him along an evil path, until he became a part of the town’s criminal underworld. During one of his errands for his new masters, he was asked to besiege the house of the town elder – and, in doing so, he accidentally wounded the girl, the elder’s daughter, with his sword. She died of her wounds, but before she did, she comforted him, telling him that it was destined to happen.”

“He sounds like a nice guy, all right,” Ryan muttered.

“Following this, the town he lived in – it was called Estrana, and was infamous for its evil deeds – suffered a natural calamity of some sort, perhaps an earthquake. The man managed to escape from Estrana, but an angel of the Infinity appeared to him, and told him the truth about his sword. The angel then took the man to the depths of the Pits, where he battled a fierce creature, and learned that the woman he was seeking was merely an illusion – she had never existed. Next, he was taken to Paradise, where he was reunited with the woman he had slain. He repented, and she forgave him his sins. Finally, he was returned to Terra, and he was one of the few survivors – some say, the only survivor – of a world-wide catastrophe that soon followed. Tradition says that all of us – all the men, women and children of Terra – are his descendants.”

“So,” Ryan said, wearily, “you’re saying that even if I hurt Lavie by accident, I’ll meet her in Heaven and she’ll forgive me? I’m sorry, Bernadette, but that’s.....not something I can really believe.”

“Wait, Ryan,” Bernadette said, and for a moment, her face changed, as if she were the dying girl, consoling the grief-stricken hero of her own tale. “That’s not quite what I’m trying to say. The man’s name is lost to history, but we know him, commonly, as the Man of Regret. That is the name by which he is referred to in the Holy Book.”

“The Man of Regret, like the Sword of Regret?” Ryan said, looking at his sword with a doubtful expression. “You mean I have *his* sword?”

“Ryan, for years, we believed that the Sword had been destroyed – either by the angel himself, or, according to some manuscripts, by the warrior who was his friend. But recent scholarship – including the studies of Father Marlborough, whom you know – has found that the text was mistranslated. The sword was not destroyed, it was purified; or, more precisely, the demon was exorcized from it. The Sword still exists, Ryan. And this discovery has helped us to solve an age-old puzzle, one that all of us from the Church of Infinity have known about, but which completes the tale of the Man of Regret.”

“A puzzle?” Ryan shook his head. The whole tale sounded strange, and yet he felt compelled to listen.

“In the writings of Lord Geraud – his own personal and spiritual notes, that is, not his works on the Commonwealth – he makes reference to a vision that he had, shortly before his death. He dreamed that he saw a man – he believed it was a Journeyman – carrying the Sword of Regret. This man stood before the Infinity, accusing him, and saying that though the Sword had now been purified, it had still wounded the one he loved, who lay dying. He said this was unjust, for he had done no wrong, and that it was no consolation to him that he might see her in Paradise.”

Ryan leaned forward, staring, but saying nothing.

“The Infinity replied to him kindly, saying that many thousands of years had passed since the Man of Regret had walked across Terra, and that his sins had been atoned for. He agreed with the Journeyman that it was unjust, and asked him what he wanted in exchange – power, wealth, wisdom, victory in battle, or even immortality. The Journeyman said he wanted none of these – he merely wanted the life of his beloved. This answer pleased the Infinity, and he granted the man’s wish, and sent him forth to battle further evils. Lord Geraud then saw a vision of the man and his wife, old and contented, walking through a garden in a large city hand in hand.”

“Though Geraud was deeply struck by the vision, the Church did not give it much credence, because they believed that the Sword was lost, and that what he had dreamed was merely a pretty story. But now we *know*, Ryan. Both Father Marlborough’s scholarship and Dr. Sheldon’s studies have confirmed that the sword you hold *is* the true Sword of Regret, and that what Geraud dreamed was no dream, but...”

“A prophecy?” Ryan said. “Then – *I’m* the Journeyman?”

“I can’t see any other eligible candidate, Ryan,” Henrik said. “Father Marlborough told us not to tell you about it until we could be – sure. When we saw the way Lavie recovered, then – we knew.”

“Lavie...” Ryan stood up, suddenly. “Does *she* know?”

“We haven’t yet told her, Ryan,” Bernadette said, and suddenly, her voice had returned to its usual, pleasant, steady self; she was back in Galvenia, at Davenport Beach. “We thought you should be the one to do so.”

“But will she believe me?” Ryan said, slowly and hesitantly.

“Believe that the two of you are *destined* to grow old together? She’d be delighted, old bean,” Henrik said, with a laugh. “She’d believe it even if she thought Lord Geraud’s vision was fiction. Besides, Ryan, even if you don’t believe in prophecies, look at it this way. Whatever happens tomorrow, do you want to be stuck with the regret – there I go with that word again – that you didn’t spend enough time together today? Even if you’ve only got twenty-four hours left together, do you want to spent twenty-three of them moping around? You always were bad at math.”

“Very amusing, Henrik,” Ryan said, placing his hand over the hilt of his sword. “You know, the two of you have done something I didn’t believe was possible; you’ve convinced me.” He grinned. “Are you sure that Lavie didn’t put you up to this?”

Bernadette laughed. “Oh, Ryan, that is *such* a plausible explanation that I’m almost sorry to deny it.” She took him by the hand. “Now why don’t you head over to Casa Regale and make up for lost time? Her grandmother’s down there, too, and she’s been asking about you.”

“You know,” Ryan said, shaking their hands and waving as he walked away, briskly, “that’s not such a bad idea after all. Thank you, both of you.”

“You did that well, darling,” Henrik said, as he and Bernadette sat down again, watching the waves break upon the shore. “But we haven’t yet told him the end of Lord Geraud’s vision, have we?”

“Poor Ryan,” Bernadette said, drawing closer to him. “It would have been an anti-climax, at least for now. And besides, whether we tell him or not, he will find out for himself very soon.”

By a strange quirk of Providence, a very similar tale was being told at that moment in a shed behind the gardens at King’s College, but in a quite different atmosphere. For one, the narrator was Father Marlborough himself, looking rather the worse for wear. And secondly, a sword was pointed just inches away from his throat. Its blade gleamed in the dim light of the oil-lamp that the man wielding it had brought, and the door was locked.

“Continue,” Juno said, calmly. “To think that if I had come to you earlier, I would have known the truth. Is that all? Is the vision only about that fool of a Journeyman, and that – woman?”

“My dear young man,” Marlborough said, indignantly, “you are behaving in a manner quite unbecoming of a gentleman, or even a warrior, which is what I presume you are. We could be conducting this conversation in the privacy of my office, instead of a shed full of cockroaches.”

“Privacy means different things to you and me, old man. And I am in no mood to argue. Because of Fossen’s sentimentality, I had to spend weeks protecting that foolish girl of Eramond’s and her mother, only to find that he had grown weary of her and was pursuing Miss Regale with his unwanted attentions.”

“Unwanted?” Marlborough was not a man who ordinarily laughed loud, but he did so on this occasion, despite the sword that was pointed at him. “My dear fellow, whoever you are, you have no idea what you’re talking about. I was with that girl when she heard the news of Eramond’s capture. I saw her break down. I’m afraid I wept a little myself.”

“Foolish sentimentality,” Juno sneered. “Are all old men uniformly foolish and sentimental?”

“Perhaps,” Marlborough said, in a tone of mild rebuke, “they have learned to recognize true affection when they see it. If you call that sentimental, my boy, that is your prerogative. To continue with what I was saying: that girl was still willing to part with five million Commonwealth dollars – drawn from her own inheritance, mind you, not her father’s revenues – to free him. I fought at her side, boy. I saw her tend him. I saw him admit that he had learned to care for her. I left them alone in the library when I saw that....”

Juno glared at him. “Enough. *Enough!* Are you toying with me, old man? Finish your prophecy, and then we will return to the second matter.”

“Look here,” Marlborough said, “why do you want to know these things?”

“Because it is my destiny, old man,” he said. “I will be the one to destroy the evil that threatens Terra, and wipe out the dishonour that hangs over my father’s name. Now talk. Talk, before my patience wears thin.”

“Boy,” Marlborough said, haplessly, “on the next rainy Sunday you get, pick up a dictionary and look up the meaning of patience. You may be surprised. Anyway, the last part of Lord Geraud’s vision is simply told. After the Journeyman left, the Infinity told Lord Geraud, who was watching the entire conversation, that following the victory of the Journeyman and his allies, he would grant his mercy to mankind by sealing the demons, so that no mage could ever contact them again. From that day on, he said, the only evil men would have to fear would be from their fellow men, for the demons would be bound until the end of this age.”

“Foolish mysticism,” Juno said, spitting out the words. “Evil is not sealed, it is confronted. Your Lord Geraud seems to have believed in fairy tales. Now answer my second question. What do you know about the man who calls himself William Striker, or, sometimes, Wolfgang Striker?”

Drops of perspiration appeared on Marlborough's forehead, and he suddenly felt weak. The boy, whoever he was, was in an ugly mood, and this could end badly. Though he often spoke philosophically about meeting death, he did not want to meet it until – until he could finally be *sure*.

"What do you want to know?" he said, finally.

"He is not who he pretends to be," Juno said, more calmly. "I do not know who he is serving, but his intentions are evil. You have met the man and travelled with him, and have associated with him closely. Tell me what you know."

"He is a skilled and, in many ways, a brave young man," Marlborough said, "though I would appreciate it if he cultivated the virtue of prudence a little more. To all appearances, he is what he says he is – an Intelligence agent of the Zion Empire, serving the interests of the Emperor."

"Surely, you do not believe that," Juno said, contemptuously. "Why would the Emperor send him to save first the Galvenian Royals at Inderness, and then Eramond in the Republic?"

"How do you know these things?" Marlborough said, astounded.

"I have contacts," Juno said, "and radio transmissions can be intercepted. There is nothing in Inderness to interest the Emperor..."

"You forget that Duke Renaud was also a prisoner there," Marlborough said.

"Ah, Duke Renaud. He interests me, too. As a man of the world, Professor, you surely realize that this Third Way, whoever they are, must have allies all over Terra, who choose to collaborate with their designs for selfish motives of their own. Duke Renaud is almost certainly one such person. I put it to you that Duke Renaud is fomenting the unrest in Terra, including the troubles in Galvenia, and that Striker is – as criminals say – his 'made man', a part of his crime family. What do you say to that?"

"That there is a connection between Renaud and Striker is quite probable, given that the Emperor is old and Renaud holds the reins," Marlborough said, feeling a mounting discomfort in his chest, "but why assume it is dishonourable? He serves Renaud, because Renaud is his future Emperor."

"I put it to you that his true purpose in visiting both Inderness and the Republic was to contact operatives of this 'Third Way', perhaps even to retrieve objects or information for them," Juno said.

"Come, old man, why make such a face? A little more, and I am finished with you."

"I – am unwell," Marlborough said, softly. "Please, for the love of the Infinity, give me leave to go. I am a scholar, not a conspirator."

"I very much doubt it," Juno said, drawing his sword closer to the priest's neck. "Finally, tell me. What was it that you and Joaquim were discussing a few days ago, at Saint Hilda's? I have hearing devices, but they do not tell me anything, except that you are up to some devilry. What is this story of candles?"

“For a wandering warrior,” Marlborough said, bitterly, “you have rather strange ways of occupying yourself. Do you not have bandits to fight, or damsels to save, or whatever it is that you Wanderers do?” He winced, and placed his hand over his chest.

“That is none of your business,” Juno said. “Answer the question.”

“It was a dream – a vision,” Marlborough said, and slowly, he began to describe what Bernadette had seen, though he omitted her name. When he had finished, he leaned against the wall of the shed. “Now leave me, please. I....”

“Six candles, you say, old man? You are worth your weight in gold. We shall see how Eramond and his friends fare without their sixth candle, then. Very well, you are free to go. But remember, if you speak of this to anyone...”

He closed his eyes.

Juno, this man may not be telling the truth, but he believes that he is acting in a good cause. Do not hurt him too much.

A blue beam shot forth, and Marlborough fell to the floor, groaning and clutching his chest.

“Goodbye, Professor,” Juno said. “It was a most enlightening session.”

As he watched Juno leave stealthily, leaping over hedges and fences, Marlborough slowly dragged himself out of the shed.

An incongruous thought came to his mind and caused him to smile for a moment. *I can't die now. I still have to officiate when those children finally marry.* Then the pain struck him again, like a wave.

“Merrick,” he groaned. “Someone.....please help me.....”

Everything turned to black, and he remembered no more.

“Good afternoon, Ryan,” Sigmund said, looking at Ryan kindly. “It’s nice of you to drop by. If you’re looking for Lavie, she’s in the music room. Mellon has recommended that she keep playing, to regain power in her hand. Her right hand and leg are still a little weak, due to pressure on her brain, but he says she’ll make a full recovery.”

“The music room?” Ryan smiled. An idea had occurred to him. “Thanks, Mr. Regale. I’ll just drop by.”

“Will you be staying for dinner?” Emily asked, suddenly climbing down the stairs. “Mother’s resting now, but she’d be delighted to see you then.”

“I might just, unless Lavie chases me away,” Ryan said, with a wink. “See you later, Mrs. Regale.”

“What do you think that boy’s up to now, Emily?” Sigmund asked. “He and Lavie were inseparable for the first few days after her injury, then he stays away for a few days, and now he comes back with a large grin on his face, one fit for Prince Ryle of Factoria himself. What *is* going on?”

“I’ll give you three guesses, Sigmund,” Emily said, placing an arm around his shoulders affectionately, “and the first two don’t count.”

Ryan, in the meantime, opened the library door as stealthily as he could, and walked slowly across it, and down the steps that led to the music room. Lavie was sitting at the piano, playing a song he knew well. It was the song she’d sung on the day they were supposed to leave together on the *Paradiso*, and as she played, she sang softly to herself. Sitting on one of the stools behind her, Ryan listened, a smile stealing across his face.

*Everywhere I look around,
love is in the air,
Every sight and every sound,
even when you’re not there,*

*And I don’t know if I’m being foolish,
I don’t know if I’m being wise,
But it’s something I must believe in,
And it’s there when I look in your eyes....*

Suddenly, she stopped playing, and sighed. There was a smile on her face, but she had a far-away look that he found had to interpret.

“Ryan, where are you?” she said, softly.

“Boo,” Ryan said, loudly but kindly. “I believe I’m right here. Sort of like in the song.”

Lavie got up suddenly, awkwardly, and turned around. “Ryan!” she said, archly, closing the piano. “What are you doing there, may I ask?”

“Listening, Lavie,” Ryan said. “I knew you were a piano pro, but I didn’t know you were adding ‘Galvenian idol singer’ to your resume as well!”

“Oh, you’re a laugh riot, Mr. Eramond,” Lavie said, blushing. “So what brings you here to Casa Regale? We’ve – missed you the last few days, Ryan.”

“I guess I was just – being foolish, Lavie,” Ryan said, slowly. “I had gotten it into my head that, perhaps, I ought to give you some time on your own – time to recover. I’m afraid Henrik gave me quite an earful when he heard of that idea.” He laughed.

“Wow, Henrik’s sure become a lot more perceptive these days,” Lavie said, smiling, and taking the hand that Ryan held out. “Maybe it’s Bernadette’s good influence. Or maybe King’s College makes boys less silly.”

“Lavie, would you mind if we sat in the library for a little while?” Ryan said, a little more seriously. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Lavie frowned. “What is it, Ryan?” she asked.

“It’s a long story,” Ryan said, with a wink, “but I believe you’ll like it. Come along. Take my hand for support, if you want.”

“Why, thank you, kind sir,” Lavie said, beaming at him as they made their way to the library. They sat down opposite each other, and then Ryan began, slowly and hesitantly at first, then growing more confident.

“Lavie,” Ryan said, “I’m going to be honest with you, so don’t snap my head off. These last few days have been rather hard for me. Infinity help me, I felt terribly guilty about hurting you...”

“Ryan,” Lavie said, as she touched his cheek, “that was an accident, okay? It’s nothing more than I would have had to face if I was fighting in the Army, and I want to fight these people, Ryan. For you. For Carranya. For Bernadette. For all of us.”

“And I even thought that, maybe, we should – oh, I don’t even want to say it, now. I was afraid that you’d be a target, because of – who I am. But then Henrik gave me a lecture, and then Bernadette told me a strange old story. You know me, Lavie. I’m not superstitious, or even particularly religious, but I felt that this was something you should know.”

“What is it, Ryan?” she said, gently.

And he told her what he had heard – about the Man of Regret, and his deeds, and about Lord Geraud’s vision. Lavie listened to him intently, as she had when they were children together, and he was telling her a folk-tale, or a story of the battlefield that he had learned from his grandfather. At times, her expression grew grave, but when she heard the ending of his story, she smiled, and shook her head.

“Ryan,” she said, softly, “would you mind if I told you a story, now? It’s a little shorter than yours, but it’s all connected.”

“Go ahead, Lavie,” Ryan said, taking her hand in both of his own.

And Lavie told him what her grandmother had told her on Mann Island – her illness as a child, the encounter with Jonas Aquary, and the letter her grandfather had left. Ryan’s eyebrows rose several times during the story, but he looked at her kindly and sympathetically, and when he finished, there was

a long silence between them. However, it was not an uncomfortable silence; they felt at peace, as if they had told each other their secrets, and neither of them wanted to disturb the moment.

“I guess you’ve known about this longer than I have, Lavie,” Ryan said, finally. “Infinity, it took me so long to realize it on my own...” He shook his head.

“That’s all right, Ryan,” Lavie said, kindly. “We can make up for lost time, now we both know that – this is our Way. And as long as we walk it together, I know I won’t be afraid, even if...another rock falls on my head.” She laughed.

“You can be priceless sometimes, Lavie, do you know that?” Ryan said, laughing. “No, scratch that, not sometimes, all the time. And you know what, I’m starting to feel just a little less afraid of this whole Journeyman thing, myself. Perhaps it’s because, unlike Kaleb, I have a Journeywoman along with me.”

“Do they teach compliments in the Army?” Lavie said, colouring down to her neck.

“No, I just improvise,” Ryan said. “God, I feel like I should make a speech or something, but like it happened back in the Republic, I can’t think of one.”

“Can’t you, Ryan?” Lavie said, leaning closer to him and smiling.

“No, and as a matter of fact” – he flushed, then grinned – “I don’t think one is necessary.”

And then, as the gentle reader must have guessed by now, he kissed her.

“Ohmygosh,” Lavie said, beaming, as they drew apart, “we seem to be doing this a lot in libraries, don’t we?”

“I suppose it’s the influence of all those *exciting* books of your dad’s,” Ryan said, and they both laughed.

Exciting books? Emily Regale thought, as she peeped in at the library door, then hurried away excitedly. *I wonder what Sigmund would say to that! Dear me.....Lavender and Ryan. It seems just a few years ago that she was my little girl, a miniature of my own mother with her toy bow and her teddy bear, and now, she’s ready to accompany Ryan wherever life will take him. I remember feeling that way – goodness, there are many times when I still do!*

“Checkmate,” young Olga Kievan said with a grin, as she moved her knight into position, trapping Carranya’s king – which was already hemmed in by many of its own pieces – in a spot from which it could not escape. “I win this time, Princess!”

“Good game,” Naomi said, appreciatively. “If you hadn’t captured the little girl’s castle three moves ago, it wouldn’t have happened, though. Or at least that’s what I *think*.”

“Goodness, you’re talented, child!” Carranya said, shaking hands with her guest. “Are all Varaldians that good at chess?”

“Actually,” Olga said, confidentially, “Father wasn’t... a very good player, but he liked to think he was one. Poor Father. We used to play together, when he had the time.” Her lower lip trembled.

Life is strange, Carranya thought, as Olga crept to her side for comfort. We Galvenians, and our Zion friends, only saw Kievan as someone who opposed us, and yet his own child mourns him. It is true that the Varald were aggressors, but in the end, they were pawns of the Third Way, just as some of us were.

She thought over the events of the past few days. *Lavie*. She shuddered when she thought how close to death her friend had come, though she had been pleasantly surprised, even amazed, to hear the details of her rescue from Bernadette and her father. She had visited Casa Regale, but could only stay for a day, much to her regret and Lavie’s, as the situation in Lorean was far from tranquil. The parliamentary elections were drawing near, and her father spent most of the day in conferences with his ministers, or looking worried.

The news from the rest of Terra was strange in its own way. Sir Douglas, the newly-appointed representative of Galvenia, was on his way safely to Unity Isle. The Varald incursion at Checkpoint Bravo had been crushed quite spectacularly, and the Varald were having the worse of their battles with the Zion Navy, all along the coast. Experts predicted that the land war would be over by the time summer came around: the Zion army had pushed the Varald divisions all the way back to the border, and the beleaguered General Lyzhnov had authorized Jansen, much to the latter’s displeasure, to sound out Kanoi and the others about the possibility of a cease-fire. The Directorate itself was riven by insurrections that arrived in starts and fits, pitting Kievan’s loyalists against the supporters of the new government.

Terrin Hipper went about in a state of perpetual confusion, unsure whether, every morning, it would be Lyzhnov or Kievan from whom he would receive orders. Then had come the news of Kievan’s assassination, under similar circumstances to Lev Andreyev’s; the Varald had accused the Zion of using mages, while the Zion calmly retorted that the military regime had both the means and the opportunity. In the meantime, Jansen had requested the Council to vote on using the Commonwealth Special Forces to quell the civil war in the Directorate, a proposal that every other nation had voted down.

No one mentions the Third Way, Carranya thought. It is as if, having been vanquished, they have retreated into the shadows, leaving their former allies to face the music on their own. But I know that this is false, and so do the Zion. Until we find the ‘new Janwen’, and defeat their leader, all our efforts may prove to be in vain.

“Your Highness!” a guard said, bursting into the room and her thoughts. “There’s a message for you from the Dean of King’s College. The bearer says it’s important.”

“King’s College?” Carranya said, surprised. “Who has brought this message?”

"A young lady, Your Highness," the guard replied. "I've asked her to wait downstairs near the servants' exit."

"Bring her to me, please," the Princess said. *Has Father Marlborough found out something?* In a few minutes, the guard arrived, accompanied by Bernadette. Her clothing seemed rumpled and out of place, her hat was askew, and her expression was perturbed.

"Why, Bernadette, how good to see you!" Carranya said, kindly. "What is the matter, my friend?"

"Princess," Bernadette said, anxiously, "please, if you can spare the time, come with me to King's College. Father Marlborough was attacked by an intruder, and the strain was too much for his heart. He is gravely ill, and it is with difficulty that we are keeping him alive. He wishes to speak with you before....it is too late." She wiped the tears that ran freely and silently down her cheeks with a handkerchief. "Please, Princess..."

Carranya placed a hand on her friend's arm. "There is no question of waiting, Bernadette," she said, gently. "Come, let us leave at once. Naomi, take care of Olga for me. I will return as soon as I can."

On their way in the Princess' carriage, Carranya questioned Bernadette, who had been nursing the Professor almost continuously since her return to college.

"Do we have any clues about the assailant?" Carranya said.

"He threatened Father Marlborough with his sword, and attacked him in the end. We suspect it may have been Henrik's acquaintance, Makarov Juno, from the description Father Marlborough gave us."

"Juno?" Carranya said, indignantly. "That boy is dangerous."

"I sent word to Father as soon as I heard, because he and Juno's mother have been friends ever since the rescue of Miss Robertson from Sir Prescott's residence. However, he wired back telling me that Juno has been missing, and that neither his mother nor his trainer knows where he is."

"Have you told the police about this?" Carranya asked.

Bernadette nodded. "But we're still not sure if it's him," she went on, "or an ally of the Third Way."

As the carriage pulled up to the gates of King's College, the Princess and Bernadette walked hand in hand, preceded and followed by guards, drawing curious glances from some of the students and ground staff. Paying scant attention to them, they made their way to the infirmary, where they were greeted by Sister Miriam, looking distraught.

"Oh, Princess," she exclaimed, "thank the Infinity you've come."

“Where is he, Sister?” Carranya said, kindly. In a few minutes, they found themselves in a room with a single bed. Marlborough seemed to have aged ten years in the past few days; he had always been frail of physique, but now, he seemed almost skin and bone.

“Princess,” he said, making an effort to lift his head, as he saw the three women enter. “Miriam, Bernadette, please....wait outside.” His voice was barely louder than a whisper, but they understood. A look of understanding passed between the three of them, and the Princess was left alone with him.

“Thank you for coming, Princess,” he said, as she sat down beside his bed. “That boy, whoever he was, was far from gentle.” He laughed.

“Professor Marlborough,” Carranya said, looking at him sympathetically, “let me help you.”

“I’m sure you will, Your Highness, and that would be coals of fire indeed, after what I accidentally did to you at Caledonia,” he said, the ghost of a smile on his lips. “But before I run out of strength, let me speak. I am fairly certain I know where the New Janwen is, but I wish I could be sure....” He looked at her sadly. “And I am also fairly sure I have understood that girl’s dream. All I need is proof – evidence..”

He looked at her intently. “Janwen burned. Janwen was rebuilt as Estrana. Estrana burned. And it burned so much that it was surrounded by volcanoes, no one could reach it....an island...the New Janwen must be an *island*...”

“An island?” Carranya said, softly. “Mann Island?”

“No, child,” the Professor said, faintly. “Janwen and Estrana were powerful. The largest cities....in their day. A powerful island, Princess.....you see it, don’t you?”

“Unity Isle!” Carranya exclaimed. “Yes, it’s logical....we need to notify the Commonwealth at once. But what do you mean by a girl’s dream?”

“That girl, Bernadette..” Marlborough’s expression softened. “Dear girl, she has tried her best, but perhaps this is the end of...my own Way...She dreamed, Princess. Six candles. She could only find five. The sixth candle is missing.”

“Six candles?”

“Eramond is the first candle, Princess,” he whispered. “Lavender Regale. Bernadette. Spenson. And yourself. The five – Sweet Infinity, I wish I had – consult the *Factoria Chronicle*, Princess. You need one more, to take on the sixth mage.”

“Another ally?”

“Can’t be....anyone...” he said. “Wilhelm....could have done it....but he’s gone.....forgive me, Princess, I....cannot be sure....if Renaud...Ask Lavender.....man and woman....against the beast....”

His head fell to one side, and he was silent.

Carranya, rising quickly, opened the door and called Bernadette to join her.

“He is not dead, Bernadette,” she said, quickly, forestalling the girl’s shocked exclamation. “But his heart is weak, and he may have had a stroke. We need to slow his systems down, but neither of us can do it alone. Come, my sister, and let us see if we can preserve him.”

“I am with you, Princess,” Bernadette said, as they joined hands, bowed their heads, and then raised their free hands over Marlborough. Sister Miriam, standing at the door, looked at them in amazement.

At the end of half an hour, they raised their heads, then stood apart, smiling at each other.

“Good work, Bernadette,” the Princess said. “I think we have left no stone unturned. It’ll be a good while before he’ll recover consciousness, but he will live.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Princess,” Bernadette said, looking with compassion at the sleeping priest, who somehow seemed less frail than he had a few moments ago. “Was he able to tell you whatever he had to?”

“I think so – Bernadette, what was that dream you had? A dream of six candles?”

Shaking her head, Bernadette told the Princess what she had told Father Joaquim. “And I’ve been having it more frequently of late,” she concluded. “Father Joaquim said it was probably nothing to worry about, but even he seemed uneasy.”

“Leave it to me, for now,” Carranya said, with a smile. “I must return to the Palace, and then I must visit Lavie as soon as I can. I think the pieces are beginning to fit.”

After saying their goodbyes, Carranya returned alone to the Palace, deep in thought as the carriage swiftly navigated the roads.

The Friend’s Destiny. The Sacrifice. Unity Isle. The Factoria Chronicle. Five candles, and five of us. And the sixth – Renaud? She shook her head. Lady Penelope, help me this once. For if this is the truth, the truth is absurd.

“This is exactly the reason why the Liberal Unionists have failed us,” Gavin Breckenridge, leader of the Opposition, said, firmly but calmly, provoking outraged howls from most of the ruling party. “Prime Minister, a breach of security of this sort *cannot* take place unless the integrity of our Government itself is compromised.”

“Granted that this is so, Breckenridge,” Prime Minister Bainbridge said, nervously, “there is no evidence that any of us is specifically involved. If you possess such evidence, please supply it to us. Rhetoric is all very well, but it isn’t enough.”

“Prime Minister, you are downplaying the gravity of the situation. These men – Sir Prescott Chuselwock, Trask and Robertson – are all accused of treason. They were due to receive the sternest sentences at the next sitting of the King’s Assizes, and were held at what is allegedly the highest security prison in Lorean. Instead of this, Robertson and Trask have escaped, and Sir Prescott was wounded while attempting to escape as well. The breach is serious, and we need to uncover the truth as soon as possible,” Breckenridge went on, implacably. “Otherwise, we will take the matter to the people of Galvenia, and they will speak at the polls.”

“Let us not turn this into an exercise in campaigning, Breckenridge,” War Minister Sheffield said, calmly. “Our men were able to detain Sir Prescott, and the Special Services are on the track of the men responsible. We must not yield to hysteria.”

“In times of war, the utmost security is required, Sheffield,” Breckenridge said sharply. “We must not allow the brave actions of our troops to obscure the fact that we have failed our own people. We have allowed foreign elements to assassinate the Prime Minister – and, even worse, we now have evidence that it was Itarians, not Varaldians, who were involved in this affair.”

“What would you have me do, Breckenridge?” Sheffield said, meeting his gaze.

“Find the guilty man – not the bandits or mercenaries who may have helped them escape, for they matter little, but the man in our own Government who is in league with them. No one else, even if he had a hundred bandits behind him, could have obtained the necessary clearance or access to prisoners such as Trask. The Opposition is willing to give you time to do this, but not too much time.”

“You dare accuse *us* of treason?” one of the younger Unionists said angrily.

“Not you, my dear colleague,” Breckenridge replied, “but one of yours.”

“Breckenridge,” Sir Cornelius Fairfax said, in a placatory tone, “you are perhaps right. I move that an Investigative Commission be set up to probe the breach of security at Lorean, comprising members of both parties. And, on behalf of the Prime Minister, I have been authorized to offer you the role of chairman. Choose your men, Breckenridge, and may we get to the truth as soon as we can.”

“You speak wisely, my lord,” Breckenridge said. “I hope that the rest of us will have as much sense as you do.”

“I must say,” the man in the suit said, calmly, “that you have not exactly performed up to expectations.”

“Sir Cornelius is dangerous,” Alex Robertson protested. He looked unkempt and haggard, but retained something of the cold formality of his usual manner. “And so is that old dotard, Sir Douglas. How were we to know that they would poke their nose into our affairs?”

“With all due respect, my good Robert,” the man replied, “if you had taken better care of your personal life, rather than terrorizing your wife and driving her to seek asylum, you would not be in this predicament. But I am willing to forgive you, if you do as I say.”

“It’s all very well of *you* to blame *us*,” Trask said, venomously. “You’re the one sitting and giving orders, my fine fellow, while we get our hands dirty.”

The man in the suit looked at him intently, until Trask began to feel uncomfortable. “Trask, I will trouble you to show some gratitude. After all, I could have left you to be hanged at the Assizes – especially after what you did to the Royal Family, despite our express orders. You were to detain them, not cause them harm.”

“Try detaining that wench and her unruly tongue without getting the urge to cause her harm yourself,” Trask said, sullenly. “She and her mother are enough to drive a man to violence.”

“Tsk, tsk,” the man said, shaking his head. “Both of you have failed to understand that, to wield the power of the Third Way effectively, you must set aside your personal vendettas. Those can be indulged in once power is obtained, but not before. You tried to act like tyrants – Robert to his wife, and you to that unfortunate Princess – and only ended up felons. I am disappointed.”

“Why, you,” Trask said, angrily, but Robertson motioned to him to be silent.

“Now, Robertson, the matter is simple. We need to recapture your wife and your child, for they know too much for our safety. And we also need to teach the brave people of Davenport – particularly that annoying boy, and that even more annoying girl – a good lesson. I would dearly love to give King’s College a message from the Third Way as well, but that would be too complicated.”

“I won’t fail this time,” Robertson said. “With enough men, even that mage will have to yield.”

“Not so fast, my good Robert,” the man in the suit said, with a smile. “Since both of you have allowed your passions to get the better of you, Robertson shall organize the punitive expedition on Davenport, and Trask will take the men to Straukpass and recapture Robertson’s family. Do not use excessive force, but do not let any humanitarian considerations blind you. Is that clear?”

Robertson nodded, and after a few minutes, Trask did so as well, though reluctantly.

“Excellent,” the man said. “You are dismissed. I give you a week, because soon, the full extent of our plans will be revealed, and we will be judged by him based on how well we have played our parts. I can count on a full reward, but I am not sure about the two of you. The Infinity may forgive, but the Third Way never does. And now, I must try to deliver our friend Prescott as well. Good day.”

The man left the room quietly, leaving Trask and Robertson staring at themselves in irritation.

“Look here, Trask,” Robertson said, nervously, “I can just about understand wanting to get – my wife and Marianne. But this Davenport business is – I mean, how safe is it? We tried it in 288, and....”

“That was different, Robert,” Trask said. “You were looking for something then. This time, we just want to take as many of them down as possible.”

“Something that turned out to be quite useless, from what they’ve told us,” Robert agreed, with a frown. “And of course, we had smaller numbers that time, and there was a Territorial Army presence. But why not just target – the boy and the girl? Why attack the town?”

“You’re soft, Robert,” Trask sneered. “At every turn, it has been Davenport who has foiled our masters’ designs. That idiot who kept knocking your bandits over was from Davenport. Your family was from Davenport. That imbecile Joaquim, and that disciple of his, were from Davenport. The boy who arrested you was from Davenport. The man who failed to bail you out, though you assured us you could count on him, was from....”

“Enough, Trask,” Robert said, uneasily. “Perhaps what you say is true. But none of them – the Juno boy, Joaquim, Spenson, Regale, even that buffoon Tamas – could have succeeded if our masters had protected us better. I do not believe in taking undue risks. You need not have been taken at Inderness, if that mage had just taken the pains to shield you better. Ronald Gray is dead, because Gharon....”

“That’s treasonous talk, Robert,” Trask spat, “and I’m sure you wouldn’t want the boss to hear you speak like that. Now for the last time, are you going to obey orders, or not?”

“Y – Yes,” Robertson said, nervously, after an uncomfortable silence. He left the room without another word.

“That man needs to be watched,” Trask said to himself, slamming his fist into his palm. “He can’t be trusted.”

“A sixth candle?” Lavie said, with a smile. “There are plenty of candles burning right now, maybe we should just pick one!”

They were sitting together in the drawing-room of Casa Regale – Ryan and Lavie together, and Carranya facing them. Father Marlborough’s condition had stabilized, though he was still unconscious, and Bernadette and Henrik remained at King’s College, both to look after him and to defend him from further attacks. A search for Juno had yielded nothing so far, but the police of every town were still on the alert. King Arlbert – shocked to hear of the attack on the premises of the college his forefathers had founded – had immediately sent members of the Territorial Army to make it more secure. The electric

supply was temporarily interrupted, as part of war-time rationing, and their faces were illuminated by candlelight.

"I'm sure that's not what he meant, Lavie," Carranya said, with a laugh. "But let me tell you the amusing part of the story first. Father Marlborough asked me to study the *Factoria Chronicle*. It was difficult to obtain a copy, for it is a very old text, and even the newest copies tend to crumble when touched. But the Dean of King's College was very helpful, especially after what happened to poor Professor Marlborough."

"I hope he gets well soon," Lavie said with concern. "He was very kind to me when I went to the Republic – and, in a way, he was our chaperone! Not that he stopped us much, did he, Ryan?" She winked at him.

"Damn right – oops, pardon my Varaldian, Princess," Ryan said with a grin, patting Lavie on the shoulder. "I'm sure you and Bernadette would have done a great job healing him, though! So what does this Chronicle talk about?"

"It's a record of the descendants of the Princes of Factoria, updated until just before the foundation of the Commonwealth," Carranya explained. "It's frightfully long, but the portion of interest deals with Prince Ryle of Factoria and his three wives."

"What a guy," Ryan said, chuckling. "He sounds like my sort of hero, all right. I remember Sergeant Burnfist telling us a little about him."

"Oh, you!" Lavie said, giving him a playful slap on the cheek.

"Apparently, when Prince Ryle was a young man, he helped Lady Fina in her fight against the Lord Below, or the Lord of the Pits. He had several allies in this fight – a fire mage and warrior named Caris Burnfist, a magician named Orubia Aquary, a woman mercenary named Hayami Raienji, and a weaponsmith called Mariel Shells. There is also a mention of another ally, a half-human named Grynwind, but even the Chronicle dismisses them as legends."

"A half-human?" Lavie said, with a laugh. "You mean like Sir Prescott?"

"Good one, Lavie," Ryan said, with a grin, "but I think she means a mythical creature, like an elf or a dwarf, who looked human but had magical powers, or who was immortal."

"Some of those *names* sound familiar, Ryan," Lavie went on. "I mean, Bernadette's last name is Aquary, and that Sergeant who helped us was a Burnfist – *and* a fire mage! Are they all related?"

"Very well observed, Lavie," Carranya said. "And the Zion captain who helped me in the Palace of Gyrus, along with her children and relatives, was a Raienji. Well, Prince Ryle eventually married three of his allies."

“At the same time?” Lavie said, making a face.

“No, one after the other. The wife of his youth was Mariel Shells, with whom he had three children, but she died in an accident when experimenting with explosives of some sort. His second was Lady Fina Delstar herself, but she died of a disease she had inherited from her father, leaving two children of her own. Finally, when he was in the prime of life, he married Hayami Raienji, who was actually Princess Esmeriah of the Kingdom of Gyrus in disguise. They had four children of their own.”

“What a family!” Lavie said, surprised. “I wonder how all those children got on with their step-moms!”

“Now here’s the interesting part, my friends,” Carranya said, leaning forward. “Just before he died, many years later, Prince Ryle told his wife, Esmeriah, that he had received a message in his sleep. According to the message, thousands of years later, their descendants – and their friends’ descendants – would have to join hands with their new friends to fight against evil. He also said that this this, they would not have to face the Lord of the Pits himself, but one of his servants.”

“That’s interesting,” Ryan said. “Looks like I’m not the only ‘Chosen One’ out here!” He chuckled. “So that means Bernadette, and Sergeant Burnfist, and your Zion captain all have to join hands with us?”

“Oh, that’s not the end of the story, Ryan,” Carranya said. “You see, we’re *all* his descendants.”

“All of us?” Lavie exclaimed.

“My mother’s family, the Traznovs, are descendants of Princess Esmeriah, which is how I was able to enter the Palace of Gyrus,” the Princess said, with a laugh. “The Delstar branch of the clan were the ancestors of the Lancasters – and you, my dear Lavie, are certainly quite like Lady Fina. She was often described as a brown-haired dragon.”

“A dragon?” Ryan said, with mock alarm. “Good God, I’d better be careful around her.”

“I’m not a *dragon*, you goof,” Lavie said, teasingly. “Except where Sir Chucklehead is concerned. So that’s why that Aline woman called me Fina, I guess!”

“By a dragon, the ancients did not mean a creature,” Carranya explained, “but a woman of great courage and devotion.”

“That’s you, all right. My friend the brown-haired dragon,” Ryan said, affectionately.

Lavie blushed, but said nothing.

“The Aquarys, of course, are Bernadette’s ancestors – Orubia Aquary apparently passed on the family name to her children. And the Shells, a green-haired family of high intelligence, became the Sheldons of Galvenia.”

“Oh my God!” Lavie said, bursting into laughter. “That must be Aline, the goof. *She’s* a descendant of Prince Ryle, too? You really ought to meet her some day, Ryan. *She’s* – original.”

“It gets better, Lavie,” Carranya said, beginning to laugh herself. “Another branch of the Shells clan, who had magical powers, were among the first Journeymen, and surrendered their surname when they became mages. Among them were Kaleb, the hero.”

“Kaleb?” Ryan stared at her for a moment. “That means Kevin, too....wait a minute! You mean.....*I’m* also a descendant of Prince Ryle and Mariel What’s-Her-Name?”

“I’m sure Aline would be delighted to hear that, Ryan,” Lavie said, laughing hard, and after a few moments, Ryan saw the amusing side of it, and began to laugh too.

“I notice your Chronicle spares Henrik and Armin, Princess,” Ryan said, when they had all returned to normal. “As well as Striker, Father Marlborough, Sergeant Burns, and a whole lot of other brave people whom we both know.”

“Well, Prince Ryle did mention new friends,” Carranya said, “and there’s no rule that someone who *isn’t* his descendant cannot perform noble deeds. But I must say that this is amusing all the same. I wonder what Prince Ryle himself would think of it.”

“I know what *I* would think,” Ryan said. “That this is the most dopey story I’ve ever heard in my entire life! And yet, Princess, it’s interesting. Wouldn’t you agree, Distant Cousin Lavie?”

“Oh, I’m with you, Ryan, my kinsman,” Lavie said, with a sly smile aimed at Carranya. “And Cousin Carranya’s certainly not about to disagree, either!”

“Now, to return to something more serious, Cousin Ryan,” Carranya said. “As I was saying, Bernadette had the dream of the six candles, and Father Marlborough seemed to think it was very important. The last words he spoke before he collapsed were: ‘Ask Lavender’ and ‘man and woman – the beast’. Does that mean anything to you, Lavie, my friend?”

“Man and woman? The beast?” Lavie shook her head. “Except, no – ah, now I remember! It was something Bernadette and Father Marlborough gave me to read, when Ryan and I got back from the Republic. Wait, I’ll fetch it for you!” She tried to stand, but her right leg buckled, and Ryan rushed to her support.

“Calm down, Lavie,” he said, kindly, as he helped her sit again. “I’ll fetch it for you. Where is it?”

“With the books in my room,” she said, smiling at him gratefully. “It’s a thin little book, with a lot of other articles in it.”

“That should be simple,” Ryan said. In five minutes, he had made the trip to Lavie’s room and back, and returned with the book, which he handed to Lavie.

"It's the last paragraph, Carranya," she said, finding the page, and reading out the words slowly:

...The union of man and woman, blessed by the Infinity and His saints, is itself a miracle, and can overcome the beast. Together, they can accomplish what neither could do on their own – in their homes, in their communities, and even in society at large. Perhaps it is here that the allegorical meaning of the Three Symbols of Janwen truly lies.

"Bernadette wrote that?" Ryan said, when she had finished. "Are you sure she isn't Marlborough's daughter, and not old Jonas'?"

"You're such a kidder," Lavie said, with a laugh. "That's the only part I thought could be important, Carranya – the rest is history, and quotes from saints, and stuff like that. What could it mean?"

"Father Marlborough said we were the five candles," Carranya said, softly, taking Lavie's right hand in her own. "You and me, Ryan, Henrik and Bernadette."

"I think I've got it, Lavie," Ryan said, with a laugh. "Marlborough's playing match-maker, like all bachelors do."

"Match-maker?" Carranya said, surprised. "What do you mean, Ryan?"

"Look at Bernadette's essay. It's obviously about the virtues of marriage, from what I could see. So he's trying to pair us up, like any good priest would." He grinned. "I wonder what you'd think of that interpretation, Lavie."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind, Mr. Eramond, but we're not yet of age," Lavie said, demurely. "But what do *you* think of it, Ryan?"

"I've always dreamed of marrying a dragon, so I'm not objecting," Ryan said, with a wink, and they both began laughing.

"Dear me, Lord Ryan," Carranya said, looking fondly at her friends, "perhaps there is something to what you say."

"No, I'm just kidding you, Princess. It can't be anything as mundane as that. It has to have something to do with the Third Way, the Way of the Beast."

"The man and the woman symbolize justice and love, according to Gran," Lavie said.

"Or violence and deceit, according to what Bernadette told me when she saw that symbol of theirs," Ryan pointed out. "Which interpretation is the correct one?"

"She seems to favour the first one, Lavie," Carranya said. "But – Goodness me, Ryan, perhaps you're right." She shook her head. "Perhaps what Father Marlborough means is that I ought to do my duty as a Princess – to marry, and preserve the royal bloodline, in case I'm....." She stopped.

“Here, Princess, take my other hand,” Lavie said, observing that Carranya was looking uncomfortable. “What’s the matter?”

“He mentioned Duke Renaud,” Carranya said, in a low voice, almost a whisper. “Is that what he meant?”

“Duke Renaud?” Ryan made a face. “Very funny, Princess. First of all, neither Charlemagne nor your father would accept. And second – do you even know him that well?”

“He treated me with kindness when we were prisoners,” Carranya said, her face looking blank, almost numb. “And yet....”

“Father Marlborough told me a story about Renaud, Princess,” Lavie said, hoping to distract her friend, who seemed upset. “Apparently he wanted to learn magic, though he didn’t have the skill, but he kept trying to! Isn’t that silly?”

Carranya managed a faint smile. “Renaud....Of course, if it were necessary for reasons of State, I could – but no. I couldn’t forget Francis.”

“Reasons of State?” Lavie said, with a grimace. “Of course you couldn’t, Carranya. No one’s asking you to. If *that* was Father Marlborough’s plan, it’s a dopey plan!”

Ryan looked at her sympathetically. “I’m sorry, Princess,” he said. “And I understand a lot of what you said to me on that ship, now. But maybe it’s nothing as specific as that. Maybe it just means that we have to fight in pairs, a man and a woman each. Lavie and I fought together at Koroth, and Henrik and Bernadette were together in Itaria City. It needn’t have anything to do with marriage as such. That was just me being silly.”

“Fight in pairs? That’s sensible, Ryan,” Carranya said, recovering her composure. “After all, you and I fought together on the *Paradiso*, and Agent Striker was with me in the Palace of Gyrus. Let’s hope that Father Marlborough recovers soon, and we can ask him what he meant.”

“That’s probably the best idea, Carranya,” Lavie said, kindly. She took out her watch, looked at it, and grinned. “And now, it’s time for tea! Carmen’s made all our favourites, and Mom has even baked you one of her cakes!”

“How kind of her,” Carranya said, brightening further.

“Come on, Princess, no point in moping about what the Professor may have meant,” Ryan said, cheerfully. “Let’s dig in!”

“They’re going to *what*?” Armin Tamas said, jumping out of his chair. “Damn it, we can’t allow them to do that!”

"I'm afraid so, Armin," Bowes said. "We're mounting guard with the Territorial Army, just to be on the safe side, but there aren't many of them, and they're hardly the most battle-ready force. What we need are unofficial reinforcements."

Armin nodded. "I can manage that, Supremo," he said, "but I'm worried about Ryan. He's a great fighter, but he'll have to stay back to look after his parents – and Lavie Regale, of all people. Geez, what does he see in *her*?"

"Well, Armin," Bowes said indulgently, "if someone had travelled thousands of miles, and fought a beast to save your life, wouldn't you feel grateful?"

"I dunno, Bowes," Armin said, with a suspiciously innocent look. "It's never happened to *me*."

"Very funny, Armin. Personally, if a girl who looked like that came and rescued me from a dungeon, I'd be falling head-over-heels myself – but don't quote me in front of my wife, please." Bowes chuckled.

"Ah, don't worry, Supremo. Armin Tamas is the soul of discretion. So what exactly should my boys and I do?"

"They plan to – strike at night, when Ryan will almost surely be with his father and mother," Bowes replied. "I initially thought of calling upon Mr. Spenson, and his friend the healer, but they have been charged with defending a professor at King's College, who was mysteriously attacked."

"Galvenia is going to the dogs," Armin said, disgustedly. "No law and order, I tell ya. Just wait till Breckenridge comes in, and things'll get better! Bainbridge is a doofus."

"He may well win the next elections, but that's a matter for tomorrow," Bowes replied. "How many can you guarantee?"

"Eight, Supremo; I had to kick out Stockhelm because he said Ryan was a traitor," Armin said. "So what's the deal? You need us in the woods, right?"

"The Territorial Army will cover the woods," Bowes replied. "But they may not come in that way. We want you and your men to cover the area around Casa Regale, and the way to Serin's Peak. The men at the shipyard have already been alerted. Move in silently, by around nine p.m., and keep watch. We'll give you a radio. The chapel at Saint Hilda's will serve as a temporary rescue point in case anyone – either you or the citizens – are wounded, and they have arranged their own defence."

"Defence?" Armin said, with a laugh. "Somehow, I don't think *prayers* are going to save us against that louse Robert."

"Now, don't say that, Armin," a voice said, breaking in on both of them. "The Infinity protects his own."

"Er...hi, Sister Miriam," Armin said, nervously. "I was just kidding."

Sister Miriam smiled. "I'm sure you were. I just wanted to remind both of you that we'll be in the Chapel all through the night, and we have medical supplies. Sister Rosemary from Lorean will be helping me, as well as a young student from Saint Nealus'. If you should meet them, Armin, please remember your manners."

Armin grinned. "Gotcha, Sister. Let's show these vagabonds what we're made of!"

"Well said," Sister Miriam replied. "And I pray that they may be utterly confounded."

"That's the spirit, my friends," Bowes said. "Now I'll just warn the others, and we're good to go."

"We've had no word from Robert," the bandit leader growled. "It's already seven-thirty, and he said he'd be there by seven."

"Ah, shut up," his assistant replied, as the five of them sat around the fire. "Anyway, we can't move yet, the others haven't come."

"What I don't get," another of them said, plaintively, "is they're asking us to hit this rich kid's house, and bust things up. But shouldn't we be, y'know, getting some loot? I'm sure the rich guy will pay us well to leave him alone."

"Better than Robert, anyhow," the leader said, with a laugh. "But he's given us his orders. We need to take them down – *all* of them. This is about revenge."

The assistant laughed raucously. "Nobody puts ol' Robert in jail, huh? I still say it's stupid of him to get caught."

"Maybe he's been caught again," yet another suggested, running his fingers across the blade of his knife. "If he ain't here by eight, let's move on ahead."

"Wait, fool," the leader said, irritably. "We move when Robert comes. Got it? Now sit down, lunkheads, and stop tryin' to be funny."

"Good lord, man, who are you?" Fossen said, mildly. "It's always interesting to have an uninvited guest, though I'm afraid my soup has run out for the day."

"To hell with you and your soup!" the man in the cloak hissed. "Let me see my daughter!"

"Your daughter?" Fossen shook his head. "Ah, I see. You must be my no-good nephew-in-law. And I'm afraid I can't let you do that, my dear fellow. She and her mother are under my protection."

“Your protection?” the man shouted. “That is totally illegal. Who are you, anyway?”

“Lieutenant-Colonel John Fowler, of His Majesty’s Army,” Fossen said, with a smile. “Or, if you want my name as a Wanderer, it is Fossen. You must be Alexander Robertson.”

“Do not mention names,” the man said, nervously.

On hearing this conversation, Julianne – who had just finished preparing the evening’s meal – came to the door, but Fossen motioned her away, and she retreated, wondering what the matter was.

“Tell me what it is you have come for, Alexander,” Fossen said, softly. “Perhaps I can help you.”

“You cannot, Fowler, or Fossen, or whatever your infernal name is,” Robertson said, and he cursed under his breath. “Tonight, a group of bandits led by a man named Trask will come here, and they will try to seize my child and – my wife, perhaps even kill them. I need to take Marianne away.”

“And your poor wife?” Fossen said, sternly. “What of her?”

“What is that to you or me, Fowler? I do not care why she chooses to stay with you, though it is dishonourable behaviour indeed for a married woman to enter the house of a strange man.....”

Suddenly, Robertson found himself looking at the point of a sword.

“Silence, Alexander,” Fossen said, softly, but with a distinct menace. “Do not complete that sentence. It will only dishonour you, and anger me – and I am not a man who is easily angered. It is the duty of a Wanderer to protect the widow and the orphan – or, in this case, the divorcee and the orphan. You have wounded her enough, Alexander. Go away. I will defend your child.”

“This is unlawful,” Robertson raged. “You have no right to...”

Suddenly, a knife flew through the air, striking Robertson in the back. “Damnation!” he screamed, as he fell to the ground. Two men emerged from the shadows, carrying knives.

“We knew you were a traitor, Robert,” one of them said. “Trask was right. He will be pleased with us. Now, old man, where are the wench and her mother?”

With a swift, almost casual motion, Fossen swung his sword, and the man was disarmed. He stared at his fallen sword, blankly, then scrambled for it – but before he could do so, a blue beam shot forth from Fossen’s own sword, knocking him to the ground.

“Wise guy, eh?” the second man roared, charging forward. Closing the door, Fossen stepped outside and parried his wild thrust, then lunged and wounded the man in one side.

“I’ll kill you, old fool!” he said, clutching his side. He threw a knife which hung from his belt at Fossen, who ducked it narrowly.

"You..." Taking up his sword, he threw himself in the direction of his older opponent, but as he was in mid-air, a blue beam struck him, and he, too, fell to the ground.

Fossen looked around, slowly and carefully.

"What happened, father?" Julianne said, opening the door. "Is all – Oh, sweet Infinity! What happened?"

"Some bandits wanted to take you and your girl away, my daughter," Fossen replied. "And I'm afraid that poor man there has learned that one cannot be a bandit one day, and a good man the next." He knelt down beside Robert, and turned him around.

"I'm afraid he's done for," Fossen said. "Those bandits may be awful at melee combat, but they know their knife-throws. Look on him one last time, Julianne, for you knew him well."

"I?" Julianne said, and then screamed – or, at least, gave a strangled scream – as Fossen drew the hood away from the dying man's head.

"Alexander....oh, no..." she said, shaking his head. "Infinity knows I hated and feared him, but I....did not wish him dead."

"Fowler..." Robertson said, faintly. "Please. Let me see my child....once...."

A look passed between Fowler and Julianne, and he nodded. In a few minutes, Marianne was at the door.

"What *is* it, Mother?" she said, rather annoyed at having been asked to leave the dinner table.

"Marianne," Julianne said, hesitantly, but Marianne needed no explanation when she saw the fallen man.

"*Father!*" she screamed. "Father, what happened? No...."

She knelt down besides Fowler, who was holding her father's hand. "I'm afraid he's been betrayed by the bandits he was working with, girl," he said, sadly.

"Marianne..." Robertson said. It was a very faint and indistinct whisper, almost a croak.

"Yes, Father?" Marianne said, looking at him through the blur of her tears.

"Marianne.....forgive me...." He tried to raise himself on one arm, then fell. "I thought I knew better.....and now it's.....all lost....."

"Father, please," Marianne pleaded. "We'll call a doctor, or something! Don't...."

"I'm sorry, Marianne....." he whispered. "It's....all going to hell, anyhow.....the Sixth.....Unity.....Marianne, I'm only glad....I could see you.....once more....."

His eyes turned blank and unseeing, and his head drooped. Marianne looked at him, disbelieving, for a moment, then burst into wild sobs, as her mother comforted her.

"He may have been a villain, girl," Fossen said, rising and sheathing his sword, "but, in his own strange way, he did love you. I'll see to it that he has a decent burial."

It was at that moment that a young man appeared. "Greetings, old man. What seems to be the cause of all this mourning?" he said, calmly.

"Where in Terra have you been, Juno?" Fossen said, disapprovingly. "Two bandits turned up here, and I had to take care of them myself."

"I see," Juno said, looking at the three fallen men. "Are they dead?"

"Two of them are, I'm afraid, Juno," Fossen said, with a guilty expression on his face. "The first had taken Robertson's life...."

"Robertson?" Juno said, and his face was contorted with rage. "Is that *Robertson* who lies dead there? May he rot in the deepest bowels of the Pits for ever. May his soul be devoured by the Three Beasts."

Marianne screamed, and Fossen raised a hand. "That's enough from you, boy," he said, sternly. "Whatever he may have been, he was that child's father."

"He was the one who took my own father from me, Fossen," Juno said, kicking the corpse contemptuously with one boot, to Marianne's horror. "He was the mastermind of the attack on Davenport, the day my father died at the hands of his bandits. And for what? To steal a sword, Fossen. A foolish sword which belonged to that schemer and scoundrel, Eramond. And the greatest irony of it all is that, in the end, the sword they sought was the wrong one. No, Fossen, do not ask me to have pity on this man."

"Juno, now is not the time for personal revenge," Fossen said, mildly.

"Silence, old man," he said, furiously, "and let me speak. If you will not leave me room for personal revenge, then at least allow me to speak as a Galvenian. You once served Galvenia, Fossen. Do you remember Darington? The sudden capitulation of Arlbert and Socius? This reptile was responsible for it as well. There is hardly a man or woman in Galvenia whom he has not harmed by his machinations."

"Darington?"

"I see you do not know. Well, let me tell you what I have found out. It was never His Majesty's intention to surrender Darington at all. He was prepared to fight. Brave men died in that fight. But thanks to a

cruel fate, Queen Katarina fell ill, and the medications she needed were being transported from Zion. This traitor, who was then in the pay of the Zion, used his bandits to intercept them, bringing Arlbert to his knees – for if he had received them, the Queen would have been cured, and our forces could have defeated the Zion. Instead, he was forced to permit the annexation in exchange for the life of the Queen. That is the kind of man you ask me to pity, Fossen. Do you understand how foolish you are?”

“Boy,” Fossen said, shaking his head, “you’re talking too much. You already let us down once, when you went gallivanting away instead of protecting Marianne when she went to visit Aquary and your mother. Calm yourself, and stop grieving that poor girl further. Use this opportunity to meditate on the fact that evil men can do evil because good men fail to do enough good.” He turned away. “Come along, Marianne. It’s cold outside. And stay indoors, in case any more of those ruffians decide to pay us a visit.”

Still sobbing, Marianne allowed her mother and Fossen to lead her into the house. Juno watched them leave with cold satisfaction.

That was unnecessary, Juno.

“Silence,” he replied, a smile coming to his lips. “I have learned all I need to know from him, at any rate. I now know everything about the dangers that lie over Terra, and what role I must play. The time has come for Makarov Juno” – he drew the sword, and watched it gleam in the moonlight – “to show Terra that a Chosen One and a true hero are entirely different things.”

“Ryan, don’t prowl around like that, son,” Theodore said, a trifle nervously. “You’ll wear down the carpet, and it’s a new one.”

“Very funny, Dad,” Ryan said, brushing at his uniform. “I keep wondering if I should be with Lavie, but that Agent promised me he’d have men to guard her house, and I need to defend you if they should come by. They did say they’d call me to join the troops if they needed me, though.”

“This takes me back to the last time bandits ever dared to attack Davenport,” Sheila said, looking regretfully at her knitting, which she had tangled quite irreversibly because of her own anxiety. “Do you remember, Theo, dear? Ryan was just a little boy at that time.”

“I remember a time,” Ryan said, “when you told me to stay in my room and close the door, because strange men were coming to town. I must’ve been about five or six. I heard about it from Lieutenant Reckland when we shipped out to the Republic, later. He was in the Territorial Army at that time.”

“That’s the time Franz Juno died,” Theodore said, looking out of the window. “He was a good man, poor soul. And what made it worse was that he was from Davenport. I don’t know why they never put up a statue to him, but then both Parker and Saunders are lazy men.”

“I’ll never forget what his wife did when she heard the news,” Sheila said, sympathetically. “Poor girl. When they brought the Lieutenant back, she didn’t cry – she just flung herself on him, and wouldn’t let him go for a long while. She’s gone around like one of those Italian nuns ever since. That’s why that boy of hers is such an oddball. Poor Constance. The only one who could ever speak to her was Barbara Spenson.”

“‘Oddball’ is putting it mildly, Mum,” Ryan said.

Suddenly, a flare lit up the sky, and burst into a sphere of green.

“That’s the signal!” Ryan said, his hand instinctively reaching for his pistol. “They’ve been sighted. I hope the Territorial Army can keep them out. If they come this way, though, I’m ready for them.”

“Careful with that sword, son,” Theodore said. “It’s got thousands of years of history within it, if my forefather was right. If anything happens to it, I’ll fine you *twenty* million Commonwealth dollars.”

Ryan grinned. “No fear, Dad,” he said. “They’ll have to take it from my dead hands.”

“Mom, what’s going on?” Lavie said, standing up with some difficulty, as she heard the flare rocket explode

“Now, Lavie, dear, don’t worry,” Emily said. “The police have been on alert, because they said bandits had been sighted here. That’s just a signal warning us to stay indoors.”

“Bandits?” Lavie said, alarmed, but alarm soon gave way to determination – and then to disappointment, as she looked down at her right hand. “Hmph! If only I could use my hand as well as I used to, I’d give them an arrow in the face!”

Sigmund smiled and helped her stand. “Now, Lavie, I’m sure the authorities have the situation well in hand. Just stay safe in your room, and once the danger is past, they’ll fire another rocket to tell us that it’s safe. You and Ryan can go for a moonlit walk then.”

“Very funny, Daddy!” Lavie said, with a laugh, as Sigmund helped her climb the stairs.

“Damn it, they’ve got past us!” Lieutenant Perkin said, wiping the tears from his eyes. “Damn smoke bomb, and it wasn’t just one, it was a crate-load of them!”

“After them!” Sergeant Burns said. She had specifically requested a transfer to the low-profile Territorial Army following her father’s fall from grace, and had soon become a favourite with the small detachment that was assigned to Davenport. “We can’t let them get away.”

“You’ve got that right. Guard the entrance, you three,” Perkin said, “and you can take charge of them, Corporal Irwin. Burns, you and I will take the rest of the men. Head east to the Regale house, and I’ll head west and encircle the rest of the place.”

“Yes, sir,” Burns said, drawing her sword and saluting. As she marched forward, her men behind her, her face wore a steely look that her former fellow Marines – including her commanding officer, Ross – had learned to fear.

I’m going to live this down, she thought. Sir Prescott may have deceived poor Daddy, but I can always make sure that the family name doesn’t stay disgraced for long.

As she marched forward, however, she heard the sound of gunfire.

“Damnation, they’ve got pistols!” she said. “Draw your rifles, men.”

Suddenly, she saw a man walking up to her, unarmed. “What are you doing here?” she called out. “It’s not safe! Go back home!”

“Ah, Sergeant Burns,” the man said, coming close enough for her to see his face, even with the helmet he wore, “I think my armour is strong enough. And I think we need to discuss certain things.”

Burns’ expression turned to one of pure fury. “Leave at once, Sir Prescott, or I shall force you to!”

“Ah, wait a minute,” he began, but the sound of gunfire grew louder and closer. He began to run eastwards, before the Sergeant could stop him.

“They’re in our line of sight now,” Burns said. “Fire!”

The riflemen fired, and three of the bandits fell, though one of Burns’ men was also wounded. The bandits had now come close enough to draw their swords, and the fighting grew heavy. Burns herself, beset by two bandits, was nearly felled, but manage to evade one and transfix the other with her own sword.

“Looks like that’s one lot of them,” one of the men remarked, rising from the ground. “They’re lousy fighters, but they’re pretty strong.”

“You three, gather the wounded,” Burns said, looking at two of her own men, who lay on the ground, “and move them to Saint Hilda’s at once. The rest of you, follow me. I don’t know what that man Prescott is up to, but it can’t be good.”

“You mean Sir Chucklehead?” one of the men said.

“Sir Chucklehead?” Burns could not help laughing. “Who gave him that wonderful name?”

“Apparently it was Corporal Eramond, who had it from his girlfriend,” another man explained.

Good one, Miss Lavie, Burns thought, smiling to herself as they drew closer to the Regale house.

“Ryan, you need to help us,” Hocha said. “The men on the west are overpowered, and the bandits are trying to break down Snell’s door and loot the place.” He was in his old armour, wearing an old-fashioned helmet that would have seemed comic at any other time. “Perkin requests it. He has sent me to guard this place, but that may not be necessary if you can repulse them.”

“I’m on my way, Mum, Dad,” Ryan said. “Stay safe, all right?”

Sheila’s lip trembled, but it was Theodore who spoke. “You too, son.”

As Ryan headed out, he saw six of the Territorial Army men being overpowered by twelve bandits. Instinctively, he drew his revolver and fired once, then twice, felling two of the bandits. The distraction was enough for the attackers to break ranks, and they turned around, heading toward Ryan.

Do not fear. You are being preserved for a greater trial.

Drawing the Sword of Regret, he aimed a beam at one of the advancing men, striking him in the chest and knocking him down instantly. Soon it was a free-for-all, bandits and Galvenian soldiers, but Ryan’s weapon gave him an advantage, and though he did suffer wounds when two of the bandits charged him, the Galvenian Army had soon secured the west side of town.

“Great work, son,” Lieutenant Perkin said, looking at his own men, three of whom were wounded. “Help us shift those three to Saint Hilda’s, while Burns’ men take care of that side.”

As Ryan helped the other men shift the wounded to Saint Hilda’s, he saw, to his amazement, that Casa Regale was surrounded by young men in plain clothes – one of whom was only too familiar.

“Armin!” he called out. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Keeping *Lavie* safe while you play the hero, you dope,” the reply came back. “Geez, sometimes this Intelligence stuff is no fun.”

However, they could not continue this conversation, as a second wave of bandits – about ten strong – made a desperate dash past Burns’ men, and drew near Armin and his companions. Three of the boys with Armin drew pistols and began firing, and the wave soon became disorderly. Armin threw one knife, then another, and the leader of the group fell, clutching at his throat and clawing at the ground.

“Nice work, boys!” Burns called out, as her men intercepted the rest of the bandits from the rear, and disposed of them without much difficulty.

“Is it over?” Ryan called out, as he left the last of the wounded men in the chapel and came out, his sword drawn. As he looked at Casa Regale, his expression turned to one of horror. “Sweet Infinity, what’s that?”

“What’s what?” Sergeant Burns called out.

“There are two men trying to enter the Regale house, there! With a grappling hook!” Ryan screamed, waving and pointing frantically. He drew his pistol and fired, and though he missed, one of the men lost his balance.

“Leave this to me, Compadre,” Armin said, throwing another knife. It hit the second of the men, and he fell into a bed of flowers, moaning in pain.

“Damn it, the other one’s got inside!” Ryan said, as he raced towards the Regale house as fast as he could, feeling his blood turn to ice. “Lavie, hang on!”

There was a sound of broken glass, and Lavie Regale started, then screamed.

“Waaaah! W – Who are you?” she said, looking at the figure that had suddenly appeared at her window, and which was now breaking the bolts which held it in place. But before she could receive a reply, she already knew.

Sir Prescott.

“Good evening, dear Miss Lavender,” he said. “It is a pleasant evening today.”

“Wh – what do you want?” she said, shrinking from the window, and leaning on her desk for support as she tried to stand.

“The pleasure of your company, Miss Lavender,” he said, as he struggled with one of the windows. Lavie reached for her bow, then realized, helplessly, that she would probably lack the strength to draw it.

There was a sound of wood splintering as Prescott forced the window open. He lost his footing for a moment, and Lavie, rushing forward with an arrow, ran towards him, trying to use it as a dagger. Or, at least, she tried to run – but she stumbled, allowing Prescott to regain his grip.

“Daddy, Mom, Ryan, help!” she cried out, frantically, now trying to make her way to the door and open it. “Help me!”

Sir Prescott finally climbed over the ledge, and stood in the Room. Lavie was backed against the door, and struggled to her feet, trying to turn the doorknob.

“There is no need to go anywhere, Miss Lavender,” Prescott said, with a cruel smile on his face. “Come, my wounded gazelle, let us speak of more pleasant things.”

“Leave here at once, you monster!” she shouted. In desperation, she threw the arrow at him, and it struck him in the face, scratching one cheek. Then she reached for the bow she had dropped, and felt the strength return to her right hand, wondering if it would be enough....

“You are as spirited as you are beautiful, Miss Lavender,” he said, calmly, despite the expression of mounting anger on his face. “Come, let me show you....”

“The hell you won’t,” a voice replied, suddenly, as the door opened. “You will never, *ever* lay a hand on her.”

“There’s someone up there!” Ryan said, as he rushed into Casa Regale. “We need to help Lavie! Where is she?”

“Good heavens, is that Lavie screaming?” Emily said, startled. “My God.....Ryan! She’s in her room!”

But Ryan had already sped up the stairs, with Emily – who, though unarmed, was a mother – following close behind. However, they were greeted by a sight that, had they not been on edge, would have left them cheering wildly.

“Call it a father’s intuition,” Sigmund Regale said, calmly, the two barrels of his shotgun pointed at Sir Prescott, who was cowering in a corner, “but I always had a feeling you’d be mixed up with this, you villain. I’m only glad I kept this old thing handy the minute I heard the bandits were coming, and that Ryan spotted you and your friend climbing up.”

Sir Prescott’s expression was venomous, but Sigmund met his unflinchingly, and he smiled. “Good evening, Sir Prescott. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“W – what do you intend to do?” Prescott stammered, perspiration streaming down his face. “You c – can’t harm me....”

Ryan had already rushed over to Lavie, and helped her rise to her feet, as she moved into the shelter of his arms. His sword was drawn and covered Prescott, in the event of any sudden movement.

“Listen to me, Sir Prescott. You have two choices. Either you can stay here quietly while I fetch the Army, or I will hand you over to young Eramond, who will settle the matter as gentlemen used to. I assume you have your sword with you. I would love to shoot, but unfortunately, I do not waste large-bore cartridges on chimpanzees like you.”

Prescott glared at him. “D – do not insult me with an offer of that sort,” he said. “Sir Prescott does not duel with commoners...”

“Silence,” Sigmund said, giving him a resounding slap in the face, which caused Lavie and Emily to cheer loudly, and Ryan to applaud. “You see, Prescott, I was giving you a chance, but you’re every bit as much a fool as I thought you were. Ryan, he’s all yours. Don’t kill him, but take him back to Lorean yourself with the rest of the Army. Short of killing him, though, you may amuse yourself.”

“You got it, Mr. Regale,” Ryan said, grinning, as he pointed the Sword of Regret at the cowering nobleman.

That fine girl has an idea of her own, so do not use too much force. Trip him when he tries to run. It will be amusing, and we Journeymen need amusement from time to time.

“Gotcha,” Ryan said, and a bolt of blue struck Sir Prescott in the chest, causing him to yelp with pain. He scrambled to his feet, and turned to run, but Ryan tripped him, as the Sword had said.

“Oh, dear, Sir Chucklehead, you’re not leaving without saying goodbye, are you?” Lavie said, a red glint in her eyes, as she scraped an arrow against her bangle. With a swift movement, she drew her bow, and – since this is a historical record, I must record this faithfully – her arrow struck the seat of Sir Prescott’s trousers, causing him to run around frantically, screaming.

“Oh, dear. Poor Sir Prescott’s pants are on fire, Lavender. You naughty girl.” Emily said, laughing loudly.

Ryan and Lavie both laughed so hard that the tears ran down their cheeks, then embraced. Outside, the Territorial Army was waiting.

“Good evening, Prescott,” Sergeant Burns said, drenching him from head to foot with a bucket of water. “I think you’ll prefer it in the brig, after what you’ve been through here.”

A second beam from Ryan struck him as he began to curse, and he fell to the ground, groaning.

“Don’t swear in front of women of breeding, jackass,” he said. “Didn’t your mother teach you anything?”

“Daddy! Ryan!” Lavie exclaimed, rushing over to embrace her father. “You were awesome! Thank you, Daddy!”

“Well, Lavie,” he said, holding her close, “sooner or later the day will come when Ryan will have to protect you on his own. But while you’re in my house, dearest, I’m damn well going to do my bit.”

“That was all kinds of cool, Mr. Regale,” Ryan said, as Lavie returned to him, and gave him a loud kiss on the cheek. “I don’t think Sir Chucklehead will ever bother us again, not for quite a while.”

“Indeed,” Emily said, watching the spluttering Prescott being led away, and beginning to laugh again.

A second flare exploded in the midst of the night sky, and Davenport was at peace once more.

“Here, all of you,” Armin Tamas said, bearing a large punchbowl into Casa Regale. He was accompanied by his seven companions in battle, all of whom had emerged unscathed from the skirmish, and laid the bowl on the Regales’ dining table. Assembled there, besides Lavie, her parents and her grandmother, were Ryan and his parents, and Armin’s mother – not to forget his younger brother, Shirvin, who was looking around at them all curiously. “Mom brewed this up just now. I’m sure you’re all too excited to go to bed right now, so you might as well have a sip!”

“That’s very kind of you, Mrs. Tamas,” Sigmund said, gratefully. “A bit of good Galvenian fruit punch is what we all need now.”

“Hey, Ryan, here’s a glass for you,” he said, handing one to his old friend. “And while I’m about it, here’s one for you, Lavie. It’s good for you, unlike a certain batch of brownies that all Galvenia has come to fear.” His brother handed him another glass, which he offered to Lavie.

Lavie rolled her eyes. “Ordinarily, Armin, I’d take offence at that, but you really helped us out, so – er, thanks, I guess.”

Shirvin began to giggle, and Armin motioned to him to be silent. “Did you do what I told you, kid?” he whispered.

“Yes, bro,” Shirvin said, grinning.

After everyone had been served their punch, and Sigmund proposed a toast, they all downed their glasses with expressions of obvious approval.

“Great punch, Mrs. Tamas,” Ryan said, holding out his glass to Armin for a refill.

“I must say, this is quite excellent,” Anne Lancaster said, causing Melody to flush with pleasure.

“This tastes funny, Armin,” Lavie said, with a grin. “Sort of like cough syrup, actually! But it’s pretty cool. Thanks, Mrs. Tamas.”

“Cough syrup?” Sigmund said, sniffing his glass. “What do you mean, Lavie?”

Shirvin sniggered.

“What are you laughing at, kid?” Armin said, though it was obvious he was trying hard not to laugh himself.

“I feel sort of....funny,” Lavie said, placing one hand over her head. “Maybe I’m just tired or something.”

“Perhaps you should just go to bed, dear,” Emily said. “We can continue the celebration tomorrow, you know.”

Lavie began to giggle. “No way, Mom, no way!” She suddenly stepped away from the table, and began to walk up to Shirvin. “Hello, little boy,” she said, rather loudly.

“Hi, how’s it going?” Shirvin replied.

“Doesn’t he look just like a little Ryan, Daddy? He’s so cute!” Lavie said, swaying a little to one side. “You’re going to grow up to be just like Ryan, little boy!”

“Hey, hey, Lavie, he’s going to grow up to be like Armin Tamas, not Ryan!” Armin protested.

“Shut up, Armin,” Lavie said, her voice a little unclear. “Gran said that when your knees feel weak, it means you’re in love. I guess I’m in love with Ryan!” She laughed loudly, then tried to climb onto one of the chairs. “Look, Ryan, maybe I *can* be a Galvenian idol singer!” She stumbled, and Ryan hurried to catch her. As he did, she began to sing “Flower of Lorean”, in an energetic, off-key voice.

“Lavie, what *is* happening to you?” Ryan said, alarmed at Lavie’s sudden boisterous behaviour. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Merciful heavens!” Anne said, noting a tinge of red appearing in Lavie’s cheeks. “Mrs. Tamas, what *did* you put in that punch?”

“But we all drank the punch, Anne,” Sheila Eramond said, “and we’re all right!”

“Ah,” Armin said, laughing to himself, “that’s a question you should be asking me and Shirvin, not my poor mother!”

“Is this one of your lousy jokes, Armin?” Lavie said, suddenly. “It’s still funny!” She continued to laugh rather helplessly, and leaned against Ryan for support.

“Good heavens!” Ryan said, feeling Lavie’s breath on his face, and realizing what had happened. “Armin! Dude, that is *absolutely* not funny! Where did you even get liquor from, anyway?”

“Liquor?” Sigmund said, sharply. “Is Lavie *intoxicated*, for the Infinity’s sake?”

“Stop using big words, Daddy!” Lavie said, slurring her words. “What nonsense! I’m not drunk! I’m a Level Ten Archer! Bring me my bow and arrows of fire, and I’ll build a new kingdom! In Galvenia’s green and pleasant land!” There was a loud hiccough, and she began to sing the National Anthem, miming the act of piano-playing as she did so.

“Armin Tamas,” Ryan said, angrily, his hand going to his sword, “I ought to zap *you* for doing that!”

“Lighten up, Compadre,” Armin said, moving away nervously. “Can’t you take a joke?”

"Here's a joke, Mom," Lavie said, losing her balance again, and this time requiring the support of both Ryan and Anne to regain it. "Why did King Arlbert appoint a mushroom as his court jester? Because he's a real fun guy! Got it? As fun as Ryan! And little Ryan!" She gave Shirvin a peck on the cheek, causing him to hide behind Armin in embarrassment.

"Good heavens, Miss Lavie!" Carmen said, laughing.

"Carmen! Give me your cap!" Lavie said, snatching it from her head and wearing it. "Don't I make a good housekeeper now, Gran? I won't break any more of your pots now!"

"Merciful heavens," Anne said, shaking her head and repressing a smile.

"Lavie, dear," Emily said, helplessly, "you'd better go to bed."

"Isn't it sad?" Lavie said, beginning to cry. "We're all safe and together, except for poor Agent Striker. Poor Wolfgang. He's so alone. Ryan, you must be nice to Agent Wolfgang, and his girlfriend..."

"Lavie," Ryan said, gently. "Come, it's late and you need to sleep. Your Gran and I will help you get to your room."

Lavie yawned. "You're so nice, Ryan," she said, sleepily, as she allowed herself to be led away without any further protest by the two of them.

"Ryan's got a good head on his shoulders," Theodore said, approvingly.

"Look here, young Armin," Sigmund Regale said, both amused and annoyed, "that was uncalled for."

"Sheesh, some guys have *no* sense of humour here," Armin said.

"Armin!" his mother said, reproachfully. "You ought to apologize to Mr. and Mrs. Regale. Poor Lavie isn't even at the legal age for drinking."

"Er, sorry, guys," Armin said, shaking his head. "I just, um, thought it would be funny."

"She's asleep," Ryan said, as he and Anne descended the stairs. "Just what the hell do you think you were doing there, Armin?"

"Hey, Eramond, cool it, okay? No harm done, right? I mean, this is supposed to be a joyful celebration, right?" Armin protested, rather feebly, though he shrank from Ryan's glare.

"Armin," Ryan said, with an edge in his voice, "I ought to make you drink the beastly stuff yourself, and then make a Memory Crystal of you to be played over and over again in the town square. I hope you didn't take any *photographs* of this ridiculous prank."

"Dear me, Ryan," Anne said, "that would be quite an appropriate punishment."

“Hey, hey, what do you take me for, friends?” Armin said, shaking his head. “I only took pictures of Prescott! And if it’s okay with you, I’ll be going now. I’m sorry, all right?”

Sigmund and Emily nodded quietly, and Armin, with Shirvin in tow, and followed by his mother – who was lecturing him sternly all the way – made his way back home.

“I hope Lavie’s all right,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “I don’t think she’s ever touched liquor before – neither have I, for that matter.”

“If she’s anything like her father,” Emily said, trying hard not to smile, “she’ll just wake up with a splitting headache tomorrow, and then she’ll be all right.”

“Very amusing, Emily,” Sigmund said, with a laugh. “And while I cannot approve of young Tamas’ idea of humour, the affair *does* have its lighter side.”

“Goodness,” Fossen said, laying down his spade and looking up at the man who was behind him, “who might you be, my Zionese friend?”

“Sometimes I wonder,” Agent Striker said, philosophically, “if I should dye my hair, so that people would stop recognizing me as a Zion. You must be Fossen. I am Agent Wolfgang Striker, from Zion.”

“Indeed, I am,” Fossen replied. “And what have I done to attract your agency’s interest, Mr. Striker?” He spoke seriously, but his eyes were merry.

“I am here to obtain information – and other things,” Striker said, with a smile. “Have you heard of the raid on Davenport last night?”

“Good heavens, yes,” Fossen said. “I sent my disciple over there, but he told me it was all over by the time he’d reached. They were here, too, which explains why I’ve had to add the task of grave-digger to the many jobs I’ve held over the years.” He sighed. “Poor Robertson. I feel sorry for his daughter.”

“It is the daughter who interests me, Fossen, and not you,” Striker said, gently. “There are things I need to know from her.”

“Marianne?” Fossen raised his eyebrows. “What could you want with *her*, poor child? She’s still shocked, and she won’t leave her mother – we both stayed up with her the whole of last night. It’s a shame.”

“Nevertheless, my good Fossen – or should I say Lieutenant-Colonel Fowler – it is a matter of great importance that I remove her from your home, at least for now. The men who seek her are still at large, especially their leader, a man named Trask. I will take her – and you, if you wish – to a place of safety.”

“Thank you, Striker,” Fossen said, calmly, “but I can defend myself.”

“Not against the numbers they are planning to use, Fossen,” Striker said. “It took the Territorial Army, in addition to Corporal Eramond and a local militia, to repulse the attack on Davenport. These bandits may be rough and unskilled men, but they are numerous.”

“And what is that to you?” Fossen said, mildly. “You are a Zion.”

Striker smiled. “I have had my eye on that girl for a long time – for reasons of my own,” he said. “She – interests me. Besides, she has information that we need to know – information about her father’s doings, and his associates. There are photographs that she may help us identify. Things are reaching a crisis point, Lieutenant-Colonel, and we need to be prepared.”

“Very well, then,” Fossen said, shaking his head. “Where do you intend to take her?”

“To her own home, Fossen,” Striker said. “Her grandmother has already been detained by the police, after it was found that she was keeping a cache of arms that the bandits used in their attack. For the moment, Davenport is safe. I and my men will personally ensure her safety, and my errand is approved by Sir Cornelius Fairfax himself. I have a carriage waiting. Will you come?”

“Let me ask her, son,” Fossen said. “But let me tell you one thing. You say you have your eye on her. Be that as it may, Striker, that girl has been through a difficult time. Don’t bother her with unwanted attentions at a time like this, even though you’re a fine young man in my opinion.”

Striker laughed. “Don’t underestimate me, Lieutenant-Colonel,” he replied.

“Ooof!” Lavie said, lifting her head from the pillow with an effort. “Did someone drop another rock on my head, or something? This hurts like hell!”

She looked around, but her vision was blurred and indistinct. Her right leg ached, and her mouth was dry. Turning to one side, the only thing she could see was Mr. Bear, who seemed to be looking at her accusingly.

“What happened?” she said, softly. “God, I feel terrible! Did – did we fight someone again?”

“Good morning, dear,” Anne Lancaster said, softly. “I hope you’re not feeling too terrible, Lavie.”

“Gran?” Lavie said, wonderingly, as memory slowly came back to her. “I remember Sir Prescott coming into my room! Did he – attack me?” she said, rubbing her head and wincing. “My head hurts, Gran.”

“Poor Lavie,” Anne said, with a twinkle in her eyes. “No, Sir Prescott was taken care of, my dear – by your father, and by that brave young man, Ryan Eramond. I must say, I’m very impressed with Sigmund! It was after he’d been captured, dear. Do you remember what happened?”

"I remember a punchbowl," Lavie said, slowly. "Yes, that sounds right. But what happened after that? Armin's mom made some lovely punch, and then – I fell asleep, right?"

"Not quite, dear," Anne said, gently, as she helped Lavie sit up in bed. "I'm afraid one of the young men there had a rather juvenile sense of humour, and he decided to, shall we say, enliven the proceedings by adding a little alcohol to your glass of punch. My poor child, it had *quite* an effect on you."

"I was *drunk*?" Lavie said, and then she remembered. "Ohmygosh!" She covered her face with her hands. "Did I kiss Ryan in front of everyone, Gran?"

"You did kiss a little boy who looked rather like Ryan, dear," Anne said, concealing her laughter behind her shawl, "and you did sing a few songs. Then you became maudlin about someone called Agent Striker. Is he a character in one of your romance novels, Lavie?"

"Agent Striker?" Lavie said, slowly, then looked around in alarm. "Ohmygosh, Gran! What did I say about him? What did I say?"

"Calm down, sweetie," Anne said gently, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You didn't say much, except that you felt sorry for him because he was lonely. Oh, and you mentioned a girlfriend, if I'm not mistaken. Then Ryan and I took you away, and we put you to bed."

"Did I say anything else, Gran?" Lavie said, anxiously. "About him, or about his girlfriend?"

Anne smiled. "No, Lavie. You were quite sleepy by that time. Poor Ryan was quite angry with that young man, I'm afraid. He even threatened to make him drink his own liquor at sword-point, or something. That boy can be quite chivalrous, I must say."

"This is so embarrassing!" Lavie said, shaking her head and sending her hair flying in every possible direction. "Gran, what would they all think of me now? What would Ryan think?" Tears came to her eyes.

"Now, don't grow maudlin again, Lavie," Anne said, kindly, handing her a cup of tea. "Ryan was very sympathetic, and he's waiting downstairs to see you once you make yourself a little presentable, darling."

"He is?" Lavie brightened a little. "But I feel *awful*, Gran! My head hurts, and I feel sick!" She groaned.

"Oh, I recognize those symptoms, dear," Anne said, chuckling. "Fortunately, we mothers know how to cure such things. I suppose it runs in the family. Neither your grandfather nor your father could hold their liquor, to be honest. Here, drink this."

Lavie took the proffered cup gladly, and sipped it. It was warm and sweet, but with a faintly bitter after-taste. "That's heavenly, Gran," she said, her customary smile slowly returning. "What is it?"

“Oh, that’s a woman’s secret, Lavie,” Anne said. “The day you get married, your mother will give you the recipe.”

“The day I....” She blushed, remembering something. “You know, Gran, you were right about that.”

“About what, Lavie? About the Way of Love?” Anne said, tenderly.

“About that, yes, but also – about recognizing when you’re in love with a guy. My knees *did* feel weak when Ryan and I....” She laughed, and hid her face with her hands again.

“Ah, Lavie, I see you’ll need that recipe of mine quite soon!” Anne said, with a laugh. “Come on, now, and let’s get you smartened up. We can’t keep Ryan waiting for too long, can we?”

“You’re the best, Gran,” Lavie said, warmly, as her grandmother helped her get out of bed.

Despite the transient coolness which his deed had in caused relations with Ryan, Armin was destined to achieve another journalistic success. His picture of a dripping Prescott, his trousers half burned away, being led away in disgrace, was just the comic relief that Galvenia needed. It soon made its way even to the Zion Empire, and sitting in his cell in the military prison, Prescott raged and cursed, knowing that he could do nothing about it.

There was a feeble attempt by Sir Turbot and some of its friends to have it banned in the House of Lords, but even his fellow peers laughed him to scorn. Such is the power of ridicule. While he was merely a renegade, there was still an aura about him, though a disreputable one; but when he had been captured in such an embarrassing manner, few could take him seriously.

At the moment, two of the more eminent citizens of Terra – Princess Carranya, and First Daughter Kievan (though the title was not current in the Directorate, Naomi had begun using it as a term of endearment, and it had stuck) – were busy amusing themselves with the photograph, after another game of chess that had ended in a hard-fought draw.

“How did that stupid man escape from prison, Princess?” Olga said, still giggling.

“That’s a mystery, Olga,” Carranya said. “He tried once, and was caught and slightly wounded, but then he escaped the very next day.”

“In the Varald Directorate, people cannot escape from prisons easily,” Olga said, rather proudly. “My Father was a strong ruler, but sometimes – he wished he could be kind, like you are, Princess.”

Carranya blushed. “Thank you, Olga,” she said. “But being a little older than you, I understand that, sometimes, being a ruler is difficult, and making the right decision isn’t always easy. We may want different things, and come from different countries, but we’re all human in the end.”

“That’s nice, Princess,” Olga said, leaning against her. “In the Directorate, we were taught that Kings and Emperors were haughty and cruel, and never associated with commoners. They must have been mistaken.”

“Goodness, my best friends are all commoners!” Carranya said, with a laugh. “I have an idea. Someday, I’ll take you around to meet them. First, you must meet my friend Lavender....”

“Lavender?” Olga laughed. “You Galvenians have funny names, Princess!”

There was a knock at the door, and Olga – still a little nervous after her recent ordeal – stood up, her face twitching nervously.

“You may come in,” Carranya said, kindly.

“Your Highness,” a Palace Guard said, “there’s a gentleman to see you in the Meeting Hall. He says it’s urgent. His name is Striker.”

“Agent Striker from Zion?” Carranya replied, surprised. “Tell him I shall be there soon.”

“As you say, Your Highness,” the guard replied, bowing as he left.

“Agent Striker is a brave man, Princess,” Olga said. “He was with us when we fought the renegade.”

“Indeed he is,” Carranya said, with a smile. “Just wait here a moment, Olga, while I see what he wants. There is something I need to ask him, as well.”

She found Striker in the meeting room, looking at his pocketwatch, which he closed with slow deliberation once he saw her. “Good morning, Your Highness,” he said, rising and bowing. “I trust I am not intruding on anything important.”

“Only a game of chess with young Olga Kievan,” Carranya said, with a smile. “What good wind blows you here, Agent Striker?”

“A wind of inquiry, Princess,” Striker replied, smiling as well. “In the aftermath of the raid on Davenport – which we were able to anticipate, through mutual collaboration between our intelligence wings - we’ve had quite an interesting session with young Miss Robertson, and the pieces are finally falling into place.” He looked at her, meaningfully.

“I see that you have a story to tell, Agent Striker,” she replied. “Would it bother you if I asked you a question first?”

“Not at all, Princess,” Striker said amiably. “How can I help you?”

Carranya reached into the small Healer’s bag that she wore attached to her sash, and drew a small object from it. “I was wondering if you could satisfy my curiosity about *this*, Agent Striker.”

Striker raised his eyebrows and smiled as he took the small sound-transmitter from her. “A familiar object to anyone working in Intelligence,” he said, softly. “Where did you find this?”

“That is the strange part of my story,” Carranya said, softly. “It was sewn into one of my dresses – the dress I wore when I first reached Davenport. When I first found it, I was taken aback, then relieved, for it provided a natural explanation to something that seemed supernatural – or, worse, that would cause me to question my own sanity. But now, as I watch matters unravel, I feel I must know the truth about this object. I believe it has – spoken to me, on one occasion.”

Striker frowned, then smiled as enlightenment dawned on his face. “Ah yes, I remember, at Davenport Beach. You heard something and cried out. If I may be curious, what exactly did you hear?”

Carranya blushed. “If you will pardon me, Agent, that is a matter of a personal nature.”

Striker looked at her kindly. “My apologies, Princess. I will not pry. Let us assume, for the sake of discussion, that you are not concerned so much with the content of what you heard, as with *who* the speaker was. Am I correct?”

Carranya nodded. “Whoever it was, it amounts to a grave breach of security. And Sir Cornelius, who has training in these matters, assures me that it is effective only over a small range – enough to cover, say, half of Davenport. Someone was there that day, Agent Striker, someone whose intentions were questionable. And yet...” She frowned, then smiled with an effort.

“It’s interesting you should bring this up, Princess,” Striker said, gently, “because it ties in very neatly with what I’m going to tell you. Now, lean back, because the news I have isn’t pretty. Yet, in all my dealings with you, you have struck me as a woman unafraid of the truth, even if it is a bitter truth. I cannot approach your father with this, though the Emperor has been made aware of it. He asked me, via my Director, to speak of it to someone who could bear it.”

“Thank you, Agent,” Carranya said, flushing again. “I hope I will prove worthy of the Emperor’s confidence.”

“Then let me begin,” he said. “We have long known that the late Alexander Robertson was, let us say, a pivotal figure in the recent troubles in Galvenia and Zion. He is an interesting person. He began life as an apprentice to Rudolph Regale – who was a crafty, miserly businessman, but never a criminal or a traitor.”

“Regale?” Carranya said, sharply.

“He was Miss Lavie’s grandfather, though they never knew each other. But I am sure she will tell you more about him later. Anyway, Robertson may have started out as a shady business agent, but he was greedy for more, and soon became both renegade and bandit. For most of his adult life, he has led what is conventionally termed a ‘double life’. Outwardly, he was a humble, middle-class trader, with a retiring wife and a pretty daughter, leading an ordinary life in a trading town. But that was merely a very

effective cover. It is hard to think of a criminal deed that he was *not* involved in – and the seizure of his papers at Davenport has confirmed this, though we are still deciphering some of them.”

“In Davenport?” Carranya said, alarmed.

“Yes, carefully concealed by that mother of his. Behind her exterior as a frail and plaintive old woman, she was every bit as unsavoury a character as her son. She is now in the custody of your police, Princess. When Queen Katarina’s medications were mysteriously stolen during the crisis of Darington – a crisis that I, though a loyal Zion, still deplore – he was one of those responsible.”

“The villain!” Carranya cried out. “Poor Mother, she was – shattered by it, for years. She felt so guilty, though no one, not even Father, blamed her. The despicable, treacherous scoundrel!”

“I am sorry, Princess,” Striker said, kindly, “but let me continue. When bandits raided Davenport in 288, he was responsible, too. When your necklace was stolen by Kodenai and Talmadge – at the instruction of Third Way mages, who wanted to charm it so that they could use it against you later – he was their coordinator.”

“My necklace?” The Princess was horrified.

“I’m afraid Robertson’s been quite a naughty boy. He has been passing information to the agents of the Third Way for over three years now, besides lining his own pockets. The reason he pursued his wife so ruthlessly is that she had seen something very important, though she did not understand its significance. His daughter was under his thumb, for he had tamed her by a combination of gifts and threats. When the Third Way first understood the significance of young Eramond, Robertson was delighted, for his daughter and Eramond were already high school sweethearts. He encouraged the relationship, and – through his daughter – tried to persuade Eramond to remain in Davenport, where he would be a passive and easy target. She used threats, tears, and even outright lies at times – and, now that he is gone, she has admitted so to us, quite repentantly. Little blame should be attached to that poor girl, for she was merely her father’s tool.”

“Ryan!” Carranya exclaimed, her green eyes flashing with fury. “The wicked man!”

“Fortunately, both Bowes and I were keeping tabs on Robertson for some time, and we were able to foil that plan. Upset, Robertson then sold his services to another master – Sir Prescott, who was a part owner of both Turbo Arms and *Al-Mu’afa*. Through the cursed pendant that Robertson passed, via his daughter, to Ryan, Prescott was able to both have his revenge on Ryan, and to give the Galvenian Army a bloody nose for daring to raid his factory. Unfortunately, Prescott’s machinations were uncovered, and Robert was taken prisoner by Bowes and his men.”

“And Robertson’s escape from prison? Do you know who was responsible?” Carranya said, anxiously.

“Gavin Breckenridge is leading a commission of inquiry, but I have little faith in such things.”

“Let me come to that,” Striker said, a grave expression on his face. “It is certain, as your Breckenridge says” – he pointed to a newspaper that lay on the table – “that such an escape could not have been engineered without there being a traitor in your ranks. Fortunately, we have now been able to put a name and a face to that traitor. His picture was recognized both by Mrs. Robertson and Miss Marianne. He has visited Robertson – and some of Robertson’s usual friends and haunts – several times, and with the death of his middle-man Lugner, he has been forced to act on his own.”

He drew a photograph from his pocket, and Carranya reached for it with trembling hands.

“Do you recognize this man, Your Highness?” he said, softly.

As she looked at the man in a suit who was smiling at her from the photograph, Carranya blanched, felt herself grow light-headed, then straightened up with an effort, anger on her face. “It must be as you say,” she said, softly but firmly. “But do we have enough proof? Father would not readily believe such an accusation.”

“Where there is a will, there is a way, Princess,” Striker said. “Bowes is doing his part, and I am helping him, as this matter obviously concerns the Zion as well. For the moment, though, if I may make an impertinent suggestion, a return to Davenport would do you good.”

“Davenport?” Carranya said, shaking her head. “But why?”

“That man can reach you more easily here in Lorean than there, Princess,” he replied, calmly. “Besides, it would be a popular gesture, after the horrors that Davenport has just suffered. The King would certainly permit it. And I’m sure your friend Miss Regale would love to see you again. Do not stay too long, Princess, for you may need to return once we have – confirmed our suspicions.”

“I understand, Agent Striker, and I thank you on behalf of the Kingdom of Galvenia,” Carranya said, graciously. “If you will kindly give me a little while, until I am quite mistress of myself, I will soon be in Davenport.”

“It would be my pleasure to escort you there, Princess,” Striker said, with a bow. “I am not finished with the fair Marianne yet.”

Carranya raised her eyebrows. “What do you mean, Agent Striker?”

“Wait and see,” Striker said, with a laugh.

“Good morning, Sheffield,” King Arlbert said, as the War Minister entered the Throne Room and bowed. “Still keeping the wolves at bay in Parliament, I see!” He laughed.

“It’s a hard job, Sire, but someone has to do it,” Sheffield replied, with a smile. “Where are Her Majesty and the Princess?”

“Poor Katarina has one of her headaches,” Arlbert said sympathetically, “and wished to rest a little. As for Carranya, she is on her way to Davenport, to comfort the people of the town after that vile attack on them. It seems beyond doubt that Sir Prescott is a scoundrel of the first water.” He scowled. “How a nobleman could lower himself thus is beyond my comprehension.”

“A noble can be a knave, just much as a commoner, Sire,” Sheffield replied. “I’m afraid I used to be quite hard on poor Socius for his distrust of Prescott, but he was right all along. With his capture, I hope the troubles of Galvenia are at an end now.”

“The Infinity truly seems to favour us, Sheffield,” Arlbert said, with a smile. “The Varald are dissolving amidst military defeats and civil war, the invasion at Bravo was checked with the help of our brave Navy, and the daughter of the Directorate’s last legitimate ruler is under our protection. It was our army which struck a decisive blow against the Varald, by destroying their supply of weapons. And even those rogue mages – whatever they are, though they cannot be of much importance – seem to have been defeated. Truly, Galvenia is emerging as a power to be reckoned with.”

“Indeed, Sire,” Sheffield said. “And it is fortunate that the Princess is in Davenport. First of all, because it would further increase the prestige of the monarchy, and second, because there is a suggestion I wish to make. Galvenia has lived under the shadow of war too long, Sire, and needs a celebration now that victory is close at hand.”

“Let us not count our chickens before they are hatched, Sheffield,” Arlbert said, cautiously. “There is time enough for Victory Balls once the Varald sue for peace.”

“I did not have a Victory Ball in mind, Sire,” Sheffield said, “but something quite different. In a short while, summer will be upon us. The season of leisure, laughter – and love.” He grinned. “And what better way to cheer the hearts of the people than with a wedding?”

“Good Lord, Sheffield, what are you talking about?” Arlbert said, taken aback.

“A royal wedding, Sire,” Sheffield said. “The Princess is of age, and her nuptials would provide the capstone to her brave deeds during the war. To put it vulgarly, it would be romantic.”

Arlbert laughed. “Sheffield, you sly dog,” he said. “I must say it would be a very popular idea. But there remains the question of finding a suitor, as you probably know. Carranya has led a sheltered life, until she came of age, and the exigencies of war have not afforded her much time for courtship.”

“The young Duke of Westbrook, Sire....” Sheffield began.

“A weak young man, under his mother’s thumb,” Arlbert said, dismissively. “He would make a useful member of the House of Lords, but remember that any husband of Carranya’s would be Prince Consort,

or even King if Parliament permitted it. Westbrook is a handsome man, but he would be a disaster as King.”

“Do not be deceived by his appearance, Sire,” Sheffield replied. “He may seem gentle, but he is a Westbrook through and through.”

“How much did his mother pay you to say that, Sheffield?” Arlbert said, chuckling at his own joke. “What about young Delanor? The Delanors have been loyal to us for centuries, and he has served in the Army as well.”

“There is the embarrassing question of his not being deployed in this war, Sire,” Sheffield said, discreetly, “due to an express request from his father. Moreover, his affections are engaged elsewhere, with a young actress who has enjoyed several successes at the Lorean Coliseum.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Arlbert said, disapprovingly. “What a pity. But you’ve certainly given me something to think about, Sheffield. Let me consider the matter, and consult her mother as well. Carranya will be Queen someday, and she must prepare herself for the task as soon as she can. I will discuss this with you once I have a clearer idea myself.”

“Wisely said, Sire,” Sheffield said, as he bowed and left, a smile on his face.

“I am *not* getting into that carriage,” Marianne said, angrily, as she stood at the porch of her house in Davenport, “and that’s final!”

It was evening, and Carranya was exhausted after visiting all the inhabitants of the town, and the soldiers at Saint Hilda’s, as well as meeting the Mayor and asking him to arrange for the necessary repairs. A brief visit to her friend Lavie – and a farewell to Ryan, who was going back to the Military Academy along with the prisoners and his wounded comrades – had refreshed her somewhat, but she was still weary. She had been standing there for almost half an hour, while Fossen, Striker and her mother tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Marianne.

“Marianne,” she said, at last, “please reconsider. Your testimony may be vital to arresting this man and making sure that he cannot harm our country any longer.”

“I don’t care,” Marianne said, bitterly. “Would going back to Lorean bring my father back to life? Look, Princess, Father’s often told me about you Royals. You live in a golden bubble. You have everything you want. Do you know what it feels like to see your father....ill-treating your mother? To....lose the boy you cared about, just because someone lied to you? To see your father killed in front of you? You don’t understand. You’ll *never* understand!” Her voice had risen to a scream, then died away as she burst into tears, and leaned against her mother for support. “You’ll never....understand.”

“Marianne, I’m sorry,” Carranya said, and her expression was both sad and gentle. Something in her tone of voice caused Marianne to check her tears and look at the Princess as she replied. “I may not have experienced all those things, but I also know some of the pains you describe.” She closed her eyes, and shook her head. “I have also lost someone dear to me because of this war. I have seen my friends face deadly dangers. I have been wounded, and faced death myself. I am asking you to help me, not only because I am the Princess, but because I have suffered myself.”

“Maybe,” Marianne said, in a defeated tone. “But you haven’t seen the boy you....loved, walking around with someone who looks down on you and despises you! And whether I testify or not, would that change anything? I’d still be the daughter of a traitor. There’s no future for me, Princess. Just....let me go back to Straukpass, and live with Fossen and Mother. I can’t hope for anything else. This is my fate.”

“Yes, you can,” Carranya said, holding out her hand. “Look, Marianne, you’re eighteen. You’re just a little younger than me. You have the whole of your life ahead of you. And I promise that both the Zion and I will see to it that you aren’t victimized for your father’s actions. I can guarantee that, and so can Agent Striker.”

“That’s kind of you,” she said, moving her hand towards the Princess’, tentatively, then withdrawing it. “But I think I’ll....pass on it, Princess. Ever since I saw Ryan leave for the Republic, I knew – that it would all end this way. It was....destiny, I guess. I didn’t even get to see him the day he left....and then Sir Prescott....” The memory of her letter was too much for her, and she broke down again.

“Marianne,” Carranya said, taking her hand, “please listen to me. You are the daughter of a noblewoman. And you’re not fated to be anything that you don’t want to be. Your father made certain choices, and they had consequences. But you aren’t like that, Marianne. You’re not guilty of any crime, and no one here wants to punish you. If you testify, you will be viewed as a heroine. And even if you refuse to testify, I will still do my best to ensure that there’s a future for you and for your mother.”

Marianne, shocked, began to dry her eyes slowly. “Do you – really mean that, Princess?” she said, in a low voice.

“I promise,” Carranya said. “Think of all of us who wish you well, Marianne. Not only your mother and your guardian – not even me – but Lady Anne, Jonas Aquary, and even the Agent. Trust us. Your life does not have to be what it once was.”

Marianne looked down, and said nothing.

“Take my hand, Marianne,” Carranya said, in the same tone that she had used with Lavie, the day they had met in Davenport Park. “Don’t think about your father, or even Ryan or Lavie, unless you have to. There’s a better place for you, somewhere, and as soon as this war is over, we will help you find it. Until that day, accept our protection. Please.”

Slowly, Marianne allowed her mother and the Princess to help her into the carriage, and they were on their way to Lorean.

“That was well spoken, Princess,” Striker said, softly, noticing that Marianne had fallen asleep. “But tell me, what exactly were you speaking of, when you spoke of losing someone dear to you? Were you referring to the Prime Minister?”

Somewhere, Carranya found the strength to smile once more. “I’m afraid that’s one secret I’ll keep to myself, Agent,” she said.

“Your Majesty,” Prime Minister Bainbridge said, “the news from the Zion front is encouraging. The Varald border has been pushed back to Meldor, and they offer no more resistance on the Western front. General Lyzhnov, the ruler of the Varald, has officially entered into negotiations with Viceroy Kanoi, and I have authorized Sir Douglas – who is nearly at Unity Isle – to join forces with him, as you instructed.”

“Good news, Bainbridge,” Arlbert said. “And what news do you have for me, Sheffield?”

“Sire, the naval battles between the remnants of the Varald fleet and the Zion Navy are fiercely contested, but the Varald are outnumbered. The Varald have blockaded the sea route to the Fulton Republic as a precautionary measure, but our forces have already withdrawn from there.” He shook his head. “However, we have also received a message from Commissioner Jansen which gives me cause for alarm. On behalf of the late Director Kievan, he asks us to return the child to him.”

“Little Olga?” Queen Katarina smiled. “Dear me, but where would he keep her, now that her own country is riven by riots, and that her father no longer lives? She and Charlotte Tremfein – who has just returned from her father’s tour of the Republic, where they were received in triumph – certainly brighten up the Palace.”

“That is the surprising thing, Your Majesty,” Sheffield said. “He asks that we send her to Unity Isle, and assures me he will keep her safe in his own household there. He says this was one of Kievan’s last requests before he was executed, and he intends to keep his vow.”

“Arranging a safe passage will be difficult, Sheffield,” Arlbert said, a worried look on his face. “Besides, the child cannot go alone. Someone would have to accompany her.”

“Is it truly urgent, Minister Sheffield?” Katarina said, gently. “Surely, this can wait until a cease-fire has been negotiated.”

“Jansen acknowledges this, Your Majesty, but he is anxious about the child’s well-being in a foreign country, particularly one that is at war with his own. He knows that he does not have Lyzhnov’s support in this, and says so quite openly, but still urges us to return the child to him.”

“This is troublesome,” King Arlbert said. “Bainbridge, what do you think?”

Bainbridge considered the question. His duties made him a frequent visitor at the Palace, and he, too, found that their Varaldian guest was a welcome addition; besides, he did not like Jansen, with whom he had crossed swords in his younger days, when he was an attaché at Zhemu. He was about to elaborate on these points when the door swung open.

“Your Majesty,” Officer Jeffries said, nervously, “there are some people who wish to speak with you urgently.”

“People? Sweet Infinity, Jeffries, have I not charged you strictly not to interrupt me when I am with the Prime Minister? Who are these people?” Arlbert said, annoyance writ large on his face.

“Sir Cornelius Fairfax, General Reed of the Galvenian Army, Agent Bowes of the Field Office for War Intelligence, Agent William Striker of Zion Intelligence, and Her Highness, Princess Carranya,” Jeffries said, rushing through the names. “There are also a young lady and her mother with them. I explained the matter to them, but both the Princess and Sir Cornelius said it was a matter of national security.”

Sheffield laughed. “You see, Sire? That girl needs to settle down, if you don’t mind my saying so. A Royal wedding in....”

“Sheffield, be quiet,” Arlbert said, creases appearing on his brow. “National security? What tomfoolery is this?”

“They claim to have discovered the truth behind the escapes from our high-security prison at Lorean, Sire,” Jeffries said, looking as if he would rather be dodging Varald bullets than remain in his current position.

“Good heavens, that is a grave matter indeed,” Queen Katarina said. “Let them in, my King.”

Without waiting for the King’s reply, Jeffries held the door open, and the party he had just listed swept into the room, looking determined.

“My daughter,” Arlbert said, taken aback at the look on her face. “Why this sudden visit?”

“To warn you, Father,” Carranya said. “The Kingdom is in danger, and I pray we are not too late.”

“What do you mean, Princess?” Sheffield said, shaking his head.

“You, of all people, should know the answer to that question,” General Reed said, standing upright and looking at him with disdain.

“Good heavens, General, what do you mean?” the King said.

There was an uneasy silence for a minute.

“That’s him!” Marianne cried out, involuntarily, and as the harsh sound pierced the air, everyone in the room turned to look at her. Her face appeared frozen with shock, and her finger was pointed, unequivocally, towards War Minister Alan Sheffield.

“Whom?” Sheffield said, turning pale, but still speaking firmly. “I do not understand these proceedings, Sire.”

“Do not play games with us, Sheffield,” Cornelius said, his face looking hard and old, quite unlike his usual youthful appearance. “Miss Robertson and her mother have both identified you as having visited her father, Alexander Robertson. They have also identified Trask as accompanying you, and, in fact, Trask has assaulted the lady on one occasion.”

“Sweet Infinity!” the Queen exclaimed. “Trask! The....wretched villain!” she said, trembling.

“Sir Prescott has turned King’s Evidence, Sheffield,” General Reed said, angrily. “There is no doubt about it any longer. Our Zion friend has also uncovered some very interesting documents in Davenport, which give a detailed account of your infamy, and your dealings with those renegades who call themselves the ‘Third Way’. This is the end of the road for you. If I had my way, I would have you hanged instantly.”

“Before you continue with these hysterical accusations, General,” Sheffield said, cuttingly, “would you do me the honour of allowing me to speak?”

“What could you possibly say?” Agent Bowes said, shaking his head. “We’ve got you cold, Minister.”

“You pathetic fools,” Sheffield said. “Are you Galvenians or not? Do you not realize that what you call treachery, I call safeguarding the interests of Galvenia? Are you content to remain puppets and toadies of the Zion? Yes, I admit to whatever it is that you accuse me of.”

“What?” Arlbert shouted, looking at Sheffield with utter surprise and dismay.

Sheffield dismissed the King with a wave of his hand, then went on. “If you were to lay aside idealism and sentiment – something that you, Princess, need to be cured of quite badly – you would realize that the Third Way are not villains, but our friends. Look at the Varald. Look at Itaria. Both of them lie in ruins, thanks to the efforts of the Third Way. If they could do the same in Zion, we Galvenians would reign supreme, the most powerful nation on Terra. If you accuse me, accuse me of patriotism.”

“Patriotism?” Carranya said, angrily. “Do you call the assassinations of Koketsu and Prince Wilhelm the acts of a patriot? The assassination of Martell Socius? The attempt on my own life? Father, judge for yourself whether these are the deeds of a good man, or an evil one.”

“You stupid child!” Sheffield spat, as Arlbert, Katarina and the Prime Minister watched in horror. “Are you so infinitely stupid as to believe in fairy tales of good and evil, like the Itarians? Trask was right when he called you a child of the Varald, and not Galvenia. There is no good or evil, child. There is only power. Until you understand that, you will *never* be fit to rule.”

“Sheffield,” Arlbert said, feebly, “how dare you speak in this manner?”

“Silence, Arlbert!” Sheffield said, reaching inside his coat. “I would have spared you this, but now, I cannot. You have one last moment to choose. You are dealing with something more powerful than you could even imagine. Leave, Princess, with your lackeys and your Zion puppet, and we can forget that this encounter ever took place. Leave the ruling of this country to those who understand the meaning of power. Otherwise” – he drew a large revolver – “I will have to assume that power by force.”

“R- Really, Sheffield...” Bainbridge stammered.

It all happened in a flash. Sheffield aimed his revolver at the King, but Carranya, whose head was already bowed the moment he had reached for it, aimed a beam of light at his right hand, disarming him instantly. Striker drew his firearm and moved forward, but Sheffield moved quickly, and before anyone could realize what was happening, he had seized the Queen and was using her as a shield.

“*Mother!*” Carranya screamed, her face twisted with pain.

“Come any closer,” Sheffield said, tightening his grip on Katarina’s neck, “and you will understand that the Way of Power respects neither father nor mother, husband nor wife, son nor daughter. There is only power...”

But a second beam of light, fine and bright, had struck Sheffield in the eyes, blinding him. Groaning, he threw the Queen to the ground, and clutched at his face.

“Mother, are you...” Carranya said, sadly, rushing over to the fallen Queen, whose neck was bruised and discoloured. The King, with a low cry, did the same, lifting her up into his arms.

“Give it up, Sheffield,” Striker said, as he and Bowes moved closer. “Your Way of Power is an empty boast, and nothing else.”

Still blinking and shaking his head, Sheffield reached for his belt. “It is you whose boasts are empty, Zion fool,” he said. “I will take leave of you now, and you will regret the day you ever decided to challenge me!”

As he placed his hand over a device that hung from it, Striker’s Chill Cartridge struck him on the hand, but he had managed to press the contact before being struck. There was a dazzling flash of light, and Sheffield no longer stood among them.

“The clever rascal,” Striker muttered. “A Warp Module. Of course they must have had a Cannon of their own there. I ought to have guessed.

“Where did he go?” General Reed thundered. “By King Richard, this is a tragic disgrace.”

“Katarina, my dearest....” Arlbert said, brokenly, as he and Carranya helped the Queen rise. “Can you breathe?”

“Quite well, my King,” Katarina murmured, her hands going to her neck to cover the bruise that had formed there.

“Good heavens,” Bainbridge said, in a choked voice. “Sheffield, of all people. Sheffield! Why, oh why?”

“Power can be seductive, Bainbridge,” Sir Cornelius said, “and I’m afraid no one is entirely immune to its blandishments. Ever since your journey to Issachar, Your Majesty, we have known that there was another traitor in our ranks beside Sir Prescott, and I thank the Infinity that we have uncovered him at last. Unfortunately, he is now beyond our grasp.”

“And we have no idea where he and his – accursed mages are, now,” Arlbert said, his arm around the Queen, as Carranya tended to her. “Damnation!”

“No, Father,” Carranya said, raising her head. “We know where they are. Father Marlborough was able to decipher that particular riddle, and Robertson’s dying words confirmed it. The sixth mage, the man behind them all, is on Unity Isle.”

“Unity Isle?” Bainbridge shuddered. “Good Lord! This could mean another Chespa Bay, Your Majesty...”

“There is no time to lose, Father,” she went on, her eyes flashing, her head thrown back. “We must head for Unity Isle at once, and defeat them before they become too strong.”

“Unity Isle...” Arlbert said, helplessly. “I....can’t believe it. Socius, Sheffield, Sir Prescott....it will never end.”

“Courage, my King,” Katarina said, softly. “I believe it will.”

“I must say, this is quite the party you’ve thrown for me,” Father Marlborough said, smiling as he sat up in bed. “There is something to be said for being old and ill.”

“We’re so glad you’re well, Father,” Henrik said, gently. “And we thought you should know about all that has happened, too.”

“Dear me,” Marlborough said, “this world can be a sad place sometimes. The attack on Davenport, and now the near-collapse of our Cabinet. The wonder of it, my son, is that there are still things worth defending, and the time has come for you to defend them.”

Ryan, who had come over on permission from the Academy, looked at Marlborough with determination. “This is it, isn’t it? Ever since that day you and I went looking for Kodenai, Henrik, it’s all been leading up to this. The more I look at what’s happened this year, the more I realize that a lot of it wasn’t accidental.

And now, we must call the Third Way to account for all they've done. General Reed and Sir Cornelius have personally charged me with this mission, and it's my duty to bring this to an end."

Lavie looked at him with admiration. "Well said, Ryan. They've hurt the people of every country in Terra, and we can't let them get away with it!"

"Indeed, Lavie, my sister," Bernadette said, rising from her seat at Marlborough's bedside. "Though we all wish for peace in this world, there are times when we must defend that peace."

"And I will be with you all the way, my friends," Carranya said, firmly. "Whatever dangers await us on Unity Isle, I believe we can face them all. That is what you taught us, Father, and that is what we shall do."

"My children," Marlborough said, softly, "I am so proud of you all. I wish I could accompany you on this journey, but unfortunately, I am in no shape to do so, thanks to our mutual friend Juno. He is still at large, but from your description, Henrik, I have no doubt it was he who, ahem, interrogated me."

"Juno's a jerk!" Lavie said, making a face. "Just what does he plan to do, anyway?"

"Beats me, Lavie," Ryan said, with a grin. "As long as he stays out of our way, that's good enough. But what if he tries to pick on you again?"

"We have arranged for a regular set of guards here," the Princess said, "as well as police protection for you, Father. There is nothing to fear."

"Good work, Princess," Ryan said. "I only hope we'll get to Unity Isle on time. Even if the wind favours us, it will take us three to four weeks to reach them, and we don't know how things will unfold in that time."

"Don't worry, Ryan," Lavie said, with a wink. "We'll get there sooner! Carranya and Agent Striker have worked out a plan, and we could be there in two weeks if all goes well."

"What sort of plan, Princess?" he asked.

"Oh, that's a surprise, Ryan," Carranya replied, sharing a conspiratorial smile with Lavie. "But first, we all need to get our best clothes ready, we have a concert to go to! You're invited too, Father Marlborough."

"A concert, Princess?"

"Yes, the Dances of Malava are being held at Alton this year, near the border! We need to meet up there first, for that is the first part of the plan," she said, laughing quietly.

"Hey, Ryan and I actually have tickets for that," Henrik said, surprised. "So what's this plan?"

"Meet us in Alton tomorrow morning," Carranya said, mysteriously, "and we'll tell you."

“This sounds kind of interesting, Compadre,” Ryan said to Henrik, as they each received a blessing from Father Marlborough before leaving. However, as the Princess turned to leave, Marlborough motioned to her to remain a little longer.

“Princess, if I may,” he said, when the others were out of earshot, “just a word. Did you get the chance to discuss that little matter of the candles with Miss Lavender?”

“Yes, Father, I did,” Carranya said, and – with a little hesitation – she explained what the three of them had reasoned out that day.

“Duke Renaud?” Marlborough shook his head. “Well reasoned, Princess, but that’s not quite what I had in mind. Even now, I cannot be sure, and I wonder if these are just the fancies of an old man. I do not want to either alarm you or give you a false notion, so let me be circumspect. The battle you will face, Princess, is a conflict between the sword and the spirit. Even if Eramond uses all the powers of the Sword of Regret, and if he is accompanied by Miss Lavender, that will not be enough. Your role is equally important. Open your heart, Princess, and when the moment comes, you will understand. Men and women will overcome the beast. The sword will not triumph over your spirits, my children.”

“I – I’m not sure I quite understand, Father,” Carranya said. “I have prayed for guidance, but it is still unclear to me.”

“When the moment arrives, it will all be clear,” Marlborough said, taking her by the hand and smiling. “There is an extraordinary force in your heart, and it holds the key – a key that will turn sorrow into joy, defeat into victory. Walk with the Infinity’s blessings, Princess.”

“Thank you, Father,” Carranya said, softly, as she bowed and left. “May the Infinity be with you, too.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE SWORD AND THE SPIRIT

*"LORD, do not hold aloof!
My strength, come quickly to my help,
rescue my soul from the sword,
the one life I have from the grasp of the dog!"
(Psalm 22, v. 19-20)*

"Ryan?" The soft voice was familiar, and though Ryan was now a veteran after a fashion, he turned around with a most un-soldierly alarm, staring at its owner.

"Marianne?" He shook his head. "What on Terra are you doing here?"

"I'm working, Ryan," she said, with a faint smile, as he looked at her old-fashioned costume with some surprise. "After I gave evidence against that man, Sheffield, the Princess was keeping me safe in the Palace. I met a playwright named Tremfein there, and he said he could use my help as a costume designer for the Dances of Malava. I figured, heck, I've been making my own outfits for so long that it would be worth a try! And I needed something to get my mind off....all that's happened, Ryan."

"I'm sorry about your father, Marianne," Ryan said, slowly. "Carranya explained it all to me, and I'm not holding it against you – at least not too much." He laughed, a little harshly, then continued. "And I hope you and your mother will be happy now. She's a nice lady. Lavie's grandmother seems very fond of her."

"Ryan," Marianne said exasperatedly, "do you have to mention that person?"

Ryan looked at her with annoyance for a moment, then sighed. "I suppose I asked for that," he said. "But, frankly, this is a free country, and if it annoys you that I mention Lavie, we might as well end this conversation right now."

"Ryan!" Marianne said, angrily. "How can you say that, when we may never see each other again?"

"Huh?" Ryan replied, surprised. "What do you mean by that, Marianne?"

"Mother and I have decided – to leave Galvenia along with Mr. Fossen, Ryan. It's better that way. The Princess has put us in touch with some of her friends in the Fulton Republic, and Fossen wants to see his son, who's a soldier there. Tremfein intends to return there after the Dances. His wife's family lives there, too. Our ship leaves tonight, after the performance is over. And, really, though the Princess has been kind, it's not exactly pleasant for me to be in Galvenia right now. Especially in Davenport," she said, a little bitterly.

"The Republic? Are you sure about this, Marianne?" Ryan said, trying to sound as kind as he could. "It's a long way from home, you know."

“Well, if you survived it, Ryan, I should be able to!” she replied, with something of her old saucy, teasing tone – the one Ryan had loved, when they were together – returning. “Besides, I need to do something with my life, like the rest of you. You’re a soldier. Lavie’s an heiress. Henrik and that stodgy girl of his will probably have lots of little bookworms. Hell, even Armin has a future taking pictures for the yellow rags! I actually enjoy costume designing, Ryan, and I’m learning a lot from Tremfein’s assistant Naomi. Perhaps one day, I’ll come back to Galvenia and open up a little shop of my own.”

“Hey, lay off Bernadette,” Ryan said, a little sharply. “She’s helped me a lot in difficult times, and her dad saved Lavie’s life – twice, in fact.”

“I suppose I asked for that,” Marianne said, regretfully. “And I suppose that’s where I – went wrong. Even though you tried to be there for me, I wasn’t there when you needed me the most, Ryan, and – Lavie Regale was, I guess. How she even did it, I’ll never know.”

“That makes two of us,” Ryan said, with a laugh. “And for what it’s worth, I don’t hate you, Marianne. Those feelings died long ago, and I’ll remember that, before it all went wrong, we were.....good friends.”

“Is that all you can say, Ryan?” Marianne said, shaking her head. “Good friends? But I suppose I shouldn’t complain. After all, it was Father who pushed me into giving you that pendant, and asking you to marry me – I suppose Carranya has told you about that, too. But – for what it’s worth – I did love you, Ryan. Hell, I probably still do. But I know it’s no use, now. Like I told the Princess, it’s just my fate, I guess.”

“Do you believe in fate, Marianne?” Ryan said, gently. “I’m not so sure. Some things are fixed, and we can’t change them. I can’t change who my parents or my ancestors were, any more than you could help being your father’s daughter. But we still have the freedom to make choices, and those choices – have consequences, I suppose. I made some choices. So did you, and so did Lavie.”

“The wrong choices, I guess,” Marianne said, stifling a sob. “Ryan, if things had been different, I know that, even now, I’d be asking you for another chance. But when I see you and Lavie together, I see that – there’s something precious there, too. Lavie isn’t just trying to score off me, though that’s what I desperately want to believe. She cares for you, Ryan, just as much as I did – maybe even more. I hope fate is kinder to her than it was to me.” She sniffed.

“That’s...noble of you, Marianne,” Ryan said. “And I’m sure fate hasn’t had its last say, even for you.”

“Maybe I really am a noblewoman’s daughter, as well as a criminal’s, and maybe I’m just trying to be noble, though it’s a little late in the day,” she replied, then began to weep quietly.

“Marianne, don’t cry,” Ryan said, reaching inside his pocket, then looking at her with concern. “Damn, I forgot to bring a handkerchief. And don’t ever think of yourself as some sort of criminal. Everyone makes mistakes, even nobles and rulers. Heck, look at Sir Prescottt Chucklehead, and Minister Sheffield. Don’t let someone else’s mistake poison your life. You have to forgive yourself and move on.”

“Do you forgive me, Ryan?” Marianne said, tearfully. “I know I hardly deserve it, but....”

“Yes, I do,” Ryan said. “Being close to death can make you awfully forgiving. Life is too short for us to hate each other, Marianne, though – Infinity help me – there was a time in that prison cell when I did hate you for that letter. But things worked out well for me in the end, and I hope they work out for you, too. Think of me as a friend, Marianne, and I hope you – come back home to Galvenia, someday.”

“Thank you, Ryan. I won’t forget you,” she said, softly. He held out his hand, and she took it briefly, then turned and left, as quickly and quietly as she could.

Ryan sighed with relief, and smiled. *I won’t forget you either, Marianne. We did share something wonderful, though we can’t go back to those days. I hope you’ll find someone else, and be as happy as Lavie and I are.*

“Cut!” a voice cried out, loudly and cheerfully. “What a terrific piece of improvisation, Rufus! I can see it already: *Lavender Regale and the Prisoner of Al-Mu’afa*, Act Three, Scene Two! The girl’s lines were much better than yours, though. If Naomi hadn’t roped her into the costumes, she might make a wonderful actress, almost as good as my Deborah.”

“You’re such a kidder, Tremfein!” Lavie said, holding her sides and laughing.

“Lavie!” Ryan said, flushing. “Were you guys watching me all along, or something?”

For answer, Lavie walked up to him and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Most of it, Mr. Eramond, and I must say you played that quite well indeed. You’re not having second thoughts about her, are you?” She laughed.

Ryan returned the gesture affectionately, and smiled. “You’re a pretty good kidder too, Miss Regale. I can’t deny that once upon a time, it was good, Marianne and I. But she would never have stood by me, and fought with me, and walked the Way with me, as you did – as you still do. Lavie, I...”

“Shh, let me say it this time, Ryan,” Lavie said, placing a finger on his lips. “Ryan Eramond, I love you.”

“Me too, Lavie,” Ryan said, touching her cheek lightly.

“Awww!” Tremfein said, applauding loudly. “That’s even better! Curtain! It’s going to be selling out the boxes all over Terra!”

“Look here, Tremfein,” Ryan said, indignantly, “is everything just a scene in a play for you?”

“Heh, Romuald, that’s how I make a living!” Tremfein said, beaming at him. “Besides, life *is* like a play. There’s drama, and tragedy, and music and dance, and romance, and war, and laughter, and even scenes where people get drunk and act silly. But in the end, we all just try to play our parts as best as we could. That’s actually pretty profound, isn’t it, Reginald?”

“Ryan!” he replied, both amused and irritated. “I guess it is, Tremfein. Your role must be that of perpetual court jester.”

“Romuald?” Lavie said, with a giggle. “Is that even a name, or did you make that up out of thin air?”

“Oh, it’s a real name. My made-up names sound better, Louise!” Tremfein said. “Try these: Rambo, Rutabaga, Roquefort....”

“Ugh!” Ryan said.

“My name is *not* Louise!” Lavie protested.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Lyrra,” Tremfein replied, laughing loudly. “Dear me, my young friends, you must allow me my little jokes.”

“Very funny, Tremfein,” Lavie said, though it must be said that she, too, was rather amused. “Is Lyrra even a name, though? It sounds kind of pretty, but I’ve never heard it before!”

“I think the Itarians had a saint or an angel like that,” Tremfein said, with a grin. “Maybe your blue-eyed friend, Boniface or Bernice or whatever her name is, could help you with that.”

“Ohmygosh, her name is Bernadette, not *Boniface*! You’re hopeless, Tremfein,” Lavie said, laughing. “Come on, Ryan, let’s head for our seats! It’s almost showtime, now!”

“Good idea, Lavie,” Ryan said, taking her hand. “By the way, Tremfein, what *is* your contribution to the Dances of Malava?”

“Wait and see, Ramon, wait and see!” Tremfein said, with a wink, then hurried backstage before either of them could retort.

“Hipper,” Commissioner Jansen roared, “I know you’re now taking orders from that renegade, Lyzhnov. But you are a Varald, as I am! Act like a man! Send in the CSF, or the Directorate will continue burning!”

“With all due respect, Jansen,” Archbishop Schliemann said, loftily, “you were the one opposing us when the rebellion in Itaria was raging. I don’t think you can ask for special favours now.”

Jansen whirled around to face the Archbishop. “You pious fool, who asked for your opinion? This is a shame and a disgrace. The Director dead, his only child forced to take refuge – refuge in *Galvenia*, of all places. Does this mean nothing to you, Hipper?”

“My dear Jansen....” Hipper began, feebly. He had been dodging Jansen’s verbal bullets for the last two Council meetings, and was growing weary, especially since he had strict orders from Lyzhnov – whom he

feared greatly, ever since his Army days – to veto any motion regarding CSF interference in the Directorate.

“Now, Jansen,” Lord Douglas McIverny said, calmly, “there’s no need to get all excited. We’re all gentlemen here, you know.” He had arrived at Unity Isle the night before, aided by swift winds, and was rather enjoying himself, despite the verbal duels that were being fought all around him. “The question is quite simple. There seem to be two opposing factions in your country – Party men loyal to Kievan, and military men loyal to Lyzhnov. The Commonwealth does not interfere in internal politics, unless it is a question of a humanitarian crisis, a genocide, or a matter that involves more than one nation.”

“Can one speak of a humanitarian crisis in the Directorate, which has no respect for human dignity and liberty in the first place?” Viceroy Kanoi said, smugly.

“Shut up!” Jansen said, coughing as a cloud of cigar smoke from Kanoi struck him in the face. “For hundreds of years, the Director and the Party have ensured the common good in the Varald Directorate. These military men are illegitimate rulers, and they are massacring civilians who even voice support for Russel Kievan! If that is not a humanitarian crisis, Kanoi, what is?”

“I agree with Kanoi,” Schliemann said. “Your regard for human rights comes rather late in the day. Perhaps it is the will of the Infinity that the Varald should suffer the rigours of civil war, for the sake of a greater liberty.”

“You talk like foolish adolescents,” Jedda said, calmly. “This is not about settling old scores, Schliemann. If the Varald suffer, we suffer as well.”

“You are out of line, Jedda,” Kanoi said, aiming another puff of cigar smoke at him. “Why, you are not even an accredited representative of the Republic any longer! May I remind President Hipper of the communication we received from Premier Alexander Josen of Fulton, just two days ago, stripping you of your voting powers pending further inquiries?”

“Typical Zion arrogance,” Jedda said, irritably. “Mind your own affairs. I know Josen better than you do.”

“Let us have the vote, then,” Sir Douglas said. “On behalf of Galvenia, I have been told to vote for peace, and I shall. Send in the men, President, and let the bloodshed end. Varald or not, they are men, and they have the right to live peacefully.”

“Itaria, reluctantly, votes against,” Schliemann said, shaking his head. “While I admire Sir Douglas’ commitment to peace, it would be a rank double standard to deploy the CSF in the Directorate, when our request for their assistance in the Itarian rebellion was summarily refused.”

“The Republic votes for the proposition, of course,” Jedda said. “As much as I detest voting the same way as Sir Douglas, whose country conducts illegal private wars in my own, the economy of Terra has suffered enough in the past year.”

“The Zion reject the proposition in its entirety,” Kanoi said, glaring at Jedda. “Let the Varald sort out their own differences.”

“The vote is three to two in favour of interference, Mr. President,” Sir Douglas said, gently. “What is your decision?”

“I feel that the grounds for interference are insufficient, despite the Council’s decision,” Hipper said, slowly and nervously. “I therefore veto the proposition, until Commissioner Jansen can give me further evidence that a crisis truly exists in the Directorate.”

“Hipper, you fool!” Jansen roared. “You will regret this! You will pay for this very dearly, my friend, as soon as Lyzhnov and his lackeys are overthrown!”

“Be that as it may, Jansen,” Hipper replied, irritably, “General Lyzhnov is your leader. Address your complaints to him, not to me.”

“How dare you...” Jansen began.

“Sir!” An engineer of the Commonwealth Special Forces burst into the room, looking alarmed.

“What is it, my friend?” Hipper said, mildly, glad of the diversion.

“Sir, there has been a complete breakdown of all radio systems on Unity Isle!” the soldier said, nervously. “We are unable to either transmit a message, or receive one!”

“Good Lord!” Kanoi said, hotly. “What is the meaning of this, soldier? Are the machines not functioning? Repair them, then!”

“The machines are working p – perfectly, Sir,” the man stammered, “but they cannot transmit anything! It’s almost as if there was a shield blocking the passage of radio-frequency waves to and from the island!”

“But that is impossible,” Sir Douglas said, his jaw going slack. “Even if jamming devices were installed all over the island. Sweet Infinity. This sounds like trouble.”

“See what you can do,” Hipper said, “and inform me of any further developments. At any rate, there is no important message to be sent at this time. You may leave.”

“Yes, Sir,” the engineer said, leaving with an unhappy expression on his face.

“This is not good, Sir Douglas,” Schliemann said. “I hope there is an innocent explanation for it, or else...”

“Oh, don’t be alarmists, you too,” Kanoi said, stuffily. “I’m sure it is nothing of import.”

The curtain had fallen over what was, perhaps, the most light-hearted of the Dances of Malava to have been held in recent memory. This was chiefly due to Tremfein's contribution – *Three Huntresses for Three Hunters* – which had expanded upon his Galvenian success by giving one of the Twin Huntresses a know-it-all elder sister, and marrying the three of them to his hunters-turned-jesters in the end, all to the accompaniment of music and slapstick. Coming after his efforts, even the *Legend of Kaleb* seemed slightly pallid, though the performers tried valiantly, and the final battle – lovingly recreated by Dreamscape Generators – brought the crowd to its feet in thunderous applause.

"They've left someone out, haven't they, Ryan?" Lavie said, with a sly smile.

"Ugh, don't remind me," Ryan said, chuckling. "For a moment I was afraid Tremfein was going to make me get up there and act, or something."

"What an amazing spectacle," Carranya said dreamily, lowering her fan. "It seems almost a pity that we have to leave so soon."

"*Encore!*" Father Marlborough said, applauding enthusiastically.

"Dear Henrik," Bernadette said, drawing closer to him as they stood and applauded, "this was quite unforgettable. I never dreamed I'd get to see a Dance of Malava myself, or visit the City of the Eternal God – much less that I would see them with you. It's – a dream come true, Henrik. I wonder when I'll wake up."

"Don't worry, Bernadette, my love," Henrik said, tenderly. "There are some dreams that we can keep dreaming for the rest of our lives, Infinity willing. There's a world waiting out there for both of us, and as soon as this is over, I will take you there."

"A remarkable performance, indeed," Agent Striker said. "It almost makes me nostalgic for the days I trod the boards, though I could well do without wearing that wolf mask again."

"All right, friends," Captain Freya Raienji said. "Now, if we want to be back in Zion for the show there, we've got to move soon. I promised Thora and Baldur – not to forget Hidoki, the poor dear – that I'd be with them at that performance, and I hope I can keep that promise."

"Where is it being held this year, Captain?" Marlborough asked, politely.

"In Acemel, a month from now," Freya replied. "Now follow me. We need to get to Unity Isle, in case you've all forgotten."

"Of course we haven't, Freya," Carranya said, with a laugh. "Now, we all need to make the journey to Zion. We thought of going by road at first, but Freya had a better idea. We'll be leaving by ship from Davenport tonight, and we'll be at Caledonia in no time."

"Caledonia?" Ryan said.

“We have, shall we say, a shortcut waiting for us there,” Striker said, grinning at him. “And Freya has borrowed a trick from our charming friends in the Varaldian Navy. With her on board, we will reach in a week or less.”

“Oh dear, Freya, are you going to use that Wind Elemental?” Carranya said. “That ought to make for an interesting journey. I hope none of you are subject to sea-sickness.”

“I’ve got my herbs, Princess,” Bernadette said, lightly, “so we can handle that.”

“Wait for me!” a voice cried out, cheerfully and rather out of breath. “Surely, you wouldn’t leave without little old me, would you?”

“Aline?” Bernadette’s face broke into a large smile. “What are you doing here?”

“Repairing Mr. Tremfein’s Dreamscape Generators!” Aline said, smoothing down her hair with clumsy gestures, and dislodging her eye-glasses in the process. Ryan retrieved them for her, and she beamed at him. “Mr. Eramond! I’ve heard *so* much about you. Did you know that the Eramonds and the Shells are related since ancient times? In fact, I’ve heard it said, our last common ancestor looked a lot like me!”

“Yes, I’ve heard that,” Ryan said, laughing. “Are you coming with us, too?”

“Of course! I *have* to!” Aline said, brightly. “Look, Miss Bernadette, I even brought you a set of dice! I know you blue girls don’t like gambling, but these are special!”

“Blue girls?” Henrik said, admiring Bernadette’s new robe, which Lavie had gifted her for the occasion.

“Oh, you know. Old-fashioned, kind-hearted Itarian church followers. Not like my grouch of a sister! Like you, Miss Bernadette.” She held out her hand.

“Sweet Infinity!” Henrik exclaimed. “Bernadette, these are....the Memory Crystals! The ones we found, and the metal one that Thomas left Amelia.” He looked at her adoringly, remembering their first encounter at the beach, and Bernadette, who also remembered, slipped her hand into his.

“You’re *so* clever, Mr. Henrik,” Aline said, with an adoring look of her own that caused Ryan to laugh loudly. “My boss, Sandra Hernandez, sent these to me through a Secret Service agent. He said I was to hand them over to the Princess herself! I’ve always found them so rugged and manly, haven’t you, Miss Fina?”

“Lavie, not Fina,” Lavie said, indulgently. “Your cousin’s as much of a goof as you are, Ryan.”

“Hey, Tremfein’s the one who gets names wrong!” Ryan protested, though he was laughing. “Agent Striker, it looks like you’ve got an admirer here.”

“Do I?” Striker said. “Hello, Dr. Sheldon. I’ll tell my colleague, whoever he was, that you want an autograph.”

“Naughty boy,” Aline said, grinning and wagging a finger at him.

“Are you coming with us to Unity Isle, Aline?” Bernadette said, surprised. “It might be dangerous, you know.”

“Of course I know, Miss Bernadette,” Aline said, resolutely. “I was with you in Itaria, don’t you remember? You’d be lost without me! Besides, I’ve brought along my latest invention, the Portable Memory Crystal Player, with me! It seems the Emperor told Sandra that it was important for you to see these crystals.”

“A Portable Crystal Player?” Ryan said. “That’s pretty amazing, I must say.”

“Oh, thank you, kind sir,” Aline said, bowing and blushing.

“Hey, lunkheads, where are you going?” another voice called out. Ryan turned to see Armin, wearing his raccoon mask and carrying a large cardboard sword.

“Armin?” Henrik said. “What in the Infinity’s name are you doing here?”

“I’m here to *save the world*, Compadre,” Armin said, taking off his mask and smirking. “Sir Cornelius sent me along to keep an eye on you guys, make sure there wasn’t a Sir Prescott among you!”

“Very amusing, Armin,” Lavie said, glaring at him.

“Hey, lighten up, okay? I’m sorry about the punchbowl, and all that. But anyway, I’m going along with you, and those are orders.”

“Are you sure you aren’t going to meet a certain Zion Sergeant with blue hair and a flaming sword?” Ryan said, with a laugh.

“Guilty as charged, Compadre,” Armin said. “She *did* send me a postcard, you know. Few ladies can resist the charms of the A-Man!” He took a card with a picture of the Imperial Palace at Caledonia and handed it to Ryan. On the back was a simple inscription. “*Dear Raccoon, or Bandit, or whatever you are. Quit fooling and join the Army, it’ll make a man out of you! Yours, Burnfist.*”

“Good heavens!” Striker said, amused. “Did Rebecca send you that, young man?”

“You got it, Wolfie,” Armin said. “Like I said, some of us guys like it hot!”

“Ugh, spare me,” Lavie said, laughing despite herself.

“All right, it looks like we’re all here,” Captain Raienji said, stifling a laugh of her own. “The coach is waiting for all of us, and we need to reach Serin’s Peak soon. Let’s go!”

“I’m ready when you are!” Armin said. “Hey, you’re pretty cute too, red-haired Zion lady!”

“Tell my husband that,” Freya said, chuckling.

“Are you coming with us too, Father Marlborough?” Bernadette said, surprised.

“I will travel with you to Zion, my child,” he replied, “and remain there, for there is a little matter which requires my attention.”

“All right, let’s get this show on the road!” Henrik said, taking her by the hand.

“Ryan and Lavie, off we go!” Lavie said, as she joined her arm to Ryan’s, and they led the way out of the Theatre of Alton, followed by a party who – all things considered – were surprisingly cheerful.

“You have taken long enough, my friend,” Juno said, as the small boat made its way between the rocky crevices of the western stretch that lay beside Chespa Bay. “I wonder if I ought to pay you as much as we had agreed upon.”

The boatman backed away, fear on his face. Life had been hard for him since Robert had been killed; within a few days of his death, Trask had been captured too, and what employment remained for a wind mage whose skills had turned towards banditry, and who had just managed to escape the long arm of the law? When Juno had offered him ten thousand Commonwealth dollars in exchange for his services, it had seemed a dream come true – not only was the pay generous, but he could use the money to make his way to the Fulton Republic, and begin a new career there, as a slaver or a smuggler. “Sir, the winds have been against us,” he said, “and you have reached here before anyone else, as far as I could see. There are no other ships docked here, except those belonging to the Commonwealth and its members.”

“Perhaps,” Juno said, calmly. “Still, you have done well enough, and Makarov Juno is not miserly. Here is your payment, my man.”

The boatman reached for the roll of notes eagerly, unfurling them and counting them. He did not notice the blue beam aimed directly at his heart, and fell into the ocean with the money fluttering around him, a smile still on his face.

“To the depths with you,” Juno said, with a harsh laugh, “and take your wages too, my friend. I could not prevent you from committing the crimes you did, but at least you will commit them no more.”

A life for a life, Juno, the voice said sadly. But how will we return?

“Do not worry about that,” he replied. “Instead, let us focus on victory.”

I still do not understand, Juno. Your heart is brave, but can you face a man of that sort single-handedly?

“Single-handedly?” Juno snorted – or, at least, produced the mental equivalent of a snort. “I should hope not, my lady. Did you not hear what that man, Marlborough, had to say? Six candles.”

You were cruel with him, Juno. But his deception was wounding a woman's heart, and I am sentenced to punish any who transgress in that way.

"A fortunate sentence, indeed," Juno replied. "Now, listen to me. First, we must find the sixth mage, wherever he is – and, fortunately, I already have an idea. Next, I shall destroy him, and that is where Marlborough and his visions will come in handy."

I do not understand, Juno.

"Six candles, my lady," Juno said, and though this conversation was taking place in his mind, gloating would be an accurate description of his tone. "Man and woman. Three pairs of two. Spenson and the girl make two. Ryan Eramond, the unworthy descendant of Prince Ryle, and Princess Carranya make two more. That leaves Miss Regale – and myself."

Miss Regale? The voice sounded outraged. You are insane, Juno. Lavender Regale does not love you.

"Who talks of love here?" Juno replied, sarcastically. "I talk of battle. Spenson and Eramond will wield their mediocre swords. The blue girl and the Princess will heal us. And Miss Regale and I will use our weapons to defeat him. That is the prophecy. There is no other warrior with my skills, or with a sword like mine, who can fulfil it. After that loathsome individual has been defeated, then we shall consider other matters."

You speak wisely, Juno, she said, regretfully, and yet, I doubt. The Purpose has veiled this prophecy from my eyes, but I still have a woman's heart, and I feel that you are mistaken.

"A woman's heart?" Juno replied, cuttingly. "A woman's brain, as well. Do not let nebulous feelings sway you. Can you name one man who fulfils this prophecy as perfectly as I do?"

I do not know of any other, Juno.

"Then doubt no more, my brave but foolish companion. Let us move onward."

The voice was kind, almost indulgent. *As you wish, Juno. Perhaps this is the will of the Purpose, prophecy or not.*

"I must say, this is quite the enjoyable journey," said Ryan, as he watched the *Wisdom of Friederich* cut through the waves of the Sea of Arlia, steadily making its way towards Caledonia. "Maybe the Zion should start using this on cruise liners as well. For one, we would have outrun those pirates with the *Paradiso* in the first place!"

"Unfortunately, the energy costs are quite prohibitive, Mr. Eramond," Agent Striker said. "We're only able to do it because Captain Raienji is working overtime, and because the Church has loaned us enough

of that metal to keep us going even when she's asleep. And even then, she's going to need quite a bit of rest once we reach Zion."

"That's a pity," Ryan said.

"What are you guys up to?" Lavie said, climbing onto the deck and smiling. "Aline's just finished wiring up that device of hers. She says she wants us to watch those Memory Crystals as soon as possible! I've never seen one myself, Ryan."

"I've *heard* one, but it was broken," Ryan said, smiling back. "Hopefully these will be more interesting. What do you think is on them, Agent Striker?"

"If the Emperor wanted us to see them, then I presume they contain something of relevance to our mission on Unity Isle," he replied.

"It's sort of disturbing that we can't communicate with them," Lavie said, shaking her head. "Aline and the Captain have been trying to reach the Commonwealth by radio, but they aren't getting any reply."

"Hopefully, that is just a question of distance," said Striker. "If the two of you will excuse me, there are things I need to discuss with Dr. Sheldon myself. I'll be back after a while."

"Bye, Agent Wolfgang!" Lavie said cheerfully, as she watched him leave.

"Lavie," Ryan said, softly, "can I ask you something?"

"Go right ahead, Ryan!" she replied, looking out at the sea. "Gosh, it's fun to be moving this fast! Maybe I'll convince Daddy to invest in developing ships like this, someday. He's already very interested in motor vehicles, after my trip to the Republic."

"Oof, those were pretty bumpy," Ryan remarked, making a face. "But I was pretty ill at the time, so maybe I'm no judge. Anyway, Lavie, you know I'm a fan of unsolved mysteries, right?"

"Detective Ryan Eramond and his loyal sidekick, that's us!" Lavie said, taking his hand. "So what are you detecting now, Ryan?"

"Nothing big, I'm just curious," he said, looking at her affectionately. "So what's this about Striker having a girlfriend?"

Lavie felt her hand grow cold, despite the warmth of Ryan's. "Er, where did you hear that, Ryan?" she said, hesitantly.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't be embarrassing you," Ryan said, kindly. "It was the night Armin decided to play the fool with the fruit punch. Just before we put you to bed, you seemed upset, and you mentioned our friend Wolfgang and his girlfriend. What was that all about, Lavie?"

“Er – me being drunk, I guess?” Lavie said, blushing. “I just wondered if he had someone he cared for, or something, and if his duties were keeping him away from her. You know how we girls are, right, Ryan?”

Ryan chuckled. “Oh, don’t tell me you’re trying to set him up with someone, Lavie,” he said, with a wink, “though I *have* seen Cathy looking at him admiringly a couple of times.”

“Very funny, Ryan,” Lavie said, giggling. “Look, there comes Aline!”

“Mr. Eramond! And Lady Fina! Come and join us at once! Aunt Aline’s just brewed up a little tea, and we’re going to watch some moving pictures too! The Princess looked at one of them with me, and she said we needed to see them all as soon as we could. What better time than now, Miss Fina? Seize the day, that’s what the brave princes and princesses always say. The others are already waiting.”

“Moving....pictures?” Ryan said, blankly.

“She means the Memory Crystal, I guess, Ryan,” Lavie explained.

“My, you’re so bright, Miss Fina. Have you ever considered a career as a scientist? Professor Aline could always use a few students like you!” Aline said, beaming at her.

“A scientist? Hey, Ryan, what do you think of that?” she asked.

“It sounds sort of cool, actually,” Ryan replied, with a nod, “but remember, scientists have to read a lot of *boring* books!”

“Quite the comedian, aren’t you, Ryan?” Lavie said, with a laugh. “Come along, let’s not keep the others waiting too long.”

“Especially Agent Striker, since you said we had to be nice to him, Lavie,” Ryan said, patting her on the shoulder. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

Below decks, the mess hall had been set up as a temporary theatre. Aline’s device was perched on the large table, its projector pointed at one of the walls, and all the passengers found their seats around the table. Aline stood near the device, and standing next to her was the Princess, looking pensive.

“Ah, Lord Ryan and Lady Lavie,” she said, brightening as they entered. “We were awaiting your arrival. Please sit down.”

“Lady Lavie?” Lavie burst out laughing. “That’s a new one, Ryan.”

“Indeed it is, though I doubt I’ll ever make ‘Lord’ in real life,” Ryan replied, winking at her. As they sat down, Carranya turned to address them.

“My friends,” she said, “as you all know, we are on a journey to Unity Isle, to face the leader of the group responsible for the past year of war and turmoil. Though the rebellion in Itaria has been

quenched, and the war with the Varald nears its end, we cannot rest until this man and his followers have been defeated. None of us here have been left untouched by this conflict, and we need to bring it to an end – for Terra, for Zion, for Galvenia, and for ourselves and those we hold dear.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad speech for a dame,” Armin observed, in a low tone, but Henrik silenced him with a stern look.

“Now, to face this enemy, it is important that we understand them, and this is why Aline and I have called you here. We have three Memory Crystals to view, and I am afraid that you might find their contents disturbing. Take courage, and let us begin.”

The two men stood at the edge of a ravine, looking into the void that lay beneath them. Though all they could see was a pit without a bottom, a red glow lit their faces, and reflected off the blades of their swords.

“Granted that you saved me from that beast, Kaleb,” the first man said, his features twisting into an expression of hatred, “but I still know.” A gust of wind blew through his hair – hair so fair it was almost white – making him appear wilder than he was.

“What do you know, Samath?” Kaleb said, gently. “The Pits can play tricks on our minds, even if we Journeymen can resist the Sickness.”

“I know your secret, Kaleb,” Samath replied, implacably. “Or, to be more accurate, I know the secret that you and your friend, Nealus, have tried to conceal all this time. How many, Kaleb? How many more like me?”

“Samath, you’re not making sense again,” Kaleb said, patiently. “What do you mean?”

“Listen, Kaleb. Do not play the innocent with me, for I have come too far to turn around now. The Woman of the Void has revealed your secrets to me. How many more bastards, Kaleb? How many more of your children have you disowned? Do you refuse to face your own son, you who preach about the holiness of life and love?”

“Samath, you are forcing a confidence from me,” Kaleb said, sadly. “Listen to me, and not to that demonic abomination. You are not my son, Samath. You are Nealus’ son. Nealus is your father.”

“Nealus?” There was a hesitation in the younger man’s voice. “By God, you are skilled at fencing with words, Kaleb. Do you have any proof for this outlandish story?”

“I can only tell you what is,” Kaleb replied. “Your mother was a noblewoman at the court of the Emperor. Nealus saved her from a baron who wished to abduct her and hold her to ransom. She and Nealus came

to love each other, and were married in secret, by a member of our Order. They kept the secret, Samath, because revealing it would have meant death for her, and for you."

"Death?" For a moment, the Journeyman's expression softened. "What do you mean?"

"The Laws of Zion, Samath. Though Nealus managed to win the Emperor's support, the old laws still forbade a marriage between a noblewoman and a commoner. To reveal the secret of your existence, and your sister's...."

"My sister?"

"Pauline the Almoner is your younger sister, Samath."

"That daughter of the Itarians? That woman who would have us all lay down our swords, and lock ourselves away in ivory towers, handing out alms?" he said, contemptuously. "If you must lie, Kaleb, lie convincingly."

"Leave the child alone, Samath, for she has a good heart. Let me finish. To reveal your existence would have meant death for your mother, for both of you, and for the Order of the Journeymen. Though it broke his heart, Nealus agreed to let you be raised apart, by lowly friends of his. When he saw your skills, he rejoiced, and he inducted you into the Order so that you could be his successor – you, and your sons after you. Do you understand, Samath?"

"I only understand that Nealus is as dishonourable as you, Kaleb. Couldn't he honour his commitment to his son? Even if he had to keep the secret from the Emperor, why did he not trust me with it? Would a leader not entrust his secrets to his appointed successor? No, Kaleb, you cannot convince me. Even if you speak the truth about my wretch of a father, I cannot believe that his intentions are pure. You have brought me here to kill me, and if you spared me from the beast, it was so that you could do the deed with your own hand, and perhaps have your vile brother record the act for posterity."

"Poor Kevin," Kaleb said, shaking his head. "He stands outside, believing that he will record our noble mission, and the deliverance of Korothe. He will have a sad tale to tell."

"Silence!" Samath's face was red, both with the glow from the abyss – which became redder as he spoke – and with anger. "You will pay the price for your conspiracy with Nealus, Kaleb. It is I, Samath, who will lead the Order of the Journeymen along the true Way – the Way of Power. The Woman has answered me, and she will avenge me. Arctura, hear me when I call!"

"Samath!" Kaleb screamed. "Infinity save us, you may have destroyed us all, and Korothe with us!" His hand went to his sword....

...and there was a dazzling flash of light, white and pure, obscuring all that could be seen....

...and, moments later, the scene changed – there were two men, one of whom was fallen, a line of blood trailing from one corner of his mouth. The second, who was barely a lad, was trying desperately to revive him, and weeping.

“Kevin....”

“Kaleb....Brother, are you going to....d...die?” the boy said, softly.

“No regrets, Kevin. No regrets at all. I have died defending the code of the Order of Journeymen, and though Koroth must perish, Arctura and her Sickness have been destroyed. Galvenia is safe from the Plague, Kevin. I have run my course. I have come to the end of the Way.”

“D – don’t say that, Kaleb...” the boy pleaded. “We’ll heal you....We’ll remove you from this place.”

“Take my Sword and my journal, Kevin,” Kaleb replied, “and don’t weep. Remember, a man must be strong. A man does not cry. And you are a fine man already, little brother. I want you to stand by Nealus and Pauline, and help them as I did. Finish the story that I have written. As long as you and your sons keep my memory alive, I will never die.”

“No! Brother, you’re going to recover! You will recover!” Kevin screamed, frantically.

“I only wish.....I could have....seen you....grow....” Kaleb said, faintly, as Kevin began to sob again....

....and suddenly, all was dark....

....and then there were two men, sitting in an ordinary room in an ordinary home....

“This scene,” the first man said, “should tell you all there is to know about how the true Order was founded – how Samath, our founder and our inspiration, destroyed the fool Kaleb, leaving behind a weeping and cowardly boy as his only legacy. Having seen this, you are sworn to silence and secrecy. If you violate the Oaths of the Third Way, may you be cursed for all eternity. You are sworn to serve us, and to destroy the lives of our enemies – Wilhelm, Carranya, Pious, and the Propheted Ones. Swear, now.”

“I swear,” the second man said, “to uphold the Oaths of the Third Way, and to destroy these enemies by whatever means are necessary. May I be damned if I ever violate the Seal of Samath.”

“Ryan?” Lavie said, looking at the expression of numb shock on her friend’s face. “Ryan, are you all right?”

“I’m....It’s strange, Lavie,” he said, softly. “That’s just what Grandpa said to me, before he...passed on. He must have known. Grandpa...”

"I understand, Ryan," she said, softly and kindly. "And you did grow up to be a fine man, believe me." She placed her hand on his shoulder, and he smiled.

"Samath was Nealus' son?" Bernadette said, a look of disbelief on her face. "And Saint Pauline the Almoner was his sister? Sweet Infinity.....I can't believe it. Truly, it is the choices we make, and not our birth, that determine our destinies, Princess."

"But how did this end up on Davenport Beach?" Henrik said, wide-eyed. "That's where we first found it."

"We cannot be certain," Aline replied, "but the second Crystal will explain it all. That Samath is a very wicked boy! Poor Kaleb, he was so brave."

"Wisely spoken, Bernadette," Carranya said, shaking her head at what she had just seen. "Now, the contents of the next Crystal may disturb some of you – particularly Ryan, Henrik and Bernadette – as it involves an acquaintance of theirs. If you wish to leave, my friends, I will understand."

"We have to be strong, as Kaleb said," Ryan said, resolutely. "Bring it on, Princess."

"That's the spirit, young man," Striker said, approvingly.

"The truth can hurt, but it can also bring light," Father Marlborough observed. "Let us proceed."

The first part of the Crystal consisted of the words Henrik and Bernadette had heard in Clarissa's warehouse, but with no images. Then there was a blur, and a picture began to form...

"Any last words, boy?" the man in the cloak said. It was a rhetorical question, for Thomas Perrin was bound and gagged, though he struggled vainly against his restraints.

"Oh, he can't talk, my friend," the second man, who wore the robe of an Itarian priest, replied. "Undo that gag, and let him spew his venom a little. It will be amusing."

With a sudden movement, he untied the gag.

"You children of the Pits!" Thomas Perrin said, desperately. "You may take my life, but the object you're looking for is now safe. You've lost." He laughed harshly.

"Be that as it may, boy," the first man said, "we will find it again, and on that day, nothing shall stop us anymore."

"Father," Thomas said, desperately. "How could you – associate with a man like that? How could you?"

"The Church needs to be cleansed, Thomas," the priest said, sternly. "There are too many who are lukewarm in our ranks. We need a purer Church."

“Yes, but at what price?” Thomas snarled. “Is killing me your idea of purification?”

“He wearies me,” the first man said, raising his wand and aiming it at Thomas. “Be still, boy – forever. Perhaps your Infinity will pity you.”

A bolt of red light struck Thomas in the chest, and he collapsed.

“Amelia...” he said, the words hardly audible. “I...love you....”

“Oh, very clever, my friend,” the priest said, annoyed. “What do we do with him now? If anyone finds him here, there’s sure to be an inquiry!”

“Do not fear, my friend,” the first man said, drawing a rope from his bag. “We will merely hang him from the rafters, and all will believe that he died an inglorious suicide, damned by his own God. Come, give me a hand.”

The deed was quickly done.

“Now, how do we get away?” the priest said, nervously.

“You worry too much, my friend,” the cloaked man replied, picking up his bag. “There is a little boat waiting for us at Davenport Beach, and the Elements of the Winds shall dance to the tune of the Beast. Come, now, and do not dawdle.”

“Poor Amelia...poor Thomas,” Bernadette said, her frame – which now seemed strangely fragile - shaken by sobs. Henrik moved closer to her, and placed both his arms around her, as she leaned against his chest.

“The first Crystal,” Carranya said, looking sympathetically at Bernadette, “must have belonged to the mage in the cloak, who was probably the same man you all fought in Korothe. He must have dropped it during their flight, and by some strange twist of Providence, it remained beneath the sands, to be discovered by an innocent child.”

“That is the pity of evil, Princess,” Marlborough said. “The worst schemes of devils and men can be undone in a single moment, as they were then.”

“Geez, this is pretty intense stuff,” Armin said, in a strangely subdued voice. “What’s on the Third Crystal, though? It had better not be too gruesome, Aline’s tea is too good to waste!”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Armin,” Aline said, managing to give him a small smile. “The Emperor, it seems, felt that it held the key to our task. Let us see if we can understand what he was driving at, shall we?”

“If I may reassure you, Armin,” the Princess said, gently, “there is no violence recorded on this, but the contents are unsettling all the same.”

“Hey, she called me Armin!” he replied, winking at Captain Raienji. “Did you hear that?”

“What do you want her to call you, boy?” Raienji replied, with a chuckle. “Your Imperial Highness?”

“Now, let’s not chatter too much,” Aline said, with a wink. She inserted the third Crystal in her viewer, and the room was lit up once more...

There were five of them, in a circle, kneeling around the man who sat on the throne. But ‘throne’ was perhaps not the right word – it was simply a tall chair with the dimensions of a throne. On the wall, above the throne, was a large shield, displaying the three symbols: man, woman, beast.

“My brothers,” the man in the chair said, “I greet you in the name of the Lord of all Power, in the names of the Phantom, Arctura and Gharon, his most faithful servants, and in the memory of eternal Janwen. May you ever walk the Third Way without stumbling.”

“We greet you, Master, spirit of Samath, in the name of the Lord of all Power and his three servants,” the five men replied. “May you lead us along the Third Way without stumbling.”

“You may rise,” the man on the chair replied, and they obeyed. “What news?”

“The Varald will be ours soon, Master,” one of them replied. “There are many who seek power, but who cloak it with pretty names, such as liberty and justice. They have been easy to sway – too easy. If only that fool Jakov had waited, instead of acting on his own, Terra would have been ours a half-century ago.”

“The Zion will soon be bereft, once the moment comes,” the second replied. “The Emperor sickens, and we have done all that we could to hasten the growth of his sickness within him. At the right moment, as you declare it, Master, we shall strike Wilhelm, and the wound will be fatal. The Zion will not recover. Moreover, the man Engel remains faithful to us, though he works in the shadows, believing that we will help his nation defeat the Varald. He is a fool.”

“Galvenia is secure,” said the third. “From the highest ranks of Government to the lowest traders and bandits, we have covered their territory with those loyal to us – all thanks to the faithful services of our disciple, Lugner. It was a fortunate day when we inducted him into the Third Way, even though the Gift within him was weak indeed.”

“Virtue carries its own punishment, Master,” the fourth said, with a smile, “and I, Gharon, disciple of the Beast, have managed to seduce those proud men of Itaria who claim to be too virtuous, more virtuous

than their own Pontiff. Spiritual pride is a royal road to gaining allies for the Third Way. When the moment comes, we will tear their peaceful land asunder."

"You have given me an easy task indeed, Master," the fifth said, in a tone that was almost a reproach. "There is no need of the Gift in the Republic, though we have amused ourselves by torturing some of the righteous there. They only speak one language, the language of money, and getting their collaboration has been child's play. So twisted are their hearts already that we hardly need touch them before they follow us, like the stray dogs in their cities."

"You have done well, my friends," the Master replied, "but there is yet more to be done. As the appointed year, the year 185 of the Calendar of Samath, draws near, Arctura has spoken to me, and warned me of a danger that threatens us. Listen to her, my friends."

An apparition – a creature that was neither human nor animal, but with the appearance of a woman – emerged in the centre of the circle formed by the five men, and spoke.

"Son of Samath, pay heed to my words," she said. "You have none to fear, except the Six. On the day when Lover and Beloved, Swordsman and Wanderer, Healer and Archer, all stand before you, you will be confounded. Scatter them before they unite, and victory will be yours, O worthy follower of mine."

The vision vanished, and the five men looked at each other in dismay.

"Whom does she speak of, Master?" Gharon said, sharply.

"I leave it to you to find out, my friends. The Harvester of Souls absorbs all my energies, and I must leave this task to you. You do not need to destroy them all; destroying one would be enough to break the mystical union that Arctura speaks of. Now depart, and make haste about your task. A reward awaits the first to hunt one of these accursed Six down."

"I will not fail you, Master," the mage from Zion said, with a cruel laugh. "I will be the one to claim the reward."

"Ohmygosh," Lavie said, her face pale. "Then....this was all planned long ago, wasn't it?"

"Not too long, Lavie, my friend," Princess Carranya replied. "After all, Thomas found this Crystal before he died, in C.Y. 298, and Aline says it can't be much older than that."

"But who are the Six?" Ryan said, shaking his head, as he placed his arm around Lavie. "That she-devil wasn't exactly clear about their identities."

"Demons are liars, young Ryan," Marlborough said, firmly, "and yet, sometimes, they speak the truth, but in a deceptive fashion, so as to misguide and mislead souls. When Arctura first spoke to Samath, she

must have told him that he was the natural son of a Journeyman, which was the literal truth – and Samath’s pride and arrogance did the rest.”

“I’ve got it,” Armin said, suddenly. “Blue girl’s the Healer, right? Lavie is the archer – the Level Ten Archer who’s going to purify Galvenia’s green and pleasant land...” He chuckled.

“Shut up, Armin,” Ryan said, irritably. “The couple could be any of us, Lavie – you and me, or Henrik and Bernadette. The Healer could be either Bernadette or Carranya. The Wanderer and the Swordsman are the tricky ones.”

“Journeyman were wanderers,” Freya Raienji observed, “so Ryan is the Wanderer.”

Striker shook his head. “Don’t tell a true Wanderer that; the Wanderers are men like Fossen, who train in combat rather than magic. They look down on the Journeyman as Johnny-Come-Latelys, Freya. The Wanderer could be anyone who is a combat trainer, or his disciple – either Ryan or Henrik, who were trainees of Whitworth, would qualify.”

“Geez, are you all stupid?” Armin quipped. “The Lover is *me*, Wolfie. Which woman can resist the charms of Armin Tamas?”

“A lot of us,” Lavie said, rolling her eyes and causing Bernadette to burst out laughing. “You and Willoughby make a fine pair indeed, *Armin*.”

Armin pulled a face, but did not reply.

Ryan chuckled. “Oh, mercy, Lavie,” he said, “don’t remind me of *him*. We’re supposed to be all serious now. The trouble is, we still need to make up a total of six – and if Father Marlborough is right, that would be three men and three women. Am I right, Father?”

“Quite so, young man,” Marlborough said. “I would agree that the Archer is Miss Lavender, and the Healer is either Bernadette or the Princess. The Wanderer is probably you, Ryan, while the Swordsman is Spenson, who uses no weapon in combat, save the sword. The Lover and the Beloved, I’m afraid, are mysteries. Perhaps Arctura was lying to her disciples, as all good demons do.”

“*Good* demons?” Aline said, shaking her head. “*Maman* always told me demons were no-good, dirty, rotten cheaters, like that wicked boy Gharon!”

“Is she always that literal-minded?” Freya asked Lavie, curiously.

“She’s just a goof, Captain!” Lavie replied, with a smile.

“Well, those Crystals have certainly given us plenty of food for thought,” Striker said, with a smile.

“Do you have any ideas, Wolfgang?” Marlborough said.

“If I might make a suggestion, we may be approaching this the wrong way if we assume that the Lover and the Beloved are necessarily a pair,” he said. “As you said, demons may take pleasure in presenting the truth in a deceptive fashion.”

“That is an interesting notion, Agent Striker,” Carranya said, kindly, “but it does not advance our knowledge very much. Traditionally, of course, a lover is a man, and the beloved is a woman. So, Henrik and Ryan, which one of you qualifies as the greater lover?” She laughed.

“Very funny, Princess,” Ryan replied. “To go one further than the Agent, what if the meanings are symbolic and not literal? I mean, the only one that’s easy is the Archer – that’s Lavie, of course. Almost every other of those terms can have more than one interpretation.”

“Geez, who cares?” Armin said, impatiently. “Anyway, we’re all going to Unity Isle together, and we’re going to fight together. Phooey on prophecies, I say.”

“You know, Armin,” Father Marlborough said, with a twinkle in his eye, “that may not be such a bad idea. Why don’t we just disperse and give the topic a break; we can always return to it at dinner-time, if you wish.”

“Good idea, Father,” Henrik said, shaking his head. “I could use a bit of a walk and some fresh air. Coming, Bernadette?”

“I’m ready when you are, Henrik,” she said, as they left the room hand in hand.

“I think I’d better get my cameras fixed,” Armin said, with a wink at Striker. “See ya later, Wolfie and Ryan.”

“You know, I think Armin’s actually on to something for once,” Lavie said, with a grin. “Come on, Ryan, let’s play the piano!”

“The piano?”

“There’s one on board, and I’m sure you remember *some* of your lessons,” she said, tugging at his sleeve. “Let’s give it a try, it’d be fun!”

Ryan laughed. “Ah, the things we do for love,” he said, as he followed Lavie to the ship’s recreation room. The others left, until only Aline and Agent Striker were left in the room.

“Mr. Striker!” she said, brightly. “I have an idea! Now it may be silly, but listen to me. I think I’ve figured it all out!”

“Really?” Striker said, with an amused expression. “What do you mean, Dr. Sheldon?”

“Oh, call me Aline!” she said, running both hands through her hair, and removing her eye-glasses to wipe them clean. “I’m going by current personalities and achievements, because after developing that

Aura Detector, I've had to bone up on my mental sciences! Mr. Ryan is the Wanderer, because that's his personality – he likes to go adventuring, and he's been all over the place, from what Miss Bernadette tells me! Miss Fina – sorry, I mean Miss Lavie – is the Archer. Mr. Henrik, the dear boy, is the Swordsman, because so far, he's done a lot with that huge sword of his! Miss Bernadette is the Healer – she's helped to heal Mr. Henrik, and that nice Miss Lavie as well! The Beloved *must* be the Princess, Mr. Striker. She's such a nice girl. I hope she finds a good man some day! Good men are hard to find."

"That is actually quite plausible, Aline," Striker said, in a friendly tone. "But who is the mysterious Lover?"

"All of us, Mr. Striker, all of us. You and I. The Lover is not about romance, of course – that's a silly idea! There are many kinds of love, you know. And in this case, the Lover is us, ordinary folks without special abilities, who will stand up and be counted for our friends' sake! Isn't that a nice notion, Mr. Striker?"

"Remarkable," Striker said, looking at her intently. "You might have something there, you know, Aline. I'm impressed."

"What a nice boy you are," she replied, blushing.

"Sire, Engel is now in custody," Matthias Ferzen, the Director of the Zion Intelligence and Tactics Division said, in a subdued tone of voice. "I understand that this must cause you pain, but we have more than enough evidence against him."

"Do not worry about that, Ferzen," Emperor Charlemagne said. "We are only fortunate that we prevented him from doing further damage. I suspected him, of course, which is why I put him under Renaud, who is younger and stronger. And I'm sure he did his job in Galvenia very well, convincing them to visit Issachar so that his Third Way friends could kill two birds with one stone."

"It is as you say, Sire," Ferzen replied. "Truly, your mind is as sharp as ever."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Ferzen," Charlemagne replied, with a strained smile. "What news of the force for Unity Isle?"

"The latest message from Striker says that they are on course, and will reach Caledonia in two days, Sire. The Memory Crystals have all been viewed, but though they are all speculating, no one seems to have quite penetrated the mystery of that creature's words."

"No one, Ferzen, not even us," Charlemagne said, shaking his head slowly. "I am almost inclined to think that it is a clever piece of misdirection, considering what we both know."

“Indeed, Sire,” Ferzen said, quietly. “And yet – if things do work out the way we have calculated, we would still have to deal with immense complications. Relations between the nations of Terra might never quite be the same again.”

“That was inevitable once the conflict began to involve Itaria and the Republic,” Charlemagne replied, “not to mention....” His voice grew weary, and trailed off.

“Marlborough will be here too, will he not?” Ferzen said, looking at the Emperor with concern.

“Spare me the pitying glances, my good Ferzen,” Charlemagne replied, straightening himself with a sudden movement. “Tell me one thing, Ferzen. If this last throw of the dice fails – if that lunatic does succeed in capturing Unity Isle for himself – then what lies ahead?”

“We do not know, Sire,” Ferzen replied, “especially given the state of the world. They might begin by seizing the Republic, which has not been riven by turmoil as the Itarians or the Varald have been. They would have no problem finding men who would sell their own infant daughters for money there. From the Republic, they could march into the Varald Directorate, and take advantage of the situation there to boost Lyzhnov and recapture power. If that happens, it would mean a renewal of the war, and the end would be nowhere in sight.”

“Hmmm,” Charlemagne said, nodding his agreement. “You are probably right, Ferzen. If this war has taught me one thing – besides the obvious – it is that the Republic is a greater hornet’s nest than we have ever dreamed. For three centuries, the Commonwealth has left them to their own devices, and they have grown dangerous, though not powerful. They are a fertile soil for the unscrupulous, as the sordid story of Sir Prescott has shown. Mark my words, if another conflict of this nature should break out, the Republic would be pivotal.”

“Sir Prescott?” Ferzen laughed. “The man is a consummate fool, Sire, and little else. I presume you have heard of his latest exploits.”

“Indeed, Ferzen. But the laughter they bring me is hollow, for they remind me that we are not so different from him. We have taken risks, we have gambled on the strike at Unity Isle being triumphant – but what if our hopes were foolish? There are nights when I lie awake, not because of physical pain – pain has lost its terrors for me – but wondering what would happen if we were defeated. Would we be held up to ridicule as Sir Prescott was? Will I go down in history as another Johan the Mad, who allowed his irrationality to lead him into the fiasco of Lorean Castle?”

“Sire, do not fear,” Ferzen said, loyally, a determined look coming to his face. “We are not in the days of Johan any longer. It is true that Johan made a fool of himself, but his intentions – though driven by a love of the Empire – were far from pure. And remember that today, we may be closer than we ever were to undoing the mistake that he made.”

Charlemagne smiled. "You are right, of course, Ferzen. And the fact that the Galvenians have Kievan's daughter with them is convenient, very convenient. Let us see how things unfold now. From now on, it is all in the Infinity's hands."

Carranya woke up with a start to find Lavie at her bedside, looking at her sympathetically.

"Lavie?" she said, blinking and opening her eyes as she sat up. "Why are you here, my friend?"

"You were having a nightmare, Carranya," Lavie said, sitting on the edge of her bunk and placing an arm around her. "I was already awake, because Captain Freya came in to tell us that we'd soon be landing at Caledonia, and I was so excited, I couldn't get back to sleep! I took a walk here, and I heard you screaming. Carranya, what's the matter?"

"I – wasn't dreaming, Lavie, my friend," Carranya said, looking dazed. "I had a vision."

"Another vision? Of Lady Penelope?" Lavie said, feeling her friend shiver.

Carranya did not reply for a moment, but leaned against Lavie for support before straightening herself. "Lavie, I – For a moment, when I awoke, I thought I had – pierced the veil. I thought I had understood exactly what I needed to do on Unity Isle, but now – I cannot remember." She shook her head sadly. "If only I could recall..."

"Why don't you tell me what you saw, Carranya," Lavie said, kindly, "and we'll see if I can help you out!"

"I was in the Palace Gardens at Lorean," she said, "and I saw a man and woman walking together. They seemed familiar – at first, I thought it was Father and Mother – but as I drew closer, I couldn't believe my eyes..." Her expression changed, and once again, her listener felt that it was someone else speaking, and not her...

"Welcome, my worthy daughter," the woman said. "We have waited for you a long time."

"Lady Penelope?" Carranya said, an awed expression on her face. Suddenly, she found herself kneeling.

"Yes, my dearest child," the man said. "You have travelled far, and your reward is now near."

"P – Prince Derren?" Carranya found tears coming to her eyes, though they were tears of joy – a joy that could not express itself in words. "I – I don't understand."

"We have waited hundreds of years for this, Carranya," Lady Penelope said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You will set right what once was wrong. Derren and I are proud of you, my child."

"What do you mean, Lady Penelope?" Carranya replied.

“Stand up, Carranya, and let me look upon you,” Prince Derren said, gently.

As Carranya rose, she saw that the entire garden was filled with flowers – with King’s Tears, the legendary flowers that obtained their name from King Richard’s grief on learning of Derren’s death on the battlefield.

“For years, child, our descendants have wept with us, waiting for this moment to come,” Penelope said, embracing her. “And now, the prophecy will be fulfilled. The grieving maiden will become the happy mother of a son. Look ahead of you, Carranya. Look at the Way.”

Carranya looked ahead, and there was a man walking towards her. Though he was too far away to be seen, somehow, she knew who he was. Her heart rejoiced.

“Francis?” she whispered. “Prince Wilhelm?”

“Yes, child,” Derren said, speaking as a father would to a child. “Do not weep for him any longer, Carranya, for a nobler and greater Way lies ahead. Go to him.”

Carranya began to walk, then to run, her shoes falling off her feet as she did. As she drew close enough to see him, a second man appeared.

“Who are you?” she said, though there was no one to listen.

Without a word, the second man drew a weapon, and a beam of blue light burst forth from it, knocking Prince Wilhelm to the ground. Though she was still at a distance, she knew that he was dead.

“Death is not the end, Carranya,” Lady Penelope’s voice called out, though she could no longer see her or Derren. “You must live. The flower that blooms in these fields shall no more be called the King’s Tear, but the fair Flower of Lorean.”

The second man turned towards her, his sword raised.

“He cannot hurt you,” Derren’s voice said. “He has failed, Carranya. Soon, you will understand.”

The sword pierced her breast, and she screamed with pain....

“There is an extraordinary force in your heart, Carranya. You are not alone. Let your heart lead you along the Way....”

“Carranya,” Lavie said, holding her friend close to her and stroking her head, “what does it all mean?”

“I – I don’t know, Lavie,” she murmured, after a long while. “I thought I knew – but now, I cannot remember.”

“An extraordinary force,” Lavie said, her expression pensive. “You know, that’s just what Father Marlborough told me, when Ryan and I were travelling back to the Republic.”

Carranya dried her eyes and sat up, recovering her composure. “What did he tell you, Lavie?” she said, softly.

“It was one evening on board the ship, Carranya. He was talking about dark magic and light magic, about the kinds of spells our enemies were using – warps, shields that could protect cities, things like that. He said it was easy for a dark mage to do it, because he had the help of demons; but for a good person, they’d need – let me remember – ‘An extraordinary force in their hearts. Love without limits. Immense courage. Deep devotion.’ It was really cool, the way he said it.”

“Father Marlborough,” Carranya said, still in a low tone. “I wonder if *he* would understand, if I told him about it.”

“Hey, that’s not such a bad idea, Carranya,” Lavie said, enthusiastically. “I’m sure he must be awake by now. Let’s pay him a surprise visit!” She laughed.

Within a few minutes, after Lavie had helped her friend change, the two were on their way to the Professor’s cabin.

“Can we come in, Father?” Lavie said, knocking on the door.

“Of course you may, Miss Lavender,” Marlborough called out, cheerfully. “I was just packing my suitcase, since we shall soon be in Caledonia. It is always a pleasure to have company at this hour.”

Lavie entered, followed by Carranya, who walked slowly and hesitantly.

“Your Highness,” Marlborough said, rising and bowing, “how may I help you?”

“Lady Penelope spoke to her again,” Lavie said, anxiously. “We’re not sure what it means.”

“Please have a seat, Princess,” he replied, kindly. “It is obvious to this old man that you are deeply unsettled by your experience, and it is fortunate that you have Miss Lavender with you. Tell me what you heard, and I shall try to help you.”

Slowly, with Lavie’s help, Carranya described what she had seen and heard again. Marlborough listened to the story with what seemed to be a faint smile, and then questioned her about the first two messages she had received, the year before.

“The second message, of course, is the easiest,” he said, when she had finished. “It refers to Miss Lavender and young Eramond. The first speaks of your mission in general terms, Princess. But this – this is remarkable. I am certain now, almost certain, of what awaits us on Unity Isle, and how it can be defeated.”

“Tell us, then,” Lavie said, leaning forward.

“My dear Miss Lavender, I will tell you what I know – which is, simply, that I have deciphered the riddle of that demon, thanks to the Princess.”

“*What?*” Lavie exclaimed.

“Oh, it is simple. Listen to me, Princess. The Archer is Miss Lavender. The Swordsman is Spenson – not only is he a master at the weapon, but he was the one who retrieved the Sword of Regret and brought it back. The Healer is Bernadette. The Wanderer is Eramond, the son of Kevin, but also the son of Prince Ryle, whose quest led him to wander all over Terra. The Beloved is you, Princess Carranya. And the Lover” – he paused, and his voice became gentle – “is Prince Wilhelm.”

“Prince Wilhelm?” Carranya cried out. “But Prince Wilhelm is....”

“Dead? Yes, that is true, just as in your vision. But remember Penelope’s words, Princess. Death is not the end. Though he is dead, his spirit – his soul – still lives on, and his spirit will fight beside you at the final hour.”

“His spirit?”

“Tell me, Princess,” – Marlborough’s voice was kind, even paternal – “have you ever had an apparition of Prince Wilhelm, or heard his voice?”

“I have,” Carranya said, with bewilderment, “but I later came to know that it was a cruel hoax.” She trembled, and told them about what she had heard on Davenport Beach, her discovery of the transmitter, and what she had learned about it.

“Poor Carranya,” Lavie said, tears coming to her eyes. “That must have hurt a lot...”

“Dear me,” Marlborough said. “I seem to make it my life’s business to hurt you despite my best intentions, but this time, I shall not. Striker thought it was Sheffield or his agents, you say, but I would not take him too seriously. Striker is a man of action, and he takes the pragmatic view. How would Sheffield’s men know exactly the right words to use? How would they mimic the late Prince’s voice so accurately? You did feel it was him, Princess, did you not?”

“I – could have sworn, with all my heart, that it was,” Carranya said, passionately. “Dare I hope...”

“You may, Princess. Listen to me. That fiend, Samath’s follower, mentioned something called a Harvester of Souls. Do you remember that?”

“Yes,” the girls replied.

“Then you must certainly hope. As your friend Bernadette may have told you, a cursed sword can absorb portions of men’s souls, particularly its victims. The mage who killed Wilhelm – whoever he was – must

have used such a sword. Such swords are commonly referred to by dark mages as ‘Soul Reapers’, ‘Ghost Reapers’, or ‘Harvesters of Souls’. Samath’s disciple probably possesses that sword, and will use it in the fight against you. But if Wilhelm’s spirit resides there – and if it has reached out to his beloved from beyond the grave – then the weapon may turn against him, out of the extraordinary love that was in his heart, and in yours.”

“I understand, Father,” Carranya said, her expression softening and becoming serene. “It must be as you say.”

“Ohmygosh!” Lavie exclaimed. “That’s just – unreal! But are you sure, Father? How do we know what the Harvester of Souls really is?”

“I am quite sure, Miss Lavender,” he replied. “Especially after Aline’s studies of the Sword of Regret, which once was a Harvester of that kind, until the Infinity purified it. Walk the Way, Princess, and with the blessing of your ancestors. You will prevail. Prepare yourself for the fight that lies ahead, for you will not fail.”

“Thank you, Father,” Carranya replied, bowing to receive his benediction. She turned and left, with a lightness in her steps that heartened the old Professor, but Lavie remained behind.

“I still can’t believe it, Father,” she said. “It doesn’t make sense. Even if a soul was trapped in the sword, how would it help Carranya?”

“By rebelling against its wielder’s orders, Miss Lavender.”

“But then, why should the sword wound Carranya in that vision?” Lavie said, insistently. “I’m sure there must be something more to it, Father!”

Marlborough sighed. “I haven’t convinced you, have I, Miss Lavender? What a fine detective you would make. There is one more explanation, but it is so fantastical that I dared not even mention it, except to my ecclesiastical superiors. And just when I convinced myself that it was not so fantastical, I received a message over the radio from Caledonia last night. It was an order from the Archbishop of Caledonia, asking me to maintain a vow of silence. I’m sorry. I really am. I suspect he is receiving his orders from someone higher up, perhaps even the Emperor.”

“Father,” Lavie said, gently, “I don’t understand, and yet – may I tell you something, in confidence? It’s something I’ve racked my brains about, from the time I went to rescue Ryan, but I couldn’t make sense of it, either.” She sat close to him, and spoke in whispers.

Marlborough nodded, and his frown turned to a beatific smile. “You are very, very close to the truth, my daughter. The Infinity has truly blessed you, not only with courage, but with understanding.”

“But what’s the connection?” she said, blushing. “Is he...”

“Unfortunately, my vow binds me, Lavender. Do not breathe a word of this to the Princess, unless her life itself is in danger – for a human life is more sacred than any vow. But since I am a stubborn old mule, even when faced with the Archbishop’s order, I will give you a clue.”

Lavie was silent, but looked at Marlborough expectantly.

“Think of what happened between you and your friend, Mr. Eramond,” he said, affectionately.

“Ryan?” Lavie said, with a laugh. “What about him, the dope?”

“Ah, you young people and your terms of endearment,” Marlborough said, chuckling into his sleeve. “Remember how, before he left you and went to the Republic, he was infatuated with Miss Robertson – he was not the person you remembered from your childhood. He seemed to have changed, to have grown away from you.”

“That’s true,” Lavie said, closing her eyes. “I wondered why.”

“Ah, never underestimate the power of a strong physical attraction, Miss Regale. But when you reached out to him – when you held out your hand to him, to borrow the Princess’ phrase – and literally saved him, he was quite a different person. He changed. He wanted things between you to be the way they were, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Lavie said, colouring with pleasure as she remembered that day in the Arnolduses’ garden.

“Well, my dear Miss Lavender, that is the clue I can offer you. *People can change*, like your friend Ryan did. And sometimes it takes a love without limits to effect that change – a hand that is held out against the odds, a beloved rushing out in the face of danger to meet her lover. Such a force is extraordinary, for it is more powerful than the strongest conjurations. That is all I can say, and if you reflect on it, you will see the answer before your eyes.”

“How romantic,” Lavie said, with a laugh that matched her blush. “But what do you mean by conjurations?”

Marlborough chuckled. “Someday, quite soon,” he said, “you will understand.”

“Something must be done,” Sir Douglas said, firmly, “about those radios.” They were sitting in the Councilmen’s Lounge after another evening of deliberation, during which much had been said but little decided.

Kanoi turned to face him, looking annoyed. “Why must you fuss about such things, McIverny? In a way, it is fortunate that we cannot receive transmissions from the Varald. The constant squabbling between Jansen and Hipper wearies me.”

“Hold your tongue,” Jansen said, angrily, catching the last sentence. “And McIverny, did I not tell you that you would regret it if you did not return Olga Kievan to us?”

“My dear fellow,” Sir Douglas replied, “considering your Navy’s latest, ahem, exploits at Checkpoint Bravo, I see little cause for regret. The child is safe, and she has apparently grown fond of the Princess, from what His Majesty tells me.”

“Hmph,” Jansen replied, thinking of a retort when – without any apparent cause – the lights went out.

“First the radio, and now this,” Jedda said, sarcastically. “Truly, the Commonwealth has much to learn from the Republic as far as technology is concerned.”

“And the reverse holds true in the case of morals, Jedda,” Schliemann retorted, sipping his glass of wine with a broad smile on his face. “That is the purpose of a Commonwealth – to share the best we have to offer, and to shed the worst.”

“Considering that it was your men who murdered Socius, Archbishop, you are in no position to preach,” Jedda replied, irritably.

“Bring us some candles, guard,” Kanoi called out, loudly, “and please find out what the trouble is.”

A guard of the Commonwealth Special Forces entered, bearing a candle and looking nervous. “I beg your pardon, Sir, but the lights have shut down all over Unity Isle.”

“All over the island?” Schliemann said, sharply. “What could it all mean?”

Before the bewildered guard could reply, the walls of the lounge began to glow a dull red, lighting up the faces of the puzzled Councilmen, and reflecting off the crystal chandelier that hung from the ceiling.

Members of the Commonwealth Executive Council, listen to me.

“Was that you, Sir Douglas?” Schliemann said, shaking his head.

“I didn’t speak, Archbishop,” Sir Douglas replied. “But I did hear what you heard.”

It is not you who speak. It is I, your new leader.

“What is this tomfoolery?” Kanoi said, nervously.

If you value your lives, leave this room at once, and follow me into the Council Chamber. You are running out of time.

“Nonsense,” Commissioner Jansen said. “We do not even know who you are, and we cannot see you. Do not trifle with us, we are the most powerful men on Terra.”

Suddenly, a red beam emerged from the chandelier, and struck Jansen in the chest. He fell to his knees, groaning in pain.

Correction, Jansen. I am now the most powerful man in Terra.

“Nabal! Who are you, to speak and act thus?” Jedda screamed. “Show us your face, first!”

I am everywhere, Jedda. I pervade this entire building. Now follow me into the Commonwealth Council, if you do not wish to suffer the same fate as your predecessors.

“Jedda....I think we must....obey,” Jansen groaned. “Pain.....”

“May the Infinity and his saints confound you, whoever you are!” Schliemann thundered. “And just what do you mean by predecessors?”

How soon you forget, Archbishop. Do the following names ring a bell? Junzio Koketsu. Prince Wilhelm. Lev Andreyev. Paul Mazarus. Martell Socius. Russell Kievan.

The five Councilmen listened in horror as the names were read out.

“Mazarus?” Schliemann said, sorrowfully. “My poor colleague. You murderer!”

“And what do you intend to do with us now?” Sir Douglas said, calmly.

You do not have to die as they did. Follow me into the Council Chamber, and you will understand what it is to reign in union with me. Otherwise...

Another red ray struck Schliemann in the throat, and he fell flat on the ground, as if he had been shot down, choking and spluttering.

“Let us go,” Kanoi said, nervously. “We cannot wait here like sitting ducks while he attacks us all.”

“I disagree,” Jedda said. “This is a pretty parlour trick, and nothing else.”

There was the sound of boots in the hallway, and before anyone could speak further, the doorway was blocked by ten men wearing the uniform of the Commonwealth Special Forces, except for the plated armour over their chests and shoulders.

“I don’t recognize these men,” Kanoi said, looking at the menacing expressions on their faces.

They will take you to the Chamber if you will not go of your own accord. They belong to me. Decide whether you will go quietly, or be borne away by them. This is the last warning you will receive.

The three men left standing looked at each other in horror, then slowly filed out and made their way to the Council Chamber, as the soldiers carried their two stricken colleagues behind them.

Henrik, who was one of the first to awaken on hearing Captain Raienji's announcement, had made himself ready for the landing. Walking on the deck, he came upon Bernadette, who was leaning against the rail, a distant look in her eyes.

"Good morning, dearest," he said, coming up behind her. "What's new?"

"Henrik!" She turned towards him, smiling and waving, as he drew her closer to her. "My goodness, you're just the person I needed to see right now. I've been – worried."

"What's the matter?" he asked, sympathetically.

"I feel we're – very close to something far more evil than anything we faced in Itaria, Henrik," she replied. "Do you remember what Father Joaquim told me? About the summoning pit?"

"Yes, I do, Bernadette," he replied. On Joaquim's advice, the two of them had met him before leaving for Caledonia, and had discussed her concerns once more.

"I feel I'm close to something of that sort again," she said, shaking her head. "I know Unity Isle is far away, but if I can perceive it at that distance, it must be powerful indeed."

"Perceive it? Have you been dreaming again?" Henrik asked, looking at her with concern.

"Yes, Henrik – and this time, the dreams have been worse. This time, I see myself – not the others – falling in battle. I am not dead, but I cannot walk – or see. I feel someone lifting me up, but I do not know who it is. And then I hear laughter....cruel laughter." She shivered.

"I'll never allow that to happen," Henrik said, with determination. "And if it ever happens that you are wounded in the battle, I will carry you to safety."

"Thank you, Henrik," she said, taking his hand. "But more than myself, I am worried for the Princess. I fear that she is reaching a time when she will have to make an important decision – but that, as she is about to make it, someone will interfere, and place a veil over her eyes and her heart."

"What do you mean, Bernadette?" Henrik said, softly.

"Do you remember the dream I had, Henrik? The six candles? I have dreamed of the candles again, but this time, what happens is different. I have found the sixth candle, and I am rushing to put it in its place, when suddenly, it is dashed from my hand – not by my own clumsiness, but by something that has struck it. It falls, but continues to burn."

"If it's still burning, isn't that good news?" Henrik pointed out.

"Dear Henrik," Bernadette said, affectionately, "you do tend to look at the bright side of things."

“Hey, I learnt that from you,” Henrik replied, warmly.

“Sorry to interrupt you two sweethearts,” Armin suddenly said from behind, “but we have to, y’know, get off the ship? We’re landing at Caledonia in a few minutes, Compadre.”

“Oh, good morning, Armin,” Bernadette said, turning towards him and smiling. “You’re up early today.”

“Hey, blue girl, you know what they say – the Secret Police never sleep!” He winked at her. “And Compadre, you’d better make sure that Ryan doesn’t do anything stupid this time. I mean, if we’re dealing with some wacky wizards, they could try all *kinds* of stunts to derail him!”

“What sort of stunts, Armin?” Henrik asked, in an amused tone.

“For starters, they could put up a gigantic image of *Marianne* at the entrance to Unity Castle, to distract him from his mission,” Armin said, chuckling.

“If they did put up such an image, I’m sure Lavie would find a way of blanking it out,” Bernadette said, with a smile.

“Geez, blue girl, you mean *Lavie* is Ryan’s secret weapon, and not that sword of his great-great-grandpa’s, or whatever? That’s a clever idea. Feed the Grand High Wizard with Lavie’s cookies, and as he rolls over in pain, Ryan cleans him up with the sword!”

“Would you mind *repeating that*, Armin?” a voice said, sweetly and pleasantly.

“Lavie, my sister!” Bernadette said, happily. “Did you have a good night’s sleep?”

“I’m afraid not,” Lavie said, yawning. “I woke up rather early, Bernadette. So what’s this about my cookies, Armin?” She stared at him, a red glint appearing in her eyes.

“Er, nothing, really.....just one of my stupid jokes, y’know. Okay, Sir Cornelius must be calling me on the radio! Toodles! See ya in Caledonia!” And, fearing that a burning arrow would be aimed at him, Armin quickly ran up to the gangplank which was now being lowered.

Lavie giggled. “I think he’s a bit scared of me, after he saw what happened to Sir Chucklehead,” she observed.

“Perhaps,” Henrik agreed, with a laugh. “Fearless before bandits, fearful before Lavie Regale, that’s our Secret Agent Armin. A little more practice, and he might be as good as Agent Striker.”

“Hey, don’t knock Striker,” Lavie protested. “He was a *lot* of help when we went to save Ryan!”

“Oh, hello there!” Ryan called out, waving at his friends. “I just saw Armin running away, looking a bit nervous. What have you been saying to him, Lavie?”

“Just having a friendly discussion about my cookies, Ryan,” Lavie said, winking at him. “So how are you feeling today?”

“Like I did the day before my final exams,” Ryan said, making a face. “It’s strange, but waiting here and wondering what’s going to happen on Unity Isle is much more unnerving than actually facing a bandit, or even those creatures in Koroth.”

“I know what you mean, Compadre,” Henrik said. “Uncertainty can be very hard to bear.”

“We’ve landed!” a voice called out, cheerfully. “Mr. Eramond, there’s a carriage waiting to take us to the Imperial Palace, where we shall have a brief audience with the Emperor Charlemagne. After that, we shall all depart at once for Unity Isle, and reach there in moments.”

“Moments?” Ryan frowned, then brightened. “You mean you have a Warp Cannon down there?”

“Indeed they do, Lord Ryan,” the Princess said, stepping onto the deck. She was wearing the silver dress she had worn on the day of Socius’ assassination, and its accompanying regalia. “Do you think this looks formal enough for the Emperor, Lavie, my friend?”

“I think it looks great, Carranya,” Lavie said, with an admiring look. “Don’t you think so, Agent Wolfgang? Ryan?”

“I’d have to agree, Your Highness,” Striker said, adjusting his cap. “It *is* quite breath-taking.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Ryan added. “So what’s this about a Warp Cannon?”

“During the Second Demonic War – that’s the name tradition has given to the battle Prince Ryle and Lady Fina had with the Lord of the Pits and his allies – the Prince was helped by a martial artist, Princess Mina of Meldia, and her father the King. They constructed a Warp Cannon that the Prince used to defeat several of the Lord’s minions, and in recompense, Ryle allowed them to keep it operational. When Meldia fell and was overrun by what became the Zion Empire, the last of Mina’s descendants offered it to the Zion Emperor as tribute, in exchange for the lives of his family. Its existence is a well-kept secret, known only to Emperors and mages,” Carranya explained. “We used the Cannon to return to Lorean after our battle in the Palace of Gyrus, and Captain Raienji told me the story.”

“Hey, that sounds like a history lesson,” Armin protested. “Tell me more about this kung-fu chick, Wolfie, will ya?”

“You are quite incorrigible, Armin,” Striker said, shaking his head and laughing.

The ship had now reached land, and the crew began to disembark, stepping into a carriage that was waiting unobtrusively at the docks. The journey to the Palace was swift and without incident, and before they knew it, they were kneeling before Charlemagne, Emperor of Zion.

"I greet you, my friends," he said, gravely. "I regret that the state of my health forbids me from having a longer audience with you, but on behalf of the Empire, I thank you with all my heart for agreeing to undertake this journey. I wish you success in destroying this great evil."

"I add my wishes to the Emperor's," Empress Antalya said, looking kindly at the Princess. "I am heartened to see that, in our darkest hour, our Galvenian friends have stood by us, and will fight with us to the finish. I especially thank you, Princess Carranya, and may the goodwill of all the Empire accompany you."

"You honour me, Your Imperial Highness," Carranya replied, bowing before them and receiving their benediction.

"The time is short, Sire," General Rohmer interrupted, "and our men have all been assembled at the appointed place. We must make haste, for the men of the 105th and 106th, pooling their powers, have detected that Unity Isle is, indeed, besieged as we speak. For the Glory of Zion!"

"I regret that you cannot accompany them, Rohmer," Charlemagne said, slowly, "but I am sure that your colleague will acquit herself honourably. For your many deeds of valour, Freya Raienji, I confer on you the title of Colonel, and may you lead our forces to victory, for the Glory of Zion."

"Thank you, Your Imperial Highness," Freya said, bowing and suppressing a laugh.

"And Agent Striker, as Freya's aide, you will assist her by all means possible. God speed, and may you return safely" – Charlemagne winced, and leaned forward – "all of you, my friends."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Striker said, with a grin, doffing his cap. "I will not disappoint you."

"I hope not," Empress Antalya said, anxiously. "Proceed, my friends, for the appointed hour draws near."

They followed Rohmer down a series of tunnels, until they came upon the Warp Cannon in the crypt that only Carranya, of all the Galvenians, had seen before. Unlike the others, it seemed new – its metal walls gleamed, and its two antennae were circled by haloes of light.

"So what's the plan, Wolfie?" Armin said. "We send thousands of Zion soldiers to recapture the island, while Ryan and the Princess knock out that Samath creep, right? And if we get hurt, blue girl heals us all. How d'ya like that? I should be a General, not a Junior Operative, I tell ya."

Striker laughed. "Not quite, Armin. There is a limit to how many people can travel by a Warp Cannon – otherwise, the Empire could have invaded the whole of Terra by now."

"Dude, not funny!" Armin protested. "Are you gonna start talking about Darington now?"

“Flaming fires, boy! Who dares to speak of Darington in this sacred place?” a voice said, angrily. Armin turned around to face Rebecca Burnfist, who was at the head of a battalion of mages, her sword drawn.

“Woo!” Armin said, a large grin appearing on his face. “Looks like today’s my lucky day, guys.”

“Burn you, raccoon! Burn you with the fires of Janwen!” Burnfist said, affectionately. “I see that, either on paper or in person, you haven’t changed one bit. More’s the pity.”

Freya chuckled. “I see you made Captain at last, Caris,” she said, shaking hands with her friend.

“And you made Colonel, *Esmeriah*,” Burnfist growled, still smiling. “What’s Bandit Boy doing here?”

“He’s helping us out, Rebecca,” Striker said. “Though I deplore some of his experiments in humour, he is brave, and he has served us well in taking out that man, Robertson.”

“Hmph!” Rebecca said. “You should have left Robertson and his bandits to me. I would have punched them so hard that they would have hit the ceiling, raccoon boy.”

“That’s all?” Armin said, shaking his head. “Tsk, tsk, Rebecca, I expected more from you.”

“That’s *all*?” Burnfist protested. “What do you want me to do, then? Give them all a submission hold?”

“Dear me,” Carranya said, laughing. “A submission hold?”

“Allow me to demonstrate, Princess,” Burnfist said, and placed her hand above Armin’s shoulder, locking his arm with her other hand and applying pressure until Armin began to wilt.

“Hey! No fair!” Armin protested, shaking his arm and yelping as she released her grip. “What was that for, Burnfist?”

“Just a warning,” she replied. “Look, Tamas, you’re funny, and I must say your postcards and letters have livened up some of my stints – plus, some of your intelligence *did* get us out of tight spots. But don’t get too fresh with me, okay?”

“She called me Tamas!” Armin said, beaming. “And she held my hand! Wow!”

“If that’s an embrace,” Henrik said, winking at Bernadette, “I’d hate to see what would happen if she were *really* angry.”

“Oh, cut it out, both of you,” Lavie said, laughing hard. “Aren’t they cute, Ryan?”

“Armin, you’re a glutton for punishment,” Ryan replied. “I had another adjective besides ‘cute’ in mind, Lavie, but that’ll do for the moment.”

“All right, here’s the plan. Striker, Burnfist and I are the only ones who’ve been on Unity Isle before, so we’ll take this in three stages,” Freya said, calling them all to order. “First, Burnfist will take the 105th and 106th Mage Battalions, and encircle Unity Castle. Next, I’ll move in with my clan of Raienjis, and move closer, securing entries and exists. And finally, Striker will take the Princess and her friends into the Castle itself, and they will explore the place. If you need our help, Striker, contact us using this bracelet.” She handed a bracelet, studded with blue and red stones, to him, and Carranya noted that Freya was wearing an identical one, above the glove on her left hand.

“Hey, who do I get to go with?” Armin said.

“You can come with me, son,” Freya said, “or you can go with the Sergeant. Your choice.”

“I pick Burnfist, of course,” Armin said.

“Good choice, Armin,” Freya said, with a wink.

“*Freya!*” Captain Burnfist said, indignantly. “What in the Pits do you mean by that ridiculous statement?”

“Oh, there’s an undeniable chemistry between you two, Caris,” Freya said, laughing into her glove.

“There’s an undeniable chemistry in exploding gunpowder, too,” Burnfist said, darkly. “All right, come along, Tamas. But if you step out of line, you’ll get another lesson in submission holds. Got it?”

“Gotcha, lady,” Armin said, with a grateful smile at Freya. “I’ll behave.”

The battalions with Burnfist, accompanied by Armin, stepped towards the Warp Cannon, the mages’ wands all raised. There was a flash of light, and they disappeared.

“All right, kids, come on in,” Freya called out, and once again, the room was filled with people identical to Carranya and her mother, and male versions thereof.

“Mother!” Baldur said, noisily and excitedly. “We’re back, and boy, wasn’t Father furious. He insisted on coming along to see us off.”

“I could not send my whole family into danger without bidding you farewell, Freya,” a man said, walking up to her. He was of below average height for a Zion – perhaps as tall as Lavie – with a good-natured expression, a wrinkled face, and shoulder-length red hair. “And this *is* your most dangerous mission, even if I am a scholar and not a soldier. Baldur, look after your mother, do you understand? Do not try to use that bludgeon of yours for grandstanding, but for the glory of Zion.”

“By Prince Derren’s silver socks, I will, Father,” Baldur said, shaking his hand.

“Princess, allow me to introduce my husband, Professor Hidoki Raienji of Zion University,” Freya said, as she embraced him warmly, causing his face to turn as red as his hair. “He’s an expert on the Galvenian War of Independence, so it’s strangely appropriate that he should be here.”

"It is truly an honour to meet a daughter of Lady Penelope Gerius, Princess," Professor Raienji said, making a courtly Old Zionesse bow. He looked at Lavie curiously, then tapped his forehead. "Young lady, are you perchance related to Sigmund Regale?"

"I'm his daughter, Professor," Lavie said, amused by the man's formal expressions. "Did you know him?"

Raienji laughed. "He was a junior of mine at Zion University, Miss Regale," he replied. "When I was a student-tutor, I remember teaching him about the magical artifacts of the Kingdom of Gyrus, though I later grew interested in Galvenian history. We did correspond for some time, but I am afraid we have fallen out of touch in the past few years. It is truly a pleasure to meet you."

"Hey, Lavie," Ryan said, teasingly. "Looks like wherever you go, you can't escape your dad's boring books!"

"It is good to see you again, Princess," Thora said, bowing before her.

There were a few moments of farewell between the Professor and his family, and then they stepped towards the Warp Cannon, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

"Take good care of Freya, Agent Striker," Professor Raienji said. "I am loath to criticize my own wife, but she can allow her love of adventure to get the better of her."

"Do not worry, Professor," Striker said, tapping his cap. "As sure as I was your student at Zion U., I'll bring her back safely."

"That is good," he said, bowing low before turning to depart. "Walk with the blessings of the Infinity, young man."

"What a nice man, isn't he, dear Henrik?" Bernadette observed. "I'm sure he must miss his family very much."

"It's strange that he isn't a mage like the rest of them, though," Ryan remarked. "I mean, that's a *lot* of magical relatives he's got there!"

"Perhaps he has minor skills, such as healing and the like," Bernadette observed.

"Those are hardly *minor*, my love, as two of my ribs would point out," Henrik said with a laugh.

"All right, it's time for us to go," Striker said. "Princess, would you do the honours and step up to the Cannon? Freya has already activated it, so that there is no need for you to expend any energies."

Or for me to pray, Ryan thought, looking affectionately at Lavie and taking her hand, as they all stepped forward, into the light and into the darkness.....

“Look, Hipper,” the man in the red cloak said, “here are your friends.”

Hipper, his entire body trembling and his knees knocking together, could hardly speak. In the Council Chamber were the five members of the council, enclosed in what seemed to be man-sized bell jars. They were surrounded by haloes of red light, and their faces were contorted, though by different expressions. Sir Douglas, Jansen and Schliemann seemed to be suffering intense pain, while Kanoi and Jedda seemed desperately unhappy. They were all wearing what appeared to be plates of armour and helmets.

“Soon they will have made their final decision,” the man observed. “To reign with me, or to donate their last essence to the Harvester of Souls.”

“The....Harvester of Souls?” Hipper managed to say, in a hoarse whisper.

“Yes, Mr. President. As the most powerful man on Terra” – he laughed loudly – “I think it is only just that I allow you some foreknowledge, and even give you a chance to avoid this ordeal. Your five friends, here, are being subjected to Arctura’s latest gift to us – a device to steal the minds and the loyalties of men. We call it Arctura’s Jar. Unfortunately, it is not yet perfect. Three of those men – Douglas, Jansen and the Itarian fool – still remain loyal to their old beliefs, which is why Arctura is allowed to hand them over to Gharon for physical torment. If they refuse to yield, they will die, and their souls will strengthen the defensive barrier around Unity Castle. The others are on the point of yielding. Their spirits are broken. Soon, they shall swear allegiance to me, and reign at my side. I am not cruel, but I demand loyalty.”

Hipper nodded, mute and terrified.

“You have the same choice, Hipper,” he went on, softly. “If you can decide now that you will serve me, so be it. But if you refuse, you shall enter Arctura’s Jar, as the other five have. There, she will probe the depths of your soul. If she finds loyalty to someone else – perhaps General Lyzhnov, or some god – then she will reject you, and Gharon will cause you unimaginable pains. If she finds loyalty to me, she will spare you. And if she finds loyalty to yourself alone, you will suffer mental anguish until you belong to me, as Kanoi and Jedda now suffer.”

“*Dumkopf!*” Hipper swore, wildly and futilely. “What do you want with me? Who are you?”

“You may call me Samath, if you want a name,” the red-cloaked man said, with a smile. “For all intents and purposes, Hipper, the Commonwealth now belongs to me. Your guards have been massacred by my men – mercenaries who have undergone the trial of the Jar, and now wear Arctura’s Armour. The walls of the Castle are protected by the auras of the Harvester, and the island itself has been secured by my men. Make your choice, Hipper.”

Frantically, Hipper reached for the gun in his holster – which he still carried out of habit, even after assuming the Presidency – but the man in the cloak was too swift, and caught hold of his wrist.

“A foolish gesture, my friend. Take him away, guards,” he called out, confidently. “The sixth Jar awaits. I trust that Arctura will prove more persuasive than I do.”

Hipper felt himself being disarmed and carried bodily by the guards to a place besides the other five. He felt numb and dazed, unable to struggle. As he looked up, he saw a glass jar descend upon him, and a red light surrounded him. Pain shot through his arms and legs.

He screamed, but there was no one to hear him.

“Damnation! Flaming *fires!*” Captain Burnfist shouted. “The whole castle is surrounded by a defensive shield!”

“That’s impossible, Captain,” one of the mages said, shaking her head. “It *must* be technology. Castle-sized shields exist only in Gyrusian legends!”

“Hey, maybe there’s a Gyrusian dude inside,” Armin suggested. He poked at the shield with his knife, but though there was a harsh scraping sound, it did not yield. “Geez, this is pretty tough, Burnfist.”

“When I want your suggestions, Tamas, I’ll ask for them,” Burnfist said, angrily. “Boys, can you get anything on your detectors about this shield? My device is just recording static.”

“We’re picking up auras!” one of the men called out. “Dr. Sheldon was right.”

“You mean that green-haired old lady?” Burnfist said.

“Yes, Captain,” he replied. “She was of the opinion that the Third Way might be trying to cast a shield using human souls, or their traces. According to ancient sources, they can intertwine with each other to protect an entire tower, such as this castle.”

“Clever girl,” Burnfist said, nodding in approval. “But where do the souls come from?”

“Dead people, Becky,” Armin said, shaking his head. “They must’ve killed a lot of people and their *ghosts* are forming this shield, I guess.”

“Tamas...” Rebecca began, angrily.

“Don’t shout at him, he’s probably right,” the older man who had accompanied Freya on their earlier mission said, gently. “The ancient legends speak of weapons – rods and swords – which can absorb the imprints of the souls of dead men, and use them to project a strong shield. Someone in there has a weapon like that. Old-timers call such swords ‘Harvesters of Souls’.”

“Hey, just like in that video,” Armin said, nodding his head.

“A video?” Burnfist said, puzzled. Armin explained what he had seen on the Memory Crystal, and Burnfist smiled.

“You know, Freya was right. Perhaps bringing you along wasn’t such a bad idea,” she said, giving him a hearty slap on the shoulder. “Now, how do we get through it?”

“We look for weak points,” the woman mage said. “Dr. Sheldon said not all auras are equally powerful, and there may be weak spots where they fail to intertwine – where the configurations of the souls are such that they simply don’t fit together. Such a spot may widen if we attack it with a combination of elements, or even with a very strong elemental attack.”

“That sounds like a plan, girl,” Captain Burnfist said, clearly pleased. “All right, then, start searching. Tamas, take one of the detectors and help them out, so that you can at least say you did something productive.”

“Hey, hey, productivity’s my middle name, Burnfist!” Armin said. Slowly, the mage battalion – wielding the new Fujiwara-Sheldon detectors – began to move around Unity Isle, pausing at regular intervals to consult their detectors.

“We’ve got a hot spot here!” Armin called out, excitedly.

“Indeed,” the older mage replied, drawing his wand. “It seems as if there was a gap here, but – someone has widened it, somehow.”

“You mean Freya and her team?” Burnfist said, shaking her head. “They must be within the barrier now, and I doubt they’d have found something like this so soon.”

Suddenly, Armin flung himself at the Captain, knocking her to the ground. “Look out, Burnfist!” he said, as a blue beam narrowly missed both of them. “Some maniac – Oh. My. God. It’s that lunatic, Juno!”

“Juno?” Sergeant Burnfist said, catching her breath as Armin helped her rise. “Who on Terra is he?”

“The Wanderer of the Way,” a voice called out, in mocking tones, as another blue beam shot forth, narrowly missing Armin. “I already have the situation here under control. Leave, you foolish intruders.”

“What are you waiting for?” Burnfist said, angrily. “Get him! He must be one of the Third Way’s mercenaries.”

The mages aimed their wands at the gap Armin had found, and began to widen it slowly. However, Juno’s attacks seemed to pass through it, and two of the mages were struck.

“We’re sitting targets here, lady!” Armin exclaimed. “Got any ideas? How about a strategic retreat, as the Army poges say?”

“Burn you!” Burnfist shouted, aiming a yellow beam through the gap at Juno, which he dodged deftly. Without missing a step, he fired a second beam at her, but she successfully blocked it with her sword this time.

“Though I could easily finish all of you off,” Juno taunted them, “I think this game has gone on enough. Fare you well, Zion interlopers, and perhaps I may spare you when I bring the Third Way down myself.” Before any of the mages could retaliate, he fired off a final blue beam, striking another of the mages, and then disappeared behind a crevice in the Castle’s rocky foundations.

“Flaming fires of Janwen!” Burnfist said, dusting off her uniform. “I suppose I ought to thank you, Tamas.” She held out her hand. “What manner of creature was that?”

“Hey, all in a day’s work,” Armin said, as they shook hands. “As for your question, he’s a dopey dope from Davenport – hey, see what I did there? – who thinks he’s a great warrior. The Galvenian police were after him at one time, on suspicion of carrying a dangerous magical weapon. I guess he’s still got it. Curse him. I will personally take the jackass down myself!”

“Leave him to me!” Burnfist thundered. “No one wounds my mages and gets away with it. Finish widening that hole, and we’re going to get that man and his allies, whoever they are.”

“I always *told* Henrik that Juno would end up a super-villain someday,” Armin observed darkly, as he held the detector in place and the mages continued their efforts at widening the breach in the shield.

“This place is deserted,” Princess Carranya said, shaking her head. “There’s something unnatural about this stillness.”

“Oooh, I didn’t know Unity Castle was supposed to be haunted,” Aline said, in a confidential aside to Agent Striker. “Fortunately, I’ve brought my Aura Detector along, and – Sweet lands! It’s off the charts!”

“What does that mean, Aline?” Bernadette said, looking at the darkened hallway in which they now stood.

“It means that something here has trapped hundreds, or even thousands, of auras, and is radiating them outwards,” Aline said. “In simple terms, someone’s using a very powerful metal object – probably a sword – and is using it to shield something, perhaps the entire castle.”

“The Harvester of Souls,” Henrik said, shaking his head. “That must be what that fiend meant.”

“But where is everybody?” Ryan said. “Unless....no, they couldn’t possibly have killed *everyone* in the Council and the Senate, could they?”

“I....hope not, Ryan,” Lavie replied, moving closer to him instinctively. “Hello, is anybody there?”

“Why, we’ve got company,” Agent Striker said, as he observed two men in CSF uniforms and armour moving towards them.

“Good evening, Your Highness,” one of the guards said. “We have been awaiting your arrival. Terrin Hipper, President of the Commonwealth, has instructed us to receive you.”

“What’s going on?” Ryan asked. “Why are you guys all armoured up?”

“It’s a Code Violet, young man,” the second guard replied. “An attack on the Commonwealth itself. The radio transmitters and electric supply have all been sabotaged, apparently on orders from Jansen of the Varald Directorate. He had apparently managed to have Unity Isle infiltrated by mages and mercenaries, who staged an attack on the Council, wounding Sir Douglas and Archbishop Schliemann. The Senate have been sequestered in the residential area for their own safety, and we are mounting a strict guard. Our forces were able to defeat the mercenaries, and most of them were slain, but the mages escaped, and some of them may still be on the island. Fortunately, Emperor Charlemagne’s message regarding your arrival managed to reach us, though we could not reply.”

“Jansen?” Agent Striker said, shaking his head. “And what has become of him, now?”

“He was wounded in the battle that ensued,” the first guard said, “and he is in the hospital level, along with Sir Douglas and the Archbishop.”

“Take us to them, please,” Carranya said, anxiously. “I must see how Sir Douglas is. Perhaps my friend and I” – she looked at Bernadette – “might be able to help them.”

“Please wait a moment, Princess,” the second guard said, leading them into a large antechamber, illuminated by candles. “The President wishes to speak to you himself, and then, we will arrange a visit to the hospital level.” The two men clicked their heels, saluted, and left.

“So Jansen’s helping the Third Way, is he?” Ryan said, angrily. “He’s sworn to serve the Commonwealth, and he’s betrayed it! We’re going to take him down, him and his masters.”

“Poor Sir Douglas,” Lavie said, sympathetically. “Gran always said he was very nice. I hope he’ll be all right.”

“Something’s not right about this,” Henrik said, placing his hand beneath his jaw. “Hipper’s basically been sitting out this entire war, and he suddenly acts decisive? Besides, why would those soldiers let us in without even checking our credentials? Ryan could be a rogue mage, what with that fancy-looking sword of his. Heck, the Princess could be one of the Raienji girls in disguise, for all *they* know.”

Despite the tension that hung in the air, Carranya could not help but smile at that suggestion.

“I’m with you, Mr. Henrik,” Aline said, nodding vigorously. “The Aura Detector detects the presence of an alien field about them.”

“An alien field?” Bernadette asked, looking anxiously at the hallway, lit only by candles.

“A mind-control device, like the one Sir Chucklehead was wearing!” Ryan said, slamming his palm into his fist. “Those ‘guards’ are probably mercenaries themselves! Did they think they could fool us so easily?”

Lavie scraped an arrow against her red bangle, which gleamed eerily in the light of the candle beside her. “Hmph! They’re not going to mess with us, that’s for sure!”

“Is there no end to their deceit?” Carranya said, sadly.

“I see you need very little advice from me,” Agent Striker said, with a broad smile. “Mr. Spenson, I suggest you and I stand guard near the door. Princess, stay back, since I think it’s you they want to target – they weren’t very interested in any of us. Aline, you and Eramond can form a second line of defence, and Miss Aquary can stay with the Princess. It’s best to be prepared.”

“Huh! What about *me*?” Lavie said, a little annoyed.

“Striker, you meanie!” Ryan said, jokingly. “Keep your arrow ready, Lavie, and shoot as soon as you see anything suspicious. Does that suit you?”

“That sounds just perfect, Mr. Eramond!” Lavie said, winking at him as she drew her bow.

Before these instructions could be carried out, there was the sound of footsteps in the hall.

“They’re coming!” Bernadette said, softly.

“Whoever this is...” Henrik began, but stopped, as he saw a man entering, who seemed to be in the grip of a great terror, and looked around nervously. He wore a crumpled suit, and was unarmed.

“Minister Sheffield!” Carranya exclaimed in horror.

“They lied to me...” he muttered, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. “Galvenia....ruined. The Princess decoyed.....the monsters....”

Ryan laid a hand on his shoulder, with a roughness that perhaps suited his current situation, but not his position. “Where do you think you’re going?” he said, firmly.

“The....The Eramond boy?” Sheffield shook his head. “I just managed to run before.....the jar, oh Infinity, the jar.....I don’t know how I escaped....”

“The jar?” Ryan said, angrily. “Look here, Sheffield, are you playing the fool with us?”

“Ryan,” Bernadette said, laying a gentle hand on his arm, “he’s obviously sick and confused – perhaps someone hit him with a stunning spell of some sort. We ought to help him.”

“Help him?” Carranya said, shaking her head. “He attacked Mother. I can forgive him his attacking me, but not that.”

“He’s a wicked boy,” Aline said, sternly. “What he needs is one of your Chill Cartridges, Mr. Striker.”

“You know, that’s actually recommended first aid for a stunning attack,” Henrik reflected. “Lowering the person’s body temperature.”

“Here we go,” Striker said, firing a cartridge that turned Sheffield’s shirt-front into frost. The former War Minister shivered.

“Wh – Where am I?” he said, looking around, then flinching as he met the Princess’ steady gaze, and felt the anger in her green eyes bore holes through him.

“On Unity Isle, *Minister*,” Lavie said, in the exaggeratedly sweet tone that those who knew her well had learned to dread. “You were wandering around in a daze. So what’s your latest exploit, after trying to strangle the Queen and breaking Sir Prescott and his friends out of jail?”

“M – mercy!” Sheffield said, backing towards a corner as he looked at the point of Lavie’s arrow. “I – I can help you! Please, listen to me! You are all in great danger.”

“Gee, looks like Captain Obvious decided to dress up as the War Minister,” Henrik said, drawing his sword with a swift gesture.

“Y – You can’t threaten a man in my position....” Sheffield began, but when he saw Aline draw her firearm as well, he wilted. “Listen to me,” he said, his voice a feverish whisper. “I warped back to Unity Isle to meet that man Samath....”

“Samath?” Ryan said, wide-eyed.

“He has no name, boy....that’s what he asked me to call him. He promised me a stronger and greater Galvenia – and gave me hell instead. You – must stop him, or there will be no more Galvenia, no Commonwealth, no nations – only his madness. He is – not human.”

“Those who seek to transcend their humanity,” Bernadette said, regretfully, “often end up less than human, Minister. Tell us what you know, if you wish to make amends.”

“Miss Bernadette!” Aline exclaimed, in a choked voice. “That man tried to make a deal with Samath! How could you trust him?”

“Aline, do you sense any force that is controlling his mind?” Bernadette asked. Aline consulted her Aura Detector, fiddling with two of the dials as Sheffield remained wedged against the wall, with both Lavie’s arrow and Henrik’s sword pointed at him, his lips bloodless, his face wild.

"I only detect fear, Miss Bernadette," Aline said. "It's not perfect, because catching the reverberations from a living man is difficult, but I think you're right."

"Then speak, and speak soon," Ryan said, firmly. "If you want to do the right thing, help us."

"I will tell you what I know," Sheffield said, exhaling loudly with relief. "Once I arrived on Unity Isle, I found that Samath – I shall call him that, for convenience – and his friends had locked the Senators away in the old dungeons on the island, the ones that date back to Meldia. He would not explain why. Next, I learned that he had trapped Hipper and the entire Council with his infernal devices..."

"Devices?" Aline said, a curious smile on her face.

"He calls them Arctura's Jars," Sheffield said, lowering his voice to a faint whisper. "They can sense a man's inner intentions, like that crackpot contraption you have there." He pointed at Aline's device.

"You horrible boy!" Aline said, colouring with anger. "Contraption, perhaps, but it is neither broken nor made of pottery!"

"Leave him alone, Aline," Ryan said, gently. "What of those devices?"

"A man trapped in those devices," Sheffield said, almost sobbing, "cannot escape. If his soul remains steadfast to his values, the device subjects him to horrible tortures – believe me, I could hear the screams of Schliemann, and he is a brave man. If he is willing to bend – either because he inclines to evil, or out of cowardice, the device wipes his mind clean, removing all that was good from it. Kanoi and Jedda suffered that way. Next, he places armour over them, which makes them obedient slaves. Oh, the devil explained it to me in great detail, and I saw it with my own eyes."

"How did you escape, then?" Carranya said, in a commanding tone. "Speak."

"I – After activating the Jars, Samath returned to his chamber, which is concealed somewhere on this island, though I do not know where. He left the devices in the charge of another mage. This man had me bound by the three soldiers with him – the CSF guards have all been slaughtered, and these soldiers wear the enslaving armour – and was about to place me in one of the jars when a strange man entered. He attacked the soldiers, killing all of them, and seriously wounding the mage, then destroyed the Jar – all with a mysterious sword that fired blue and orange beams at everyone. He hardly noticed me, only telling me to escape, as he was on a quest to destroy Samath. I do not know where he is....I just began to run, madly, not knowing where I was going..."

"He's telling the truth, if you believe my 'contraption'," Aline said, her head bobbing up and down.

"A strange man," Striker said, closing his eyes. "This complicates things."

"Ohmygosh, it must be Juno!" Lavie said, horror coming to her face as she remembered the duel she had witnessed in the woods. "That creep Juno – what is *he* doing here?"

“Juno?” Ryan said, angrily. “I’ll teach him a lesson, if *he* crosses my way.”

“Ryan, be careful,” Henrik said. “We are here to fight the Third Way. Perhaps Juno can help us.”

“Help us, like he did on Davenport Peak?” Ryan said, darkly. “No, Henrik, I’m not blaming you,” he went on, nothing the alarm on his friend’s face. “I understand what happened there. But Juno – can’t be trusted. He’s dangerous. He attacked me once with a cursed weapon, and he tried to interfere with our second mission to Ozunhold, too. He’ll only get in our way, if it is him.”

“Mr. Juno?” Aline said, puzzled. “Mr. Juno’s so brave and chivalrous! He saved my life from bandits once, and he was so kind! I’m sure his mother must be proud to have a good boy like him for her son. And he had a sword that shot out blue beams, too! Rosemary and I once had him over for tea.”

Thinking of what her father had told her about Constance Juno, Bernadette suppressed a smile.

“Aline,” Lavie said, shaking her head, “the Juno we know isn’t at all like that. He’s a jerk!”

“Well, why don’t we look for him,” Aline said, brightly, “and then we’ll know who he is for sure!”

“That would be unwise,” Striker said, calmly. “Now, while the presence of this Juno is a complication, let us not lose sight of our target, as Mr. Spenson says. We need to take care of Samath, and any allies of his, first and foremost. Sheffield, take us to where Arctura’s Jar was kept, and we will use the place as a starting-point for our search.”

“We also need to free the Council members imprisoned in those jars,” Carranya added, “and remember, if what Sheffield says is true, there are two of them – Kanoi and Jedda – wandering around under Samath’s control.” She shivered. “We need to be vigilant.”

“I swear I am speaking the truth, Princess,” Sheffield said, wearily. “And as proof of this, I shall show you the way. Come with me.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Ryan replied, drawing his sword. “Lead on, Sheffield.”

I have taken you this far, Juno. But greater dangers lie ahead, and I still cannot pierce the prophecy.

“That is immaterial,” Juno replied. “With our combined power, neither the Zion nor that fool Samath can resist me. Witness what I just did to that penny-ante mage and his minions.”

That is true, Juno, the voice replied, with a hint of a laugh in her tone, but listen to me. I sense two evils in this castle. One is a wicked lord, who wants to rule the world.

“That is the one we want, my lady,” Juno replied. “And once we reach his lair, I shall take care of whatever I can on my own, and we shall then await the arrival of that idiot Eramond and his friends.”

The other, Juno, is a deceiver. He is a man who is inflicting suffering and pain on an innocent woman, by lying and dealing falsely with her.

“You speak of Eramond,” Juno replied, casually.

I do not know his name, but if I see him, I will recognize him instantly. He is false and treacherous, but pretends to be a loyal ally. If he could see the suffering that his deeds have caused to a pure young maiden, he would weep bitter tears, unless his heart were made of the hardest stone. My heart quivers with indignation at what he has done.

“You speak of Eramond, my lady,” Juno repeated, in a mental monotone. “This is nothing new. You were foolish to have trusted him in the first place. But if you wish, we can dispose of him first.”

I do not know if it is Ryan Eramond, Juno, but he is in this castle, and he pretends to be on the side of good. Do not let him deceive you.

“I am not an easy man to deceive,” Juno replied, as he went further into the depths of Unity Castle. At length, he came upon a room in which two men in dark cloaks were sitting together, speaking excitedly in hushed tones.

“This looks interesting,” he observed, silently. “Let us see what these two rogues are meditating upon.”

Be careful, Juno. There is so much good in you, that I would not want you to risk it needlessly.

“Spare me the compliments,” he replied, as he stood near the door, listening.

“The Jars aren’t working properly,” the first man complained. “Our master trusts them too much. Why not simply kill those three?”

“What do you mean?” the second said, sharply.

“I mean that none of the three still trapped in them – Jansen, McIverny and that dog of a Schliemann – feel any more pain. They are weak and weary, but Gharon inflicts his pangs on them no longer. Methinks Arctura is deceiving our master. We ought to call upon the Lord of the Pits.”

“That is not easily done, without a summoning pit,” the second replied. “Besides, our master is the servant of the Lord Below, and has his trust. He would not use the Jars unless the Lord Below had sanctioned their use.”

“You are foolish to trust them,” the first said. “The Way of Power is direct, swift, ruthless, inflexible. We do not need these clumsy contraptions.”

“Do you claim to understand the Way better than our master?” the second said, softly.

"I claim that you are both fools," Juno said, entering the room, and firing an orange beam at the first man before he had the chance to even more. He shrieked and fell to the crowd, clutching at his chest and stomach and groaning.

"Who are you?" the second man said, reaching for his wand.

"A friend," Juno said, disarming him with a second beam, "if you prove friendly; a torturer, if otherwise." He bent down and picked up the wand, then placed it casually in a pocket of his long cloak. "Make your choice quickly, for the lady of the sword is eager to hear it."

You can be so amusing sometimes, Juno!

"Wh - what do you want?" he said, stammering.

"Information, my friend," Juno said, his lips curving into a smile. "Where may I find your great master?"

The man laughed nervously. "If that's what you want, I can tell you. It won't do you any good. No one sees the master, except at the appointed time."

"I do not require an appointment, fool," Juno said, firing a blue beam at the man's chest, knocking him against one of the walls. "Answer my question."

The man groaned and rubbed his head. "You won't find it unless I take you," he said. "And I need my wand to find the way."

"How juvenile," Juno replied, "to think you could trip me up so easily. Speak to him, my lady, as he will not speak to me."

As you wish, Juno.

An orange beam struck the man in one eye, and he clutched at his face, rolling on the floor. "I - I'm blind! You - you....," he moaned.

"I can take care of the other eye, or perhaps your brain, the same way," Juno said, calmly, standing over the fallen man. "I have killed a man that way once. Would you like to experience such an end for yourself? Perhaps you could tell the Lord of the Pits about it, once you rejoin him."

"N - no...," the man faltered. "I'll show you the way! D - don't do that again! Never!"

"Tsk, tsk," Juno said. "Your master would be quite ashamed. Now, lead the way, and I may spare your life - *perhaps*. It all depends on your good conduct, my friend. Prove a friend, and I will prove friendly."

"Spare me," he pleaded, "and return my wand once you have met the master. But I w - warn you, you can't hurt him the way you hurt me!"

“Enough chatter from you,” Juno said, sternly. “Concern yourself with the task at hand, and we shall cross that particular bridge later.”

Silently, the man led Juno down a hallway, and then towards a long, winding staircase, which they both followed....

“To the successful return of our brave heroes,” Father Joaquim said, raising his glass with a hand that was only slightly unsteady. The rest of his companions, seated comfortably around the table of the meeting hall at Saint Hilda’s Chapel, concurred enthusiastically as their glasses were raised in unison.

“And especially to young Ryan and Lavie, who were responsible for delivering me,” Sister Miriam said, gratefully. “It was good of you to come, my friends.”

“I haven’t been in a church for decades,” Sigmund Regale said, chuckling, “but I’m always ready to participate in a worthy endeavour, and besides, I owe both the Infinity and the Five Angels a debt of honour. The former saved my daughter, and the latter saved Eramond and the Princess.”

“I remember that,” Sister Miriam said, with a smile. “Poor Lavie. As the Infinity lives, she has come a long way since then, Mr. Regale. You must be proud of your only child.”

“It was always a blow to me that we could have no more children,” Emily said, softly, “even if Sigmund always hid his disappointment well. I must agree with all my heart, however, that Lavie is worth a house full of children on her own.”

“Emily, my dear,” Sigmund said, gently, “don’t worry about that any longer. After all, we now have Bernadette as well!”

“Dear me,” Emily said, shaking her head and smiling, “I quite forgot. Dear Bernadette. I think it’s very fortunate that she and Lavie met – they’re opposites, but they complement each other. But let’s not be self-centered, Sigmund. Speaking of brave children, what about Ryan and Henrik Spenson?”

“Ryan’s all right,” Theodore Eramond said, with a satisfied smile. “I only wish Father had been there to see him follow his own path. And I must say I’m glad he and Lavie are getting along well these days. That Robertson girl cost me many a sleepless night, though I daren’t say so to him!”

“They’re doing a good sight more than ‘getting along’, Theo, dear,” Sheila said, with a laugh.

“Don’t I know,” Emily replied, winking at her. “Though I wonder what Sigmund would say about Ryan making use of the library for...”

“The library?” Sigmund raised his eyebrows, then laughed. “Dear me, looking at those two makes me feel quite young again.”

“And what about Bernadette and Spenson?” Sheila said, with a dreamy look on her face. “They’re so *nice*. We had them over to tea once, and it was such a pleasant experience!”

Suddenly, the group fell silent – remembering, despite their best efforts to forget – that their children were all on Unity Isle, involved in a mission that was as dangerous as it was brave.

“Ryan...” Sheila said, shaking her head. “I know he’s made it through all kinds of dangers, Emily, but I just wish he – and all of them – could be back safe. I’m sure even Alphonse Spenson, for all his cold looks, wishes that Henrik were home again. I know they’re fighting for what’s right, but still...”

“You’re right, Sheila,” Melody Tamas replied. “I’m only glad Shirvin is too young to understand what his big brother’s doing, but....I’m terribly proud of Armin, but I want him back safe. For all his silliness, he’s nothing like his no-good father. He’s made of fine stuff.”

“Indeed he is, Melody,” Father Joaquim said, with a laugh. “Anyone who helped put that scoundrel Robertson away is fine in my book, no matter how many girls he tries to flirt with. He’s young, after all.”

“Sheila, Melody,” Sister Miriam said, gently, “we know how you feel. We all feel the same way. Even the King and Queen of Galvenia do, I’m sure. The Princess is certainly as brave as her legendary ancestors.”

“Speaking of Alphonse, I haven’t seen him around lately,” Sigmund observed, sipping his wine. “He did come over after Robertson’s death and tried to make some half-hearted excuses, but he’s vanished since then. He must be working on another of his unreadable novels.”

“Dear me,” Emily said, with a laugh, “to think that you should say that, Sigmund. Weren’t you the one who championed him in the first place?”

“Because he wrote a good book, my dear,” Sigmund replied, with dignity. “Unfortunately, he’s turned into a mess of clever technique and soapboxing, and his new books read like long-drawn-out excuses to show off, and little else. That man has run out of inspiration.”

“Perhaps he misses Henrik, as Sheila said,” Melody suggested. “I haven’t even seen him for the past couple of weeks, and when I knock at his door to collect his payment, nobody answers. Not that I need the money these days, thanks to Armin” – she smiled – “but it’s strange.”

“Melody,” Sigmund said, sternly, “you ought to have come to me in the first place. You know I wouldn’t have turned you away, even if yours is a small concern.”

“I know, Sigmund,” she said, softly, “but sometimes it’s hard to swallow my pride. I thought I could make something of my little catering service, and I didn’t want to let on that it wasn’t doing that well. Armin knew, of course, poor boy.”

“Well, don’t worry about that in future,” Sigmund said. “I’m glad your son has done you proud, but if you need a little help in keeping afloat, Regale Enterprises is always glad to help.”

“Thank you,” Melody replied, and the group fell silent again, wondering what was happening on Unity Isle, and when – none of them dared think *if*, at least not consciously – they would see their children again.

“We’ve combed the entire building, or at least the actual Commonwealth,” Ryan said, sheathing his sword, as they assembled in the large guest bedroom that now served as a makeshift sick-room. “And while we’ve done good work, we’ve drawn a blank as far as finding the leader of the pack is concerned.” He shook his head. “Thank the Infinity that we could save the three Council Members, even though Hipper passed on.”

The group stood silently, watching over the beds of the three men – Schliemann, Sir Douglas and Jansen – who now slept peacefully, though the lines on their faces bore eloquent testimony to the torture of the Jars. They had found them in the room adjacent to the one Sheffield had been captured in, and thanks to Bernadette’s water-based attack, the two mages there had been easily defeated. Carranya’s light had made short work of the Jars, which dissolved into thin air as she struck them with her rays, and she and Bernadette had worked hard healing them. Finally, they had been forced to put them to sleep, using one of Bernadette’s father’s traditional potions, as a means of hastening their recovery.

There had been two skirmishes with groups of CSF ‘guards’, during which Henrik had played a heroic role, and sustained minor injuries – but, thanks to the advantage yielded by the Sword of Regret, they ended in decisive victories for the Princess and her group. Aline had used another of her inventions – an exploding shell the size of a cartridge – to defeat a third group which had ambushed them from behind. Mysteriously, all the fallen soldiers had turned to dust or powder upon being killed, something that Aline was still at a loss to explain.

“I still feel it’s been too easy,” Henrik observed, looking out at the night sky through a window in the eastern tower, where they had now regrouped. “This can’t be all there is to the Third Way.”

Striker, who was contacting Freya with his bracelet, turned to Henrik and nodded.

“Exactly, Mr. Spenson,” he said, gravely. “The shield that is keeping the mage battalions out of Unity Castle has grown stronger since our landing here. Obviously, every man who falls here is strengthening the power of the Harvester of Souls.”

“Good heavens!” Ryan exclaimed. “Do you mean we’re – playing into his hands?”

“Not quite, Mr. Eramond,” Striker replied. “Listen to me. Freya and her band, who warped to within the Harvester’s shield, have detected the presence of a Warp Cannon within the foundations of the castle. Perhaps our friend Samath is hiding there.”

“That’s no good, then,” Lavie said, dispiritedly. She had spent several hours tending to Schliemann, and the effort had made her weary. “He could just warp away if he wanted to!”

“Not quite, Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette said, with a smile. “A Warp Cannon is blocked by the use of a soul shield. Our enemy is trapped on this island as long as he is using the Harvester – and, unlike a light switch, it cannot be turned on or off. Isn’t that right, Aline?”

“Quite so, Miss Bernadette,” Aline said, enthusiastically. “Once an aura is trapped by the Harvester, it remains until the Harvester is destroyed.”

“That is heartening, indeed,” Carranya said, raising her hands from Commissioner Jansen’s forehead. “He seems better, poor man. I am surprised that he could offer that much resistance to an evil thing like Arctura’s Jar.”

“Perhaps he is not as evil as he seems, Princess,” Striker observed. “Few of us are.”

“That is very true, Agent Striker,” Bernadette said, looking at him appreciatively. “It is a truth few of us wish to recognize, however. We are so busy seeking evil among our fellow men that we sometimes ignore a greater evil, to our own detriment.”

“You have a good head on your shoulders, young woman,” Striker replied, causing her to blush. “Now, since it is late, I suggest we take turns keeping guard, and begin our search of the lower levels early in the morning. The Princess, in particular, needs to rest.”

“That’s true, Carranya,” Lavie said, looking at her friend’s drooping eyelids. “You’ve used a lot of energy destroying those Jars, and you need to rest. We’ll look after these guys during the night, but you need your beauty sleep!” She smiled. “Why not use one of those guest bedrooms we found next to this one? They look pretty comfortable.”

“Thank you, Lavie,” Carranya said, with a sleepy laugh. “Some rest would, truly, be what I need – we have enough food for the moment, thanks to what we found in the Commonwealth kitchens.”

“We can’t leave you alone, Princess,” Ryan said, firmly. “One of us will keep guard at your door, and one of the girls will stay with you inside, just to be on the safe side. We can’t take chances with this Samath bloke, anyway.”

“I’ll stay with Carranya,” Lavie said, “since Bernadette would be of more help with the sick men.”

“An excellent idea, Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette said, yawning a little herself. “Goodness, we *all* are quite sleepy.” She grinned.

“Then I’ll stay with her in the sick-room,” Henrik volunteered.

“Me too! Aunt Aline’s a good nurse, Mr. Henrik, don’t you remember?” Aline said, producing a nurse’s cap from her bag and donning it proudly.

Henrik laughed. "That leaves two of us: Ryan and Agent Striker," he said. "One of you will have to guard the passageway, at least until Colonel Raienji and her group get here, and the other will stand guard over the Princess' door; Lavie will stay with the Princess as well. What do you think, guys?"

"Let's toss for it," Ryan suggested, taking a coin from his pocket. "What do you call, Agent Striker?"

"Heads," he called out, and heads it was.

"Looks like it's the corridor for me," Ryan said, ruefully, drawing his sword. "Aunt Aline, could you bring me a cup of coffee some time later, to keep me from falling asleep? I'd ask Lavie, but she's doing royal guard duty tonight."

"Very funny, Ryan," Lavie said, patting him on the back. "I'm sure Aline's coffee will do just fine."

"Of course, Mr. Ryan, you nice boy," Aline said, cheerfully.

"Then good night, Princess," Striker said, as everyone went to their assigned positions, "and pleasant dreams carry you to the morrow."

"Good night, Agent Striker," Carranya said, kindly.

"Don't stay up too late, Agent Wolfgang! You too, Ryan!" Lavie joked, as she and Carranya entered the guest room and locked the door.

"Raienji," a firm but gentle voice said, from behind, "a word with you, if I may."

Professor Hidoki Raienji turned around, and frowned. The evening's gathering – a quiet dinner in the Imperial Palace, for those guests who had not travelled to Unity Isle – had proceeded pleasantly and uneventfully, except for Rohmer's penchant for long tales of army life. But, it seemed to him, this was not the case any longer. He did not particularly object to the person who was addressing him – in fact, they had once been on a friendly footing – but he was keen to avoid embarrassing questions, and Terence Marlborough had a disconcerting knack for asking them.

"Marlborough," he replied, with a short bow. "It has been quite a long time, has it not?"

"Indeed it has, Raienji," the priest replied. "Ten years, perhaps a little less. We old men tend to lose track of time. It is good to see you again, for I believe you can help me with a particular puzzle."

Raienji raised his eyebrows. "I see even an ecclesiastical order cannot overcome your curiosity, my friend," he replied. "I am far from being the Church's most obedient member, but even I must remind you of that."

“Point taken, Raienji,” Marlborough said. “Let me tell you a little story, about a little something I believe you have done, and perhaps we could share our thoughts on it. It is quite an interesting tale.”

His tale was short, and told without much difficulty. At the end of it, Raienji sighed and shook his head.

“You ask too much, Marlborough,” he replied. “Granted that it is as you say, how can I help you?”

“Oh, don’t hide behind that ‘frail scholar with a military wife’ stance,” Marlborough said, with a laugh. “I am one of the few who know what you really are. Renaud was quite indiscreet, poor boy.”

“He has learned discretion with age,” Raienji said, with dignity. “Let us assume, for the sake of discussion, that you have – with your annoying Galvenian knack of being right – stumbled upon the truth, or shall we say, a part of the truth. I was merely following orders.”

“Orders?” Marlborough’s expression grew indignant. “What sort of excuse is that, Raienji? I expected better from you. Those are the words of a Varaldian secret policeman, not a man of your wisdom and position. The Emperor’s orders, I presume.”

Raienji sighed. “Listen, Marlborough, I am not in the best of moods now. I know perhaps far more than you do about the dangers of this situation. My own wife, my son, and my daughter have all been deployed, perhaps as hostages to fortune. And, if I may speak a little in my own defence, they were not the Emperor’s orders. You know very well who gave the order. The order to silence you was from the Emperor, but even he does not know everything.”

“It was unwise, Raienji,” Marlborough argued. “Even if we grant the one in a million odds that it works, what next? There are wider ramifications to the entire matter.”

“I know, Marlborough,” Raienji said, “but what choice did I have? To have a great talent is not always a blessing. As a teacher, you ought to know that.”

“I’m sorry, Raienji,” he replied. “I can even sympathize with you. Perhaps, if I was in your place, and had received the same order from the same person, I would have obeyed too. My only hope is that one of them finds out the truth, and can bring it to the light before things get out of hand.”

“Do you seriously consider that possibility?” Raienji said. “If it has taken you so long to understand, what chance would a lesser mind have of piercing the veil? I am sorry I could not be more helpful, and sometimes, I wish I could trade all the glory of Zion for a chance to undo – a particular action. Let me be honest, Marlborough. I distrust the idea as much as you do. And yet...”

“I understand, Raienji,” Marlborough said, kindly, “and I thank you for your time. May the peace of the Infinity be with you.”

“And also with you,” Raienji said, as they shook hands and went their own ways. Marlborough returned to his room in the Imperial guest house, his mind troubled.

An extraordinary force in one's heart.

Love without limits.

Man, woman, beast.

But people can change.

Infinity help them all, he prayed.

“Are you sure about this?” Sheffield whispered.

“You owe me your life, fool,” Juno replied. “The man we seek is near, according to my sword. Keep quiet, and play your part, once I have played mine.”

That is the man, Juno.

“Him?” Juno looked at the man from a distance, contempt on his face. “I ought to have known. He is as despicable as Eramond.”

What do you know of him?

“I know that he is a traitor,” Juno said. “Do not fail me, my lady. Maximum power. If you speak the truth, he merits it. We shall not kill him yet, for he has not taken a life.”

He is cruel, Juno. I do not know the details of his cruelty, but it is grave and far-reaching. I shall not fail you. Though he will not die, he will suffer.

A blue beam shot out from the Sword of Justice, and before the man could even react, he lay on the ground, unconscious, a look of pain on his face.

The bedroom door swung open.

“Princess!” Sheffield called out, urgently. “It’s Sir Douglas! He’s – sweet Infinity, I think he’s dying!”

Carranya stirred and rose from her bed with a start, looking at him anxiously. The next moment, she was uneasily conscious of her unruly hair and her bare shoulders, and reached for a robe to cover the simple nightdress she wore.

“Huh?” Lavie said, waking up and pulling on her own jacket. “What happened, Carranya?”

“It’s Minister Sheffield,” she replied, slowly slipping on her shoes. “He says Sir Douglas is very ill.”

“Please come at once, Princess,” Sheffield said, sadly. “He’s asking for you. Miss Aquary is at her wit’s end.”

“Do you want me to come with you, Carranya?” Lavie said.

“I’m sure Agent Striker will cover the area, dear Lavie,” Carranya said, affectionately. “Go back to sleep. We have to rise early tomorrow, anyhow.”

As she followed Sheffield out of the room, she was greeted by a sight that froze her in her tracks. Agent Striker was lying on the ground, blood on his lips, struggling to rise, and in front of her stood another man in a green cloak – a man she had not seen before.

Carranya began to scream, but before she could, a blue beam struck her in the chest as well, and she crumpled to the ground.

It is better that way, Juno. It is better that she learns the truth, than that she lives with a hopeful lie. It is a lesson I paid for with my life when I walked this world, and I wish to spare her.

“Now take us there, Sheffield,” Juno said, as the two of them moved close to the Princess. Sheffield placed his hand over the device at his belt, and there was a flash of light.

Hearing Carranya fall, Lavie pushed the door open.

“Princess, are you...Ohmygosh! *Ohmygosh!*” Lavie screamed. “Ryan! Bernadette! Help me, please! Carranya’s gone!” she said, desperately.

Ryan came hurrying down the corridor. “Lavie? Lavie, what’s wrong?” he said. “Where’s the Princess? And what happened to Striker? He looks in terrible shape!”

“Sweet Saint Integra!” Bernadette exclaimed in horror, as she knelt down beside the Agent and placed her hand over his head.

She rose after a few minutes, shaking her head. “Someone’s wounded him quite badly with a light-based attack. We need to heal him at once!”

“A light-based – No!” Ryan shouted. “That maniac, Juno! This must be *his* doing!”

“Goodness, must you children have a party at this unearthly hour?” Aline exclaimed, emerging from the sick-room still wearing a nurse’s cap, then staring in dismay at the Agent. “Miss Bernadette, is he....hurt?” she went on, tears coming to her eyes.

“Quite so, I’m afraid, Aline,” Bernadette said, sadly. “And the Princess is gone.”

“We must find her, then,” Aline said, firmly. “And I have an idea. I only hope it works!”

Agent Striker, who was making a desperate attempt to stand, leaned against Ryan for support. "I – think it was your friend Juno," he said, with an expression of despair that was quite unlike his general attitude of poise and calm. "Infinity help us, he may have.....ruined us all."

"Ohmygosh, Agent Wolfgang, you're hurt," Lavie said, wiping her eye with one hand. "You can't move. We'll go ahead with Aline and look for them. Bernadette will stay here and heal you."

"That....won't do..." Striker said, placing one hand over his side. "It would be best if we...went together."

"I appreciate your courage, Agent," Henrik said, gently, as he walked up to join the group, "but surely, we can fight without you. You're in no shape to come along."

"I must try, then," he said, recovering his former calm expression. "Do your best, Miss. We must leave at once. That boy, Juno, is dealing with something he cannot possibly understand."

Lavie looked at him sympathetically, then looked at Ryan, then stood open-mouthed, as if she had been struck.

"What's the matter, Lavie?" Ryan asked, with concern, as he helped the Agent rise.

"Just – upset about what happened, Ryan," she said, smiling at him. "Well, you'd better try to help him, Bernadette. Ryan, you and I will move on ahead with Aline. Do your best, my sister, and then the three of you can follow."

Bernadette, wasting no time, bowed over the Agent, looking grave, as she placed her hands over his side. "I think you should be able to keep going for a while, Agent," she said, rising after a few minutes, "but I make no guarantees."

"Thank you, both of you," Striker said, speaking in a voice quite like his normal tone. "I think that is the wisest course, as I need to contact Raienji and find out what's happening down there as well. If I may ask, Aline, what is your idea?"

"Ooh, I love giving lectures," Aline said, beaming at Striker. "You see, we can't detect auras from a living person, but we can detect emotions, though it's difficult at a distance. But if my theories are correct, using a combination of Miss Bernadette's healing techniques and my device, we can amplify the signal for a strong emotion. If we sense something particularly strong, then we know we're heading the right way."

"But Bernadette needs to stay back and help Agent Striker," Ryan pointed out.

"That will hardly be necessary, Mr. Eramond," Striker said, straightening himself and drawing his weapon. "Let us move along, now. I have a little score to settle with that Juno, or whatever he calls himself."

“Are you sure?” Lavie said, anxiously.

“I never felt better,” he said, slowly. “Let’s move on.”

“Bernadette, stay with Aline in the rear, in case we need a shield,” Henrik said. “Ryan and I will be in front, Lavie will give us long-range cover, and Striker will cover the rear with his gun.”

“You’re almost as good as Eramond,” Striker quipped, as they began to move forward...

There was a sound, as if glass was shattering, and the red wall that stood before Juno was no longer red.

I can carry you this far, Juno, but there are greater trials ahead.

“I already have one ally,” Juno said, looking at the sleeping Princess at his feet. “Now, Sheffield, if you wish to remain with us, remain. Otherwise, leave.”

Sheffield looked around nervously, touched the device at his belt, and was gone in the blink of an eye.

“Good morning, Princess,” Juno said, calmly. “I must apologize for waking you at this hour, but the time is short.”

Carranya woke with a start. “Where am I?” she said, softly.

“Very near to the lair of the Third Way’s master, Your Highness,” Juno replied. “Sheffield, who was a most consummate liar, enticed you out of your room and used a warp device to bring you here – presumably to deliver you to his master. Fortunately for you, I was nearby, and I chased him away.”

“Who are you?” she asked, shaking her head in bewilderment.

“My name is Makarov Juno,” he replied. “Please remain here, Your Highness, and do not panic. I will scout ahead, and look for further dangers. In the meantime, if you will, please contact your friends.”

My friends? Carranya felt a wave of weariness pass over her. Ryan said this man was dangerous, but he claims to have saved me. I don’t really remember how I came here. I wish I had more power..

Then she smiled, as an idea occurred to her.

It’s already served me well twice. I may have enough strength for it, but I hope it will work.

Closing her eyes, she began to chant.

“Take that!” Armin said, as one of his knives struck a mage in the neck, toppling him to the ground. “My aim’s pretty good, hey, Burnfist?”

“Good enough for me, boy,” Captain Burnfist said, surveying the field in front of her, and the twenty or so mages who had fallen before them. “Flaming fires, it certainly took us enough time to get through that shield! Worse, it’s now reformed behind us, and we can’t break it at all now. We’re trapped.”

“And we don’t know how many more of them there are,” one of the mages observed, lowering his wand. “Can you contact the Colonel, Captain?”

“We’re not able to get through with the radio, even now that we’re inside the shield,” Burnfist growled. “They must have found some other way of scrambling it.”

“Do you think the shield gets stronger the more of them we take down?” the woman mage said, looking at her detector. “The aura count is higher now.”

“Hey, that makes a horrible kind of sense,” Armin observed.

“Burn me!” the Captain said. “What a clever devil. If we defeat them, we’re stuck here; if not, we’re sitting ducks. I hope those wonderboys inside can find a way around them soon!”

“Over here, Mother!” Baldur called out, lustily.

“I knew the boy had it in him,” Freya said to Thora in a low voice, as they moved forward. They had found an entrance into Unity Castle through its foundations, and following Striker’s instructions, they were looking for the Warp Cannon.

“Remember, we’re dealing with a powerful mage here, one who could even sense changes in surrounding artefacts,” she said, as she joined Baldur. “Do not destroy this object dramatically. We need to use low power, if we don’t want to raise the alarm.”

“Are you saying that just to annoy me?” Baldur said, with a smile.

“Oh, do be quiet, son,” she replied. “Girls, let’s try to do this together. Our wands are clear that there’s a Warp Cannon here. First, break the rocks. Baldur, take two of the boys, and use fire. Slowly.”

Raising his cudgel and beaming, Baldur aimed at the rocks, which began to glow red and purple.

“Now a cooling breeze, girls,” Freya said, pointing her wand at the rocks. “A little water too, Thora. Gentle, now.”

Slowly, the rocks began to fragment and fall to the ground, revealing the Cannon.

“It looks quite run-down,” Thora said, doubtfully. “We shouldn’t need much effort to put it out of action.”

“All right, men, this is your turn. Fire at will, but don’t use too much power.”

A beam of fire shot forth from five of the men’s wands – and was instantly reflected back, causing them to back away hastily.

“Johan’s bones! The Infinity’s socks!” Baldur cursed. “He’s got a shield over that, too.”

“And no ordinary shield, brother,” Thora said, as she found her own wind-based attack deflected towards her, sending her flying for a moment.

“It’s not registering any auras, Freya,” one of the women said, looking at her detector. “It’s just a very strong dark shield, probably maintained by some object within the Castle.”

“Infinity help us,” Freya said, shaking her head. “Now it truly depends on them. Hidoki, you fool...”

Juno fired his beam twice in rapid succession, and again, there was the sound of broken glass. As he moved forwards, he found balls of orange and yellow flying rapidly in his direction. One of them struck the edge of his cloak, which caught fire.

“It was a good cloak,” he said, regretfully, as he removed it.

Lying low, and dodging the fireballs carefully, he looked up, trying to trace their source. With a quiet smile, he noted that the projectiles were emerging from the mouths of two figurines – a stone one representing a man, and a wooden one representing a woman. Between the two, glowing red, was a third, representing a beast.

You cannot pass through this alone, Juno.

“Then it is time to make a strategic retreat,” he replied, with a smile, as he moved out of the range of the creatures’ attacks, “and wait for the others.”

“There are two signals,” Aline said, dispiritedly, “and both of them are strong. One of them is below, in the dungeons, and the other is in a tower.”

“I’d pick the dungeons,” Henrik said. “He might have a summoning pit down there, for all we know.”

Bernadette turned pale. “You’re probably right, Henrik,” she replied.

"I think that's a bit too obvious," Ryan remarked. "After all, what you're getting from the dungeon may be the Commonwealth Senators, if what that traitor Sheffield told us was true. He wasn't lying about the Jars, anyway."

"I still wonder if it's safe to leave those three men behind," Bernadette said, regretfully. "Their lives are safe, but what if someone tries to attack them?"

"We can take care of that easily," Striker said, with a smile. "Freya's men have entered the Castle from its foundations. They are trying to destroy the Warp Cannon they have found there, but it is shielded. I will ask some of them to move in and protect the Council members, while we move ahead."

"That's a great idea, Agent Striker," Ryan said.

"Give me a few moments," he replied, as he placed his fingers over his bracelet.

"In the meantime, we..." Ryan began, then stopped, amazed, as a figure materialized before them all. It was Princess Carranya, in golden robes, holding out her hand.

"My friends," she said, "I have been taken to a tower in this castle, though I do not know its location. There is a man here, Makarov Juno, who claims that he has saved me. I hesitate to follow him. If you can find me, please come to my assistance. I do not think this Juno is evil, but he is imprudent."

There was a flash of light, and the apparition vanished.

"Juno is nuts," Henrik said, shaking his head. "Just what the hell is he doing here?"

"The towers," Ryan said, with a look of determination. "Aline, we need to check all the four towers one by one, using your device as a compass. Will that work?"

"Of course it will, Mr. Ryan," Aline said, earnestly.

"The Warp Cannon's been found," Striker said, with a smile. "The trouble is, it's protected by another shield, and this one isn't being projected by the Harvester, but probably by another cursed object. I suspect we may find it in the tower where the Princess is. For the moment, I have asked Raienji to leave some of her men with the Cannon, and to take the rest into the dungeons, where she will try to deliver the Senators. Let us hurry to the towers."

"Carranya, we're going to save you," Lavie said, softly. "Please wait for us."

"Three figurines?" Carranya shook her head in wonder, and drew her robe more closely around her.

"Yes, Your Highness," Juno said. "A man, a woman and a beast. You are certainly aware of the significance of these."

“The Third Way,” she replied, softly. “What would you have me do?”

“The spirit of my sword – who, apparently, is a young lady such as you – has told me that I cannot fight them alone; I need a companion. Since we are both attempting to destroy the Third Way, I have come to request your help.”

“Me?” Carranya said, hesitantly.

“Listen to my sword, Princess,” Juno said, and as he spoke, Carranya could feel words forming in her mind.

Sweet Princess, beware a man who will try to follow you. He pretends to be an ally, but there is falseness in his heart. Trust Juno.

“Who are you?” Carranya whispered.

I once had a name, my princess. I had a father, a brother, and a man whom I believed was my true love. But he was false. Learning of his deception drove me mad, and I died young. I do not want you to suffer the same fate.

The girl’s voice was filled with pain, and the Princess blanched. “What are you speaking of?” she replied, finding that she only had to think the words.

I speak of a man named Striker, Your Highness.

“Agent Striker?” Carranya’s expression was angry. “He is a brave man, who has saved my life more than once. I cannot think of him as a traitor.”

Sometimes the ones closest to our hearts are the ones whose betrayals are the most painful, dear princess. Learn from my lesson.

“Tell me your name, then,” Carranya said, “that I may verify the truth of your tale myself.”

My tale is thousands of years old, Princess. Ever since then, the Infinity in his goodness has confined me in this sword, to help chivalrous men and fair women in distress. Please, my princess. Trust me.

Juno, who had listened only to the sword’s side of this conversation without saying a word, now stepped forward.

“Do not fear that man, Princess,” he said. “I have chastised him once, and I will do it again. Now, will you help me?”

Carranya shook her head, helplessly. “Infinity help me,” she said. “I do not know what to believe any longer.”

“Damn it!” Ryan said, his face red with anger and impatience. “We’ve combed all the four towers, and we’ve found absolutely nothing, not even a flicker! Just bugs, bats, and the odd guard. It’s almost as if they knew we were coming, and cleaned out the place in anticipation.”

“Poor Carranya,” Lavie said, sadly. “Do you think they’ve warped away?”

“I doubt it, Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette replied, taking her hand. “Trust in the Infinity.”

“Wait a minute, Ryan,” Henrik said. “I think I have an idea.”

“What is it, Mr. Spenson?” Agent Striker said.

“When Bernadette and I were studying those Legends of Janwen, we came across the story of Estrana, the town built on Janwen’s ruins. Estrana was apparently famous for a tall tower called the Arm of Estrana, which was used to detain criminals, and which overshadowed the town. But when Estrana itself was destroyed, the ruins of the tower still stood. Many thousands of years later, several kingdoms copied the notion of the Tower when building their prisons.”

“Dear Henrik, you’re absolutely right!” Bernadette said, with a smile. “One of those kingdoms was Meldia. When Meldia annexed Chespa Isle and converted it into a prison colony, they built a tower which was the copy of the Arm of Estrana, calling it the Tower of Meldia. It must be still here, somewhere!”

Ryan nodded. “Great work, you two. Let’s comb the upper level again and look for passages.”

“Let me try using the detector this time, Aline,” Lavie said. “I think I’ve got the hang of it from seeing you work with it. Besides, you’re tired.”

“Sweet lands, I am!” Aline said, handing the heavy improved version of the Aura Detector to Lavie.

“You’re such a nice girl, Miss Lavender. Are you sure you and Miss Bernadette aren’t sisters?”

“Cousins, actually,” Lavie said, with a wink, causing Bernadette to laugh. “Come on, guys, let’s find the Princess!”

Moving carefully, they soon found a signal under a stone – a stone which seemed slightly discoloured, compared to the rest of the floor.

“Under here?” Henrik mused. “Perhaps there’s a passage.”

He began to pry it out, with a little help from Ryan, and it rose like a door, revealing a tunnel.

“Someone’s been this way recently,” he said. “It’s quite loose, though it is heavy.”

"Your broad shoulders are getting quite a bit of exercise, my Henrik," Bernadette said, affectionately. "Come on, let's enter."

Striker lit a lantern and climbed down. "Follow me," he said.

"I hope this isn't like that tunnel in *Al-Mu'afa*," Lavie said, darkly, as they entered. Their path seemed to go on endlessly, leading up a winding staircase and then another, until they finally stood in front of a door.

"There's something written on it, but I don't understand the language," Ryan said, looking at the metal plaque that was affixed to the door.

"Let me try, Ryan," Bernadette said. "It's Old Itarian. This is what it says."

*Welcome to my abode, foolish mortals.
Only six may enter, so choose wisely.
Only know that once you enter,
you will have to follow your Destiny,
till the very end.*

*And this is the Destiny:
Six victims in atonement for Samath, the first Master.
Six souls for Arctura.
Six bodies for Gharon.
Six minds for the Phantom.
Six burnt offerings to the Lord Below, Master of the Third Way.*

"If he's trying to scare us," Lavie said, trying to sound as cheerful as she could, "he's not doing a very good job."

"That's the spirit, Lavie," Ryan said, drawing her near to him. "Samath was defeated, and so will this successor of his."

Bernadette trembled. "It's very strong, Henrik," she said. "There is more than one cursed object within. I can withstand them now, after surviving my illness, but I can feel them."

"There's no lock," Striker said, drawing his weapon. "It seems like a simple wooden door. Perhaps we should shoot it down."

"Oh no, Mr. Striker! Don't damage a priceless antique door like that!" Aline said, shaking her head. "Look below you."

Striker looked at the ground, and found that six of the tiles were numbered, one to six.

“We need to stand on these tiles, I presume,” Ryan said, “but then, how did Juno get in?”

“Sheffield may have been using his Warp Device,” Striker suggested. “Perhaps they have one that works within the building, even if the shield prevents them from leaving.”

“That is possible,” Bernadette said. “There are six of us, at any rate. Let us line up.”

“Do we need to do this in any particular order?” Henrik asked.

“Man and woman....” Lavie said, softly. “Ryan, you and I will go first. Next, Henrik and Bernadette. And finally, Agent Striker and Aline.”

“Well, I’m a lucky girl!” Aline said, as Agent Striker offered her his hand. “This is quite unbelievable, wouldn’t you say, Miss Bernadette and Miss Lavie?”

“That’s putting it mildly, Aline,” Lavie said. As they stood on the tiles, the door swung open, revealing a red glow.

“This is it, guys,” Ryan said. “Let’s move forward slowly.”

They stepped forward, but as they did, a blue beam shot out...

“There are more of them!” Armin cried out in alarm, waving his arms. “These aren’t mages, though!”

“Mercenaries, I presume, or loyalists of the Third Way,” Burnfist said, looking at the approaching battalion – there were at least a hundred of them – with concern.

“But what do we do, Captain?” the older mage asked, nervously. “If we kill them, we’re only strengthening the Shield!”

“So let it get strengthened, my friend,” Captain Burnfist replied. “The only thing it can do is keep us in here – and that will change once our companions inside do their job.”

“Are you sure?” the woman replied. “I’m – the detectors are going haywire.”

“Crazy green-haired lady and her crazy contraptions,” Burnfist said with annoyance. “Tamas, step back. Wind Mages, prepare for action!”

The wind mages raised their wands, and a strong wind began to cut across the enemy lines.

“Now!” Burnfist said, raising her wand. The advancing horde, already pushed back by the gusts of wind, now rose in the air.

“Push back, and then release!” The wind mages closed their eyes, and the group was thrust hard against the walls of the castle, lying stunned.

“That’ll give them something to think about,” Armin said, looking with admiration at the Captain. “But how long can we hold them off?”

“Let’s not think about that now, Tamas,” she growled. “It all depends on your friends.”

Almost instinctively, Bernadette cast her shield, and the beam was deflected harmlessly off Agent Striker.

“You again, Juno?” Lavie said, her eyes gleaming a dark red that contrasted with the dull glow of the walls. “Leave us alone!” She scraped another arrow against her bangle, and readied her bow.

“There is no need for that, Miss Regale,” Juno said, calmly. “Before you act hastily, listen to me. I assume you are all aware of the prophecy by now.”

“How did *you* hear about that, Makarov?” Henrik said, his hand going to his sword.

“That is none of your concern, and kindly do not address me by my first name in front of these people,” Juno said, with a frown on his face. “We are at the time when the prophecy is to be fulfilled. Beyond these two gates, which I have destroyed, lie three figurines, which attempted to attack me with fire. Beyond them, I am sure, lies Samath, the master of the Third Way. He can only be defeated if the prophecy is fulfilled.”

“Go ahead, Juno,” Ryan said, drawing his sword and pointing it at him. “Let’s see how you can get out of this. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t knock you out right now, and then go ahead.”

“Ryan, wait,” Carranya said, emerging from the shadows. “Juno’s sword – there is something other-worldly about it. It has spoken to me. It may be” – she looked at Striker regretfully – “that he knows something that we do not.”

“Carranya?” Lavie stared wide-eyed at the Princess. “What do you mean?”

“Listen to me, Miss Regale,” Juno said, looking at her intently. “The prophecy spoke of six people. Five of them are among you. Ryan Eramond, foolish descendant of the foolish Prince Ryle. The Princess of Galvenia. Spenson and the girl. You, Miss Regale. And I, the Wanderer.”

“You?” Lavie said, incredulously. “Listen, Juno, that’s not at all how it is!”

Juno glared first at Ryan, then at Striker, but said nothing.

“Juno,” Henrik said, calmly, “listen to me. We viewed a Memory Crystal that contained the full prophecy. It spoke of six people – lover and beloved, swordsman and archer, healer and wanderer.”

“How satisfying to have one’s knowledge confirmed,” Juno said. “Listen to me, Eramond, you fool. You always thought highly of yourself, but now you must listen to the truth. The Lover and Beloved are Spenson and the woman, who truly love each other – I presume.” He laughed. “The Swordsman is you. The Archer is Miss Regale. The Healer is the Princess. That leaves me. Ask these two others to depart, before I do so myself.”

“Mr. Juno!” Aline said, with a smile on her face. “Don’t you recognize me, you dear boy?”

Juno scowled. “I wish you no harm, Miss Sheldon,” he said, “but you are not part of the prophecy. Neither is this man, whom the sword informs me is a traitor.”

“Take those words back,” Striker said, calmly, drawing his weapon. “You have no idea what you are dealing with, Juno. You cannot decide on your own that you have been chosen; that decision belongs to the Infinity.”

“Then let him speak,” Juno said, contemptuously. “Whatever I may be, *you* have certainly not been chosen for the task at hand.”

“How right you are,” Striker said, smiling at him.

“Juno, this is hopeless,” Henrik said. “None of us know what the prophecy truly means. All we know is that Samath is immeasurably evil, and that it is our duty to fight him, prophecy or no prophecy.”

“Henrik is right,” Bernadette said, gently. “Juno, it might be better if we fought together. Our goals are almost the same. It would be tragic if we wronged each other in the name of good, as the rebel priests of Itaria did.”

“Bernadette,” Lavie said, glaring at Juno, “I love you like a sister, but this is crazy. Juno is...”

He has a purpose of his own, Ryan. Take him with you, but when the moment comes, you will have to decide.

This time, the voice was audible to everyone, and they started. Ryan lowered his sword. “Who just spoke?” Henrik said, amazed.

“My sword,” Ryan said, with a smile. “I’ve heard it on a few occasions, and it gives me good advice, too. The Eramond men of past generations, so it is said, fight along me when I use it.”

“Ridiculous,” Juno said. “For all we know, the Eramond men are deceivers, as you are, Eramond.”

Ryan, your companions are your strength. Ask the Beloved. And ask the woman whose life is joined to yours, and to the Eramonds of all generations.

Carranya blushed and covered her face with her hands.

“Looks like it’s up to us, Carranya,” Lavie said. “I don’t trust Juno, not after what he did to Ryan and to Bernadette.”

“I?” Juno said, angrily. “I never harmed that girl, Miss Regale.”

“He is right, my sister,” Bernadette said, softly. “It was the cursed pendants that hurt me, and not that sword of his. Besides, according to Father, his sword did little harm to Ryan when they fought at Ozunhold.”

“I do not know, either,” the Princess said, sadly. “Juno’s sword...” She looked down.

“I do not know what that sword has told you, Princess,” Striker said, “but I can assure you, on my honour as a man, that I intend no treachery. Remember that I have aided you in your hour of need, Princess, more than once. Do not be afraid. I am here to protect you.”

“I trust you, Agent Striker,” Carranya said, with a sad smile, “and yet – that woman in the sword...Lavie, let us allow Juno to accompany us. We will not be too many to face the perils that lie ahead.”

“All right, Carranya,” Lavie said, though her expression suggested that she was still unconvinced.

“Looks like you’ve decided,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “All right, Juno, you can come along, but no funny business, all right? I’ll keep an eye on you personally, and if you try any stunts like you just did with Agent Striker, you’re a dead man.”

“Brave words, Eramond,” Juno said, “but also foolish ones. You will soon realize that it is I, and not your friends, who hold the key.”

“What about me?” Aline said, scratching her head. “Dear me, Mr. Juno, this is all very confusing!”

“Watch his back, Aline,” Striker said, firmly. “If he tries any ‘funny business’, as Mr. Eramond so nicely puts it, use one of those Chill Cartridges I lent you.”

“Cool!” Aline said, with a laugh. “Come on, let’s go.”

“We’re reaching Unity Isle, Commander,” Hopkins called out. “There is still no reply either from the ships there, or from the Castle itself.”

“Nevertheless, we have our orders from Finkel,” Commander Arnoldus said, as he issued orders to the rest of his fleet – the same ships which had successfully defended Checkpoint Bravo from the Varald incursion. “We are required here.”

“What’s going on?” one of his officers asked.

“Whatever it is, it’s serious,” Arnoldus replied, shaking his head. “Finkel said the island had been captured by rebels, though he could not give me any further information.”

“That’s ridiculous, Sir,” Hopkins replied. “The Varald wouldn’t dare attack Unity Isle, and Almonth Jakov is dead.”

“Nevertheless – Good God, Hopkins, look at that!” the officer exclaimed. “Look at Unity Isle!”

Arnoldus stared in consternation at the sight that greeted him. The sun was rising, but it was eclipsed by the brightness of the shield that now surrounded Unity Castle – a bubble of red and green, which blinded them and prevented them from approaching.

“It’s burning our eyes!” Hopkins screamed, closing his eyes. “Commander, turn back!”

“We cannot,” Arnoldus said. “All men below decks, now. We will hold this position.”

“But what is that thing, Commander?” the sailor on the lookout said, terrified, as he covered his eyes with his hands. “It looks like something from another world!”

“I wish I knew,” Arnoldus replied, shaking his head. “Stop the engines, and head below decks. We can’t go any closer now. Fire one volley, and let us see what happens.”

Nervously, the gunners fired one round – then looked with horror at what happened. The cannonballs bounced off the shield as if they were cricket balls striking a pitch, and headed straight towards the *Lord Geraud VII*, narrowly missing it.

“Sweet Infinity,” Arnoldus said in horror, “what work of the Pits is this?”

“Fire...” Bernadette said, trembling, as a ball of fire flew past her, striking her cap and setting it aflame. Holding Henrik’s hand, she aimed a jet of water at one of the figurines, but it bounced off harmlessly.

“Ryan, she’s terrified,” Lavie said, compassionately, as Henrik drew her away and ducked beneath the projectiles, which were now increasing in intensity. “What do we do?”

“Distract them while I take care of this, fool,” Juno said, aiming a blue beam at the figurine of the beast. It was deflected, and nearly knocked him off his feet.

“Lavie, your arrows won’t work,” Ryan said, dodging a fireball and pushing her out of the path of another one. “They’re fire-based, too! Let me try.” Moving quickly, he fired a Chill Cartridge at all the three figures, causing them to freeze for a moment, but the ice melted in seconds. Striker fired another volley of Chill Cartridges, but they were of little effect.

“You nasty little things!” Aline said, angrily, firing an exploding shell at the beast. It burst into fragments on contact, showering them with particles of metal.

“Lavie!” Ryan exclaimed, seeing her wince. “Are you hurt?”

“It’s...all right, Ryan,” Lavie said with a laugh, as he rushed over to her, removing a small piece of metal from above her left collar-bone. “It’s just like one of those stupid Beelzebubs we fought in Blackwater Park.”

“Let me try,” Henrik said, charging forward. “Shield the rest of them, Bernadette!” As she raised a pale hand, he rushed forward, thrusting with his sword at the figurine of the man. It was chipped by the force of the blow, but remained unyielding. Ryan fired at it with the Sword of Regret, but once again, the blow was deflected back at him, and he dodged it with alarm.

“Ryan!” Lavie exclaimed, as she wiped away a trail of blood from his face.

“It’s nothing, Lavie,” Ryan said, grimacing. “Aline’s shell did its work too well, that’s all.”

Carranya fired beams of light at all three figures, but they were stopped short in mid-air, as if by an invisible barrier.

“No, listen! The beast is the key! It’s controlling the others! The man and the woman must defeat the beast! Bernadette, Henrik! Only you can do it!” Lavie said, frantically, as Striker helped her dodge another projectile.

“Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette said, rising and leaning against Henrik for support, “I shall try. Stay with me, Henrik. Let us defeat it together!”

Still holding her hand, Henrik struck at the beast with his sword. It split neatly into two, and a tongue of fire flashed forth, striking Bernadette in the face and bringing her to her knees. Carranya rushed forward to cast a shield around her, but the damage was done.

“Bernadette, *no!*” Henrik cried, rushing to shield her with his own body.

“Henrik...” she said, faintly. “Don’t be afraid, Henrik. It is broken.....and it can be defeated.” The device at her belt glowed a deep blue, and a wall of water surrounded the figurine. It began to dissolve before their eyes, as if it were made of clay, and the figures of the man and the woman were still, no longer spitting their balls of fire.

“Bernadette...” Henrik said, sadly, cradling her head in his hands as she fell backwards.

“I...can still see you, dear Henrik,” she said, smiling at him. “One of my eyes....is in darkness, but the other is in the light. Don’t be....afraid, Henrik. We have defeated the beast.”

So stricken were they – except for Juno – that they did not notice that a passage had opened before them, whose walls glowed red and green.

“Forgive me, Bernadette,” Henrik said, as she struggled to stand, her friends all rushing to support her. “I....”

Bernadette stood up and smiled. The corner of her left eye was burned, and stood out against her face, an angry red welt, but the eyes that met Henrik’s guilty glance were as blue as they had ever been.

“I think the flash has – blinded me temporarily, Henrik,” she said, “but I am quite all right. The dream was false. I can see.”

“Thank the Infinity,” Henrik said, wrapping his arms around her, as tears came to his own eyes. “Oh, thank Him.”

“If you have finished with the melodrama,” Juno said, with a disapproving glance at Bernadette, “we must proceed. Spenson, I expected better from you.”

“Mr. Juno! That’s just mean!” Aline protested.

“Just shut up, Juno!” Lavie added. “Bernadette could have been blinded or even killed by that flame! How can you say that?”

“We are here to fight Samath, Miss Regale,” Juno said, implacably. “Do not be distracted from that objective.”

“Juno, Lavie’s right,” Ryan said, drawing his sword. “Just shut up. Bernadette,” he went on, gently, “can you go on? Do you want to rest a little?”

“I’m all right, Ryan,” Bernadette said, firmly. “I have faced the flames, but they did not consume me. Let us go ahead.”

They stepped forward, and suddenly, they felt everything spin around them. The red and green lights faded to black, and when they could see again, they stared, aghast, and what stood before them.

“Welcome, my friends,” the man in the red cloak said. “I have been waiting for you for a long time.”

“The shield around the Warp Cannon has fallen, Baldur!” Thora said, lowering her wand and looking at him with excitement. “Let us destroy it!”

“You and I seldom agree on anything, sister,” Baldur said, aiming his bludgeon-wand at the device and grinning, “but this is one of those times. Let your wind direct my fire.”

“It shall be as you say, brother,” Thora said, smiling back.

As Thora and the other wind mages directed their wands at the device, a stream of fire issued from the end of Baldur’s club. The wind directed it in a narrow beam, and as it struck the Warp Cannon, it began to glow red, and then its surface began to fissure.

“Good work, Thora,” an older mage said. “It can’t be used for anything, now.”

There was a loud sound, and then the device glowed blue briefly, before starting to fall to pieces.

“Hurray!” Baldur exclaimed, raising his wand. “Now, let us go and help Mother!”

“Baldur, is that wise?” Thora said with alarm.

“Stay here if you will, sister,” he replied, “but Father charged me to protect her, and I intend to keep my promise – to Hidoki Raienji, the leader of the mages of Zion. Is there anyone who wishes to come with me? Our task is finished here.”

“You are right, brother,” Thora said, smiling at the mention of her father’s name, as she followed him into a crevice behind the Cannon. “Let us assist her, and hope that the Commonwealth Senate is unharmed.”

The group stood, frozen in their places – Juno in front of them all, Ryan and Lavie together, Bernadette standing with Henrik’s support, Striker covering Carranya, and Aline peeping out nervously behind him.

“You do not speak, I see,” he replied, removing the hood of his cloak, revealing a youthful, unlined face, deep blue eyes, and short fair hair. “Perhaps looking at me would make things clearer.”

“Samath?” Ryan said, stunned by the resemblance to pictures he had seen in books of lore.

“Not the fool who perished at Korothe, Mr. Eramond,” he said, “but his successor. A being infinitely more powerful than he was. I share no tie of blood with him, but we are the sons of the Third Way. I am glad of your company. Come, let us discuss things as civilized men do.”

“You....you demon!” Lavie exclaimed. “We’re not here to discuss things, we’re here to take you down!”

“How brave,” Samath replied, with a yawn. “I must confess that I am disappointed that you could not assemble the six of the prophecy, but the presence of three additional souls should satisfy my master. Of course, it was inevitable, considering that we killed one of them long ago. Look around you, my friends, and decide whether you still wish to remain.”

Ryan, dazed, drew his sword and looked around. The red-cloaked man had just risen from a simple chair, which, though gilded, could not be called a throne. Beside him was a large device, about the length of a

sword but thicker and more cylindrical. A single window behind him allowed the light of the rising sun to enter the room, and standing on a glass stand, atop a velvet cushion, was a sword that looked just like his.

“What do you want to discuss?” he said.

Ryan, this time, it is up to you and your companion, the voice said, though only he could hear it. There is one more trial beyond, but it is not you who will face it. Do not fear.

“Oh, several things, son of Kevin,” Samath replied, casually. “First, look at the sword in front of you. You may pick it up if you will, but it will not obey you.”

Juno reached out for the sword, but found that he could not grasp it – it was as if its handle was surrounded by layers of thick but invisible metal.

“That, my friends,” Samath went on, “is the Harvester of Souls. It has absorbed the aura of every man who has died at the hands of the Third Way. As you might already have guessed, it is projecting a shield around this island that is now impenetrable. And if I call you friends, it is because you have helped me.”

“Helped you?” Striker said, amused. “What do you mean, my good man?”

“Address me with respect, please,” Samath said, in a dignified tone. “But I shall answer your question. Every time you or your forces killed one of my men, the Harvester absorbed their auras, and the shield has now grown in power and in beauty. Look out of the window, my friend.

Bernadette leaned forward, looking with her good eye, and stepped back in shock. The sunrise could be seen no longer, and everything outside was a blinding glow of red and green.

“It will blind anyone who attempts to draw near, girl,” Samath said, “and it will reflect anything, including a cannonball. If I am not mistaken, the Commonwealth Navy is very near, but even they can do nothing.”

“What good would that do you?” Henrik said, angrily. “Even if you stay here behind a shield, and trap us here, the rest of Terra will endure. The Church of the Infinity will endure. Galvenia will endure.”

“Poor Mr. Spenson, I see your education at King’s College has left out many things,” Samath replied.

“Did you seriously think that, by defeating my five weak allies, you were doing a brave deed? Their deaths have only strengthened the Harvester further, for their souls were bound to it by a blood oath. Before they died, they planted devices similar to the Harvester, made from the El Metal, in all the five nations of Terra. They are well-concealed, and you cannot find them. When the shield is strong enough, it will encompass all of Terra, spreading its curse over both body and mind. Men and women will sicken and die. Others will be driven to madness. Weapons shall fall useless at the sides of the warriors wielding them. On that day, they will cry out in mercy – even the Church of the Infinity, our most implacable foes, shall weep like a feeble child – and I shall be their ruler. No, not merely their ruler. I

shall be their God, and they will be my people. All of them. They will hand themselves over to me, and the Lord of the Pits shall reign over Terra, as it was in the days of Janwen.”

“What if I destroy your sword?” Juno said calmly, while the others stared in horror, unable to believe what they had just heard.

“You cannot, since the prophecy will never be fulfilled,” Samath said, calmly. “I know what you dream of, boy, but you are not the one. Neither is it the son of Kevin. The one who would lead you to victory lies in a grave in Caledonia, while the Empire mourns for him.”

“Fr – Prince Wilhelm?” Carranya said, hanging her head in despair.

“You are a clever woman, dear Beloved. Your lover, Wilhelm, was the one. Now listen to me. None of you need die a futile and painful death. I have never killed a man myself – ever since Samath died, consumed by his foolish envy of Kaleb, it has been a tradition of the Third Way that none of us should ever take a life with our own hands. My five allies are all fallen, but you can replace them, if you so wish.”

“You’re crazy,” Lavie said, her eyes turning a bright red. “You’re *nuts*, if you think we’d ever want to work with you! You’ve killed innocent people, started wars, hurt the ones we love.....”

“My dear girl, your indignation is commendable, but misplaced. I did not do any of those things. I merely found men and women who were willing to do evil deeds, and I directed them to my own purpose. Do not think of me as some sort of demon, Miss Regale. The true demons lie within our own hearts. Sheffield, Gray, Lyzhnov, Chuselwock – these are the ones you should blame, not me.”

“Excuses, excuses!” Aline said, her eyes flashing. “You are a very, very, *very* wicked boy! The Infinity will punish you!”

“Samath,” Bernadette said, softly, “I can sense the great evil that lies in you. But listen to me. Perhaps what you say is true, but the evil of others cannot absolve our own guilt. Is there nothing in you that is still human? Do you not yearn, at times, for forgiveness? Do you feel a call to repent?”

At these words, Samath’s entire expression changed, and he screamed in wordless fury. With a swift movement, he raised the cylinder that stood at his side, and an intertwined beam of red and green flew out, striking Bernadette in her left leg. There was a sickening sound of splintering bones, and she fell to the ground, unable to rise, her face twisted with pain, a small pool of blood beneath her.

“*Murderer!* I’ll – kill you!” Henrik screamed, rushing forward desperately, and knocking the device from Samath’s hands. It fell to the ground, but as he raised his sword to strike again, he was thrown back against a wall, where he lay, stunned.

“Do *not* speak such words, girl,” Samath said, speaking calmly, “unless you wish to go through life crippled, blind, and barren. I can warn you once, but no more. Though I cannot kill, I can wound enough

to cause you and those you love to despair. Do not blaspheme in my presence again, for I never forgive such an offence.”

“Kill...him...” Henrik groaned, as Carranya rushed over to Bernadette, trying desperately to heal her.

Ryan drew the Sword of Regret and closed his eyes. A wall of blue surrounded Samath, and he fell back into his throne, a frown on his face.

“Bernadette...” Lavie said, tears streaming down her face, as she stared numbly at her fallen friend. Then she turned, and fired an arrow at the cylinder. It burst into flame, but remained intact, the flames remaining around it without its being consumed.

“Leave now,” Samath said, “unless you wish to accept my offer – or share the fate of your friend.”

“We will not,” Carranya said, looking him in the eye. “We will fight you with everything we have.”

“Oh, will you?” Samath said, sitting down on his chair with a smile on his face. “Then allow me to introduce my newest friends. Kanoi and Jedda, finish them!”

As Henrik struggled to rise, and Aline frantically tried to bandage the gaping, bleeding wound in Bernadette’s leg, two men entered the room. They carried similar cylinders to Samath’s, and moved stiffly, as if they were machines.

“Kanoi and Jedda, whom do you serve?” Samath said.

“The Third Way, master,” they replied, pleasantly.

“Excellent. These men...”

An arrow flew through the air, striking Jedda in the chest and felling him. As he collapsed, his weapon fired, and Striker pushed Carranya out of harm’s way.

Carranya aimed a beam of light at Jedda, and one of his arms began to crumble and turn into dust. But to her horror, new flesh and blood seemed to sprout in its place.

“Carranya, shield Bernadette and Henrik,” Ryan said, aiming the Sword of Regret at Kanoi. A blue beam struck him in the face, and his features seemed to melt and dissolve, but then reformed.

“More power, Eramond!” Striker hissed, firing a Flare Cartridge at Jedda, blinding him. Striker picked up his fallen weapon and fired it at Samath. Though it left him unscathed, the recoil knocked him out of his chair.

Ryan fired again with the Sword, and Lavie fired another arrow. Both of them struck Kanoi in the throat, and it began to turn to dust, but this time, it did not regrow.

“Man...and woman....Lavie, my sister...” Bernadette whispered.

“I understand!” Ryan said, remembering the sword’s words. “Lavie, it’s our turn this time! We have to take them down together!”

“You got it, Ryan,” Lavie said, readying her bow. “Aim for the throat and chest!”

They both fired in rapid succession, and Kanoi’s chest soon turned into powder. As Jedda approached them, drawing a knife, Striker shot him with another Flash Cartridge, and he clutched at his eyes and groaned.

“Bernadette, please, please...” Carranya said, sadly, as she and Aline, concealed within a shield, tried their best to heal her wounds. Bernadette stirred and smiled, then lost consciousness.

“I’ll...Bernadette!” Lavie exclaimed. “You are so dead, both of you!” She fired three arrows in rapid succession at Kanoi, which were followed by a second beam from Ryan’s sword, and Kanoi fell, his entire body crumbling into ashes.

“Jedda’s regrouping!” Striker said, aiming at him again. But before he could pull the trigger, Juno fired a beam from his own sword, disarming him.

“Juno, you’ve asked for it this time!” Henrik said, disarming Juno with a swift thrust and pushing him into a corner. “What are you doing?”

“Attend to your woman, Spenson, and leave me alone,” Juno said, leaning down to pick up his sword. Jedda advanced on Lavie, his hand reaching for her throat.

“Never!” Ryan exclaimed, closing his eyes and aiming the sword at Jedda’s hand, which was inches from her neck. “Lavie, fall back and shoot the hand!”

Jedda’s hand began to crumble, and Lavie, a look of fury in her eyes, fired arrow after arrow at him. Striker took advantage of Samath’s stunned state to purloin his weapon, and Ryan fired a final beam at Jedda, who fell dead, turning into fine dust, like the sands of the Republican desert.

Lavie stood, panting, looking at the two fallen men, as Ryan walked over to her. “Your allies aren’t much good, Samath,” Ryan said, calmly, as she leaned against him.

“Why, thank you, Mr. Eramond,” Samath said, coolly. “Your bravery, though commendable, has only served to strengthen my shield. Kanoi and Jedda’s deaths have set the process in motion. Soon my Shield of Souls will cover the Zion Empire, and then the whole of Terra. And you cannot reach me, not as long as the Harvester exists. You may stay and watch, if you wish.”

“I may not be able to take you, Samath,” Juno said, coldly, “but at least I can take one of the traitors who serve you with me. Prepare to meet your Master, Striker.”

“You are insane, Juno,” Striker said, calmly, as he rose to his feet, from where he had been kneeling besides the Princess, Aline and Bernadette. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I know something you do not,” Juno said. “You see, being the son of a true hero, I have access to information, Striker – information about who does, and does not, belong to Zion Intelligence. There is no official record of a William or Wolfgang Striker in any of the Intelligence Division’s archives. You are an impostor and a traitor, like Kodenai and Lugner, and you will die knowing that I exposed you.”

“A pretty story,” Striker said, with a smile. “Did Samath tell you this, or was it some disgruntled former Intelligence employee?”

“It does not matter how I have learned this, Striker. What is true, is true. Now die, like the traitor that you are.”

“The hell he will, Juno!” Ryan said angrily, drawing his sword. Both men launched an attack simultaneously, and the two beams met, locking into a blue knot just inches before Striker’s face. They stood frozen, unable to break the deadlock, or to let go of their swords.

“What – is happening?” Lavie said, shaking her head.

“Two Swords of Justice have met, Lavie,” Carranya said, sadly. “I have heard of such things in legends. Both Ryan and Juno are speaking the truth.”

“How is that...possible, Princess?” Bernadette said, raising herself on one knee, as Henrik stood guard over her.

“Oh, by all means, continue,” Samath said with a laugh. “Nothing is more entertaining to me than to watch so-called heroes devour themselves.”

“I will explain,” Striker said, with an expression quite unlike the one he had worn before. “The prophecy is fulfilled at last. The grieving maiden will become the happy mother of a son.”

“Agent Striker!” Carranya cried out. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that your journey is at an end, Carranya,” he said. “Flower of Lorean, come forward, for you need mourn no longer.”

Carranya flushed, and a tear came to her eye. “What – what does this all mean? I have dreamed of hearing these words, but....how can it be?”

Samath laughed and pointed at Striker. “Exactly, young fool. Stop play-acting.”

They all stood in their places – Striker holding out his hand to the Princess, Carranya frozen, Ryan and Juno locked through their swords in a knot that neither could break – while Samath continued to laugh.

Ryan, a woman's heart holds the key. She can see the truth that neither of you can.

"Lavie, help me!" he said, desperately. "Juno and I are both convinced of our truths, but you have a better truth within you! Tell me what it is!"

Lavie stared with amazement at Carranya, then at Striker, and then she understood.

An extraordinary force. People can change. Love without limits.

The sixth candle. Renaud and magic. The photograph. Carranya.

"Carranya!" Lavie cried out, with a smile on her face. "Ryan, Carranya! He isn't an agent at all! I don't know how it could possibly be, but I just *know!* He's the one you love, Carranya! He is..."

"Sweet Infinity!" Carranya's entire expression changed – it was as if she were no longer a confused girl of nineteen, but a legendary queen of ages gone past. "I understand!" She rushed towards Agent Striker, and as she moved into his arms, the room began to quake.

"Wh – what is this madness?" Samath said.

All at once, the blue beam that was knotted between Ryan and Juno gave way, and recoiled upon the latter. He fell to the ground with a shout of pain, disarmed and wounded.

However, none, not even Ryan, saw it, for their eyes were upon Agent Striker. He stood there, holding the Princess close to him, but it was not Agent Striker who stood there. It was a young man, with delicate features and fair hair, and a determined look to his mouth and chin.

"Prince....Wilhelm?" Samath said, tottering.

"Indeed, my friend," Wilhelm said, taking a step forward. "It seems you were misinformed. You killed my poor friend, my obedient cousin, a true son of the Lionhearts and the Valtemonds, who agreed to take my place so that I could be secure – and so that I could defeat you at last, you poor, misguided son of the Pits. I claim Carranya as my own, and I claim victory over you. The prophecy has been fulfilled. His last words were true, Samath. The sword shall never triumph over the spirit."

"I do not understand...." Samath said, then attempted to recover. "The Harvester still remains, you fool! It is immeasurably more powerful than any of your spirits, Prince Wilhelm! It shall defeat you yet!"

"Francis, take my hand," Carranya said, looking at him with an immeasurable love in her eyes. "I have understood, at last. My destiny, and my sacrifice. You will help me."

"I know, and I will, Carranya. Don't be afraid," Wilhelm replied, as he held one of her hands in both his own. "We will rebuild our castle, and make it stronger than it ever was."

“Then watch as you are undone, Samath,” Carranya said, raising the sword. “Prince Derren and Lady Penelope, look down on us!”

“Carranya, *no!*” Lavie cried, as the Princess, in a swift motion, thrust the Harvester of Souls into her own breast.

“What is this?” Samath screamed, as there was a sound of metal breaking. The Sword had shattered itself against the Princess’ heart – the extraordinary force that its conjurations could not encompass – and now lay on the ground, broken in two, a thing of metal that no longer held any terrors. There was a sound in the room, as if hundreds or thousands of men were all shouting in joy, and then there was a stillness – there were only Carranya and Wilhelm, facing Samath, hand in hand.

“You ought to have understood from the beginning, Samath,” Carranya said, steadily. “Man alone cannot defeat an evil such as the Harvester of Souls. Neither can woman. But my friend Bernadette spoke the truth, and Lavie perceived it, though I was slow and faithless. Man and woman, together, have defeated the Beast. Return to where you came from, Samath.”

“The truth,” Bernadette whispered, the ghost of a smile on her lips as she clung to Henrik. “And it was right before my eyes, all the time.”

“The – the Harvester,” Samath said, helplessly, tearing at his hair.

“Listen, Samath,” Wilhelm said, as he flung the window open. “Listen as the last of your men are cut down by my mage battalions, and as the Senators are freed from their prison. You may have killed some of them, but the Commonwealth is greater than your designs. Saint Geraud has confounded you. There is no more Harvester, no more Third Way.”

“Allow me to do the final honours,” Ryan said, aiming the Sword of Regret at him. “Kaleb and Kevin, you are avenged at last.”

“Ryan, wait...” Bernadette said, between clenched teeth. “Give him one last chance....to repent...”

Samath howled and covered his ears, and flung himself on Ryan, who fired instinctively as he moved out of the way. A beam of blue shot forth, and Samath began to crumble into dust, which glowed red briefly, then slowly vanished, leaving behind no trace.

“Where...did he go?” Aline said. “That wicked Samath! Not only does he hurt my friends, he violates the laws of nature as well!”

“Oh, Carranya,” Lavie said, rushing to her friend, tears of joy in her eyes. “I wasn’t sure until the last moment myself – I – I’m so happy for you, Carranya, for both of you.”

“I – I cannot believe what I have just seen,” Ryan said, lowering his sword, as he looked at the place where Samath had stood, moments ago.

“Thank you, Lavie, and thank you, Ryan Eramond.” Prince Wilhelm said. “You were true friends and comforts to Carranya when she needed you most, and you gave her hope. Without that, all my plans would have been futile.”

“Francis,” Carranya said, softly. “I still can’t believe that – it’s you...Oh, Francis...”

“Wait a minute, where’s Mr. Juno?” Aline said.

“He must’ve slunk away after your sword hit him, Ryan,” Henrik said, shaking his head. “He could have gone anywhere. This is a big castle. Oh, Bernadette...”

“I am well, dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, softly, as he lifted her up in his arms. “The Princess is safe, the Prince has been restored to us, and Samath is gone. And – you are still with me, Henrik,” she said, with a gentle smile. “Do not weep for my wounds, for I am content.”

“That’s...just lovely, Miss Bernadette,” Aline said, removing her glasses and wiping her eyes. “And – oh, look! Isn’t that cute, Miss Lavie?”

“Aline!” Lavie said sternly, looking at the Prince and Carranya as they kissed. “You’re supposed to respect their privacy, or something!”

“Let us return, now,” Prince Wilhelm said, as he and Carranya drew apart, not without reluctance. “We must greet our brave men, and tell them that all is well. Mr. Eramond, would you all do me the honour of accompanying me?”

“Sure thing, Your Highness,” Ryan said with a smile, bowing and sheathing his sword. He took Lavie’s hand, and they walked behind the Prince and the Princess as they passed through the now empty corridors, descending the stairs, and emerging into the light of day.

“The shield has fallen!” Armin said, leaping in the air and taking the first steps of a victory-dance. “Look, Burnfist! It looks as if Ryan and company have done it!”

“Flaming lands!” Burnfist said, as the red glow within which they were trapped disappeared, and Commonwealth ships began to land on the shore. “How on Terra did they...”

“We’ve won, this time!” Armin said, and before the Captain could realize what was happening, he had waltzed up and planted a resounding kiss on her, causing the Mage Battalion to burst out laughing. Burnfist flushed, then turned red with anger.

“What in the Pits do you think you’re doing, raccoon boy?” she said, raising her fist menacingly.

“Celebrating, my dear Caris, celebrating!” Armin said, throwing his arms up. “Hey, look, it’s the red-headed guys!”

Burnfist blushed again. "I pray to the Infinity that she did not see that, Tamas, or I shall punch you so hard that you will fly to the stars."

"Aw, you're cute when you're angry, Burnfist," Armin said, as he and the rest of the men moved towards Colonel Raienji.

"Mission accomplished, Burnfist," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm still not sure what happened, but Agent Striker and my foolish husband certainly had something to do with it."

"Agent Striker?" Burnfist said, with a scowl. "And your tame college professor back home? What are you talking about? Did one of Samath's men hit you on the head and make you stupid, or something?"

"Hey, that's my line, Burnfist," Armin protested.

"You stole a kiss, she stole your lines, son," Freya said, laughing into her sleeve. "I guess you're even."

"Shut up, Freya," Burnfist said, angrily. "He was out of line there!"

"Armin Tamas and the straight and narrow just don't get along, red-haired mage," he said, with a wink.

Freya laughed. "You two are the *cutest* couple ever, do you know that? You really ought to settle down in a home of your own, Rebecca. It'll make a woman out of you."

Armin sniggered. "Hey, lady, how come you're on my side?" he said, with a wink.

"Oh, it's just Army hazing, son," Freya replied, as Burnfist turned an even brighter red. "Now come along, Caris, and stop imitating a beetroot. We've got Senators to tend to before our ruler arrives."

"Our *ruler*? Is the Emperor coming here?" Burnfist said, shocked.

"Oh, not him. He's too old. Someone much younger, and someone you know well. Come along, now!"

And, led by Armin who was singing an old Galvenian marching song, the Zion soldiers marched into Unity Castle, where they were greeted at the door by Princess Carranya – and Prince Wilhelm.

"P – Prince Wilhelm? Your Highness?" Rebecca said, incredulously, as she felt her head whirl. "How could you possibly..."

"Oh, come on in, Burnfist," the Prince replied, casually, as Carranya began to laugh. "We have a lot on our hands. Just don't pull a sword on me like you did on the *Paradiso*, though!"

Captain Burnfist, for once in her short life, was speechless.

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE ROAD HOME

*“Look, I am beckoning to the nations
and hoisting a signal to the peoples:
they will bring your sons in their arms
and your daughters will be carried
on their shoulders.”
(Isaiah, ch. 49, v. 22)*

“How is she, Doctor?” Henrik whispered. Though he was a brave man, he found it hard to witness the sufferings of others, and though Bernadette tried her best not to complain, her cries had shaken him and left him white-faced and sleepless, as the doctors worked hard to repair her wounds.

“Can’t you give her anything for the pain?” he had asked, as they were finishing.

“Son, that would be too dangerous,” one of the surgeons had said, shaking his head. “She’s lost too much blood. If we tried to knock her out, she might collapse and never wake up.”

“And her leg?”

“You can never tell with these magical attacks,” another doctor, older and kinder, had said, when the operation was over. “There’s an inch or so missing, but we’ve fixed everything that remains quite well. She’ll walk, of course, but there’ll always be a limp, if you’re particular about such things. Would you be her brother?”

“Not her brother,” Henrik said, “but I hope to make her my wife someday. Thank the Infinity that she is safe now.”

“Oh, do you?” the doctor said, with a smile. “Well, just take good care of her then, son, and make sure that she’s happy. She seems a brave, healthy girl.”

“I will,” Henrik said, shaking his hand with gratitude.

Soon the doctors left, leaving Henrik at her bedside. A few moments later, the door swung open, and Lavie entered.

“How is she, Henrik?” she said softly, as she sat down beside him.

“She’ll be all right, thank all the saints and angels,” Henrik said, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, “though the doctor did say that one of her legs would be shorter than the other.”

“You’ll just have to support her, then,” Lavie said, smiling through the tears in her eyes. “Poor Bernadette. She’s the bravest of us all, Henrik, she truly is.”

“You can say that again, Lavie,” Henrik said, looking at her face. “The surgeons said that even Army veterans would have yelled and roared at what she’d gone through, but she took it....so quietly. I....don’t know what to do now, really.”

“What do you mean, Henrik?” Lavie asked, surprised.

“I took her along on this mission, and I couldn’t protect her,” Henrik said, sadly. “Now she’s been wounded twice, and it’s – my fault. I ought to have been out in front, keeping her safe, but that fiend Samath was too quick...”

Lavie stared at Henrik for a moment, then laughed.

“What is so funny, Lavie?” Henrik said, a little annoyed.

“Henrik Spenson,” Lavie said, seriously, “listen to me. I’ve already been through this with Ryan. You and Bernadette were the ones who talked him out of all that, remember? Are all you guys that clueless?”

“Hey, I’m not clueless,” Henrik said, indignantly. “Well, certainly not as clueless as *Ryan!*”

“Then prove it, Henrik,” Lavie said, in a firm tone. “Look, you tried your best to protect her, but you’re not the *Infinity*, remember? Even Prince Wilhelm couldn’t protect Carranya all the time. Bernadette’s bound to be in pain for a while, and she’ll take time to get better. Don’t you *dare* make things worse for her by developing some sort of guilt complex and walking out on her, okay? She needs you right where you are – by her side. Don’t forget that, buster.”

Henrik frowned, and was about to formulate an angry retort, but paused. “You know, there may just be something to what you say, Lavie,” he said, breaking into a smile. “Where *did* you learn all this this stuff, anyway?”

“Oh, we girls have our secrets,” Lavie said, with a smile, “especially when we’ve been wounded war heroines ourselves.”

“Lavie?” Bernadette stirred, and opened her eyes. “Is that you, my sister?”

“Yes, Bernadette,” Lavie said, cheerfully. “I was just giving Henrik a lecture about how to treat you.”

“Were you, Lavie?” She laughed. “Dear me, I can see that we’re going to have some very interesting times ahead, aren’t we, dear Henrik?”

“We sure are, my love,” Henrik replied, laughing as well. “Just don’t expect me to take everything that Lavie says too seriously, though. I’m not Kanoi or Jedda!”

“Very funny, buster,” Lavie said, looking at him with mock annoyance. “You’re almost as funny as Ryan.”

“You lied to me,” Juno said, as he slowly made his way down to the beach.

I did not lie, Juno, but I did not know the whole truth. The Princess loved that man, but he was concealed. It was a conjuration so powerful that it seemed like deceit to me. Like you, I am not the Infinity. Many things are veiled from us in this life, Juno, that we will only know in the next.

“And what now?” he said, shaking his head. “The adventure is over. Makarov Juno is not a hero, but a fool, marooned on Unity Isle until the Zion troops pick him up. What is left for me?”

The rest of your life, Juno.

“Do not make fun of me,” Juno retorted, angrily.

Look ahead of you, and you will find reason to hope. Then walk to the shoreline, and you will find your way home.

“Home?” he said, and as he turned, he saw Aline running towards him, followed by Henrik.

“Mr. Juno!” Aline said, waving excitedly. “We’re so glad to have found you. We thought you’d already left!”

“Spare me,” Juno said, sarcastically. “How could I possibly leave?”

“That’s what we were wondering, Makarov,” Henrik said, kindly. “Look, Bernadette’s having her dressing changed, and Lavie and Carranya are looking after her. She asked me to look for you, Juno.”

“The Princess?” Juno said, surprised.

“No, Bernadette,” Henrik replied. “Juno, if you want, you can come and stay with us. After all, you did help us defeat Samath, though you got a lot of things wrong. We’ll explain things to Prince Wilhelm, and as long as you and Ryan don’t get into fights, it shouldn’t be a problem. And after that, come home. Bernadette believes that you are a good man, and that you deserve another chance.”

“No, Spenson,” Juno replied. “Davenport is no longer a home for me. If I have failed here, it is part of the Wanderer’s code that I must make amends. I must return to my master, tell him the whole tale, and then wander once more, until I find a worthy task.”

“That’s all very well, Mr. Juno,” Aline said, sternly, “but what about your poor mother? Miss Bernadette says she’s a very nice lady, and very lonely. What would she do without you?”

“Mother?” A softer expression came over Juno’s face for a second, then it hardened again. “Spenson, I must leave now. My boat is probably still on the shore, if it has not been destroyed. I must go to the Republic, and see Fossen. Promise me one thing.”

“What is it, Makarov?” Henrik said, gently.

“Spenson, you and that girl are the only truly good people I have met in my short life – except for Mother and Fossen, of course. Mankind is selfish. Samath spoke the truth, though he was a monster. It is not the demons that we have to fear the most, but our own wicked desires. Someday, not too far in the future, another war will break out – a war where there are no demons or mages involved, but just brothers fighting each other, man against man and nation against nation. It will be the highest folly and the highest wickedness that Terra has known, Spenson, and it may mean the ruin of your precious Commonwealth. But the two of you will emerge unscathed.”

“How do you know this?” Henrik whispered.

“I know it, and that is all,” Juno replied. “Promise me, Spenson, that you and Bernadette will look after my mother, when you return to Davenport. I do not know when I will see her again, but I wish her to remain in good hands, for my sake and for my father’s. Promise me this.”

“We will, Makarov,” Henrik said. “We’ll make sure that she’s all right.”

“And you can always call on Aunt Aline when you’re in trouble, Mr. Juno!” Aline said, beaming at him. “You’re one of the bravest persons I’ve ever met! I don’t know much about being a Wanderer, but I’m sure you’ll have a long and interesting life! Fare you well, Mr. Juno. I’ll ask the Five Angels to make sure you get to the Republic safely.”

Juno smiled for a second, then looked ahead at the setting sun. “Goodbye, Spenson, and goodbye, Miss Sheldon. Perhaps we will all meet again, someday.”

He turned and left, walking down to the coastline, without turning back.

“I owe you all an explanation, my friends,” Prince Wilhelm said, as he sat, with Carranya at his side, in the lounge of the Commonwealth Council. Around him were Ryan and Lavie, Henrik and Bernadette – who was in a wheelchair – and Aline, as well as Commander Arnoldus, Armin, Captain Burnfist, and Colonel Raienji with her children. Ryan found it hard to believe that the man he knew as Agent Striker would never be among them again, at least not in that guise. It was as if their lives had been divided into two parts, with the first part ending at the moment that Carranya had rushed, weeping with joy, into the Prince’s arms.

“Gee, Wolfie,” Armin said, “I sort of preferred the old look, actually. Did the Princess make you get a makeover and a haircut, or something?”

Wilhelm laughed. “Your sense of humour will be the death of me, Armin,” he replied. “Now I must ask you to bear with me, for my tale is a long one. Carranya has already heard it, for she, of any man or woman alive, has the right to, after all she has endured. But I am sure that in years to come, if this story has not been forgotten, it will be mired in legend. For all I know, I may go down in future history as Wilhelm the Shapeshifter.” He smiled at Lavie, who was looking at him with an amused expression.

“And are you truly a shapeshifter?” Arnoldus asked, incredulously.

“Not at all, Commander,” Wilhelm replied. “What Hidoki Raienji and I attempted was a simple enough conjuration, though there were added complications. You see, according to the laws of magic, it is extremely difficult to change one’s appearance, without resorting to demonic assistance.”

“Yes, Father Marlborough explained that to me,” said Lavie.

Wilhelm smiled. “He has given me many sleepless nights, my dear Lavie,” he said. “From the moment he landed at Caledonia, I was worried that he would stumble upon the truth, though in the end, it was you who did.”

“Well, he did help me a lot!” Lavie admitted. “Besides, the original insight was Bernadette’s.”

“And it was quite fitting that you did, Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette replied, affectionately.

“I’m still not clear about one thing, Prince Wilhelm,” Ryan said. “Who was it who died on the *Paradiso*?”

“I see I shall have to start at the beginning,” he replied. “This story began for me twelve years ago, when I was a boy of eleven. That was the first time I learned more about a place that, until then, was just a name on a map that I memorized for my teachers – a place called Darington.”

“Uh oh,” Armin muttered. “I don’t like where this is going, Wolfie.”

“Behave yourself in front of the Prince!” Burnfist hissed.

“Don’t worry, Armin,” Wilhelm said, with a laugh. “I think you’ll like the ending to this story. Until then, Darington was just a part of the Zion Empire to me, a place I’d rule over some day. But at eleven, I had a Galvenian tutor – I refer, of course, to Marlborough. He never discussed politics with me, but learning from him made me curious to know more about his country and its history.”

Carranya said nothing, but smiled as he took her hand in his.

“As you will probably understand, I had to carry out these studies in secret – Galvenian history is not very popular in the Empire – but fortunately, I had another mentor who helped me with them.”

“Hidoki was always a romantic,” Freya observed, with a laugh. “When the Emperors ordered him to keep his identity as the leader of the Mages’ Guild secret, he found it quite amusing to construct a parallel career as a teacher of history – until he found himself falling in love with his new subject.”

“Through Professor Raienji,” Wilhelm went on, “I learned the truth about Darington, including the machinations between Galvenian traitors and Zion Intelligence which led to Arlbert’s final surrender. As an admirer of Lord Geraud, I was indignant. More than anything else, my heart went out to the child who was almost left motherless as a result of their intrigues, and who would, perhaps, have to live with that knowledge for the rest of her life. I felt that when I became Emperor, I would somehow be the one

to comfort her, to apologize for what they had done. And then one day, when I accompanied Marlborough on a trip to his beloved Galvenia, I saw her.”

“I am not as romantic as Hidoki, or even as Miss Regale, but – somehow – from the moment I first set my eyes upon her, I knew. I knew that this girl’s fate and mine would be linked somehow, and that we would set right the sins and failings of our fathers. And then I met her, and spoke to her. I am not a mage, and with one exception, I have never made use of a conjuration myself, but I believe that, on that evening, there was a different kind of magic at play – a human magic, the magic of one soul reaching out to find what it had, unknowingly, been seeking all along.”

“Francis,” Carranya said, affectionately, “you aren’t fooling anyone. Hidoki Raienji and Lavie haven’t got a thing on you, when it comes to romanticism!”

“I knew who she was at once, though I did not want to reveal myself so soon – especially since relations between our countries were only beginning to mend. Sitting there on the beach, by Carranya’s side, I was doubly sure that she would be the one to save our nations. It was a wonderful dream, even if it ended in a nightmare for you, Carranya. I only wish it had been I, and not Renaud, who had chastised Trask for his brutality, though he did it at my prompting.”

“Aw, that’s sweet!” Lavie said, looking at the blush on the Princess’ face. “Prince Wilhelm, you’d better skip over this part of the story, or Carranya’ll turn as red as Captain Burnfist’s armour!”

“How amusing, Lavie,” Wilhelm replied. “It was a little later – when I turned thirteen – that, having reached the age of wisdom, by Zion tradition, I was allowed full access to the writings of Lord Geraud. It was in them that I discovered his vision of the Journeyman, and another prophecy, that none of you have heard until this day. None except the Zion Emperors have been allowed to read it. I know it by heart now – Infinity knows that it was the only thing that gave me hope, many a time in this last year – and I think you have all earned the right to hear it.”

The Prince closed his eyes, and went on: *“When three centuries have passed, the Evil will return once more, as it did at the last milestone. On that day, my descendant must join hands with the true descendant of the Lionhearts, and she will be the one to finally destroy it. But they cannot complete their task unless they draw on the bow and the sword, on the gracious heart and the restless Journeyman. Six shall rise, and the six Evil Ones shall fall. And then there shall only be Man and his God.”*

“I see,” Ryan said, with a smile. “Arctura must have received a distorted version of this prophecy, as we saw on the Memory Crystal. But what did your father think of it?”

“Father was terrified, Ryan,” Wilhelm continued. “I was the only son of his old age, and as the years went by, and the year C.Y. 300 drew nearer, he was frozen. But I was old enough to know my own mind by then – and, having had a chance to see Carranya again, I knew that my heart was not lying.”

“What does he mean by ‘the last milestone’, Prince Wilhelm?” Bernadette asked.

“Saint Geraud was referring Inderness, my brave Bernadette,” he replied. “There was an earlier prophecy that the Third Way would rise after a hundred and fifty years, but Friederich the Wise ignored it – and during that time, they grew powerful, inciting both the conflict at Inderness and the rebellion of the Lifter’s Guild in Itaria. After Inderness, even the most agnostic of the Zion Emperors has taken Lord Geraud’s visions more seriously.” He laughed. “About this time, I began to cultivate the friendship of Matthias Ferzen, the head of the Intelligence and Tactics Division. I know it is hard to conceive of an honourable man working in Intelligence, but he was genuinely repentant of what had happened at Darington – in fact, he led an almost monastic life. We began to plan for the upcoming crisis, secretly reforming the Mage Battalions under the guidance of Hidoki and Freya.”

“Geez, did you know all along, Raienji?” Armin protested. “You ought to have warned us, or something.”

“I’m afraid even we didn’t know what form their attack would take, Armin,” Freya said, kindly, “until about C.Y. 298, when the first reports began to come in from Itaria.”

“It all began with the Itarian news,” Wilhelm said. “At first, it seemed hardly worth our attention. We had long known that Itarian politics is torn between an ultra-conservative faction, a larger but less powerful group of liberals, and a Pontiff who tries uneasily to square the circle that they form. But the Itarians – especially Legrand – found evidence that the Third Way was infiltrating their ranks, and thanks to that brave man, Thomas Perrin, we had irrefutable proof.”

“Poor Thomas,” Henrik said. “God rest his soul. I suppose he saw one of the Memory Crystals.”

“Indeed he did, Mr. Spenson – a Crystal similar to the one you did, detailing the Third Way’s plans to obtain the Sword of Regret, and the outline of Arctura’s prophecy. He managed to send it to Itaria, and was able to warn Archbishop Elias to hide the Sword in time, but he was caught, and paid for it with his life, as you now know.”

“As the year 300 drew closer, we obtained more information about the Third Way’s scheme. They would assassinate the President-Elect of the Commonwealth – who was bound to be either Zionese or Varaldian – and then proceed to eliminate me before instigating the war. They did not know who the others mentioned by the prophecy were, except for Carranya – in fact, it took me a long time to find them myself. They were, of course, Eramond the Journeyman, Miss Regale the archer, Spenson the swordsman, and Bernadette, the gracious heart. It was all obvious in hindsight.”

“The Itarians were conducting their own investigations, since they also had a copy of Geraud’s prophecy in the secret archives of Itaria City. On the basis of passages from some of their saints’ writings – which I do not claim to understand very well – they had realized that the remaining four must be in Galvenia, and they sent word to their members there to begin the search. Sister Miriam had long suspected that it was Ryan and Henrik, and when she heard of their exploits in Trinden and Alton, she and her friend, Father Joaquim, were certain. They passed on the message to Marlborough, who, in the meantime, had selected Bernadette for her scholarship, and had his own suspicions about her.”

“I didn’t realize I was so suspicious, dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, with a smile.

“There remained the archer. I knew the legend of the Twin Huntresses, so I assumed that the archer would be a woman – and when you became Carranya’s friend and confidante, Lavie, I was quite certain that it was you. I felt a strong sympathy for you – both of us were in quite a similar position with regard to those we loved, though for quite different reasons. It was one of the main reasons why I decided to take the risk of travelling to Fulton to rescue Ryan.”

“Thank you, Prince Wilhelm,” Lavie replied, gently. “I suppose I also felt sorry for you, when I saw that photograph in my watch.”

“Ah, that almost gave the game away,” Wilhelm said, regretfully, as he flipped open his watch to reveal a picture of the Princess, smiling and excited. “I took it when I saw her for the last time, when I helped her board the *Paradiso*, though I was already in my disguise at Striker when that happened.”

“The man in the carriage?” Carranya’s eyes widened in surprise. “Was that you, Francis?”

“Yes, my princess,” he replied. “But I am getting ahead of my tale. As the day drew near, we realized that they would target either me or Carranya. The only way to throw them off the trail – to buy ourselves some time, and to lull them into a false sense of confidence – would be to make them believe that they had succeeded in killing me. Raienji and I agonized over it for a long time, until he spoke to me of a powerful conjuration that only he could bring about.”

“I have already told you that certain spells – such as the disguising of one’s appearance – are what are generally known as dark magic, or demonic magic. That is because they are deceitful in essence. But Raienji told me that it was at least theoretically possible for him to ‘disguise’ me using a spell. There were several catches to using it. First, it would work only once. Second, it was to all intents and purposes irreversible, *unless* it was bound two things. One of them was the fulfilment of Lord Geraud’s prophecy, and the other was love – the love of man and woman, which would defeat the Beast, as the Italian theologians had begun to realize.”

“How does that work, Mr. Striker?” Aline said, puzzled.

“I will tell you what Raienji told me, Aline,” Wilhelm replied. “He told me that, at certain rare moments in history, such a conjuration was not only permitted but encouraged by the Infinity, but it only happened if the fate of our world was at stake, and if the Way of Justice and the Way of Love could unite to change this fate for the better. He made his calculations, and finally decided that the thing was possible. The night after I met you at Lorean, Carranya, and held you for the first time in my life, Raienji performed the transformation.”

“Did you have any choice about your – new appearance, Your Highness?” Commander Arnoldus said, shaking his head and wondering if he had stumbled into one the fairy tales he enjoyed reading to Phemie, before putting her to bed.

“The changes could not be too far-reaching. Things like the shape of a face, the line of a jaw, the colour of one’s hair, the muscularity of one’s build – that was all that could be altered. Height, age, gender – all those had to remain the same, unless we had recourse to the demons, which we never would even consider. I wondered if it would be enough, but Raienji promised me that it would. So I became, so as to speak, a stereotype or a caricature – a Zion agent with an iron jaw. Raienji always had a sense of humour.”

“He was listening to *me* there, Prince Wilhelm,” Freya said with a laugh. “I told him that he had to make you as rugged as possible.”

“He did a good job, for sure,” Armin quipped. “A real man’s man, that’s our Wolfie.”

“Dear me, Armin,” Carranya said, placing her hand on the Prince’s shoulder and smiling, “you are probably right, in a sense.”

“There remained the question of my sudden disappearance. The hard part was, of course, convincing Father. He disliked the idea through and through, and believed that Geraud’s prophecy was quite fantastic, but he realized that he could not take a chance on me. I’m afraid we argued about the matter a good deal, though he was quite convinced after Koketsu’s death. Fortunately, for better or worse, I am surrounded by loyal friends. One of them was a cousin, a descendant of the Lionhearts named, by a curious twist of fate, Richard. Young Richard Lionheart was an actor, he idolized Prince Derren – and he happened to resemble me very closely. He had helped Ferzen on several missions, and he volunteered to impersonate me aboard the *Paradiso*, while I travelled incognito as Agent Striker. To lay the foundations carefully, he would occasionally accompany Ferzen in disguise, using the Striker persona, and through his contacts in the acting world, he also made arrangements for himself – or rather, me – to be taken aboard as part of his troupe.”

“I helped you stow away, Carranya, though I knew the crisis point was not yet reached, because I loved you, and believed in your cause. Had we reached Caledonia, I would have spoken to Renaud, and he would have opened doors for you; had you been arrested on the ship, I would have used my identity as Striker to negotiate your release. We knew, from information that the Itarians had given Ferzen, that an attempt would be made on my life during the journey, and it was fortunate that Carranya had, by then, met Eramond. He made my task infinitely simpler, though I must confess that I yearned to rush out and protect her myself.”

“I did not count on the Third Way using pirates, frankly. I assumed they would either travel on the ship in disguise, or simply sabotage the engines and warp aboard. They upset my plans, which were to preserve both Carranya and my unfortunate cousin, whom we would disguise, and then spread the word that he had been killed and thrown overboard. Unfortunately, when the pirates attacked, I was bound – *noblesse oblige* – to defend the lives of poor Tremfein and Naomi, as well as the child. Our men fought bravely, but unfortunately, I could not reach my cousin on time – he was already dead by the time I reached him. I then tried to find you, Carranya, but Eramond had already saved you by then, so I returned to the theatre, and waited. That was when when we all met for the first time. Burnfist, of

course, had only met Richard Lionheart when he was playing the Striker character in Ferzen's company, and had no suspicions of me. Very few were privy to the secret – Father, Professor Raienji, Ferzen and Freya were the only ones."

"And they never even told us, Your Highness," Baldur said, with a grin. "Truly, Mother, you are as secretive as Hayami of old."

"But why did Juno say that Striker didn't exist, if you and Richard Lionheart had built up a backstory for him?" Lavie asked.

"I think old Fossen may have suspected something," Wilhelm replied, "and besides, Juno must have met at least some Intelligence agents – or former ones – during his wanderings. Besides, Fossen was an Army man himself, and a respected one. The Wanderers are few, but they sometimes have access to resources that few of us can use. They are a fascinating breed, even if they swear allegiance to no one."

"Juno almost undid the plan at the last minute, didn't he?" Ryan said, shaking his head.

"Quite so, Ryan," Wilhelm said, a frown coming to his face. "Juno and his sword very nearly were my undoing. You must understand that, throughout my journey, I was constrained by the nature of the conjuration. It would only break if both the conditions Raienji mentioned were fulfilled, *simultaneously* – in other words, if the Third Way crisis had reached a decision point *and* if Carranya still loved me. If she had fallen in love with Agent Striker in the place of the man she knew as Francis, the spell would have behaved unpredictably; if she had rejected me at the crucial moment, it would have been even worse – the reverberations set up, according to Raienji, may have simply ended my life at that moment."

"Francis," Carranya said, reproachfully, "how could he have taken such a risk? That sword of Juno's – I don't know whose unfortunate soul was trapped within it, but it – lied to me. It accused you of being a deceiver. I – forgive me, Francis, but I doubted for a moment. I didn't know..."

"There is nothing to forgive, Carranya," Wilhelm said, placing his arm around her protectively. "I should be the one to ask for your forgiveness. When Juno attacked me, and then allowed his sword to speak to you, I doubted myself – and the rightness of my conduct – for the first time. I wondered if I had been foolish, and if the price of my folly would be to lose both you and the battle against Samath. Fortunately, Ryan's sword – and Lavie's feminine intuition – broke the deadlock."

"As for his sword," Bernadette added, a distant look on her face, "I have an idea of what it is. The legends of the First Generations speak of a young woman who was a sister – or a relation of some sort – of the Man of Regret, and who threw herself upon his sword, crazed, when she learned that her lover had been false to her. According to the Itarians, the Infinity had pity upon her, and made her the patroness of unhappy wives and maidens. There is one tradition that her soul was allowed to reside within a Sword of Justice, which could only be handled by a worthy man. Her name is Saint Laura, or Saint Lyrra. My own mother, Laurette, was named after a variant of her name."

"Lyrra? Hey, I remember Tremfein mentioning the name once," Lavie replied.

“But how could *Juno* be a worthy man? That’s just – dopey!” Armin protested.

“The worth of a man cannot be measured at one point in time, Armin,” Prince Wilhelm said, kindly. “It is the sum of a man’s life – what he believes in, but also what he does – that gives him worth in the eyes of the Infinity, from whom all such gifts come. Though *Juno* acted unworthily, he may have had good reasons, and there is no reason to believe that he could never do a good deed.”

“That’s right!” Aline said, nodding vigorously. “Mr. *Juno*’s a very brave boy! He saved me from bandits, and he also saved another lady, who was being hunted down in a convent! My sister, Rosemary, told me all about it! Sweet lands, he’s done plenty of good deeds!”

“I guess *Juno*’s one of those mysteries of Nature, Aline,” Henrik said, with a smile. “Even you’d be hard put to unravel what he’s up to, whether it’s good or evil.”

“I wonder where he is now,” Ryan said. “I hope he isn’t going to bother us again.”

“I don’t think that’s likely, Ryan,” Henrik said, and went on to narrate his encounter with *Juno* as he had headed for the coast.

“That insolent boy,” Burnfist fumed. “If he was still there, I’d make things hot for him!”

“Good riddance,” Lavie said, with a shudder. “To think, he wounded Prince Wilhelm...”

“Do not feel too sorry for me, Lavie – I honestly think I deserved it. The rest of my tale is quickly told. From the moment poor Richard died, until we reached Samath’s lair, I continued to work for the good of my five destined allies as much as I could. Henrik and Bernadette did not need much assistance, as they complemented each other from the start, and had the help of the Itarians as well. I tried to be with you, Carranya, whenever I could, and help you in any capacity whatever. I only wish I could have spared you the ordeal you and your parents underwent at Inderness. And” – he laughed softly – “I did send you a message on Davenport Beach with that transmitter, forgive me. It was something I could not resist doing.”

“You needn’t apologize, Francis,” Carranya said, reaching up to touch his face gently. “It gave me hope – even when I came to believe that you were dead. Ask Lavie. It was only later, when I discovered your little device” – she laughed – “that I began to have doubts, but now, it all makes sense. Even when you fought beside me, in the Palace of Gyrus, my attacks were stronger when I was close to you. There are so many things I understand only now. Don’t feel guilty, for you truly were a guardian angel to me in more ways than one.”

“I don’t know if I deserve that, Carranya,” Wilhelm said, gently, “but I am glad that, in the end, my hope – for Terra, of course, but most of all, for you – was not in vain.”

“So what happens now, Your Highness?” Arnoldus said, still looking at the Prince with an expression of awed disbelief. “The Third Way has been destroyed, but we now have to pick up the pieces, don’t we?”

The Varald Directorate is still torn by two warring factions. The President of the Commonwealth is dead, as are two of the members of the Executive Council. Galvenia's War Minister, who has betrayed his King, is still at large. You have won a victory, young man, but there is still much to rebuild."

"You speak the truth, Commander," Prince Wilhelm said, gravely. "Fortunately, my ancestor and his friends did foresee even the worst eventualities, and incorporated relevant laws into the Commonwealth Code – and following the tragedy of the War Hawks, those laws were strengthened by President Drake. Three of the Councilmen still live – Schliemann of Itaria, Jansen of the Varald, and Lord Douglas McIverny of Itaria. They will preside over further sessions of the Commonwealth, and their decisions will be binding on us all, until a fresh election is conducted. In the meantime, both we and the Republic will have to make fresh nominations to the Council."

"You seem to have it all worked out quite nicely, Prince," Freya said, appreciatively. "I must say that even I didn't know everything – Hidoki couldn't tell me, since the Emperor had bound him by an oath – but I'm sure that, despite a few false starts, life on Terra will return to what it once was."

"Indeed," Bernadette said, with a smile. "Truly, the Infinity has been merciful to us."

"And all's well that ends well!" Aline said, applauding. "Miss Lavie, do you think they'll nominate your father for President, instead of poor Mr. Hipper? Then Mr. Ryan could be the First Son-In-Law of the Commonwealth!"

Lavie and Ryan stared at each other, then burst out laughing. "Dear me, Aline," Lavie said, "that is *quite* an original idea. But I don't think Daddy's going into politics any time soon!"

"Ooh, what a pity. Perhaps you could represent the Republic, Commander," Aline went on, with a wink at Arnoldus. "I'm sure the Council would benefit from having a war hero among them, don't you think, Miss Bernadette?"

"I doubt my wife or children would approve of my entering politics, Dr. Sheldon," Arnoldus said politely.

"Oh, I'm sure Penelope wouldn't mind, Commander," Lavie said, causing him to flush. "And I'm sure you'd be a much better leader than Jemma!"

Despite his discomfiture, Arnoldus was forced to agree with this statement.

"Now, I will meet you again a little later," Prince Wilhelm said finally, as he rose from his chair, "at which time we will be joined by the members of the Council, who are currently resting. For now, though, I must request you to grant me a few hours' freedom. There are matters I wish to discuss."

"What sort of matters, Your Highness?" Burnfist said, anxiously. "I must once again ask your pardon for my actions on board the *Paradiso*, which were purely the result of inadvertence..."

“Think nothing of it, Captain,” Wilhelm said kindly, as he helped Carranya rise. “But we must be going now. We shall see you again in the evening.”

And, without a further word, the Prince and the Princess walked out of the room, hand in hand.

“Discussing? Is that what they call it now, Burnfist?” Armin said, with a chuckle.

“Burn you, Tamas,” she replied, though her tone was far from threatening.

“Spare me,” Sheffield said, in a resigned tone, as he found himself pinned against a rock by Juno’s sword. “I have never harmed you, whatever else I may have done.”

“This is not about you and me, renegade,” Juno replied, closing his eyes. “This is about Galvenia. And more to the point, this is about my father. What had he done, that you and your minions should throw him to the dogs? Answer me, or I shall silence you this very moment.”

“Your father?” Sheffield stared at him in amazement. “Franz Juno?”

Juno nodded, and brought the point of his sword closer to Sheffield’s neck.

“I had n – nothing to do with that, boy,” Sheffield stammered. “I was not even War Minister at that time, though I heard the tale. I bear you no ill will, for you have saved my life. It was an early attempt by the Third Way to secure Eramond’s weapon, though they soon abandoned their attempt when they realized that the one he had in Davenport was not the one they sought.”

“Tell me, then, how long has the Third Way been among us?”

“I cannot tell, boy,” Sheffield said, leaning against the rock for support, and uneasily aware of its sharp edges pressing against his back. “You seek answers for everything, but none of us can give you satisfaction. You will have to find your own answers.”

“Do not hide behind that answer,” Juno said, coldly. “Even if it was the Third Way or Robertson who led the attack, the Galvenian government had no reason to defame my father.”

“Listen to me,” Sheffield said, irritably. “Governments do not exist for the protection of one person, but for the greatest number. At that moment in time, given the state of the economy and our relations with the Empire, we had to protect the reputation of Davenport. We had to ensure that it grew stronger and more populous. And, in the eyes of the government, that was more important than the reputations of a few dead men. I am sorry, Juno, but that is all the answer I can give you.”

Juno glared at him for a few moments, then lowered his sword.

"I see," he said. "Very well, Sheffield. Leave, and return to serving your government, if they will have you back. Leave as soon as you can, for if I see you again, I shall have no mercy on you."

Sheffield moved away with haste, and Juno continued his solitary walk down to the shore, where he found his boat still waiting there.

"Not only am I not a hero," he muttered, "but this world we live in has no place for heroes."

That is not true, Juno.

"Do you say that because you admire Eramond and the deceitful Prince Wilhelm? Truly, the Infinity has a cruel sense of humour. He chooses men such as these for his purposes, when it is clear that the world they envisage will be as empty and as corrupt as Sheffield's."

And what sort of world do you envisage, Juno? Or do you speak this way because your purest hope has been disappointed?

"My purest hope? Of being a Chosen One? That died the moment Eramond disarmed me, my lady. Makarov Juno will live in ignominy; he will not even have the consolation of death, as his father did."

Do not deceive yourself, Juno. I know.

"You know *nothing*," he replied, harshly.

Juno, the first step of wisdom is to be honest with oneself.

"Are you quoting Fossen to me?" he replied, as he looked out across the ocean.

I can only speak of what I know, Juno. I know that you are driven by the memory of your father, and that you wish to fight bravely, as he did. But there is another.

Juno was silent, and his expression was resigned, almost defeated.

When I faced the spirits of the Journeymen, it was neither you nor Ryan Eramond who made the decision that disarmed me, and gave them the victory. It was Lavender Regale – the woman whom you both love. Only she could end the battle between the Swords of Justice.

"Why do you torment me thus?" Juno said, bitterly. "It is as you say it is. I have admired her – and, truth be told, loved her from afar. But how could I confess it – with a dishonoured name, with no fortune, with nothing except my own heroism to offer her? Besides, she was infatuated with that fool, Eramond. I believed that, if I defeated Samath, I could..."

Claim her as your own? Win her affection? Poor Juno. We are not that unlike, in the end. Come, let me show myself to you.

There was a burst of orange light from the sides of Juno's sword, and suddenly, a woman – or, rather, the likeness of one – stood before him. She was young, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, and wore a blue robe that was quite like Bernadette's, except for the orange embroidery on it. Her brown hair – darker than Lavie's – fell in waves around her face and onto her shoulders, and both her smile and the look in her blue eyes were hopeful and friendly. One incorporeal hand was held out towards him. Against his will, Juno felt his spirits lift a little.

This adventure is over, Juno. But a new and greater adventure is about to begin.

"Who are you?" Juno whispered. "What do you call yourself?"

My name is Lyrra. I once lived and died on this world, but the Purpose preserved me in this sword, so that you would not have to die, Juno. Do not weep for the memory of Lavender Regale. She has found her Way, with all its joys and sorrows, and she will walk along it without faltering, in the company of Ryan Eramond. But now, I will show you your own. Come, let us leave. Your master awaits you eagerly, despite your errors.

"On a little boat like that, all the way to the Republic?" Juno said, shaking his head.

Have faith in the Purpose, Juno. He has allowed you to live so far, and he will preserve you for years to come, in war and in peace. You will win a different sort of victory – one that the world may not acknowledge, but a victory nonetheless. And at the end of it all, Juno – it seemed to him that the voice broke – you will find your home.

"Home?"

Someday, you will understand, as fair Princess Carranya did. Come, the spirits of the winds shall guide our way. You will not travel alone, Juno, for I, Lyrra, shall be your protector.

Juno laughed. "You, a protector?" he replied.

The voice that replied sounded light-hearted. *What amuses you, Juno? If Lavender Regale could be the protector of the son of Kevin, why should I not protect you?*

"Perhaps there is something to what you say, Lyrra," Juno replied. As he climbed into the boat, he felt it begin to move, cutting across the waves, until – in mere moments – Unity Isle was just a speck on the horizon.

The adventure has begun! My heart quivers with anticipation, Juno, the voice replied, with a laugh.

Looking out at the vast expanse of the sea, Makarov Juno allowed himself, if only for a moment, to hope.

“Henrik,” Bernadette said, laughing out of sheer surprise, “where are you taking me?”

“Do you remember what I said to you before we travelled to Unity Isle?” Henrik replied, softly, as he pushed her wheelchair down the slopes leading to Chespa Bay with cheerful abandon. “There’s a whole world waiting out there, for the two of us. Not just Davenport or Hartridge, but Terra. Don’t ask me how I know it, but I’m sure that in the end, we will be almost as nomadic as Agent Striker was. And for a start, I’m taking you down to the sea.”

“The sea?” She smiled. “Whatever on Terra for? I can’t swim in my current condition. Come to think of it, I can’t swim in the first place!”

“Neither can I,” Henrik said, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper. “But today is a day of hope, Bernadette. The Third Way and its nightmare are over, and the dream I told you about can begin.”

“Do you truly believe that, Henrik?” she said, softly, as they reached the path that led down to the rocky beach of Unity Isle.

“I’ll tell you what I believe,” Henrik said, as they moved along the path. “I believe that I *‘will hope, and not doubt; not doubt you, who have brought me so much joy; nor doubt the Infinity, who, for his own mysterious purposes, blessed us by bringing us together.’* Hey, I’ve actually managed to memorize it all. Not bad, even though I’m a King’s College man and all that.” He chuckled.

“Henrik!” Bernadette said, blushing. “Are you quoting my own poem to me?”

“No, darling, I’m giving you a lecture,” he replied, with a wink. “Lavie gave me one, and since she isn’t here, you’re standing in her place. Besides, if I’m going to be a Professor of History, I’d better get used to giving lectures!”

“History?” Bernadette laughed. “But didn’t your father say there was – how do I say this – no future in history?”

“Have I lived to see *you* making a pun worthy of Armin, Bernadette Ellis Aquary?” Henrik said, wagging a finger at her. “Of course there’s no future in history. But if this tale of the Third Way has taught me a lesson – besides the lesson of our love – it is this: that if we do not remember the tragedies of the past, we will face them over and over again. Only by understanding the past can we work to break the circle. If the Infinity had not preserved us all, Unity Isle could have been another Janwen or Estrana. There is much about the past that we need to learn, if we have to secure our future. Even if we need hunt the Third Way no more, there is a world buried beneath the surface of Terra, a world that we must know if we are to better our own. That’s what I believe, Bernadette.”

“I see Father Marlborough will soon consider you his prize pupil, and not me,” Bernadette said, playfully, as the path abruptly ended in sand. “Goodness, it looks like we can’t go any further, Henrik.”

“Oh, you’ll always be his favourite theologian, make no mistake,” Henrik replied, looking at her fondly. “But I don’t mind being second-best, as long as the first is you.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about that too, dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, leaning against him as they looked out at the ocean. “I know theology’s been my subject for years, but there’s no law that says I can’t tackle two things at the same time, is there? I’ve been considering what Father Joaquim told me, just before we left, and when we return to King’s College, I think I’m going to start studying music, in addition to literature and theology.”

“Are you and Lavie going to play piano duets, then?” Henrik said, with a laugh.

“Perhaps,” she replied, gently, “but think of it this way. Music also tells a tale, Henrik. Many of the legends we have heard of – the stories of the Kingdoms, for example – survive only as ballads. In a few centuries, the story of Kaleb may only exist in the songs of the Dances of Malava. And who knows, someday, they may compose a song about us!” She laughed. “I know that’s vain of me, but I still find it irresistibly amusing.”

“The Ballad of Henrik and Bernadette,” Henrik said, as he lifted her gently out of the chair, taking care not to jar her injured leg, and carried her down to the shoreline, where they both sat down in the sand, at the edge of the water. “I like the sound of that. Or the Ballad of Bernadette and Henrik, if we insist on alphabetical or academic order.”

“Very funny, Henrik,” she replied, laughing as she slipped her hand into his.

“That’s Armin’s influence, bless him,” Henrik replied.

“Sweet Infinity,” Bernadette said, suddenly, “look over there, Henrik!”

Henrik turned, and understood the cause for Bernadette’s surprise. Kneeling down near the shore were Prince Wilhelm and Princess Carranya, who were working together to construct an immense and elaborate castle of sand, laughing and talking animatedly as they did so. “Good heavens, what are they up to?”

“I’m sure there’s a story behind it, Henrik,” Bernadette said, with an indulgent smile, “but let’s not disturb them now, shall we?”

“I’m with you on that,” Henrik said, and they sat together silently, neither wishing to say anything.

Suddenly, he turned towards her with concern. “Bernadette? Are you....crying?” he said.

“It’s weak of me to do so, Henrik,” she said, as he offered her his sleeve, “but....for a few moments, when I was lying in bed, after the doctors had....finished operating, I doubted. I wondered if....you would still care for me, despite my injury. Infinity forgive me, I wondered if I would....be a burden to you.”

“Bernadette Aquary,” Henrik said, softly, “you could never be a burden to me. But I understand – heck, I also went through a dark night of my own, wondering if you’d forgive me for...not protecting you. Fortunately for us, Lavie snapped me out of that pretty soon. I’ve got to say that Lavie grows on you. Both Ryan and I used to find her rather annoying – but that’s changed, now.”

Bernadette laughed and dried her eyes. “Are you trying to make me jealous, Henrik Spenson?” she replied.

“Not at all, my love,” he replied, holding her face in his hands. “And to answer your question, you are even dearer to me, with the wounds you bear – wounds that testify to your bravery. Even if no one will ever compose a ballad about *me*, Terra deserves to resound with the song of Bernadette Aquary. They could, perhaps, add a few lines about the big lug who was fortunate enough to be her companion.” He chuckled.

“That’s sweet of you, Henrik,” she murmured, as he leaned forward to kiss her....

“Aw, that’s cute, Gran!” Emily said. “I wish I could meet them both someday.”

“Perhaps we will, sweetie,” Lavie said, with a grin. “After all, travel to Itaria isn’t that hard these days. Maybe I’ll take you there, once Penelope and Matthew get back from the Varald Republic.”

“Hey, Ryan, aren’t they cute?” Lavie said, with a laugh, looking at them from a distance. “Willoughby hasn’t got a thing on our Henrik, that’s for sure! And what about Prince Wilhelm and his sand castle? I guess we don’t have to worry about looking too ridiculous out here!”

“We’re all fools in love, that’s for sure,” Ryan said, with a laugh, as they continued to walk together, hand in hand. “But that’s part of the Way, after all!”

“He’s....gone,” Constance said, shaking her head, and setting down her cup of tea.

“Gone? What do you mean?” Jonas Aquary said, puzzled, as he placed his glasses on his nose.

“My son, Jonas. Until today, I felt that....he might return home, to be with me, after this war was over. But now, I feel he’s leaving to go somewhere far away, and that he won’t be coming home. I don’t understand it, but I know it, somehow.”

“I’m sorry, Constance,” Jonas said, gently. “He was a good lad, even if he could be quite silly at times.”

“I hope he’s safe, wherever he goes,” she replied. “I know he’ll be an honourable man, like his father. It’s just that – he was all I had for many years, Jonas, my last reminder of Franz. It’ll be hard to get used to living without him, even if he was missing for most of the last year.”

“Hey, don’t worry,” Jonas said, patting her on the back. “You’ve still got us, remember! My child’s just sent me a wire from Unity Isle, now that communications are working again. She’s broken a leg, poor girl, but she’s on the mend – and that fine boy, Spenson, is taking care of her. I’ve also got a wire from Miss Regale, who’s been a very good friend to my girl, and from Spenson himself today. They should be back in Galvenia in two months or so, if everything goes well at the Commonwealth.”

“Broken a leg?” Constance said with alarm. “I’m so sorry, Jonas. She’s a dear girl.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Jonas said, smiling back. “She’s tough, Bernadette is. It’ll take more than a broken bone to stop her! And besides, I’m just glad that she’ll be home again.”

“I’m glad for you too, Jonas,” Constance said, affectionately. “It must be lonely out here in Hartridge without them.”

“Lonely? Not as long as I have your company for tea every other day, Constance,” Jonas said, with a smile. “You know what Aramondrius said, don’t you? Every time a hand slips out of yours, there is another one held out. Every time a gate is shut, another one is unlocked.”

“Aramondrius sounds like a very wise man,” Constance said, with an approving nod. “Almost as wise as you, in fact.”

“By the way, Spenson asked about you in his wire,” Jonas went on, looking at the telegrams on the table before him. “He wanted to know if you were all right, and he said he was wiring you too. Perhaps Makarov asked him to look after you, if you’re right about his dashing off somewhere.”

“Do you think so, Jonas?” Constance said, wonderingly.

“Perhaps, my dear Constance,” Jonas replied. “But frankly, even if Makarov did, it’s a silly idea. Spenson’s a young man, and I’m sure he’ll take my child into his own home some time soon, perhaps once they finish college. They’re both young, and they need to take their own steps in the world, as Laurette and I once did – or you and Franz, Constance. Even if Spenson tries his best, I guess we’ll be meeting at five o’clock for quite some time to come.” He winked at her. “Tea and good company; I suppose that’s all a man can ask for, at my age.”

“You’re not *that* old, Jonas,” Constance said, placing her hand over his. “Though I must concur with you on the benefits of tea and company. It’s a very Galvenian sentiment, but it’s true all the same.”

“I wonder,” Jonas said, hesitantly. “You know, Constance – I’ve mourned Laurette for quite a while now. I’ve tried my best to ensure Bernadette’s future, in honour of her memory. And now she has found her own Way. I’m wondering if that’s a sign.”

“A sign?” Constance laughed. “A sign from the Infinity?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go that far,” Jonas said, laughing in turn, “but perhaps it’s a sign that – she’s free, now, to lead the life she wants to. So am I. And, though it may be harsh of me to say it, Constance, so are you. Franz would want you to be happy, my friend.”

“Me?” Constance Juno blushed, something she had not done in years. “What on Terra are you talking about, Jonas?”

There was a knock at the door, and a rather weary-looking postman entered the Aquary cottage.

“Telegram for you, ma’am,” he said, handing her a slip of paper. “You’re lucky my beat covers both Davenport and Trinden, otherwise you’d have to wait until tomorrow!”

Jonas handed him a generous tip, and he left with a broad smile on his face.

“What’s the matter, Constance?” he asked, noting the frown on her face.

“It’s....just as I thought, Jonas,” she said, shaking her head in surprise. “Spenson says that Juno has left for the Republic to meet his master, Fossen, and does not intend to return home. He hopes I’m all right, and has asked me to contact you, or Dr. Mellon at Glendale, for assistance until he and Bernadette return. It’s....just as you said. He’s gone.” She smiled nervously. “Perhaps it *is* a sign, Jonas.”

“Mellon?” Jonas snorted. “Who needs that old sour-puss? How Laurette, who was the happiest woman in Galvenia, had a brother like *him* is a mystery of Nature. He’s another one who’s been mourning far too long. Let’s not take *him* as a role model, Constance.”

“But Jonas,” Constance said, timidly, “would you really...”

“Aha, now you see it,” Jonas said, taking hold of her hand. “Will you do me the honour, Constance Juno, of being my awful wedded life?” He burst out laughing. “I think I got something wrong there.”

“Jonas, look at me,” Constance said, gently, “and don’t joke, please. You know I care about you. You’re – the best friend I’ve had since Barbara Spenson died, to be honest. But I’m – old before my age. I’m faded. Would you....”

Jonas laughed. “Heck, Constance, if you looked at *me*, you’d realize that I’m not exactly a spring chicken,” he replied. “If we’re a couple of old-timers, what of it? We’re still good for tea and company – and for each other, I guess.”

“But what would your daughter say?” Constance said, looking up at him with hope in her eyes.

“She’d be delighted to have a wicked stepmother, I guess,” Jonas replied, as he placed his arm around her waist. “It’s like one of those old fairy tales, isn’t it?”

“I suppose it is, Jonas,” she replied, as she moved closer to him.

"I wonder what mean Mr. Juno would think of it!" Emily said, with a laugh.

"Dear me, Emily, he was busy with a lot of other things, or at least I guess he was," Lavie said, with a giggle. "He probably ended up a mercenary in the Republic, if I know anything about him. But somehow, I don't think he would've minded too much."

"I thank you once again," Commissioner Jansen said, with a stiff bow, as he looked at Prince Wilhelm. He had lost weight, and had aged a good deal in the past weeks, but his stern expression remained unchanged. "Now, Your Highness, let me make certain things clear. Your Empire and our Directorate will never be good friends, even if the follies of Jenkin and Sylvania may have raised your hopes. But you and your friends have saved my life, and that of Kievan's daughter. Though I will never love Imperialism or monarchy, I am not an ingrate."

"Thank you, Commissioner," Prince Wilhelm said. "We appreciate your frankness, and the Zion Empire will not seek to exploit the situation. My father has asked me to inform you that we are sending my cousin, Duke Renaud of Issachar, to represent us at the Commonwealth, and he will do as we say. There is no need for further bloodshed, now that Terra needs other things."

"You have heard, of course," Jansen went on, "of the death of Lyzhnov in an attack on his convoy by loyalists of the Director. Bromfeld, the last of the usurpers, has surrendered and handed power over to Georgiy Vitols, Kievan's deputy in the Party, and Vitols has authorized me to sign a cease-fire with you. Let this war end, Wilhelm, and let our nations go their own ways. We will never be allies, but this war is pointless."

"Well spoken, Jansen," Sir Douglas said. "We don't have to all hold hands and sing, but we can at least behave like civilized men, now that this Third Way melodrama has been brought to an end."

"I have been authorized to accept your terms, Commissioner, in the absence of Kanoi," Wilhelm replied. "At this point in our histories, there is no use in wrangling over borders. Let the Ghetz border remain where it has stood for over seven hundred years, and let your nation mourn its dead, as we mourn ours. Vengeance would be futile at a time like this."

"I second that," Archbishop Schliemann said, soberly, as he turned to face Wilhelm. "I only regret that the Commonwealth will have to bear the expenditure of a second Presidential election, but that is inevitable. I can only thank the Infinity that this is finally over, and that we can all breathe again, Your Highness. I know your nation and mine have not seen eye to eye in recent times, but hopefully, that need not recur in the future. Your armies helped to save Itaria, as did the Galvenians, and our Pontiff is grateful to you all."

"It is remarkable that you are able to say so much without yielding to the temptation to lecture me, Schliemann," Jansen said dryly. "Truly, none of us will ever be the same after the ordeal of those Jars."

“If I may make a further suggestion,” Princess Carranya said, “why not deploy the Commonwealth Special Forces to bring a swift end to the civil war in the Directorate? General Finkel has already expressed his readiness to do so, and feels that the operation would save more lives than it would cost. Subject to your approval, gentlemen, I request Sir Douglas to consider the matter.”

“This is surprising language from an ally of the Zion, Princess,” Jansen said, taken aback. “May I ask what has prompted this idea of yours?”

“Perhaps it is the memory of a young girl, barely a child, who mourns her father,” Carranya said, gently, “and who realizes that, beneath the coverings that we all assume, we are human. Like you, Commissioner, Olga Kievan may never learn to love monarchy in any guise. But I believe we owe it to her, and those like her, to secure peace as soon as we can. We have all been played for fools by the Third Way. Let us not give them the satisfaction of continuing in the path they have laid out for us.”

Schliemann shook his head. “Admirable sentiments, but you speak as the young do, Your Highness,” he said. “If it is true that the Varald want peace, let them stop persecuting those who wish to follow their conscience, as ensured by Lord Geraud when he drafted the Commonwealth Charter. Otherwise, such a peace will not last long.”

Jansen sighed. “Schliemann, do not expect too much. Let us remember that it was men of Itaria – men with whom you sympathized, to some extent – who did a lot of the damage, including the death of Socius. Our viewpoints may be different, but the Church cannot claim complete innocence.”

“My word, Jansen,” Schliemann said, softly, “you raise a disturbing issue. It is true that some of us, angered by the slowness of our own leaders and the Commonwealth, have followed an evil path. All I can say in my own defence is this: if I had known even a fraction of what we now know about the Third Way, I and my friends would never have held out our hands to them. But though they did evil, their cause was just. Can a compromise never be reached?”

“Time will tell, Schliemann,” Jansen said, calmly. “I have never believed in an Infinity, but after suffering at the hands of those creatures from below – whatever they were – I cannot but think that there was a higher purpose to what happened here, and we were all a part of it. I cannot promise anything until I have further instructions from Director Vitols – who is actively engaged in suppressing the rebellions – but I am sure that you will find at least some of his words satisfactory.”

Schliemann nodded. “I hope so, Commissioner,” he said, closing his eyes. “And let us hope that our descendants prove wiser than we are.”

“Yes, Archbishop,” Carranya said, “we must hope. And now, Commissioner, I am at your disposition as regards young Olga. If Director Vitols wishes her to return to the Directorate, both Prince Wilhelm and I can guarantee her a safe passage, at least until the Ghetz border. If, however, you feel that it would be more prudent for her to remain with us, we will ensure that she is happy, and that she is treated as befits her station. We are both children of Gyrus, and I would never allow harm to befall her.”

“So I see,” Jansen said, his features relaxing a little. “As a matter of fact, Your Highness, the Director would be most grateful if you would protect her a little longer. There are still enough supporters of Lyzhnov who would attempt to harm her, simply because she is Kievan’s child. As much as it goes against the teachings of the Party to make such a request to a noble, I must make it on his behalf. She has no next of kin, except a maiden aunt, who cannot guarantee her safety. Once Zhemu is free, she will find a home there, with my own family.”

“Consider it granted, Commissioner,” Carranya said, with a smile. “I shall inform Mother to make the necessary arrangements at the earliest, and I will also arrange for any message that she may have for her family to be sent to you at the earliest.”

“Then I thank you, on his behalf and mine,” Jansen said politely. “And if you will excuse me, I need to rest now. It will be some time before I am quite myself, physically.”

“We all could use some rest, Commissioner,” Lord Douglas said, with a smile. “Coming along, Schliemann? We haven’t yet finished our game of chess, you know.”

“Amateurs,” Jansen said, without malice. “I found it quite amusing to count the number of blunders you both made.”

“Be careful what you say, Jansen,” Schliemann said, a smile coming to his face. “I may surprise you, yet.”

The three Councilmen filed out of the room, leaving Carranya and Wilhelm alone.

“Thank the Infinity they left, Carranya,” Prince Wilhelm said, “for there is something I wish to speak of, which I do not want them to hear.”

“What is it, Francis?” Carranya said, taking his hand in hers. “Is it about Duke Renaud?”

“Renaud?” Wilhelm laughed. “I’m afraid the poor chap was let in on the secret quite late – he did know when he was with you at Issachar, of course, but we hesitated, because he can be quite outspoken, and could easily have let something slip. In the end, I decided it was worth it, for he has always been loyal to me.”

“Francis,” Carranya said, with a worried expression as an idea came to her, “what about your father? He’s ill, and I’m sure he wants to see you again. Besides, what would he think about....” She blushed.

“About us, my Carranya?” Wilhelm said, with a loud laugh. “Father suffers from a slow-growing tumour, certainly, but he’s good for a few more years. It could extend beyond that if you and that noble-hearted girl, the daughter of the Aquarys, chose to help him. As for what he would think, I’m sure he wouldn’t object. In fact, he even tried to bargain with me when I first floated the idea of going *incognito* to him: he said ‘I don’t mind you marrying a Galvenian, but no magic tricks, Wilhelm!’”

Carranya laughed. "You know, that line in Tremfein's play was so true," she said, leaning against him contentedly. "I'm in love with a Zion."

"While we're on that topic, Princess," Wilhelm said, teasingly, "what would Prince Derren think?"

"Oh, he's already given me his blessing, Francis," Carranya replied, as she slowly recounted her vision to him. "They had seen it all – right down to Juno – but their promise has come true."

"My flower of Lorean," Wilhelm whispered. "The King's tears shall give way to the Princess' laughter, or my name isn't Wilhelm Albrecht Francis Hohenzollern Valtemond. Quite a mouthful, isn't it? In fact, my mother wanted to add Wolfgang as well, but Father thought it sounded too Gyrusian. That's why I chose it as a *nom de guerre*."

"You'll always be Francis to me, my prince," Carranya said, affectionately. "So what was it that you wished to say?"

"I was thinking," Wilhelm said, with a wink, "about a wedding present."

Carranya flushed a deep red. "Wilhelm Francis," she said, "what exactly did you have in mind?"

The Prince leaned forward and whispered a single word in her ear.

"What do you mean, Francis?" she said.

"Quite simply, my princess," he replied, "that I intend to set right what went wrong, not so long ago. I would be a poor husband, and an even worse ruler, if I could not do that."

Carranya smiled. "But how is it even possible?"

"Think of it this way, Carranya," Francis said. "We need a place between Lorean and Caledonia for ourselves, after all. And what better place than the one where our destinies first began to meet?"

"Assuming you can convince everyone concerned," Carranya said, dreamily, "it's such a wonderful dream....Dare I hope?"

"Do not underestimate Agent Wolfgang Striker, my princess," Francis replied with a wink.

While these deliberations were taking place, the Galvenian Government was not allowing the grass to grow under its feet. The elections took place with remarkable efficiency, and our friends were allowed to wire in their votes from Unity Isle.

The evening that the results were due, Ryan, Henrik and Armin sat around the wireless, engaged in a heated debate.

"I don't know what the future is for Socius' clowns, except to just crawl away and die," Armin said forcefully. "Heck, Sheffield was a traitor, and no one'll ever forgive that!"

Sheffield had been apprehended a few days earlier, trying to board one of the Commonwealth ships returning to the Republic on the sly, and was now detained in the ship's brig. "Well, Sheffield got off pretty lightly, all things considered," Ryan observed. "I'm surprised Juno didn't try to finish him off with that sword of his, though."

"Perhaps the sword told him not to," Henrik suggested. "And whatever you might say, Armin, I wouldn't count out the Unionists! There's bound to be a wave of sympathy for Martell Socius, and his wife's been doing great work in keeping his legacy alive, with her work for the victims of bandits, military families, as well as Zion children affected by the war. She's even reached out to many of the Conservatives. Besides, Breckenridge didn't exactly cover himself with glory, considering that it was Striker – I mean Prince Wilhelm – who uncovered Sheffield's treachery. So much for his investigative commission!"

"Hey, Henrik," Armin shot back. "Does your *girlfriend* also support Socius?"

"As a matter of fact, she does," Henrik said, with a smile. "Why do you ask?"

"Great," Armin groaned. "Just what we need. The two of you are bound to breed a house full of do-gooder, bleeding-heart liberals! Poor Galvenia."

"Hey, Armin, *you're* the one dating a Zion here," Henrik retorted. "Pot, meet kettle."

"Guys, could we *please* lay off each others' personal lives here?" Ryan said, gently, noticing that Armin was about to embark upon a long defence of Zion militarism. "Besides, our political opinions aren't set in stone. Remember, Lavie and her parents were quite anti-Royal, until she got to know Carranya better!"

"Who's Lavie voting for, anyway?" Henrik asked, curiously. "I'd guess Breckenridge, since her dad couldn't have enjoyed Socius' tax hikes too much."

"She and Bernadette made a deal," Ryan said, with a laugh. "She agreed to vote Liberal if Fairfax was the nominee, and Conservative if he wasn't. Apparently Lavie's grandmother knew Fairfax when he was a baby, or something."

"Women and politics don't mix," Armin grumbled. "Imagine if a woman represented us at the Commonwealth. It'd be worse than Socius!"

"Hey, you're forgetting Queen Carranya," Ryan said, sternly. "Are you going to refuse allegiance to her because she's not a guy, Armin?"

“Argh, you’ve got me there, Compadre,” Armin said, with a grin. “But anyway, Fairfax isn’t running. He said so on the GBC broadcast last night, anyhow. They’re fielding Bainbridge again, which is a total dope move if you ask me. It’s as if they want Breckenridge to win!”

“I’ll have to agree with Henrik on Jeannelle Socius, though,” Ryan replied. “She could easily swing a few cities the Liberals’ way, and then, who knows?”

There was a crackle of static, and the GBC’s announcer, in his usual calm, measured tones, began to read out the results from the first cities.

“Woo hoo! Alton is ours, baby!” Armin said, doing a victory dance. “See, guys, everyone remembers my exploits with the Gorn Jabola there!”

“Your exploits?” Henrik said, with a doubtful look on his face.

“Yours, mine, who cares?” Armin said, with a grin. “First Alton, then Trinden, and then Davenport! Just watch!”

A little later, it was Henrik who was grinning smugly. “The Unionists have taken Trinden – and Hartridge!” he said. “Bernadette, I love you.”

“Don’t tell me she and her dad were canvassing for the Liberals!” Armin protested. “That’s dirty pool!”

“She could hardly be canvassing, considering that she was here with us. But if you’re going to be huffy, if we count war wounds, the Liberals in our own little team have taken far more bumps than the Conservatives,” Henrik said, with dignity.

“Sorry, Henrik,” Armin said. “I – Hey! What’s new, pirate girl? Come to hear the good news?”

Bernadette had just entered, wearing an eyepatch to protect the burn near her eye, and walking with the help of a stick. “I’m afraid so,” she said with a laugh. “I was just keeping Lavie company while she got some hot chocolate ready for you men. We thought you’d appreciate some refreshments, considering the gravity of the situation.”

Henrik helped her to a seat, and smiled. “Thank you, darling,” he replied. “That’s very considerate of you both.”

“You’re such a gentleman, Spenson,” Armin said, rolling his eyes. There was a sudden announcement, and this time, it was Ryan who reacted – though with surprise, rather than pleasure.

“Lorean has gone to the Conservatives,” he said, with a look of disbelief. “The Liberals can’t possibly catch up now, unless they sweep every other constituency.”

“Which proves that the idea of proportional representation is silly,” Henrik said, looking displeased, as he took a seat next to Bernadette. “Of course Lorean would swing this year, after what Sheffield did, but why should the rest of us have to suffer for that?”

“Dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, consolingly, “don’t worry. Hartridge will not surrender.” She laughed.

Armin had now recovered from the shock, and was resuming his victory dance. “This is *it*, baby!” he exclaimed. “Galvenia will have the government it deserves, at last!”

“I wonder how the new government will get on with the Royal Family, whoever they are,” Bernadette reflected. “Especially given the Princess’ unbelievable act of courage.”

“And Wilhelm,” Ryan added. “The Conservatives are not going to be happy about him, though I’m very glad for both of them myself. But look at it this way – as Striker, Wilhelm not only saved us all, but helped to uncover Sheffield’s treason in the first place! They’d be ingrates to use him for negative propaganda, even though he’s a Zion.”

“Pfft, they’re going to be disappointed,” Armin said, calmly. “Old Arlbert and Breckenridge would never let the Crown Princess marry a Zion.”

“Armin,” Ryan said, sternly, “just shut up. If you make one more such comment, I’m going to fetch Sergeant Rebecca Burnfist right now!”

“Oh, Ryan,” Bernadette said, stifling a laugh, “that would be quite mean!”

“There is hope,” Henrik said, calmly, signing to the others to remain quiet as the announcer spoke again. “Westchester has gone to the Liberals. If they can take Glendale and Davenport, then it’s dead even.”

“Fat chance that Glendale will go to Socius!” Armin said, shaking his head energetically. “Mayor Bosley is dead against the Unionists, and Talmadge was one of them! Face it, Spenson, Unionists are either bleeding hearts or traitors, and right now, the average Galvenian doesn’t want either!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about Bosley, Armin,” Ryan replied. “Given that he was occupied full-time with capturing Marianne’s dad, he wouldn’t have had much time to campaign.”

“Shh, the results from Glendale are coming in!” Armin said, excitedly. “Wait for it!”

A few minutes later, he was kicking the carpet and scowling. “People of Glendale, I am ashamed of you,” he said, darkly. “Hey, Spenson, perhaps you and pirate girl should go and settle down there! You could even run for Mayor one day.”

Bernadette laughed. “Mayor Spenson? I like the sound of that, Henrik,” she said, affectionately. “Though I’d say Hartridge suits me just fine. Or Davenport.” She beamed at him.

“Wait for it, guys,” Ryan said. “Here come the Davenport results!”

The announcer, who until then had spoken quite calmly, began to sound excited, for the Davenport race was close indeed. All our friends (including Bernadette, if the truth must be told) listened excitedly, until he made the final announcement.

“A handful of votes,” Henrik said, disgustedly. “A handful! People of Davenport, you disappoint me. Not only do you reject the Church, you vote Conservative?”

“Wait, there’s more,” Bernadette said, as another announcer’s voice came on the air.

“Lionel Bainbridge, on radio from Lorean Castle, has conceded the election,” the announcer said, in calm, measured tones. “The Pragmatic Conservatives have been declared the winners of the Galvenian Parliamentary Election for the year C.Y. 301. We now transfer you to our correspondent in Parliament House, where Gavin Breckenridge will accept the office of Prime Minister shortly.”

“Now would be the right time for a big ‘No!’ , Bernadette,” Henrik said, shaking his head.

“Hello, Ryan,” Lavie said, entering the room wearing an apron, and carrying a tray of cups of chocolate. “Did I miss anything?”

“Only the election results, Lavie,” Ryan replied, grinning at her. “The PCs have won, and boy, isn’t Armin glad.”

Lavie looked at Armin, who was jumping and waving his arms in the most unrestrained manner possible, and laughed. “He looks like a kid who’s just got his favourite toy, hasn’t he?”

“Indeed, my sister,” Bernadette replied. “I think he’s flying into the heavens with Breckenridge right now. Depart, Willoughby, for Breckenridge hath vanquished thee!”

At this, despite the gloom he felt a moment ago, Henrik burst out laughing. “They are priceless, aren’t they, Ryan?” he remarked.

“Indeed they are, Compadre,” Ryan replied, then paused to pick up his cup of hot chocolate. “Thanks, Lavie. I’m sure your dad and mine will be happy about this, though I’m sort of neutral on the issue.” He took a sip. “Hey, this is pretty good, Lavie!”

“Well, thank you, kind sir! But wait, Ryan, there’s a surprise!” Lavie replied, patting him on the back.

In the meantime, Breckenridge had gone through the forms of accepting the office of Prime Minister “from the King and the people”, and then he began to speak.

“People of Galvenia,” he began, “we have been through a collective ordeal, and we have all suffered. I can honestly say that I am both proud and humbled – proud of your courage in the face of adversity, and humbled that you have chosen me to represent you. As my first act in office, I announce that a commission will be set up for the assistance of all those who have been the victims of the Third Way and

their allies, whether civilians or members of our valiant troops. And it is my honour to welcome, as the chairperson of this Commission, a person who exemplifies this courage. Your Majesty, my fellow legislators and the people of Galvenia, I hereby nominate Jeannelle Socius, our former First Lady, to assist the Government in this endeavour.”

“Mrs. Socius?” Bernadette smiled. “What a noble gesture.”

“Hurray!” Lavie cheered. “Daddy will be so pleased. She’d discussed this with him some time ago, and he was supporting her, but he was quite worried about how it would work out.”

“Hey, maybe Breckenridge won’t be that bad after all,” a stunned Henrik said. “I was afraid he’d nominate Armin, or something.”

Armin scowled. “This is dopey!” he grumbled. “First act in office, and he sets up a commission? We’re just getting out of war, and he wants to burn our dollars? Has he gone soft in the head, or what? Heck, he could go all the way and ask pirate girl to head the commission, and to give away all our money to bums, one cent at a time! Who came up with this stupid idea?”

“Shut up, Armin,” Lavie said, firmly. “And besides, your ‘pirate girl’ joke grew old the first time you said it.”

“I’ll have to agree with Lavie on that, Armin,” Henrik said, shaking his head. “I don’t think even Captain Burnfist would find that amusing.”

“Me, a pirate?” Bernadette laughed. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t make a very good one, eyepatch or not.”

“Damn right,” Armin said, drinking his hot chocolate with a frown. “Breckenridge or Bainbridge, what’s the difference if they’re both going to play the fool like this? Bring me the person who thought of this idea, and I’ll kick them so hard that.....”

Just at that moment, Princess Carranya swept into the room, looking flushed and excited. “Would it be me you’re looking for, Armin?” she said, teasingly. “Dear Jeannelle, I’m sure she’ll do a wonderful job. And it was good of Prime Minister Breckenridge to take my idea seriously, though I’m sure your father also helped, Lavie.”

“Me? Uh – N – no, Princess,” Armin stammered, “I was just practising my stand-up comedy routine! You know, ‘Why did the chicken cross the road? Because Socius was coming to tax it!’ Ha, ha! Funny stuff, right, guys?”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Give it up, Armin,” he said. “You’re setting some sort of world record for anti-humour today!” He smiled. “Good evening, Princess. We were just, ahem, discussing the election results.”

"I can't say any of us is overjoyed, but maybe this is the way to go," Henrik added. "If Jansen and Schliemann can sit down and have a discussion without things going out of hand, what's wrong with Breckenridge and Mrs. Socius deciding to collaborate?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong, Henrik," Armin replied. "It puts us dead center in the middle of the road, and you know what lives there, right?"

"Trees?" Princess Carranya said, mischievously. "We do have a lot of them in the middle of some of the Lorean roads, Armin, especially the highways."

"Hmph, another punchline ruined," Armin said, shaking his head.

"How are you today, Bernadette?" Carranya went on, walking up to her friend with a look of concern. "Are you sure you should be putting that much weight on your leg?"

"Hey, hey, Princess, don't you know you should never ask women about their weight? You really oughta know that yourself," Armin interrupted.

Bernadette laughed. "Quite well, thank you, Princess. The surgeons said I could begin moving a little, though I'll still need to use the chair a little longer. Thank the Infinity that Henrik's got broad shoulders."

"Dear me," Carranya said, affectionately, "it looks like we shall have to knight not only Ryan, but Henrik as well, for their heroic deeds. My friends, I have come here to bring you good news. The deliberations at the Commonwealth are over, and both the Zion and the Republic have nominated their Council members. Duke Renaud will represent the Zion, and Usman Rasheed of Marcopolis will represent Fulton at the Commonwealth. They have both set sail, and will be here in two weeks' time."

"Usman Rasheed?" Lavie said, surprised. "Isn't that the doctor who looked after Ryan when we freed him from prison?"

"The same, Lavie. He is the son of Premier Rasheed of the Republic, Josen's predecessor, and after learning of Jedda's actions, Josen has decided to nominate someone with more integrity. We did ask Commander Arnoldus, but he declined," Carranya replied.

"Wow, that's good news," Lavie said. "He's a good doctor, and he was very kind to us when we were – waiting for Ryan to recover."

"Don't worry, Lavie," Ryan said, walking over to her as he sensed the emotion in her voice. "I made it through all right – thanks to all of them, of course, but thanks to you. So what's the good news, Princess?"

"Simply that we'll all be returning home soon," she replied, with a smile. "The ships that will take us back have been sighted, and they will reach Unity Isle in a day. We will all travel together to Davenport, then to Lorean, and then I will travel to Caledonia."

“With Prince Wilhelm?” Lavie said, beaming at her.

Carranya laughed. “Yes, Lavie, my friend – Wilhelm and I will proceed to Caledonia, to meet the Emperor, for there is much we need to discuss with him. And Bernadette, don’t worry – we have made every possible arrangement for your comfort aboard. Our shipbuilders have done a good job – another fine instance of Zion-Galvenia collaboration, though I say so myself.”

“Collaboration? Is that what they’re calling it now, Princess?” Armin quipped. “I wonder what Wolfie would have to say to that.”

“That’s not bad, Armin,” Ryan said, with a smile. “A little more practice, and you might actually elicit a faint chuckle from some of us. But you do much better when Tremfein writes your lines, that’s for sure!”

“By the way, Armin,” Carranya went on, mercilessly, “Prince Wilhelm says the Empress was quite impressed with your sense of humour, but she replies that, though she is getting old, she still considers herself more attractive than a Varaldian soldier.”

Armin blushed. “Dang it, Wolfie, why did you have to tell your *mom* that I made a ‘your mom’ joke about her! I didn’t even know he was Wilhelm at the time! No fair!”

Everyone else in the room began laughing, which only added to Armin’s discomfort. “Oh, don’t worry, Armin,” Lavie said, with a giggle. “You can always join Tremfein in the Republic, in case the Zion Empress decides to take offence!”

“Not funny!” Armin said, shuffling his feet.

“We were just teasing you, Armin,” Carranya said, kindly. “Now make your preparations for departure, my friends, for our ship will not wait too long – as you know from experience, Lavie, my friend.”

“Got it, Princess,” Lavie said, cheerfully. “I’m not going to spend too much time with the lipstick this time around!”

“That’s the spirit, Lavie,” Ryan said, taking her hand. “Come on, let’s go and pack up.”

“I was right, wasn’t I, Raienji?” Marlborough said, with a broad smile on his face, as he walked through the halls of Zion University.

“You were *annoying*, Marlborough,” Professor Hidoki Raienji replied, but there was no anger in his voice. He had just received a wire from his family, and had spoken to Freya over the radio, and in consequence, was feeling at peace with himself and the whole world, Varaldia included. “Words can’t describe how worried Wilhelm and I were, from the day of the funeral onwards. If anyone on Terra could have stumbled upon the truth, it was you.”

“I’m afraid you overestimate me, Raienji,” Marlborough replied. “I am not as young, or as quick of mind, as I used to be. I had the help of several fine minds and brave souls, and they deserve as much credit as I do.”

“The Six,” Raienji mused. “What do you think will become of them now that this is all over, Marlborough? I must confess that I am quite happy for Carranya and Wilhelm – call me biased, perhaps, but Wilhelm could do worse than marry a descendant of Penelope and Esmeriah, particularly at this point in time. Our nations need to stand together, and a royal wedding will cement the alliance better than all the diplomatic mumblings of Socius and the Viceroy.”

“Be careful about that, Raienji,” Marlborough replied. “I am convinced of the sincerity of their affections – and so was the Harvester of Souls – but politics and love are a dangerous combination. Remember Empress Sylvania and Yuri Jenkin. At some point, the two will come into conflict, unless human nature somehow changes over the years.”

“Tell me, Marlborough,” Raienji said, with a frown, “are you deliberately trying to vex me? You know that we of the Zion do not like to be reminded of Yuri Jenkin, or of that infamous Crystal. Or is there an allegorical significance that I am missing here, you lover of subtleties?”

“Lover of subtleties?” Marlborough laughed. “Yes, Raienji, that is a good description. But now I am nearing the end of my own life, and perhaps, I have learned to appreciate simplicity. I still believe, as Aramondrius did, in goodness and kindness, as well as in truth. And the Six have made that lesson very clear in my mind. If Jenkin and Sylvania’s story ended sadly, there is no reason for Wilhelm and Carranya’s to end the same way. They will set right a lot of what is wrong in the history of our nations – they are not the new Jenkin and Sylvania, but the new Derren and Penelope. And we will need every last bit of it, when the next crisis comes around.”

“The next crisis?”

“Come now, Raienji. As a student of history, you know better than I that we can never draw a line in the sand of human deeds, and say – as the storyteller does – that we all lived happily ever after. The demons have been sealed, and the Lord Below will now have to work without the help of Arctura, Gharon or the Phantom. But if the Third Way has taught us one thing, it is that the Lord of the Pits will never want for human allies. Men like Robertson, Prescott, Gray, Lyzhnov – they are capable of evil, with or without demonic assistance. So were Kanoi and Jedda. So are we, Raienji. Time will tell if the chaining of the demons by the Infinity was an act of mercy, or an act of cold-blooded justice.”

“Justice? Come, Marlborough, I never expected such pessimism from you,” Raienji replied. “Where is the hope?”

“There is always hope, Raienji,” the old priest replied, with a smile. “Hope for enlightened and wise rulers, like Carranya and Wilhelm. Hope for good men and women to support and guide them, like

Eramond and Lavender Regale. And, most of all, hope for the good and the kind, and their children, and their children's children – perhaps the greatest hope of all.”

“You speak of Spenson and Miss Aquary, do you not?” Raienji replied.

“Yes, my friend. A time will come, not too far in the future, when men will go to war again; where the faith of mankind in kings and emperors, Pontiffs and churches, presidents and prime ministers, will all be shaken. It will be a sad time, but there is always hope. It will be a judgement upon us, for our presumption, and for believing that we were pure, and only the demons were at fault. And at that time, it will be ordinary people – not rulers – who will help us to rebuild Terra.”

“How do you know this, Marlborough?” Raienji said, sharply.

“It came to me suddenly, at the moment when the Princess and Bernadette were healing me from that boy Juno's attack. It is often granted to us priests, near the end of our lives, to be granted a vision of this sort. I have spoken of it to none, except you – but when the time comes, I will speak of it to Henrik and Bernadette, and they will know what to do. Someday.”

“I hope you are right, Marlborough,” Raienji said. “Come, now. The staff of Zion University await you eagerly. To have a guest lecturer in a time of war is by no means ordinary.”

Marlborough smiled and followed the Professor. “Lead on, Raienji,” he said, gently. “Lead on.”

“What?” Ryan exclaimed, staring at the ship in front of him and shaking his head. “How – how on Terra did you pull this off, Princess?”

“Where there is a will, there is a way, my friend,” Prince Wilhelm said, slapping him on the shoulder. “What better way to mark the end of this tragedy than by refloating the ship where we first met? The *Paradiso* was sleeping, but not dead, and I have decided to wake it and restore it. It is a fitting tribute to the brave men who died on board, especially Richard Lionheart – and to those of us who survived. You, and I – and Carranya.”

“Are you waxing poetic again, Francis?” Carranya said, walking up behind him and slipping her hand into his. “There is is, Ryan. His Majesty's Ship, the *Paradiso*, ready to take us all back to Davenport. Home awaits us.”

“Ryan!” Lavie came running down to the docks, her hair fluttering in the wind, looking flushed and excited. “Ryan, did you see that? We're finally going to take that cruise on the *Paradiso*, exactly a year after we were going to in the first place! Isn't that cool?”

“Whoa, Lavie, don’t go falling into the water there!” Ryan said, catching her in his arms. “I must say it is quite remarkable. It more than makes up for the fact that I celebrated my birthday in *Al-Mu’afa* eating their lousy soup, that’s for sure!” They laughed.

“Want to go aboard and check out our rooms, Ryan?” Lavie said, with a wink.

“Dear me, Lord Ryan,” Carranya said, with a smile. “To think that last year, you were just – ahem – business associates.”

“Life is strange, Princess,” Ryan said, philosophically. “Hey, I sound just like Aramondrius.”

“Aramondrius? Doesn’t his name sound a little like yours, Ryan?” Lavie joked. “Aramondrius, Eramundum, Eramond – just how many famous ancestors do you have, buster?”

“Actually, Lavie,” Wilhelm replied, “titles of that sort were quite common among philosophers, or at least those whom the Itarians approved of. Since Aramondrius was a philosopher of history, he also received the same title as Ryan’s ancestor Sean, though he added a fancy twist to it. His actual name was Alfred.”

“Another legend bites the dust,” Henrik said, as he arrived at the docks, gently pushing Bernadette’s wheelchair. “Though it would be cool if Ryan were Aramondrius’ descendant as well as Kevin’s!”

“Dear Henrik,” Bernadette said affectionately, as he helped her to her feet and handed her a stick, “if we judge by personalities and not names, you would be a more likely descendant of Aramondrius than Ryan.”

“Aww, Bernadette!” Lavie said, walking over to support her friend. “Those scholarly compliments of yours have a charm of their own.”

“Indeed they do, Lavie,” Henrik said, stroking Bernadette’s hair as she looked out across the ocean. “Indeed they do.”

“*Saludos, amigos!*” Armin said cheerfully, walking onto the deck along with Captain Burnfist. “I’ll be coming to Zion too, Wolfie. Fairfax has just wired me, and he’s got me a job at our office in Zion. It’ll mostly be desk work, but hey, I could use a break. Right, Becky?”

“Don’t call me Becky!” Burnfist growled, but it was clear to all her listeners that she was not truly angry. “First thing I do when I get back, is to apply for a transfer far, far away, so that raccoon boy stops bothering me!”

“Ah, you may say that, Captain, but you know you just can’t resist the A-Man!” Armin replied.

“Burn you, Tamas,” she retorted. “You’re just a big kid who needs looking after. And you’re lucky that, like my friend Freya, I have a soft corner for silly kids! Between you and Baldur, there’s not much to choose!”

“Good one, Captain,” Ryan replied, causing Armin to glare at him.

“Raccoon boy, pirate girl...Hey, Armin, why don’t you write comics? They seem to write themselves when you’re around, Compadre,” Henrik said, with a laugh.

“Oh, very funny, Henrik. You’ll get a special appearance as Mr. Goofy Grin, wait and see!” Armin retorted.

“I wonder how everyone is back at Davenport, Ryan,” Lavie said, looking at the ship. “Sure, we did get to talk to our parents on the radio, but I’m sure there are a lot of things happening back there! It’ll take us some time to return to normal, that’s for sure.”

“And there’s always the Army,” Ryan replied. “Remember, Lavie, my commission isn’t over yet. I have to serve for two years, unless I apply for a discharge – and somehow, I feel I still have work to do.”

Lavie looked at him with concern. “Do you intend to stay on, Ryan?”

“Would you object?” Ryan replied, gently.

Lavie smiled. “No, Ryan,” she said. “If that’s what you want, I’m for it! Besides, you know we girls love men in uniform. But be warned, if you’re going to be in Lorean, you’ll be seeing a lot of me!”

“In Lorean?” Ryan looked at her with surprise. “Are you going to stay at the Palace with the Princess, Lavie?”

“No, you silly boy,” Aline said, running up to them, her white coat flapping around her like a pair of wings. “She’s going to study with me for a while! Professor Aline’s student will make her famous! Now what do you say to that, Mr. Ryan?”

Ryan grinned. “As long as she doesn’t end up as – um – original as you, that’s actually a pretty cool idea, Aline. But what gave you the idea, Lavie?”

“Think about it, Ryan,” Lavie said, with a smile. “You’re a soldier, and someday, whether you like it or not, you’ll go into politics. Henrik will be a teacher, and so will Bernadette. Carranya and Wilhelm have countries to rule. I also need something to do, besides learning how to make better brownies! And after seeing the way Aline’s inventions helped us on our journey, I think that in future, technology’s going to be something very important on Terra! Daddy thinks so, and though I doubt I’ll ever run his company for him, I can always help him out that way!”

“Dr. Regale?” Ryan placed an arm around her shoulders. “I kind of like the sound of that. It sounds a lot less dopey than Lady Lavender, that’s for sure!”

“A wise choice, Miss Lavie,” Aline said, patting her on the head. “Someday, you’ll be almost as smart as me!”

“Very funny, Aline,” Lavie replied, giggling.

“Oh, Ryan, she’ll be that too, once I hand you your knighthood,” Carranya said, with a wink. “Doctor Lady Lavender Regale Eramond. Her name will almost be as long as yours, Francis.”

“Don’t remind me,” Prince Wilhelm groaned. “Not that yours is much shorter, Carranya.”

Carranya laughed. “Dear me, that is one thing I envy our friends the commoners,” she said, teasingly. “The pleasure of having a simple, short name.”

“Miss Regale!” The voice that called out to them was loud and booming, but she recognized it instantly. “By the Five Angels, this is strange indeed!”

“Skipper Williams!” Lavie turned and smiled at him. “Are you going to be taking us all back home?”

“Do you know him, Lavie?” Ryan asked.

“Well, I should hope so, Mr. Eramond,” Lavie said, tossing her head. “The day Daddy and I set out to meet you at Checkpoint Bravo, on one of your father’s boats, he was the one who took us there!”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, son,” Tobias Williams said, holding out a large hand to Ryan, who shook it. “The boss has always spoken highly of you. In fact, it’s only because you and the young lady are here that he loaned me to the *Paradiso*, Princess or no Princess.”

“We are grateful, Captain Williams,” Princess Carranya said, graciously. “Mr. Eramond has recommended you most highly, and I am sure you will bring us back home safely, across the thousand leagues.”

“Indeed I will, Your Highness,” Tobias replied. “Goodness, you’re quite different from the last time I saw you. I don’t suppose you remember it, though.”

“The last time?” Carranya said, curiously.

“On Davenport Beach, Your Highness,” Tobias Williams said, with a smile, and then proceeded to describe what he had seen, which he had told Lavie earlier.

“This is quite remarkable, Carranya,” Prince Wilhelm said, joining the group. “Apart from your guards, he was the only witness to – the first time we met. He was the one who helped Lavie, when she first set out

to meet Ryan. And now, he is bringing us all home – you and me, Ryan and Lavie, and the rest of our friends. Truly, the wheel of our lives has come full circle.”

“Full circle,” Lavie said, reflectively. “Perhaps that’s what the Way is all about – the real Way, I mean, not the Third Way. We complete a circle, ending up a little wiser, a little older – and a little closer too, isn’t it, Ryan?” She beamed at him.

“Well said, Lavie,” Ryan replied. “One thing’s for certain - on the next circle, we’ll be making the journey together, all of us – not just you and I, but Henrik, Bernadette, and the Prince and Princess. Who knows where the Way will lead us next?”

“I don’t know, Ryan,” Lavie replied, as he slipped his arm into hers, “but I’m sure that, wherever we go, we’ll be all right. After all, I’ll bring my bow and arrow along with me, in case we run into any more *evil* mages!”

Ryan laughed out loud. “That is a good one, Lavie,” he said. “Who’s that guy over there waving at us?”

“Goodness, Henrik!” Bernadette said, with an expression of pleased surprise. “Could it be...”

“Arr, lads, wait for me!” an elderly man called out, waving vigorously and pushing a trolley in front of him. “I be a....luggage lifter, and I’m here to put ye bags on board! Mr. Spenson! And Miss Aquary! Sweet Infinity, what happened to you, Miss?”

“She was wounded during the battle with....their leader, Mr. Merrick,” Henrik explained.

“Flying crates, lassie, that is something to be proud of! Allow me to shake ye by the hand, if you won’t be minding it.” And before Bernadette could reply, he shook her hand enthusiastically and vigorously, causing her to laugh with surprise.

“Thank you, Mr. Merrick,” Bernadette said. “It’s a pleasure to see you here. Are you now working on the *Paradiso*?”

“That I am, lass, that I am,” Merrick replied. “When I heard that my young friends were boarding yonder ship, I couldn’t pass up the offer! We old men tend to get sentimental.” He chuckled. “Now here’s how we’ll do it. I’ll get the luggage, and you can carry the lassie, young man. Treat her well.”

“He’s already been doing it for the better part of a month, Mr. Merrick,” Bernadette said, beaming at Henrik. “Lavie, my sister, this is Mr. Merrick, of the Lifters’ Guild. He and his men fought valiantly beside us in Itaria, and helped us defeat Gharon, the mage who had assumed power there.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Merrick,” Lavie said.

“It’s an honour, sir,” Ryan said. “My dad always speaks highly of the Guild, especially when he’s lecturing me on the value of hard work!” He laughed.

“Mr. Merrick!” Aline said, running up to him. “Look, I’ve got one of Aunt Aline’s special sandwiches just for you, when I heard you’d be coming! You and your boys always did like them, didn’t they?”

“Arr, Miss Aline, you do know the way to a man’s heart,” Merrick said, as he grabbed the sandwich enthusiastically and began wolfing it down. “Keep that in mind, ye lasses, when you’ve got young men of your own.” He grinned at Bernadette and Lavie.

“Did you hear that, Lavie?” Ryan said, elbowing Henrik. “Though to be honest, Mr. Merrick, she’s got a lot better.”

“Thank you, Mr. Eramond,” Lavie replied, teasingly. “For a moment, I thought you were drawing inspiration from Armin Tamas!”

“It does my old heart good to see you young folks, lad,” Merrick said, fondly, looking at all of them. “Wouldn’t you agree, Skipper?”

“That it does, my friend,” Tobias Williams said, looking at Ryan and Lavie with a paternal expression. “That it does.”

“Ah, Juno!” Fossen said, looking up from his cauldron with a cheerful expression. “How did you get here so soon? I was waiting for you.”

“Thank you, old man,” Juno replied, calmly. “It is – good to see you again. And, to answer your question, the sword assisted me. Its powers – or rather, her powers – are quite remarkable.”

Fossen chuckled. “Ah, Juno, she must be very fond of you,” he said. “Saint Lyrra does not grant her gifts to ordinary men.”

“*Saint Lyrra?*” Juno said, sharply.

“Someday, she will tell you the whole story, Juno,” Fossen said. “But it will keep. I can see that you have something to tell me, first. Now out with it, boy, and speak the truth.”

“Is there anyone else with you?” Juno said, looking around the small cottage, that seemed to be the only habitation for miles around.

“Marianne and her mother are at Marcopolis, boy,” Fossen replied. “They’re entertaining the Republican Legion troops there with one of that man Tremfein’s farces, and my son, who’s captain of the garrison there, is looking after them. Perhaps you will meet him someday. But there is no danger of your being overheard, so you can speak freely, and tell me your story – the story of your failure.”

Juno groaned. “Is it that obvious, old man?” he said, shaking his head.

“I’ll ask the questions here, if you don’t mind,” Fossen replied.

And Juno began to tell his tale slowly – his investigations, his arrival on Unity Isle, the fight with the mages, the meeting with the Princess, and finally, the battle with Samath and his defeat by Ryan’s sword. Fossen listened carefully, then smiled at his disciple with affection, as a father would at a young son who had done something that was both silly and endearing.

“Good work, boy,” he said. “The adventure of your youth is over, and now it is time for you to truly follow the Wanderer’s Way – the Way where Justice and Love are intertwined in an unbroken thread.”

“What do you mean?” Juno said.

“Juno, there are failures that can teach us more than the greatest victory,” Fossen said, gently. “You have done well, despite everything, and you will do better. Now listen to me, for I have a task that requires your skills.”

“A task? But would you trust me, old master, now that I have – failed?” Juno said, bowing his head.

“Juno, no defeat is final. You are alive, and Samath is not. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, and listen to me. Not forty miles from here, there is a group of slavers, who have captured some of the men who escaped from Sir Prescott’s factories. They are few, and they will be no match for your skills, especially with that sword of yours. Defeat them, boy, and then make contact with a man called Hamid, who is an honest trader, and who has been secretly helping people escape from those wretches for years. He will guide you from there.”

“Are you serious, Fossen?” Juno replied, raising his eyebrows.

“Have you known me to joke about something as serious as slavery, boy?” Fossen said, with a smile. “Now run along, Juno. Do us proud, and don’t get into fights with Zion princes. You’re lucky to still be alive, you know. And don’t be afraid. Your sword will lead the way.

Listen to him, Juno. A Wanderer who tries to force destiny, as you and I did, will only bring misery to himself. But now, your Way has truly begun. Walk bravely, and I shall follow.

“So be it, old man,” Juno said, as he strode off purposefully, his sword in his hand. “Come, Lyrra, let us go now.”

“Here’s your room, lad,” Merrick said, as he unloaded Ryan and Lavie’s bags – which, admittedly, were rather light – on the floor of the cabin with a grin. “If ye need anything, just shout out, and this old lifter’ll come and help.”

“Thank you, Mr. Merrick,” Lavie said, handing him a tip. “If you ever get tired of working on this humongous ship, I’m sure Daddy will always have work for you!”

“Ah, you will have your joke, won’t you, lass?” Merrick said, with a loud laugh. “Now enjoy your cruise, d’ye hear me? Gharon and his friends are six feet under, as we old-timers say, and it’s time for amusement. If ye’ll excuse me, I have to see to your other friends. Toodles!”

“See you later, Mr. Merrick,” Ryan said. He sat down comfortably on his bunk, then looking around as if he had been struck by something all of a sudden. “Hey, Lavie, this is strange! This – is actually the same room I had when I travelled on this ship, all the way back last year....”

“Of course it is, Ryan,” she replied, sitting down next to him. “I asked Toby Williams to give it to us, and being a friend of your dad’s, he couldn’t refuse the favour!”

Ryan chuckled. “I ought to have guessed,” he said, shaking his head. “Sweet Infinity, it seems like – half a world away, Lavie. I – never thought I’d get off that boat alive, honestly.” He shuddered.

“Want to talk about it, Ryan?” Lavie said, sympathetically.

And, to cut a long story short, that is what he did – telling her what had happened from start to finish, in a way that he had not told even his parents. She said nothing, though she held his hand and looked at him with concern, and when he had finished, she smiled.

“It’s strange to think of how it all began, Ryan,” she said. “And to think that all that time, Daddy and I were waiting at Checkpoint Bravo, wondering what would become of you – I’ll never forget the day we were sailing back and I heard the news, Ryan. I’ll never forget...” She covered her face with her hands. “I was so grateful.....”

“Lavie, don’t cry,” Ryan said, kindly, as he offered her his handkerchief – which was, Lavie could not help noting, in much better condition than the one he had offered her when he was eleven. “If we couldn’t be together then, we’re together now, with a vengeance.” He laughed. “I guess some things are just – meant to happen at a certain time.”

“That’s right, Ryan,” she replied, warmly. “And I guess now’s the time. Here we are, you and me, sailing back to Davenport on the *Paradiso*. How does that make you feel?”

“Do you really want to know, Lavie?” Ryan said, looking at her intently.

“Let’s hear the *awful* truth!” she replied, with a laugh.

“Let me put it this way, Lavie. When I graduated from school, I thought I had it all. I was the valedictorian, I was Colonel Whitworth’s prize pupil, and I had someone whom I thought was the right girl for me.” He scowled. “I had no idea what I wanted to do next, but I was – convinced that I knew better. Better than our teachers at school, better than Dad – heck, better than you, Lavie. And yet,

somewhere, I must have had doubts. It took that cruise to start making me realize that I was just a man like any other, and that I could make some pretty huge mistakes. But even then, I didn't fully realize it, until you came all the way to *Al-Mu'afa*. And now, now that it's all over, Lavie, I feel like – I finally know. I've found the Way, because you came and showed it to me, even though I didn't deserve it. I found – something precious, that I almost lost forever, because I didn't realize it was right here all the time." He smiled. "Did that make any sense?"

Lavie, who had been looking at him with widening eyes during this little speech, flew at him and hugged him, causing him to turn a bright shade of red. "It did, Ryan – and...it makes me happy. Thank you."

"Hey, hey," Ryan said, "I think I ought to be thanking you here, Lavie. I was....blind."

"Not really, Ryan – just short-sighted, I guess!" Lavie said, affectionately. "And let's not forget that little matter of saving my life at Koroth, shall we?"

"You really know how to make a guy speechless, don't you, Lavie?" Ryan said, leaning forward. "Well, since this ship doesn't have a library, I guess we'll have to find another place to kiss..."

"What better place than here, Ryan?" Lavie said, beaming and blushing...

"Aww, Gran, so you did get to go on that cruise, after all!" Emily said, with a laugh. "That's funny!"

"Now, now, Emily," Lavie replied, with a wink. "You know me, don't you, dear? I would either have gone on that cruise, or died trying!"

"Hello there, young man," Prince Wilhelm said, looking at the young radio officer, who was typing away furiously at an old-style machine. "Would you, perchance, be a writer masquerading as a radio man?"

The man looked up with an expression of intense embarrassment. "Pardon me, Your Highness," he said. "It's just a hobby, and sometimes I get carried away with it. I am ready to send any message you wish."

Wilhelm looked at the man. He was in his late twenties, with an angular face and a small, pointed beard, whose most distinctive facial features were his thick eyebrows. Despite his youth, the resemblance he bore to the erstwhile director of Starlight Plays was striking. "Oh, don't mind me," he replied. "I don't have a particular message in mind, but I think you can help me. You're Karl Tremfein, aren't you?"

"Karl Tremfein, Junior," the man replied, with a scowl. "Son of Karl Tremfein, Senior, who'd rather see me sailing the high seas and operating a radio than doing what I love best – being a playwright. Not that he minds the theatre, but he feels his only son ought to have a steadier job. I write plays in my spare time, and keep wishing I could be more like my uncle Conrad, who gifted me his old TypeMatic when I came of age."

Wilhelm laughed. "Did you know, young Karl, that I once was in your uncle's employ?"

Karl Tremfein, Junior, stared at the Prince with a stunned expression. "How is that even possible, your Highness?" he murmured.

"It's a long story, my friend," Prince Wilhelm said, "and I might just tell it to you, but on one condition."

"I love long stories," Karl Tremfein, Junior, replied. "My ambition is to write a historical epic, like the anonymous 'Legend of Kaleb', or my uncle's play about Prince Derren and Lady Penelope. But where will I find another story of that scope, of that – grandeur, Your Highness? The age of heroes is past. Sure, I could write a play about how the Zionese and Galvenian Armies defeated the Third Way, but where's the fun in that?"

"Oh, I won't disappoint you," Wilhelm said, kindly. "We will be landing at Davenport in three weeks, and we need some way of whiling away our time aboard ship. More importantly, in two weeks, Princess Carranya will celebrate her twentieth birthday, and I wish to present her with something memorable for the occasion. I am commissioning you, Karl Tremfein, Junior, to help me with this task."

"Help you, Your Highness?" Tremfein exclaimed. "But how could I do that?"

"It is simple, my boy," Wilhelm said. "I will provide you with a story that even you would be impressed by, and you will write that play for me – a play that will rival anything your uncle has ever written. Besides this, you will direct your uncle's play, the tale of Derren and Penelope, on board the *Paradiso* – in the Starlight Theatre that once belonged to your uncle, on the Princess' birthday itself. It is, if I may say so, the opportunity of a lifetime. How does that sound to you, young Tremfein?"

Karl Tremfein's jaw dropped. "Like a dream come true, Your Highness," he whispered. "But what is this story that you speak of?"

"Let me begin at the very start, Tremfein – in a town called Davenport. Now, in this town, there lived a notable family – mother, father, and a young girl. A lovely girl, though I say so myself, and do not quote me to the Princess." Wilhelm laughed.

Tremfein laughed as well. "Does this play end with a royal wedding, Your Highness?"

"If I have my way, my good man, most definitely so. But let me continue my story. This girl had just graduated from high school, and on the day our story began, she was rather unhappy, because she had missed the chance to take a trip she'd been looking forward to...."

Tremfein listened, a satisfied smile on his face, then began to type furiously....

"Good fortune to you, Rasheed, my friend," Penelope Arnoldus said, as the Doctor's carriage stood at

the door of her home. "In a way, I am responsible for your departure, for it was at my prompting that Hieronymus refused the office that has now been offered to you."

"Think nothing of it, Penelope," Usman Rasheed replied, with a low bow. "After all, it is perhaps fated that the House of Rasheed should be embroiled in politics. Father would approve, though I wish my tenure in office is less tumultuous than his own was."

Penelope laughed as they shook hands. "Then farewell, Rasheed," she said. "On behalf of my entire household, whom you have been both a healer and a friend, I thank you. And lest I forget, I also thank you on behalf of my young friends, Ryan Eramond and Lavender Regale."

"Ah, Mr. Eramond," Rasheed said, with a smile. "I had heard of him long before I even met him, strangely. My cousin Hamid, who makes trading runs to Galvenia in between his – ahem – acts of valour, met him once in Davenport. Little did I know that he would be my patient one day, and that I would help that young woman to save him. It was an honour to help them, especially considering his future destiny."

"Are you leaving already, Doctor?" Phemie said, peeping out beside her mother. "We're all going to miss you terribly. I seem to be missing a lot of people this year – first Lavie, then Cousin Stasia, and now you. Oh, my goddess, sometimes it's hard to be cheerful." She made a face.

"Don't worry about me," Rasheed said, lifting her up in his arms. "Be of good cheer, Miss Euphemia, and take good care of your mother, until that vagabond of a Hieronymus returns. I'm only grateful that I never took him up on his offer of being a ship's doctor."

"Papa, a vagabond? Oh, my goddess, I wonder what he'd say if he heard that!" Phemie replied, with a laugh. "Thank you, Doctor Rasheed. I'll look after Mama all right! You'll always be my friend, just like Lavie was."

At precisely that moment, a second carriage came to a halt beside Rasheed's, and two people emerged – a man and a woman, both wearing the uniform of the Commonwealth Naval Authorities. "Rasheed, you old smuggler!" the man exclaimed, walking towards him, and holding out his hand. "I did hope I'd catch you before you left to plague the Commonwealth. This is good luck."

"Hieronymus, you old infidel!" Rasheed replied, affectionately, as the two men embraced. "And – is that you, Sergeant Burns?"

"Indeed it is – now, Phemie, don't choke me before I can even start speaking!" Sergeant Burns replied, as Phemie ran up to her and hugged her. "Thanks to Uncle and Sir Douglas, not to mention the Princess, I've got a transfer to the Commonwealth Navy, and we've both been given a few days' respite, Aunt Penelope," she said, happily. "Father and Mother will join us soon, if you don't object, until they can find another place to stay."

“Athena’s always welcome in our home, Anastasia,” Commander Arnoldus replied, as he drew Penelope closer to his side, “and right now, I’m inclined to be merciful even to your idiot of a father. Penelope, I’m home, and it has seldom seemed sweeter to me than it does now.”

“So are you going to end your roving ways now, Hieronymus?” Penelope said, gently.

“Ah, you never tire of that, do you, my beloved?” the Commander replied, embracing her. “Well, I think I shall have to, for they’ve now stationed me at our base in Marcopolis. Anastasia will return to Bravo, where she’ll be under the command of Ross of Galvenia, who’s just been promoted to the CNA. But for now, she’ll be with us for a while.”

“Papa!” Phemie cried out with joy, as he bent down to pick her up. “Oh, Papa, you’re back at last!”

“Yes, I am, my little second-in-command,” Arnoldus said, gently. “So how have you and your mother been running the ship here?”

“We’re just saying goodbye to Doctor Rasheed, Papa,” Euphemia said, “and we were planning to visit the base tonight! It seems there’s a man from Galvenia who puts on funny plays, and we thought we’d go and watch one of them, to cheer us up a little! But now we don’t need to” – she kissed him – “because you’re back, Papa!”

“A funny play?” Arnoldus laughed. “You know, Phemie, that’s not such a bad idea. Let’s all go along, shall we? I haven’t had the chance to take you all out in almost a year, and Infinity knows I need to laugh a little, too!”

“And are you really going to stay with us now, Papa?” she went on.

“Certainly, my daughter,” he replied, “until the Commonwealth sends me away again, which I hope will be some time away. And while I’ll always be a sailor at heart, there really is no place like home – especially this one.”

“I envy you, Hieronymus,” Rasheed said, as he climbed into his carriage and they said their final farewells, and as he took one last look at the Arnoldus family. “Wish me luck, old friend, for the Commonwealth is no easy proposition.”

“Goodness!” Emily Regale said softly, waking up with a start, and blinking at the sun as it streamed in through the window of her room. “Our children will all be home soon! Dear me, I do need to get things in shape for their return!”

She looked at Sigmund, who was fast asleep beside her, affectionately. “Poor Sigmund,” she went on, with a smile. “I’ll have to tell him quite soon, but he’s been so busy helping out with Mrs. Socius’ commission that he’s dead tired. It was the least I could do for Jeannelle, though – her father and Father

always were good friends, and I owe it to her husband's memory. I wonder how he'll react when he finds out, though!"

Emily giggled – a light-hearted, girlish giggle that would have normally sounded strange in a woman of forty, but which was strangely fitting given her current situation. Dressing rapidly and quietly, she headed downstairs, where she was greeted by a smiling Carmen.

"Good morning, ma'am!" Carmen said, cheerfully. "Goodness, you're up early today."

"I'd best be up and about now, and let Sigmund sleep a little longer," Emily replied with a wink. "Poor man, he's had his share of sleepless nights over Lavie, and over the election – and he'll have them again, soon enough!"

Carmen laughed. "Have you told him yet, ma'am?" she replied. "We're all so happy for both of you – Juan, Mother and I, not to forget Father Joaquim."

"Not yet," Emily replied, "and thank you, Carmen. But I think today would be the right time. I wonder how Lavender will take the news, though!"

"Miss Lavie? Oh, she'll be charmed, ma'am," Carmen replied. "Just think of it! We'll be doing a lot of celebrating in the days to come, here at Davenport! The return of our heroes, my own wedding, and then..."

"Emily?" Sigmund stood on the landing, blinking and adjusting his spectacles. "Sweet Infinity, what are you women doing awake so early?"

Emily flushed – much to Sigmund's surprise – and smiled at him. "Er, good morning, dear," she said, in a rather embarrassed tone. "Carmen and I were just discussing her wedding plans, that's all."

"Wedding plans?" Sigmund smiled at his housekeeper benevolently. "You're lucky that your young man didn't have to go to Unity Isle, Carmen. But it is good of you to wait till Lavie comes back before holding the ceremony. We're all very happy for you, of course."

"Thank you, Mr. Regale," Carmen said, with a bow. "But actually, that's not the only thing we were discussing."

"Carmen!" Emily said, with a laugh. "Give poor Sigmund some time to wake up before we break the news to him, you silly dear!"

"News? What are you talking about, Emily?" Sigmund said, surprised by the excited look on her face.

Emily crept up to him, and whispered a few words in his ear, which had a singular effect on her husband of twenty years, the strong-willed founder of Regale Enterprises. He stared open-mouthed at her for a long while, then turned red himself, then opened his eyes wide, all traces of sleep obliterated.

“You’re joking, aren’t you?” he whispered.

“Not at all, dear,” she replied, taking his hand in hers.

“But – Good heavens, Emily, this is...Sweet Infinity, are you absolutely sure?”

“As sure as any woman could be, Sigmund,” Emily replied, with a wink.

Sigmund felt pleurably light-headed, and remained silent for a while, as a smile slowly broke out upon his face. “Emily, my darling.....this is quite, quite unbelievable. It’s like – a sign, a sign that all our troubles are over, somehow.”

“Now don’t say that, Sigmund,” Emily said, with a laugh. “Our troubles are just beginning, if you can remember how things went the last time around!”

“Good heavens, Mrs. Regale, ma’am,” Carmen said, hiding her laughter behind her cap, “I wonder what Miss Lavie would say if she heard that.”

“Lavie?” Sigmund smiled at Emily fondly. “I’m sure she’ll be too delighted to object to any of my little jokes, Carmen. And I’m sure she and Bernadette will do a wonderful job helping us out, since neither of us is getting any younger!”

“Indeed, they will, Sigmund,” she replied, her voice sounding slightly choked as he drew her closer to him. “But at this moment, dear, I feel quite young again.”

“So do I, Emily,” Sigmund replied, affectionately. “So do I. If there’s an Infinity up there, all I can say is that, every now and then, he does great things, even for those who least deserve it.”

“You know, Sigmund,” Emily said, her expression radiant, “you always did have a nice way of putting things. We already received a wonderful gift from Him when we had Lavie - and now, we have another...”

“*The War for Galvenian Independence*,” Thora Raienji read out, with a smile on her face, “*was finally won.*”

There was a hearty round of applause, even from Captain Burnfist, who had been indignant when she had heard of Wilhelm’s plan to stage Tremfein’s drama on board.

“Here ends our play,” Prince Wilhelm said, stepping forward and taking a bow. “And on behalf of all of us – the crew and the passengers of the *Paradiso* – I take this opportunity to wish the Flower of Lorean, Princess Carranya, a very happy birthday! May she live long and prosper.”

“Hurrah!” was the enthusiastic reply from everyone, starting with Toby Williams and ending with the cabin crew.

“Hey, Burnfist,” Armin said, elbowing her in the ribs, “I thought you weren’t going to clap!”

“I’m clapping for the acting and the script, raccoon boy,” she replied, embarrassed, “and not for the antics of Johan the Mad!”

“And to think that Wilhelm played the role of Prince Derren,” Armin went on, ruthlessly. “I wonder what old Johan would think of that!”

“Well, it could hardly be Ryan, Mr. Armin!” Aline said, with a chuckle. “Miss Lavie wouldn’t have stood for it!”

“Miss Lavie was pretty awesome as Princess Amanda,” Baldur said, climbing down from the stage, where he had enthusiastically played the role of one of the Zion soldiers killed by Prince Derren. “Especially when she talked about the Zion being her brothers. I know it’s supposed to be sarcastic, but it’s true, isn’t it?”

“I think you mean *ironic*, Baldur, my boy,” Freya said, affectionately. “You really need to polish up your Common. But I will agree with you on Lavie’s performance. Ryan was quite amusing as the innkeeper, too.”

“He looked quite ridiculous with that wolf mask,” Burnfist said, laughing into her glove. “To think that the Prince once wore a mask like that! He looked almost as absurd as Armin.”

“Not funny, Becky,” Armin said, pointing at Ryan – who was removing his mask – and laughing. “Pirate girl did a good job with the songs, too.”

“Those were a nice addition, to be sure,” Thora observed. “Her role as the widow with her roses was a small one, but it added a lot to the play, and young Tremfein’s giving her a singing part was an inspired decision. She sings like one of the Five Angels, though her voice needs a bit of training.”

“I thought Princess Carranya stole the show as Lady Penelope, though,” Aline said, enthusiastically. “She was so lovely! I burst into tears during that scene where Derren leaves her, and she said she’d never understand. Poor Princess. I’m sure her ancestors must be looking down from Paradise right now and cheering, don’t you, Mr. Henrik?”

Henrik, removing his Galvenian guard’s costume, was climbing down from the stage accompanied by Bernadette, who was removing her wig. “Quite so, Aline,” he said. “I do wish I’d seen the original performance with Ryan, especially the part where he kisses her!”

“Shut up, Henrik,” Ryan said, affectionately, putting the wolf’s mask on Henrik’s head. “Here, wear my mask as punishment for saying that!”

Lavie, still in her regalia as Princess Amanda, giggled. "Oh, don't worry, Henrik," she said, winking at Ryan. "Carranya told me he was quite remarkable in his role, though Wilhelm outdid him!"

"Very funny, Lavie," Ryan replied. "My, aren't you a sight, though. You look almost as dazzling as you did during that cricket match in Lorean!"

"Oh, you charmer," Lavie replied, slipping her hand into his. "Look, Ryan, here come our hero and heroine!"

"Who only shone thanks to the greatness of the supporting cast," Carranya said, smiling at her friends as they crowded round her. "Bernadette, your rendition of that song, 'Six Months Without You', almost reduced me to tears."

"Almost?" Prince Wilhelm said, with a laugh. "Come now, my flower, be honest with yourself."

Bernadette flushed and looked up at Henrik, who was looking at her admiringly as he handed her a walking-stick. "Thank you so much, Princess," she replied. "I was just telling dear Henrik that I would take up music when I returned to King's College, and your kind words have encouraged me further."

"And that's not all, Bernadette," Prince Wilhelm said, removing his silver stage armour. "I've asked Tremfein to write another play, and we'll see it in all the theatres of Lorean soon if I have my way! The only trouble is, he needs a little help with the songs, and I thought you could help him out there."

"It would be an honour, Your Highness," Bernadette replied. "What, if I may ask, is this new play about?"

"Us," Wilhelm said, with a laugh.

"Us?" Ryan said, incredulously.

"All of us, Mr. Eramond," the Prince went on. "A story such as ours must not be allowed to die – and if it is fated to become legendary, let us at least set the record straight, insofar as this is possible. I have commissioned Karl Tremfein, Junior, to write down our story in the form of a play. He will, of course, be interviewing you to verify certain details, and Bernadette will have to help him with the songs, but he is almost done. I look forward to seeing it at Acemel, at the Dances of Malava."

"The Dances?" Baldur said, throwing up his arms. "Hooray! Won't that be a sight, Mother?"

"Indeed it will, my boy," Freya replied, with a laugh.

"And what's the title of this play, Prince Wilhelm?" Lavie asked.

"Tremfein intends to call it *Romancing the Way*," Wilhelm replied. "I had originally wanted him to call it *Love and War*, but that was the subtitle of Tremfein's *Derren and Penelope*, which we have just enacted – so we shall have to settle for his choice. It has a certain charm to it."

"It sounds cool," Armin said. "Only, you oughta give me a bigger part, Wolfie. I could play a soldier of fortune, who takes a shy Zionese mage girl on the adventure of a lifetime, hunting down a Memory Crystal! Henrik could be the villain, he looks goofy enough."

"Henrik a villain?" Bernadette protested. "The very idea!"

"If you want adventure," Captain Burnfist said, showing him her fist, "I've got a trip to the stars waiting for you right here."

"Wow!" Lavie said. "That's a pretty awesome idea, Prince Wilhelm. I'm sure it'll be a hit, and soon, young Tremfein will be as famous as his goof of an uncle!"

"Indeed he will. Ah, here is our author," Wilhelm said, introducing an embarrassed-looking Tremfein. "How is your work advancing, young Karl?"

"Pretty good, Your Highness," Tremfein replied, shuffling through a large bunch of papers. "I'd want a few more details from Mr. Eramond and Miss Regale about what happened in the Republic, as well as a first-hand account from Mr. Spenson and Miss Aquary about Itaria, but the basic outline is all set down, and we've got some of the songs worked out already. Can anyone here help me out with the music? I need a piano player, just to get the melodies right."

"Count me in, Mr. Tremfein!" Lavie said, enthusiastically. "And this time, it'll be me and not Carranya who gets to kiss Ryan, so I'm already a fan of yours!"

Carranya laughed. "My dear friends," she said, softly, "this is the best birthday I've ever had in my life, though I'm so far away from home. I thank you from the bottom of my heart, and especially you, Mr. Tremfein."

"Oh, thank Prince Wilhelm, Your Highness," Tremfein replied, bowing low. "It was all his idea, to surprise you for your twentieth birthday. And I must say I've had the time of my life, as well!"

"Thank you, Francis," Carranya said, flushing as she embraced him warmly. "I just....don't know what to say, really."

"To borrow a line from young Eramond," Wilhelm replied, "Smile for me, Carranya! Just smile!"

And let us draw the curtain on this scene by saying that, if a painter could have captured Carranya's smile on canvas, he would have been a wealthy man several times over.

It was a remarkably fine morning when a young sailor, on lookout duty, suddenly sprang up from his post and began waving his arms excitedly.

"The *Paradiso*, lads! The *Paradiso's* in sight! Get your fiddles out!"

It was a somewhat superfluous announcement, given that news of the *HMS Paradiso* had arrived by radio an hour earlier, but there is something about word of mouth that is more compelling than a disembodied voice on the air. The men at the docks, who until then had been going about their duties quite nonchalantly, suddenly rose and began bustling around with great excitement. The first strains of “The Sun Rose Over Lorean” and “Flower of the Kingdom” could be heard, and a crowd began to gather.

“Ryan!” Sheila Eramond said, running towards the edge of the water. “Ryan’s home at last, Emily!”

Emily Regale, who was already waiting there, with Sigmund standing protectively close to her, beamed back. “I know, Sheila. It’s strange, isn’t it? It’s almost like the old days, when you and I would go wandering in the park to play, and my father and yours would be waiting outside the Lancaster house for us to return. And now, here we are, waiting for our own children to return.” She laughed.

“I’m very glad for you too, Emily,” Sheila said, with a wink. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you, Sheila,” Emily said, looking out at the sea and taking her friend’s hand. “Things have changed a lot in the past one year. We may never see another year like it again, not for a long time, but in a way, everything worked out for the best. Everything.” She leaned closer to Sigmund, who smiled at her fondly. “I still can’t believe what we’ve all lived through, but I’m grateful.”

“So am I, Emily,” Sheila said, gently, then turned and waved as she spotted her own husband, walking slowly up to them. “My, Theo, you are taking things easy today, aren’t you?”

“No point in hurrying, Sheila,” Theodore Eramond said, as the *Paradiso* appeared on the horizon, its sails fluttering in the afternoon breeze. “Here they come!”

The next few hours were an excited blur, as the ship arrived at the docks of Davenport, and the Princess appeared on the deck – surrounded by a gleeful army of Raienjis of all ages and genders.

“Good Lord, Sigmund,” Emily exclaimed, with a laugh, “who are those people with the Princess?”

“Perhaps she’s found some of her long-lost relatives on Unity Isle,” Sigmund joked.

Music played, sailors and their sweethearts danced, and everyone – right down to Mayor Saunders, who watched the proceedings with a satisfied smile – was merry. When the Princess was joined by Prince Wilhelm, the cheers grew even louder. No one cared that he was the Prince of Zion, or the son of Charlemagne – all they could see were two young people who were as obviously in love as the humblest shore-girl and fisherman of Davenport, and they rejoiced for their sake. Besides, Zionsese or not, Wilhelm had saved the Princess’ life, and the Princess was very dear to the people of Davenport, ever since that day she had first landed there, a year ago.

Long were the celebrations – filled with music and dance, joy and good cheer, tears and laughter. Of the reunions of our friends with their families and their loved ones, and with the entire city of Davenport, little needs to be said, except that they were all that could have been wished for.

If there is one complaint that could be made, it was that it all ended too soon – for Carranya and Wilhelm now had to set sail to Lorean, and then proceed from there to Caledonia, accompanied by an escort of both Zionese and Galvenian soldiers.

As the Princess spoke her last words to her beloved people, and bade them farewell, the crowd slowly dispersed, their hearts and minds full of something that could not be described, but which they would never have missed for the whole world.

Finally, Lavie was left standing at the docks, her parents at some distance behind, accompanied by Bernadette, Henrik, Jonas Aquary, and Constance Juno. The news she had just heard from her mother and father had surprised and excited her, and it had still not fully sunk in. As she waved goodbye to her friend Carranya, who was now returning to her quarters hand in hand with Wilhelm, a tear slowly rolled down her cheek, though she was still smiling.

“Boo!” a voice called out from behind.

“Wh – Oh, Ryan!” Lavie said, turning around and laughing. “What’s up, you goof?”

“I just asked for permission to say goodbye, at least for now, Lavie,” he replied, affectionately. “I’ve got to be part of the Princess’ escort, being a corporal and all that, and from there on, I and my men will probably have to move to the border, just in case any over-zealous loyalists make trouble for us.”

“Loyalists?” Lavie said, a little apprehensively.

“Oh, people who aren’t happy at the idea of Carranya and Wilhelm getting on so well,” he explained. “It’s probably not a big deal, but in any case, both we and the Zion are staying alert, just in case.”

“I guess that’s the life of a soldier,” Lavie said, taking his hand. “But I’m not complaining, Ryan. I know you’ll do the right thing, and I believe in you. I’m sure Carranya will be glad that you’re there to defend her. I’m glad too, Ryan, because Carranya’s been a true friend to me ever since we first met in Davenport.”

“That’s true, Lavie, and thank you,” Ryan replied, looking at her fondly. “I don’t think we’ll ever forget the friends we made on this journey. Perhaps it’s a lesson to us all, that Terra needs every kind of person if she wants to be happy – the scholar and the saint, the Emperor and the Queen, the mage and the goofball, and even us – the soldier and the dragon.” He laughed.

“Dragon? Very funny, buster,” Lavie replied, giving him a friendly punch on the shoulder. “But I agree with you, Ryan. Someone like Bernadette is worth more than a world of sermons, though Professor Marlborough’s a pretty cool guy, too!”

“Speaking of cool old guys, what about your mum and dad?” Ryan said, chuckling. “How do you feel about becoming an elder sister, Lavie?”

“Ohmygosh, I still don’t know!” Lavie said, her cheeks turning a deep red. “But Mom and Daddy are so happy about it that I guess I’m glad too, Ryan. I wonder if it’ll be a little brother or a sister, though!”

“My money’s on a boy, Lavie,” Ryan said. “Regale and Son. That’s how those old business houses all keep running, don’t they? But whoever it is, they’ll have a cool big sister to look up to. And while we’re on the topic, what about Bernadette’s dad and Mrs. Juno? People do crazy things in wartime, that’s for sure!” He laughed.

“Indeed, Ryan!” Lavie replied, brightly. “But Bernadette’s actually very happy. She was sort of feeling guilty about leaving her dad alone, when she left for college and then for Itaria, and Mrs. Juno’s a nice lady, from what she says. I wonder what Juno would think of it, though!”

“Oh, never mind him,” Ryan said. “Someday, I guess our own kids will look at the two of us and have a laugh about the crazy things we did when we were their age. I’m not grumbling, though, Lavie – I’d do it all again, if I could, as long as I was sure you’d be with me. Heck, I wish they still allowed women archers to join the Galvenian Army.”

“Thank you, Ryan,” Lavie replied, softly. “And stay safe, okay? I know I can’t tell you *not* to be a hero, given your ancestry, but don’t take too many risks. I’ll be waiting for you, either here or at Lorean. You know that, right?”

“I do, Lavie,” Ryan replied. “I’m only sorry we can’t fight together this time, but who knows? We may have to again, some time in the future. And we work much better fighting the bad guys than fighting each other, for sure!”

Lavie laughed and squeezed his hand. “That’s true! So when will I see you again, Ryan?” she said.

“That, I can’t say, Lavie,” he replied, gently holding her face in his hands. “The past is important – you’ve taught me that. But the future is also important. Someday, our own children are going to live in the world we’ve made, and if I can do anything to make that world a little safer, or a little better, I’ll try. And I know you will too, Lavie. Together, we can build – something precious. That’s our Way, Lavie – yours and mine. But I’ll be back as soon as I can. I promise.”

Lavie turned red, and looked at him intently. “Ryan Eramond,” she began, excitedly...

Ryan smiled, and gathered her into his arms.

“...I love you,” she said, leaning contentedly against him.

“I love you too, Lavie Regale,” he replied. “And while Galvenia may be greater than us both, it won’t keep us apart, not for long.” They remained together, standing at the edge of the gangplank as the sun began to set, before he released her, and made his way back to the *Paradiso*, stopping at the end to wave goodbye.

She remained at the edge of the water, waving and smiling, as the ship slowly receded from her view...

“And you...all lived happily ever after, didn’t you, Gran?” Emily said, softly, as Lavie gently wiped her eyes with a corner of her shawl.

“All things considered, Emily,” Lavie said, a distant, fond smile on her face, “I’m quite certain we did.”

EPILOGUE: THE TIES THAT BIND

“So what happened next, Gran?” Emily said, a curious expression on her face, as Lavie gently lowered her onto the ground, and began rummaging around in a roomy closet, finally emerging, with a triumphant look on her face, and holding an album bound in faded green velvet.

“I knew you would ask me that, darling,” Lavie said, fondly, “so I thought you might like to look at this! It’s a collection of all sorts of odds and ends from our lives, from the day Ryan left for the border, till about a year ago. I’ve been meaning to show it to you for a long time, Emily.”

“Wow!” Emily said, as she climbed back on Lavie’s lap, opening the album carefully, and pointing to a photo of four people standing outside a cave on an island, looking tired but victorious. “That looks like another adventure! Where was this, Gran?”

“Oh, that’s quite a story, Emily,” Lavie said, patting her on the head. “You see, near the end of Ryan’s commission in the army, Princess Carranya and Prince Wilhelm were about to be married, and both their countries were abuzz with the news! Unfortunately, some people weren’t too happy about it...”

“Why, Gran?” Emily said, puzzled. “Aren’t we and the Zionese friends?”

“Oh, I forget you’re a child of the Imperium, sweetie,” Lavie said, with a laugh. “Well, back in 303, things were rather different, you know. There were some people in Galvenia who didn’t want us to be close to the Zion, and they wanted to make things difficult for Wilhelm and Carranya. Fortunately, our royal friends had us to call upon! This picture was taken at Landorin, Emily, soon after the four of us – Grandpa and I, Henrik and Bernadette – had managed to set things right!”

“Landorin?” Emily laughed. To her, Landorin was the Imperium’s largest amusement park, a huge old castle filled with all sorts of thrills, rides, and visual effects, and a favourite destination for children all over Arlia. “Were the bad guys hiding in the roller-coaster?”

“Oh, dear,” Lavie said, with a chuckle. “I keep forgetting what Landorin has become these days. Well, in those days, Emily, it was quite different. In fact, many refused to go near the Landorin Stretch, saying that it was cursed...”

i. The Landorin Incident (C.Y. 303)

“Landorzan?” Henrik said, looking up sharply at Professor Marlborough. “That’s where the Man of Regret was born, wasn’t it?” They were in the lounge of the Department of History at King’s College, where he had summoned them with a wink and a nod.

“Or Landorin, if you trust the oldest manuscripts,” Marlborough replied. “No one knows exactly where it is. The wildest theories state that Landorin, Janwen, Estrana and Korothe are all the same place, but I seriously doubt it. You’ve been to Korothe after all, haven’t you, my children?”

“How could I forget?” Bernadette said, with a smile, as she closed the dusty book in front of her – *The Landorin Stretch: Myth and Fact* – and looked at her teacher. “I’m afraid my sister Lavie has less than fond memories of that unfortunate town, though.”

“Very funny, Bernadette,” Lavie said, looking at the ring on her finger – a gift from Ryan, who had recently returned from the Republic, where he had worked as part of the Galvenian attaché’s military detachment – with a large smile on her face. “I certainly didn’t enjoy having a rock fall on me, that’s certain, but hey – in a way, it helped Ryan and I to grow closer, so I shouldn’t complain!”

“The greatest misfortunes are but milestones along the Way, for those with whom the Infinity is pleased,” Father Marlborough quoted. “Old Aramondrius is always pithy.”

“So what’s up with Landorzan or Landorin, Father?” Henrik said. “You’ve assigned it to us for our archaeology seminar, I know, but I suspect there’s something more to it.”

“How well you know me, Mr. Spenson,” Marlborough replied with a chuckle. “Let us see if any of you can guess what I am leading up to.”

“Let me try!” Lavie said, enthusiastically. “First, there was that demonstration during the Princess’ visit to Darington, when a group of people claimed that she was dishonouring the memory of Minister Sheffield. Hmph! Sheffield was a traitor and a jerk, who tried to kill the Queen! Next, there was that mysterious letter printed in the Davenport Times and the Voice of Zion by an anonymous group, claiming that they were ‘older than Janwen’ and that Wilhelm and Carranya were ‘violating an ancient interdiction’ by deciding to marry. I’m sure it must be all connected, somehow.” She shivered. “I thought we were done with the Third Way, but now, I’m not so sure....”

“Fifty points to you, Miss Lavender,” Marlborough said, with a firm nod as he replaced his glasses on his nose. “But I would be a poor mentor if I did not reassure you all: this is not the work of the Third Way. Both Raienji and I are assured of this. This is a group of political agitators and hedge wizards...”

“Hedge wizards?” Bernadette said, with a laugh. “What on Terra are they?”

“Mages with relatively weak powers, who turn to a life of crime, or become mercenaries, my dear Bernadette,” Marlborough replied. “The term was coined by Kaleb the Journeyman, based on a legendary tale of a wizard who tried to charm a hedge into becoming a Lightning Elemental barrier at the command of a Meldian warlord, but ended up frying himself instead.”

“Frying himself? Oh, dear, that sounds like the way I used to cook,” Lavie said, with a laugh. “So where are these hedge wizards from?”

“They are probably mercenaries who have lived in the Republic since the days of Inderness, and are now selling their skills to the ‘Galvenian Supremacists’, as the late Sheffield’s followers call themselves,” a man observed, walking into the room and smoothing his hair down. “Good afternoon, Marlborough. I see you’ve already started briefing our friends, here.”

“Professor Raienji!” Lavie exclaimed, holding out her hand to him. “Have you come down to see Daddy again? It’s great to see you!”

“Indeed, Miss Regale,” Hidoki Raienji replied, with a courtly bow and a handshake. “While Sigmund and I have enjoyed renewing our friendship – and young Victor is always a pleasure to be with – I’m afraid that my errand here is a more serious one. I have just received a message from Baldur that confirms my suspicions, and there is little time to waste.”

“I must agree with you on my little cousin, Professor,” Bernadette said, beaming at him. “He is a joy, certainly. Wouldn't you say so, Lavie, my sister?”

“Of course!” Lavie said, with a laugh, thinking affectionately of her younger brother, who was her junior by eighteen years. “He’s a charmer, though he’s not yet two!”

“So what’s cooking, Professor?” Henrik said, with a frown. “I know the Galvenian Supremacists have a small and fanatical following, and that Breckenridge has worked hard to keep them in check, but what’s all this about mages and Landorin?”

“It is simple, young man,” Hidoki Raienji replied. “Do you remember that, when you fought Samath of the Third Way, he mentioned that his allies had planted rods of the El Metal in concealed locations across Terra?”

“I remember that,” Lavie said, making a face. “Fortunately, Carranya put his ‘Harvester of Souls’ on the junk heap, where it belongs!”

Marlborough laughed. “Dear me, Miss Lavender, that is a lovely way of describing it, if a little prosaic.”

“Well, two of those ‘concealed’ rods have already been found – I’m afraid Samath’s followers were none too bright. One was found in the Palace of Gyrus itself, below a crypt, and another was discovered by Itarian exorcists in a sepulchre beneath the Cathedral of Lorenza. Both have been inactivated. But the one in Zion is what concerns us now, my friends,” Raienji went on. “My son Baldur, who is now on a tour in the Republic with the Commonwealth Forces, received an encoded message stating that a group of mages was trying to activate it, which would cause an outbreak of sickness in the Empire. Without the Harvester or the demons, such a sickness would not lead to death, but it would certainly cast a pall over the approaching nuptials of Wilhelm and Carranya.”

“That’s despicable!” Lavie said, a red gleam appearing in her eyes. “Do we know where the metal rod is, Professor?”

“Fortunately, we have a clue. One of the hedge wizards, who has a Journeyman ancestor, defected to us when he learned about the involvement of the Galvenian Supremacists. Unfortunately, his friends had him killed when they found out about his betrayal, but he was able to pass on enough information before they could silence him. He was quite clear that the conductor was in Landorin.”

“That’s ‘cool’, Raienji, as our young friends would say,” Marlborough said with a deep laugh. “But where is Landorin?”

“We know a few things about Landorin, Marlborough, that you may not know,” Raienji replied. “For one, remember your Holy Book. The Man of Regret, his family, and some of his acquaintances were all born there. It was the site of a massacre, by a man who was possessed by the Phantom. And it was not more than a week’s journey on foot from Janwen and Estrana, which all archaeologists agree are in the southern part of Zion.”

“That’s interesting, Professor,” Bernadette said. “Father told me that, for a long time, no one lived in Landorin; it was considered ill-fated because of its association with the demons and the Man of Regret. However, he’d heard from his Aquary ancestors that it was located close to the Zion-Galvenia border.”

“Exactly,” Raienji said, with a pleased expression. “How unfortunate that it is Marlborough, and not I, who has you as a pupil, Miss Aquary. Because of the curse on Landorin, it is perhaps the most logical location for a cursed object such as the one we seek. But there is another reason why our Galvenian friends” – he laughed – “have chosen Landorin.”

“Because it’s now part of Galvenia? Do they want to use a base in Galvenia to spread the disease to the Zion?” Lavie asked.

“You are burning, as children would say,” Raienji replied. “Correct me if I am wrong, Miss Regale, but is it not true that you and the Princess are particularly close friends?”

“Yes, indeed,” Lavie replied. “For all the evils of the Crisis, it brought me closer to many whom I now hold very dear: Daddy, Carranya, my sister Bernadette – and Ryan, of course!” She laughed.

“Very good,” Professor Raienji said. “If you are in Carranya’s confidence, surely she has told you about the plans she and Wilhelm have for a certain town, which has caused much heartburn to both our nations in the past.”

“Ohmygosh!” Lavie exclaimed. “You mean....”

“Darington,” Marlborough replied, with a grave expression on his face. “Confound it, Raienji, I ought to have figured that out myself. What is the Princess doing at Darington, Miss Lavender?”

“She and Wilhelm are constructing a summer palace there, where they will spend their honeymoon,” Lavie said, with a smile. “The project has the blessing of both Emperor Charlemagne and Prime Minister Breckenridge, and Daddy’s firm is helping out with the actual construction.”

Henrik whistled. “Pretty cool idea, Lavie,” he replied. “Of course our friends the Supremacists would love to strike at Darington, if they’d got wind of a plan like that. But how can we be sure that Landorin is in Darington?”

“Therein hangs a tale,” Raienji said, “and fortunately, the only person alive who knows the truth has confided it to us. You might know her, Miss Regale.”

“Her?” Lavie said, then rose from her chair, her arms outstretched, as her own teacher, Professor Aline Sheldon, entered the room, her glasses askew, her green hair in a tangle, but with a broad grin on her face.

“Fina!” Aline said, laughing, as she and her student embraced. “Am I on time? I’m quite preoccupied with one thing and another, including your pre-doctoral work!” Her glasses fell from her face, and Marlborough retrieved them with a laugh.

“Oh, thank you, kind sir,” Aline said, shaking his hand. “Now sit down, children, because Aunt Aline has a story to tell you! Is Mr. Ryan here yet?”

“Ryan?” Lavie said, surprised. “Isn’t he at Checkpoint Alpha, receiving the dignitaries for Queen Katarina’s birthday party?”

“He was, my little student, but he’s now been called to help us out! Isn’t the Princess a darling, Miss Fina? She’s almost as cute as that reaction we observed last week in the lab, isn’t she?”

“Lavie, not Fina,” Lavie said, good-humouredly. “And yes, it was pretty uncanny to see energy appearing, or at least seeming to appear, out of nowhere! It was almost like magic, except that we know why it happens. But is Ryan really on his way here, Aline?”

“Hello there!” Ryan called out, cheerfully, as he entered the room, still in his Sergeant’s uniform. “Sorry to be the last to arrive, Lavie, but hey, someone’s got to be last, and besides, I still had some stuff to clear up at the Palace. So what’s cooking?”

“Only a chocolate cake, Ryan,” Bernadette said, pointing to a covered platter on the table. “Lavie and I baked one just in case. It’s fortunate you’re here to enjoy it!”

“Thanks, both of you,” Ryan replied, sitting down next to Lavie. “So what’s this about Darington and Landorzan, Professor Raienji? Prince Wilhelm’s already told me a little, but he asked me to contact you for the straight dope.”

“Landorin, young Ryan,” Hidoki Raienji replied. “‘Landorzan’ is a distortion, obtained from the ramblings of the Itarian Saint Lyrre during a fit of madness. And I believe that, before I say anything further, Dr. Sheldon has something to tell us.”

“Ooh, yes!” Aline said, removing her glasses. “Now listen carefully, children, and hold on to your hankies, because this is rather a sad story. It goes back to the time of the annexation of Darington. Why did Charlemagne do such a mean thing, Mr. Hidoki?”

"I have no idea," Professor Raienji said, apologetically. "Perhaps the Hohenzollern blood in him was coming to the surface."

"Anyway, at that time, I was much younger and prettier, Miss Lavie," Aline said, with a wink. "Perhaps not as pretty as you, but I certainly wasn't the mess I am now!" She looked disconsolately at her lab coat, which was stained by the results of recent experiments, and sighed, then brightened rapidly. "At that time, I was engaged to a Lieutenant in the Galvenian Army, whose platoon was sent to Darington to check the Emperor's incursion. His name was Bruce, Miss Fina. Bruce Stone. His mother and father were innkeepers in Lorean, poor dears. I still visit his dear mother when I have the time. Poor Ruth, she misses him almost as much as I do."

"I believe we've met," Henrik said, surprised. "Remember the inn we stayed at when we went in search of Juno, Bernadette? That must have been her."

"Indeed, Henrik," Bernadette said, affectionately. "Goodness, that was our first adventure together!"

"How nice! Anyway, Miss Bernadette, Bruce and his men had been asked to investigate a warehouse near the border – the Intelligence men suspected that it was being used by spies! I would've been terrified, but Bruce was always the brave one among the two of us. Between you and me, though," – Aline lowered her voice confidentially, and looked at Henrik – "he was rather scared of marsh lizards! Now isn't that funny, Mr. Henrik?"

"I don't care much for heights myself, Aline," Henrik replied, with a laugh. "So I can sympathize with your fiancé. Poor man, he missed out on a lot – your sandwiches, your perpetual good humour, and your uncanny way of phrasing things. Not to forget your nursing skills!"

"Oh, that's sweet of you!" Aline replied, blushing. "Anyway, Bruce's commanding officer sent him along with his men to comb the warehouse – aren't these military terms funny, Mr. Hidoki? Bruce used to like my messy hair, you know. I've never been able to comb it right! When he did, he came across three men who seemed scared out of their wits."

"Who were they?" Lavie asked.

"They claimed to be Zion agents, who were too afraid to continue with their task. Bruce captured them and brought them back to the Galvenian camp, where they told him a strange story! It seems they'd been asked to set up radio receivers in the warehouse to help the Zion army, but the locals frightened them, telling them that there was a series of cursed tunnels under the warehouse, and that no one went near it! Suspecting that this was a story made up to dissuade them, they began exploring the tunnels, and found out that it was no story."

"What do you mean, Aline?" Professor Marlborough said, gently.

Aline took a letter from one of the pockets of her coat and unfolded it, reading the words with a smile on her face. "Dear Bruce wrote such nice letters, Miss Lavie," she replied. "In one of the last letters I

received from him, he told me all about it! Apparently, under the warehouse, they found signs that people had once lived there, in caves and tunnels. There were a number of tombs, and statues of dead children and their skeletons! Ugh!”

“Ugh, indeed!” Lavie said, shuddering. “Was it a summoning pit, like the one Bernadette found in Itaria?”

“Not quite, Miss Fina,” Aline said, in ominous tones. “They claimed that they heard voices, and ran away as soon as they can, but Bruce was always unafraid of such things. He thought the Zion were being superstitious, or lying to hide something, so he took his own men in there. They found evidence of a human settlement, though it was a nomadic one! People had lived in the caves, Miss Fina. It was a place called the Landorin Stretch, according to the carvings he found. They also found several stone slabs with inscriptions. Knowing that I could help him, Bruce asked me to contact a historian, and I put him in touch with an Itarian scholar, who was at King’s College with me. His name was Father McMillan, and he was just a little older than us. He immediately realized that they were onto something big, and he came down to Darington with some students of his own, under military escort.”

“Unfortunately, in the meantime, things had worsened between Galvenia and the Empire. Fighting had broken out, and the Zion had moved more troops to the border. We were caught on the wrong foot, and most of the border defences were cut down. Bruce and his men had to move from the town of Darington to the front lines, and two days later, the Zion forces broke through the Galvenian line, and made for the town. Bruce's platoon was deployed to defend the inhabitants who lived near the border, but they were outnumbered by the Zion infantry. They opened heavy fire with their cannon, and he....” She began to cry, silently.

“There, there, Aline,” Lavie said, gently, patting her on the back. “He must have been a very brave man, for them to entrust him with such a desperate task.”

“Ooh, he was, Fina!” Aline said, beaming despite her red eyes. “He was braver than Mr. Ryan and Mr. Henrik, though I say so myself! Anyway, before he died, he handed over documents that he had found at Landorin to Father McMillan. Father was very kind, and he made use of his status as a non-combatant – Itarian priests are protected, thanks to the old Itarian-Zion Concordat – to bring Bruce's body back to me. I was staying with his mother at Lorean. I've been loyal to the Church ever since, even if I don't agree with all that they say.” She shivered.

“I'm sorry, Aline,” Lavie said, as her professor leaned against her. “I can imagine how it must have felt. Goodness, I had nightmares of my own when Ryan was deployed to fight those Loyalists at Checkpoint Alpha...”

“Come on, Lavie, the Loyalists were peanuts compared to the Zion Army,” Ryan replied, affectionately. “But I appreciate the concern – and the cake.” He took a large bite out of it. “Hey, this is pretty good! A few more decades, and you might get to be as good as your Gran!”

“Very funny, you goof,” Lavie replied, blushing. “Anyway, what was in the documents, Aline?”

“Bruce and the Itarian scholars found them in a sealed box, which seemed quite new compared to the rest of what they found there. It had the initials J.G on it. The box contained the documents – which were old and crumbling – and a letter, which seemed fairly recent. The letter said that the contents of the box were of tremendous historical importance, and had been discovered by a group of mercenaries in the tunnels under the warehouse; however, they were unable to deliver them to the man who had asked for them, because he died under mysterious circumstances. Therefore, the writer said, he was leaving them there, for anyone brave or foolhardy enough to claim them; he had tried selling them to Zion University, but they had refused his offer, claiming that they were probably fakes.”

“Ah, I remember,” Hidoki Raienji said, suddenly. “It was several years ago, when I had just been nominated to a permanent post at Zion University. One of my responsibilities was to evaluate the veracity of such claims. A Galvenian soldier of fortune, named Swift, offered me the box, claiming that it contained tremendous secrets about primordial times. But we historians had little love for Swift – who, among his exploits, had managed to fool some of us with clever forgeries earlier – and I am afraid I was rather curt with him. A case of the child who cried Wolf, to be sure.”

“Dear old Jack Swift, or Jack Milton, to give him his proper name,” Marlborough said with a laugh. “He’s an example of a modern-day legend, if you will. Every mother’s nightmare. According to respectable historians, he was just a mercenary and explorer, Galvenia’s answer to Estebian Via; but there are many who believe that he was actually a mage, or even a spy for the Varald or the Zion.”

“I believe I’ve heard Grandpa mention him a few times, though not approvingly,” Ryan said, with a laugh.

“Really, Mr. Ryan?” Aline said, with a laugh. “Anyway, the documents were in Old Itarian, so I handed them over to dear Father McMillan, who sent them to a museum in Itaria City. Scholars there worked on the documents, and found that they spoke of an event called the Landorin Massacre.”

“That certainly sounds cheerful, Aline,” Henrik quipped.

“Mr. Henrik, you naughty boy!” Aline replied, with a wink. “Anyway, the papers said that, buried beneath the tunnels of the Landorin Stretch, there was a sealed room which contained a cursed artifact, called the Landorin Stone. According to them, the Stone contained the souls of children who died during the Massacre, and was sealed by the Man of Regret to prevent demons or dark mages from using it.” She shivered.

“The very last page of the document, though also in Old Itarian, was much more recent, and was written by Swift himself. It said that he and his companions, who were all adventurers like him, had found the chamber where the Stone lay, but saw no profit in taking it, as they loved their own lives and did not want to meddle with cursed objects. It warned anyone else reading the documents to stay away from the Stone, as it might cost them their lives.”

"I don't get it," Ryan said. "If it's sealed away, how did the Third Way – or these new *poseurs* – find out about it?"

"We're not sure, Ryan," Hidoki Raienji replied, "but it seems possible that the Third Way may have planted their rod in the tunnels, though they did not know about the Stone, since Landorin would be quite a safe hiding-place. Even today, the warehouse and the tunnels are sealed and patrolled by a troupe of Zion soldiers, and Wilhelm has had the guard strengthened. However, we have reason to believe that the current trouble-makers know a little more about Landorin than their predecessors."

"Why do you say that, Raienji?" Professor Marlborough said, surprised.

"Because some of their allies are – how do I put this nicely? - followers of the late, unlamented Father Ronald Gray; renegade members of the Church of Infinity, in other words. They would have been able to access the late Father McMillan's documents, though McMillan was a faithful servant of the Pontiff and would have been horrified to learn of this. They believe that by supporting the Galvenian Supremacists and causing the plague, they can bring about an armed conflict between Galvenia and Zion, which would damage both, and strengthen the position of the few Zionesse supporters they have. They have not learned their lesson, sadly." Raienji shook his head. "We learned this when Ferzen's men succeeded in infiltrating a Zionesse cell of these 'Reformed Infiniti'..."

"'Reformed Infiniti'?" Henrik said, angrily. "They're the ones in need of 'reform', if you ask me. Saint Geraud, protect us all."

"How terrible," Bernadette said, sadly. "To think that there are still enemies within the Church's ranks."

"Which is why," Raienji went on, "it is urgent that we defeat this triumvirate – this unholy alliance between the Supremacists, the Reformed Infiniti and the dark mages in their service – before any actual damage is done. The men whom Ferzen captured did not know too much, but they did tell us that this group would make an attempt to unseal the Stone, and use it in conjunction with the rod."

"There's no time to lose, then!" Lavie said, firmly. "We must stop them. Professor Raienji, do you have a plan?"

"I'm afraid we'll have to improvise a little, Miss Regale," Raienji replied. "Wilhelm will lend us the services of one of the mage battalions, but neither he nor Carranya can fight at your side this time, though they would dearly love to; there are matters of State that occupy them both, especially since Arlbert is sick and Carranya is now his co-regent. If you all agree, we can move to Darington in a week's time."

"We?" Ryan said, with a smile.

"All of you, my friends. You, Mr. Eramond, possess a powerful weapon that may be able to destroy the stone in some way," Raienji replied. "Miss Aquary, being a Light Healer and a water mage, can neutralize any earth-based spells in the tunnels, and can also detect cursed objects through her dreams. Spenson

will be needed both as a fighter, and to add strength to Miss Aquary's spells. And if any of those hedge wizards can actually warp – oh, not a long-range warp, but a small, local one – or use cursed beasts, Miss Regale's arrows will soon put an end to that.” He laughed. “Dear me, I feel like we are back in the days of Prince Ryle of Factoria.”

“I've heard of him, the goof,” Lavie said, with a laugh.

“What about me, Mr. Hidoki?” Aline said, enthusiastically.

“Though Carranya is very reluctant to send you along – since you are Galvenia's greatest physical scientist, now that Hernandez has retired – it is certain that you will be able to help your friends. Besides, I am sure the late Lieutenant Stone will be watching over you. Your detector should be able to identify any shields or auras in the crypts, and your firearm will also come in handy – if you should wish to come with us, that is.”

“Us? Are you coming too, Professor Raienji?” Bernadette said, with alarm.

“I would be a poor mage leader if I hid away and let you do all the hard work, my dear Miss Aquary,” Hidoki replied, with a low bow. “I will accompany you, for fire can sometimes destroy a cursed stone. Marlborough would have loved to join us as well, but his physician forbids it.”

“That sounds reasonable, Professor,” Ryan said. “In fact, with all of our combined powers, it ought to be a piece of cake!”

“Be wary, young Eramond,” Marlborough said. “Remember that even mighty warriors like Kaleb and Kevin fell in battle, though they were victorious.”

“They were fighting Samath and his men, not hedge wizards,” Ryan said, brightly. “And speaking of pieces of cake, I vote that we finish this one off, Lavie. It's too good to waste!”

“An excellent idea, Mr. Eramond. A hundred points to you,” Marlborough replied, enthusiastically reaching for a slice of his own.

“Woo!” Armin said, taking a few quick steps forward. “Beautiful, beautiful Darington. Someday, baby, this place will belong to Galvenia once more!”

“Burn you, bandit!” Captain Burnfist growled. “Darington will never surrender!”

“Ah, but after we get rid of the curse, you Zions will owe us big time!” Armin replied, with a wink.

“Besides, it was me and my guys who helped capture those 'Zion-Reformed-Infinitus-Blah-Blah' dopes, or whatever their name is. Face it, Becky, you're in love with a famous man now!”

"I am *not* in love, you foolish Galvenian," Burnfist said, thankful that her helmet effectively hid her blushes. "And besides, we have work to do."

"Ah, the two things a man needs to be happy. Someone to love, and work to shirk. Isn't that what Aramondrius said?" Armin quipped.

"Work to *shirk*?" Thora Raienji replied, with a laugh. "I'm almost certain that even a Galvenian philosopher wouldn't go that far, Mr. Tamas."

"Are all Zion mages as cute as you and Becky?" Armin said, beaming at her. "Heck, that ought to be my next business enterprise. A dating service that sets up lonely, shy Zion mage girls with tough, *macho* Galvenian men like Armin Tamas....."

A light jet of water struck Armin in the face, and he spluttered.

"Nice work, Thora," Burnfist said, bursting into laughter. "Just soak him every time he gets too fresh. If it doesn't work, I can make things hot for him!"

"For you, Becky, I would go through fire and water," Armin said, wiping his face with a large handkerchief. "And hey, Thora-girl, you've got spunk!"

Thora laughed. "Are you sure it isn't you, and not Ryan Eramond, who's a descendant of Prince Ryle? You are *so* much like him, Mr. Tamas."

"Hey, I'm sure I've got famous ancestors, even if my father was a low-life," Armin said, cheerfully. "Maybe some day I'll find a Zion Emperor at the root of my family tree!"

"A Republican slave trader, more likely," Burnfist said, with a giggle. "Now move in, and let's comb this warehouse. We don't go down into the tunnels until the boss and your friends arrive, though. Thora, shield us if there's any funny business, including from Armin."

"Very funny, Becky," Armin replied, laughing as they unlocked the steel door.

"Listen, Grayson," the Reverend Hans Kartner observed, his left eyelid twitching nervously, "I am having second thoughts about this entire enterprise."

He was seated, along with his two companions, in a chamber of the Explorer's Guild at Lorean. He was wearing the long cloak and rough clothing of a Zionese or Republican mercenary, but Kartner's Itarian accent would have given away his origin to any careful listener.

Michael Grayson shook his head. "It is true that, as your friend Marlborough said, excessive certainty is dangerous. But we are intelligent men, Kartner, and we have learned from our mistakes. This time, there is no Samath to dominate us; we will call the shots, as the vulgar say, and those hedge wizards will obey.

The risk is theirs, the benefits are ours. For you, a strengthening of the Reformed Church of the Infinity; for me, revenge for my uncle's memory, a split in the Conservative Party, and a chance to hold that which my grandfather sought."

"Do not call him my friend," Kartner said angrily. "Despite his great gifts of learning, Marlborough is a liberal heretic, a compromiser of the worst sort. Witness the way he kow-tows to Wilhelm and Carranya, whose faith is lukewarm at best. But I remember – or rather, I have heard – how Gray died in torment. Pious has even claimed that he repented and betrayed his allies before he died. You may care only for this world, but I have an immortal soul to worry about. Why do we not proceed without the wizards, who may betray and damn us? We can activate the rod ourselves, once we find the Stone that McMillan wrote about."

"You and I are laymen, Kartner," Grayson said firmly. "Listen to me. That Stone holds tremendous power, but it must be handled with care. My ill-fated grandfather, Sir Jonathan Grayfax, died trying to find it, in mysterious circumstances. My unfortunate uncle, Alan Sheffield, was convinced that if he had found the Stone, the Third Way and Galvenia would have triumphed. I sit here, a lion in lamb's clothing, an obedient junior Member of Parliament who has, to all appearances, disowned my uncle and his deeds – but, in truth, I am biding my time. Let us use the mages to obtain the Stone, and dispose of them once they have initiated the plague in Zion. Besides, do you not consider Pious a heretic?"

"Slowly, man, slowly!" Kartner said, with alarm. "Pious is deeply in error, but even I would hesitate to call him a heretic. That is why we call ourselves the Reformed. Gray and his friends erred in trying to take power by force, and they died horribly. Since their defeat, those of us who remain – Davis in Zion, Bastow and I in Itaria – have been working from within, to slowly bring down the corrupt office of men like Pious, Elias and Legrand. Once they fall, those who are only nominally conservative – such as Schliemann – will certainly join us. Our approach is evolution, not revolution."

"Do not both those roads lead to the same goal, my schismatic friend?" Grayson said, with a laugh. "I certainly believe in an Infinity, but I also believe that he favours the brave, Kartner. Do not be so timorous."

"Grayson is right, Father Kartner," the third person said, suddenly. She was also cloaked, and wore the coarse dress of a Lorean shopgirl, but her refined accent betrayed her own origins. "Do not be a coward, after having led us bravely thus far. For years, Schliemann and his friends, such as San Martino, tried the soft touch. It does not work against hardened hearts like Pious'. The spirits of the Pits have entered the Church of the Infinity, and it is up to us to purge it."

"Marilyn, I'll trouble you to remember that, as a priest of the Church, I still command your obedience and your respect," Kartner said, harshly. "You have served us well in Zion, especially in spreading the alarm about some of Pious' reforms, and in pouring cold water on the idea of a marriage between Wilhelm and Carranya. But remember – if we get too close to the Beast, it can draw us into its infernal embrace. We must be cautious. If these wizards get out of hand..."

The Honourable Marilyn Howarth, daughter of the Viscount of Meldor, shook her head. "They will not, Father, because we have a weapon." She drew an object, shaped like a cylinder and the length of a sword, from within her cloak, and placed it on the table. "Sheffield was lost to us before he could use it, but Grayson was good enough to entrust it to me, though he kept its twin for himself. It has remarkable powers. No hedge wizard could stand before it. If they play the fool, we shall slay them."

"One of Samath's cannons?" Kartner said, shuddering. "Marilyn, this is folly...."

"Silence, Kartner," Grayson said, picking up the cylinder and aiming it at him. "With an object like this, even a wicked man like Samath could turn that apostate girl, Bernadette Aquary, into a helpless and dependent cripple. Do you wish to experience the same fate?"

Kartner's entire face was now twitching with fear. "Grayson, Marilyn.....very well. I shall do as you say. But if, at some point in the future, things go wrong, remember the words I now speak. Reform is not a matter of force and violence, Grayson. It is a matter of patience and persistence, and of doing the right thing at the right time. Those who try to force Fate defy the Infinity's providence, and will incur his displeasure."

"Don't annoy me, Kartner," Grayson said, one finger caressing the cylinder. A thin ray of blue and orange shot out, and Kartner fell back in his chair, stunned and silent. "Listen to me, instead, and ignore that foolish conscience of yours. Galvenia will be mine. Itaria will be yours. There will be war, as Marilyn has planned. And the Landorin Stone shall finally belong to the House of Grayfax."

"So let it be," Marilyn said, with a satisfied smile.

"And now, the award that is perhaps the most coveted," Derren Gorman – Galvenia's best Grandmaster, and Vice-President of the Commonwealth Chess Association – said with vigour, as he held up a large silver trophy. "To win a tournament is, perhaps, a great achievement. But to do so repeatedly, with such panache – with sacrifices that even an experienced man like myself could hardly understand – is a remarkable achievement. To this day, no woman has ever won the coveted Commonwealth Award for Chess Artistry, but I'm happy to say that this has changed today. Ladies and gentlemen, by unanimous decree, the Association is proud to present the Award to Miss Olga Kievan, the Varald Directorate's newest Grandmaster."

Olga, flushed and proud, walked up to the podium and received her trophy with an elegant bow.

"So tell us, Olga," Gorman said, shaking her hand, "what's next on your list? The Women's World Championship?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Gorman," Olga said, with a laugh. "The World Championship itself. Someday, we shall perhaps see men and women Grandmasters compete on an equal footing, and I intend to lead the way!"

Gorman beamed at her. "Brave words, Miss Kievan, brave words indeed! I'm sure the Directorate must be very proud of you. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?"

"I'd like to thank my foster-father and mother, Evgeny and Manya Jansen, for all their support and their affection," Olga said, softly, waving at the former Commissioner, who sat with his wife and two sons in the front row, flushed with pride. "And I'd also like to thank my good friend, Princess Carranya of Galvenia, for inviting me to all the tournaments in her country, and giving me a chance to compete. Thank you, all." She bowed and left, to the sound of thunderous applause, and returned to her seat, as Gorman continued with his stage patter.

"Congratulations, Olga," Princess Carranya said, embracing her. "Who would have thought that ballet's loss would be the chess world's gain?"

"Thank you again, Uncle Evgeny and Aunt Manya," Olga said, "and thank you, Princess. I never thought I'd feel this happy, not after what happened to Father, but I do. Thank you."

"You've done us all very proud, child," Jansen said, gently. "In fact, Director Vitols will soon present you with an award, and the title of 'Honoured Master of Sport' – something that no Varaldian woman, except the gymnast Nadezdha Symkov, has ever earned before. Not to mention that you've been a very welcome addition to the Jansen household. Lands of Ghetz, it feels good to be out of the Commonwealth Council, and back to running my own business once more."

Olga smiled. "The best is yet to come, Uncle," she said. "Next month, I've got permission to compete in the Ghetz Interzonal, and if I come within the first three places, I can actually enter the eliminators for the World Championship! Isn't that 'cool', as the Galvenians say?"

"It certainly is," Manya said, affectionately, ruffling her hair. "Olga, if you'll excuse us for a minute, we both need to speak to the Director for a moment; he wanted an account of tonight's proceedings. Princess, could you stay with her for a moment?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Jansen," Carranya said, with a smile.

"I'm sort of glad they left, Princess," Olga said, with a serious look on her face. "I have something important to tell you."

"What is it, Olga?" Carranya asked, kindly.

"Something bad will soon happen to you – and to the Zion," Olga said, shivering. "Just before we left for the Awards, my foster-father and I had gone to visit Director Vitols, and he was receiving a briefing from the Geheimpol at that time. They said that a group of dissidents would try to make trouble in Darington. The Director thought about it for a while, then decided to keep silent, as it did not concern him directly. But though I am a Varald" - she drew herself up proudly - "I will always be grateful to you, Princess, and to brave Prince Wilhelm, who helped save my life."

“What sort of trouble, Olga?” Carranya said, shaking her head.

“I do not know, Princess, except that it involved a group of mages,” Olga replied. “I’m sorry. But I think that this might help you.” She held out her hand, and handed Carranya a pendant, which was the replica of the one she had received from Director Kievan, three years ago.

“Your pendant, Olga?” Carranya said, a look of puzzlement on her face. “It’s lovely, but why are you giving it to me?”

“Remember, Princess,” Olga said, gravely. “Those mages tried to harm you using an object like this, when you came to rescue me. You may be able to use it against them – or at least prevent them from cursing it and using it. I do not know much about magic, but my Aunt Tatiana – Father’s sister – told me that the magicians of Gyrus used such objects to defeat evil men. Keep it with you, Princess, and may you and your kingdom be safe.”

“Thank you, Olga,” Carranya said. She would have said more, but Jansen and his wife were now returning, with smiles on their faces, full of the news from the Director, so she remained silent, and tried to conceal the agitation she felt.

Francis was right, she thought. I must make sure that this reaches Ryan or Lavie on time – or Bernadette, who would know what to do with it. I only pray we’re not too late.

“So what exactly is the Landorin Massacre?” Ryan said, looking at the thick book that Henrik was reading, as their carriage left Checkpoint Alpha and headed for Darington. “Is it more stuff from that Holy Book of yours?”

“It is mentioned briefly in the thirty-fourth chapter of the Book of Origins, in the Evangelium,” Henrik replied, with a smile, “but there are more detailed historical records available in the chronicles of Meldia. Unfortunately, it is sometimes difficult to tell legend from fact in these accounts.”

“Dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, patting him on the back, “you sound quite like Professor Marlborough already. Anyway, the most reliable account says that at the dawn of time, during the Age of Wanderers, the Landorin Stretch was just an inhabited area like any other. Many families lived there, hunting and gathering food, before continuing along the Way. But one day, a young man apparently came upon two warriors – or mages – one of whom was dead, and the other stunned or dazed. This second man had a sword, and the young man – who was barely a child – was curious and picked it up. The sword was possessed by a demon, and filled him with a murderous rage. He went on a rampage, killing the other children in the camp before blacking out; when he came to his senses, he was horrified, and wandered away to lead a new life. It is said that he was killed by the Man of Regret in battle a little later. One of the survivors of Landorin was this young man’s sister – a woman known to legend as Saint Lyrra – who remained traumatized by what she had seen.”

“Saint Lyrra, as in the girl in Juno's sword?” Lavie exclaimed, remembering what the Princess had told her. “That's creepy. Poor girl.”

“Anyway,” Bernadette went on, solemnly, “ever since that day, no wanderer would go near Landorin, for it was considered cursed; eventually, during the age of Cities, homes were built over it, and the original stretch was buried beneath them. It eventually became part of Factoria, then Zion, then Galvenia, before returning to Zion during Charlemagne's annexation of Darington. However, two artifacts – both of which are believed lost – are associated with Landorin by legend. One of them is a pendant, which was worn by a little girl killed during the massacre, and which apparently could serve as a channel for magic. The other is a stone that was touched by the pendant as it fell off the child's neck. This stone is the Landorin Stone, and it is believed to be cursed, as it contains portions of the massacres' victims – or rather, their auras – who seek vengeance against all mankind.”

“Ugh,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “Not a pretty story, Bernadette. That Landorin Stone certainly sounds like bad news. But if the Man of Regret could defeat that demoniac, then I'm sure his sword” - his hand went to his belt - “can take care of it without much trouble. What became of the pendant?”

“It was last heard of as being in the possession of the magicians of Gyrus, who used it to drain their enemies' energy in battle,” Henrik replied. “However, when Gyrus fell, it was apparently lost or destroyed.”

“That's a pity, Mr. Henrik,” Aline said, shaking her head. “I would have liked to study it!”

They fell silent for a while, looking out at the barren land that lay between Alpha and the town of Darington, as an hour passed by swiftly.

“We're almost there, my friends,” Hidoki Raienji said, fastening his cloak securely. “Goodness, winter is upon us early this year.”

Lavie drew her fur coat closer around her. “You can say that again, Professor,” she said, with a laugh. “Will your fire spells work if it's snowing?”

“Very amusing, Miss Regale,” Raienji replied, as the carriage drew to a halt, and they presented their border passes to the guard, who looked at them with deference. They all alighted, and made their way to a small inn, whose owner, an elderly lady, greeted them with enthusiasm.

“Aline Sheldon, as I live and breathe!” she said, hurrying towards them. “Good evening, my dear. My sister Ruth has told me so much about you. So you've come to Darington for some research of your own, I see! It's a pleasure to meet you all, my friends.”

Aline laughed. “You must be Bruce's Aunt Jane,” she said. “Ruth's told me all about you! Sweet lands, this is a pleasure.”

“And who's the handsome man with you?” Jane said, wrapping her shawl around her tightly. “Don't tell me you've found consolation elsewhere, my dear Aline!”

“Flaming lands, no,” Hidoki Raienji said with alarm. “My own wife is already here, with the mage battalion. I am merely here with them as part of our mission, madam.”

“Aren't you sweet?” Jane replied, with a wink. “Now hand me your coats, boys and girls, and I'll have dinner ready for you in a jiffy! Wouldn't that be nice?”

“Certainly, ma'am,” Lavie said, breathing in the appetizing smells that came from the kitchen with a smile on her face.

“Goody!” Aline said, with a giggle. “Let's all eat! The Landorin Stone can wait till tomorrow morning.”

“You're incorrigible, Aline,” Henrik said, with a laugh.

“Armin?” Ryan said, pleased and surprised, as the Three Compadres shook hands. “What in the name of the Infinity are you doing here?”

“Working while you guys sleep, Mr. Eramond,” Armin said, with a wink. “Our guys helped Zion Intelligence capture some jackasses, who wanted to bring Church rule into the Empire. As a reward, I've been allowed to join Becky on this mission! Woo hoo!”

“Don't call me Becky,” Captain Burnfist warned him, her hand going to her sword.

“Oh, leave him alone, Captain,” Thora said, with a laugh. “It is good to see you, Father. Mother and the other mages have encircled the area for ten miles, and will detect and repel any attack that should come your way.”

“Likewise, my daughter,” Hidoki said, embracing her. “What news, then?”

“Good news, Father,” Thora replied. “We have unlocked the warehouse, and we also stopped a troupe of three suspicious individuals who tried to approach. They were hedge wizards of the lowest kind. I was able to keep them at bay with a little wind, while Mr. Tamas entertained us with his knife-throwing skills.” She laughed. “We have held them at our camp for questioning, but they know little, except that their contact was a woman, who wanted them to scout around.”

“A woman?” Henrik said, sharply. “Not one of Father Gray's nuns in skirts, I hope!”

“Goodness, no,” Thora replied, with a laugh. “The three all said she wore shabby clothes, but had the bearing and accent of a Zion noble.”

“Deep waters,” Raienji replied. “I suspect she may be a Reformed Itarian sympathizer.”

“You guessed right, fools,” a voice said, loud and clear.

“Who said that?” Ryan said, drawing his sword and turning around – only to come face to face with a woman in a cloak, who was pointing an object at him.

“Bernadette, shield us!” Lavie said, recognizing the object with horror. “Sweet Infinity, it's one of those...”

“How clever you are, girl,” the woman replied. “It's almost a pity that you will burn in the Pits forever.” She fired a blue and orange beam at Lavie, but Bernadette's shield blocked it.

“Clever girl, aren't you?” Armin quipped, throwing a knife at her, then watching in amazement as it bounced off harmlessly.

“I don't know how you got here, but I can guess,” Ryan said. Before any of the others could react, he aimed a blue beam at the woman's belt, and there was a sound of glass and metal breaking and falling to the ground. The woman stared at him, aghast.

“Curse you! Curse you, boy!” she screamed, firing a beam at him. Ryan fired in turn with the Sword of Regret, and his beam turned hers aside, before striking her in the chest. She fell to the ground, clawing at the dirt helplessly, a murderous look in her eyes.

“What a lovely cloak,” Lavie said, coolly. “It seems a pity to do this, but...” Scraping an arrow against her bangle, she fired, and the woman's cloak went up in flames.

“Dear me, my children,” Raienji said, with a laugh, “this is too easy. Miss Aquary, quench those flames before she truly gets hurt.”

“Ready, Henrik?” Bernadette said, calmly, as they held hands. A jet of water shot out from the device at her belt, and the fire was extinguished. The woman turned around, helplessly, and walked straight into Captain Burnfist's iron grip.

“Not so fast, girl,” Burnfist growled. “Who are you?”

“Unhand me, you shameless creature,” the woman hissed. “And speak to me with respect. I am a noblewoman, and will not be handled in this way.”

“You really shouldn't speak of hands so much to someone from the House of Burnfist, princess,” the Captain replied, punching her on the jaw.

“Woo!” Armin said, applauding. “Sock it to her, Becky!”

“Captain, wait,” Hidoki Raienji said. “Let us take her to a safe place for questioning. Whoever she is, she obviously has access to magical devices.” He stooped down, and calmly picked up the cylinder that had

fallen from her hands. "One of Samath's contraptions, and" - he looked at the broken device at her belt - "a very simple Warp module. Come along, my lady, it's time for us to have a chat."

"You will learn nothing from me, you apostates," she said, softly. "I accept capture and defeat, but you cannot stop us now."

"Sweet Infinity, Father!" Thora exclaimed, looking at the device at her own belt. "Someone's entered the warehouse while we were distracted! That attack was just a diversion."

"Flaming lands!" Raienji exclaimed. "To think that we fell for a stunt like that."

"Who's the hedge wizard now, O Guild Master?" the woman said, tauntingly, before receiving a second punch from Captain Burnfist.

"That does it," Ryan said, firmly. "Professor, we're going in. Whoever it is couldn't have gone that far."

"I'm with you, Ryan," Lavie said, glaring at the woman who had tried to shoot her. "Let's not waste any more time!"

"Tunnels, tunnels," Ryan said, shaking his head. "What sort of nutcase architect designed this place, anyway?"

"Whoever it is, he isn't a match for....The Three Compadres!" Armin said, triumphantly.

"Aline, can you find the person who came in?" Bernadette said, anxiously. "It's hard to pick out a trail, since the ground is solid rock here."

"Give me a minute, Miss Bernadette!" Aline said, adjusting the dials on her Aura Detector, then beaming. "Sweet lands, he's below us! And there are three - no, five of them!"

"Below? There must be a hidden passage somewhere!" Lavie said. "Just like in that prison in the Republic! We need to find it somehow."

"Bernadette, do you sense anything cursed?" Henrik said, looking at her drawn face with concern.

"It's....close," she said, softly. "Not very close, but....extremely powerful. I can feel its power....Armin. Armin holds the key." She slowly sank to her knees. "We can't find it unless Armin comes with us. He is..."

"Me?" Armin said, with a grin. "Told ya I would be the Chosen One someday, Ryan!"

"Bernadette!" Lavie and Henrik rushed to her side, seeing that she was beginning to fall, and propped her up. "What's the matter?" Lavie asked.

“There is another object within, too, which is not cursed,” she whispered. “It is more recent, but can only be unlocked by – a descendant of the one who placed it there. Behind it lies – the Landorin Stone.”

“Remarkable,” Hidoki Raienji said, with a gentle look at Bernadette. “Thora, heal her. She has used a tremendous amount of energy in making that assessment. And we will need her to shield us, for if there are five men, they have come prepared to fight.”

“Of course, Father,” Thora said, with a smile, as she placed her hands over Bernadette's head.

“Okay, Armin,” Henrik said. “Whose descendant are you? What dark secrets lurk within your family tree?”

“Hey, lay off, Henrik,” Armin said, with a laugh. “My mom is Galvenian. My no-good dad was from the Republic. His name was Calvin Tamas. I never knew any of my grandparents; Dad never told us about his folks before walking out on us, and Mom was an orphan, working in a store, when she married him.”

“That doesn't tell us anything,” Lavie said, shaking her head. “You mean a Republican man found the Stone, and placed a guard against it here?”

“Time enough to solve puzzles when we get there, guys,” Ryan said, drawing his sword. “Lead the way, Aline. We'll take care of those hedge goofs first, and then we'll see what Armin can do.”

“Burn me!” Captain Burnfist growled. “Of all of us, it had to be him. The Infinity's sense of humour is truly corny.”

“Ha ha, you're a laugh riot today, Becky,” Armin said, as they moved further into the tunnels.

“A seal?” Michael Grayson swore under his breath. “You never told me about any seal, you music-hall magicians.”

“Sir Grayfax...” the first of the three of the mages began. They were all dressed in matching robes of dark blue, and lowered their wands, staring at the door before them.

“Do not call me by that name,” Grayson said, firmly. “Now tell me the truth, and do not play me false.” He drew a second cylinder, similar to the one his ally had used to create the diversion, and pointed it at the mage. “Can you undo this conjuration, Master Kin?”

“We shall try,” the second said, nervously. “Sweet lands, I wish we were still pretending to be ninjas, Master Kin.”

“You share my own wishes, Brother Kun,” the first replied.

“And mine, as sure as my name is Hun,” the third said, his hands trembling as they touched the sealed door.

“I wish we could call this entirely off,” Hans Kartner said, darkly. “No good can come of this. If the Stone is sealed, it is the Infinity's design. Breaking the seals of the Infinity before the appointed time is...”

“Shut up, Kartner,” Michael Grayson said, fiercely, “unless you wish to become the first victim of the Second Landorin Massacre. Now, you three clowns – Kin, Kun and Hun – what have you found? Be quick. My fingers are itching.” He caressed the device lovingly, and a beam struck Hun above one eye, burning his eyebrow.

“Ouch! That hurt, Lord Grayfax,” Hun replied. “The seal is protected by a blood oath, Sir. It can only be broken if someone of the same bloodline is present.”

“That's no good, you crazy conjuror,” Grayson snarled. “And address me as Grayson, please. Is there any way around it?”

“I sense the presence of a suitable person, Lord Grayson!” Master Kin said, nervously. “He is present in these very tunnels! We shall find him, and even a drop of his blood will suffice to undo the spell! I promise!”

“Very good, Kin,” Grayson said. “Now, let us find this person. If he will cooperate with us, well and good. If not” - he ran one hand over the cylinder, a smile on his face - “he will serve us in death.”

“A pendant?” Lavie said, looking at the object that Bernadette held out to her. “Why, it looks just like mine!”

“It arrived at King's College just before we left, my sister,” she replied. “There was a small note with it, written by the Princess, saying that this object might help us in our quest at Darington, though she was not sure how.”

“Okay, that's two unsolved mysteries, guys,” Ryan said, with a grin. “First, what does Armin have to do once we get to the sealed door, and second, what does this pendant have to do with it all?”

“The easy solution,” Henrik replied, “would be that it's the pendant from the Landorin Massacre. But if that's so, it's older than Ryan's sword, and this one doesn't look that old! But even if it's just a replica, it may be able to counteract the Stone to some extent – am I right, Professor?”

“Not bad at all, for a non-mage,” Professor Raienji said, with a smile. “The original Landorin Pendant, which Miss Aquary told you about, would probably be a sort of magical counterpart to the stone. But even this one could come in handy.”

"It's strange, though," Lavie remarked. "It looks just like mine, and like the Princess'. Remember, Ryan? When Carranya and Wilhelm went to fight the mage in Varaldia, he tried to use her pendant against her, and Wilhelm and Captain Freya destroyed it in order to save her. We ought to be careful with this thing!"

"May I have the pendant, Miss Aquary?" Raienji said, holding out his hand. She handed it to him, and he looked at it carefully, then closed his eyes and struck it with the tip of his wand. There was a flash of blue light that leapt out from it for a second, and nothing more."

"Interesting," he said. "This is almost certainly not the Landorin Pendant, but it certainly is ancient enough; it dates back to the magicians of Gyrus. What I wasn't expecting was that it would flash that way. A flash means that the object has, in a sense, "recognized" something superior to it nearby."

"You mean the Stone is more powerful than it?" Armin quipped. "That's no problem, baby, Ryan's got the Sword!"

"Be respectful in addressing your elders!" Burnfist growled. "You silly Galvenian, you know very little of magic! The Sword may not be enough to destroy something as ancient as the Landorin Stone."

"The Captain's right, Mr. Tamas," Thora said, quietly. "But I have good news. I have found the passage that leads below these tunnels."

"Congratulations, my daughter," Raienji said, affectionately. "Where is it, may I ask?"

"Beneath our feet, Father," Thora said, pointing to an area of the ground that was slightly more sandy than the rest of the tunnel's floor. Aiming her wand at it, she swept the sand away with a strong wind, revealing a stone slab with an illustration on it.

"Ooh, this is what Bruce wrote about," Aline said, clapping her hands. "An inscription that talks about the Landorin Massacre! And it's even got pictures, like a comic book! Can you read these old languages, Miss Thora?"

"I've been working on them, ever since our adventure in the Palace of Gyrus," Thora replied. "Let me see – this is the language of Gyrus. It's not too different from Varaldian, but it's easier to follow."

"The picture is quite clear, though," Bernadette said. "There's a young man wielding a sword, a young girl who's been slain by it, another man trying to defend her – and the pendant, which has fallen off her neck and is lying on a stone below."

"Right you are, Miss Aquary," Raienji said. "Can you manage it, my daughter?"

"Yes, Father," Thora replied. "This is what it says: *At the dawn of days, when the sun first rose, this was the scene of a horrible tragedy, a demon's snare. It was a punishment for the people of Landorin, who forgot to wander the Way, and grew proud and complacent. The Child with the Sword was possessed,*

and slaughtered many, including the Child of Peace, whose precious jewel was lost forever, as it fell into a river. Only those with a similar jewel may enter this hallowed place, but horrors lurk within. May the Purpose be with us all."

"That sounds like the writings of the Guided," Henrik said. "The Guided were an old religion, who believed that any sort of town or settlement was an offence against the Infinity – whom they called the Purpose. The Child of Peace is a sort of saint among the Guided. According to one legend, Saint Lyrra and she were enemies, which is why the Church of the Infinity – who opposed the Guided - took over Lyrra's cult with enthusiasm."

"I see Marlborough has taught you well, Mr. Spenson," Raienji replied. "It looks like we have a use for Princess Carranya's pendant now." He pointed to an indentation in the stone slab, where the pendant ought to have been. "Place it here, and let us see what happens."

Bernadette placed the pendant in the gap, into which it fitted neatly. There was a sound, as if of thunder, and the slab began to move apart in halves, revealing a passage that led below, and that glowed with red light. The pendant glowed brightly, then seemed to dissolve before their eyes.

"Red light, take warning," Captain Burnfist said, darkly. "Professor Goofball, can you sense anything with that goofy device of yours?"

"My name is Aline!" she replied indignantly, with a sniff. "If you're going to be so mean about it, I won't tell you anything!"

"There, there, Aline," Lavie said, consolingly. "The Captain's like that with everyone. She even pulled a sword on Prince Wilhelm once, from what Carranya told me. Can you find anything?"

"I didn't know he was Prince Wilhelm!" Burnfist protested, with a flush that could be seen even through the visor of her helmet. "And who asked him to tell that story to everyone?"

"Hey hey, Becky, that's one more thing you and the A-Man have in common!" Armin said, chuckling. "I once pulled a 'your mom' joke on him, not knowing that he was Wilhelm and not Wolfie! If I survived it, so can you!"

"You can be very comforting sometimes, Tamas," Burnfist said, slapping him on the shoulder. "It's nice to know that there's someone more foolish than I am."

"There are at least ten auras here!" Aline said, triumphantly. "If the Landorin Stone is what legend claims it to be, we're very, very near!"

"Goody, as you would say," Henrik replied. "Let's use your detector as a compass, and let's get this show on the road!"

"I'm with you guys," Lavie said. "But what happened to the pendant? I hope we won't need it later on."

"I have an idea," Professor Raienji replied, "but let's proceed, first. Those hedge wizards may be well ahead of us."

"Blasted mosquitoes!" Armin muttered, as he swatted at his arm, and his palm came away stained with a drop of blood. "Blue girl, can't your shields keep bugs out?"

"Wait a minute, Armin," Ryan said, looking at the small cut on Armin's arm. "That was no mosquito! Look!" He pointed straight ahead, at the figure of a short man in a black cloak, who was running away as fast as he could. "Get that man, someone!"

"With pleasure, Ryan," Lavie replied, firing an arrow that struck the man in the arm. He groaned and stopped in his tracks, and Ryan fired a beam from the Sword that knocked him to his knees.

"And who might you be, my fine fellow?" Captain Burnfist snarled, advancing towards him with her fist clenched. The man paled, and with a sudden, jerky movement, threw something far behind him. There was a clatter, followed by the sound of rushing footsteps and a flash of light.

"Damnation!" Raienji exclaimed. "He's handed something to an ally, and the second man has probably gotten away!"

"Ooh, we still have him, anyhow!" Aline said, drawing her firearm. "Now tell me, Mr. Bad Man, do you like it hot, cold or blinding?"

"P – pity!" the man stammered, his entire body trembling. "I'm just a tool, I tell you! It's Lord Grayfax whom you have to shoot, not me!"

"Huh?" Ryan said, as he pushed aside the man's cloak roughly. "Do you remember this loser, Henrik?"

"Why, yes, Ryan," Henrik replied, equally surprised. "As the Infinity lives, this is one of Lugner's sidekicks. Now which one are you? Kin or Kun?"

"Mercy!" the man squealed. "I am neither Master Kin nor his brother Kun, O warrior! I am merely Hun, their obedient cousin! Spare me!"

"What did you do to Armin?" Henrik said, aiming his sword at him.

"Th – that's a secret!" Hun replied. "Only Lord Grayfax...."

"Becky, sock him," Armin said, cheerfully, and Captain Burnfist complied, sending Hun flying against a wall of the cave.

"D – don't do that again, please!" Hun pleaded, wiping the blood from his nose. "I'll tell you everything! Please don't punch me again!"

“Ah, the power of a harmonious and righteous fist,” Raienji said, with a chuckle. “You must be a hedge wizard of some sort, I'm sure. What are you up to?”

“It is Lord Grayfax, Sir! He is a powerful Lord of Galvenia...”

“Never heard of him,” Henrik said, cheerfully, as he swung his sword in the air.

“I wish Marlborough was here,” Raienji said, with an annoyed expression. “He knows far more about Galvenian lore than we do.”

“He is accompanied by an Itarian priest! They wish to unlock the Landorin Stone, but it is protected...by a blood oath! We needed the blood of the descendant to unlock it, and that is what I have done! They must have found the Stone by now, sir! Hurry! Find them, and leave me be!”

The bracelet at Raienji's right wrist flashed, and he held it to his ear.

“Freya, dear? Yes, I can hear you,” he replied. “What news?” He listened attentively for a few minutes, then nodded, clearly pleased. “He's telling the truth, my friends. Freya and her team have finished questioning that cloaked woman – who is a Zionese noble trying to make trouble for Wilhelm and Carranya. Her name is Marilyn Howarth. Under the influence of Moon Herbs, she has told all. The conspirators are, indeed, an Itarian priest named Kartner, and a Galvenian politician, Michael Grayson.”

“Grayson? Isn't he the junior Member of Parliament from Lorean?” Lavie said, surprised. “I've met him at one of Mrs. Socius' parties, actually!”

“Apparently Grayson wants the Stone for reasons of his own, and plans to take over the Pragmatic Conservatives once he has it,” Raienji went on.

“The auras have vanished!” Aline said, suddenly. “Sweet lands, they've just – dropped off the map! The Stone is no longer here!” She shook her head.

“We can sort things out later, Professor,” Ryan said, firmly. “We need to follow them, wherever they've gone!”

“Wait,” a voice said, suddenly. “I will go with you.”

“Who's that?” Lavie said, scraping an arrow against her bangle, and drawing her bow with a swift movement.

“Don't shoot,” the voice went on, shakily. “Infinity forgive me....that man Grayson is a fiend. He does not know what lies on Grayfax Island. Please, let me help you.”

“Who are you?” Captain Burnfist said, clenching her fist.

A man, wearing the robe of an Italian priest, stepped out of the shadows. "I am Monsignor Hans Kartner, from Lorenza," he replied, "and if you wish, I can help you."

Armin stared at the sealed door, his eyes wide open, his jaw dropping.

"What's the matter, Armin?" Henrik said, kindly. "It looks like you've seen a ghost."

"I heard a voice, Compadre," Armin said, nervously. "It said: *Open the door...*"

"Well, that's what Master Hun said," Ryan replied, pushing Hun – who was tied hand and foot – in front of them. "Now, Mr. Hedge Wizard, tell us about this blood oath."

"Look at the door," Kartner said, pointing to what seemed to be a knocker, but was fixed in place, with the shape of an eagle. "I think the young man has to touch it."

"What do you mean, Father?" Bernadette said, gently.

"Let's find out!" Armin said, placing his hand over the knocker suddenly. There was a flash of light and a crackle, like the sound of a radio, and the figure of an old man, with a mocking smile on his face, stood before them.

Welcome, my worthy grandson.

"You talkin' to me?" Armin said, shaking his head.

"Shh, Mr. Armin, it's a Memory Crystal," Aline whispered. "Listen to it."

I am Sir Jack Milton – or, as my companions in arms know me, Jack Swift. Listen to my story. Many years ago, my companions and I were the greatest adventurers Terra had ever known. Our motto was: "By Sword and Spell, by Guile and Gun."

"I think I've heard of them somewhere," Henrik said, softly. "They were Galvenian mercenaries."

We have lived many adventures, and now, I am the last one left alive – my last companions, Nate and Reena, passed on just a few months ago. There are many tales I could tell you, my boy, but I must confine myself to the most strange of them all.

"Loves to talk, doesn't he?" Burnfist growled.

When I was a man in my prime, my companions and I were contacted by a Galvenian knight of dubious reputation, Sir Jonathan Grayfax, who lived at Darington. He owned a family estate on an island named Grayfax Island, which had long been abandoned and had become a lair of bandits. He wanted us to

retrieve a box from there, marked with the initials of his forefather, Sir James Grayfax. After many perils, my friends and I succeeded, and brought the box back to him.

Accompanying the box was a Memory Crystal, which warned us not to open the box unless we had another object with us – a pendant. Grayfax refused to listen to us, and as he opened the box, a flash of blue light emerged, striking him in the chest and killing him instantly. The box contained documents that spoke of an ancient secret in the tunnels below Darington – a place known as Landorin. Realizing that this was what Grayfax sought, we searched the place ourselves, and found a sealed door, behind which was an object that we identified as cursed. We were tempted to take it, and quarrelled, but in the end, I convinced my friends not to. I was still too much in love with what life had to offer – a sunset, a glass of wine, the smile of a fair maiden – to throw it away on something that had already proved fatal to Grayfax. I sealed the door with a blood oath, with the help of my mage friend, so that only a descendant of mine could open it.

“You mean Armin...” Thora said, amazed.

My loves have been as many as my adventures, grandson. Soon before Reena died, she told me that the one who would unlock this seal would do so for a good purpose, which is why I allowed the seal to remain, and did not destroy it when I realized that my own end was near.

And now, I must tell you the truth. When I was young, I journeyed to the Republic, where I met perhaps the greatest love of my life – a woman from San Delas, Soledad Tamas. It was impossible for us to marry, for hers was a family of note, notorious for their vendettas, but she did bear me a child, whom she named Calvino. I never saw the boy, for Soledad died soon after his birth, and he was raised in an orphanage. If this offends you, grandson, I am sorry. But Jack Milton has lived his life without regrets, and it would be foolish to develop some in my old age.

“Woo!” Armin exclaimed. “What a guy! He’s a worthy ancestor to Armin Tamas, that’s for sure!”

“Very funny, Armin,” Lavie replied, rolling her eyes.

The rest of my tale is simply told. If you wish to unlock the door, grandson of Soledad, you may do so – at your own risk. May you live life to the fullest, as I did. Fare you well.

There was a flash of light, and the tunnel was dark once more. The door trembled, then creaked and opened, as if of its own accord.

“Sweet Infinity,” Ryan exclaimed. “Is there anyone here who doesn’t have an illustrious ancestor?”

“Only me, Compadre,” Henrik said, with a laugh. “Come on, let’s go in!”

“Woo!” Armin said, again, doing a little dance. “By Sword and Spell, by Guile and Gun! Armin the Explorer, that’s me!”

“Armin the *Explorer*? That sounds totally dopey,” Burnfist said, with a laugh. “It sounds like a stage play for simple-minded children. Even Tremfein wouldn't write anything that corny. Do you want a pet monkey to go with that?”

“Hey hey, Becky, don't address the descendant of Lord Jack Swift like that!” Armin said, as they entered the room...

“Good heavens, Emily!” Sigmund said, removing his glasses and rising from his chair. “Just look at this. I was about to throw it away, when this fell out of it.”

“What is that, Sigmund?” Emily said, setting Victor down on the floor, where he began to crawl happily.

“It's an old copy of the Holy Book that belonged to my illustrious father,” Sigmund said, sarcastically. “Not that he ever followed it. It's falling to pieces, so I thought I'd give it to Joaquim to bury. But there was this scroll inside the binding. It looks quite ancient!”

“Oh, dear,” Emily said with a laugh, as she looked at Victor, who was trying to climb one of the chairs. “Hidden treasure, perhaps?”

Sigmund unrolled the parchment slowly, running his fingers over it. “Old Gyrusian parchment, by the Infinity. Fortunately, I'm good at old languages. Listen to this: *A Deed of Sale. I, Hermanus Excellize, last of the sons of Gyrus, reduced to desperate straits by the wicked deeds of the Kingdom of Meldia, hereby sell this treasure, the Pendant of the Child of Peace, to my worthy kinsman in Factoria, the scholar Roland Regalus. May he treasure it and hand it on as an heirloom to his daughters, but may he never bring it again near the cursed land of Landorin.*” He shook his head. “If this is real, then....”

“Lavie's pendant,” Emily said, softly. “Who is the Child of Peace, Sigmund?”

“An old legend from an old and bogus religion, known as the Guided, Emily,” Sigmund replied. “Such legends were popular among the men of Gyrus. But even if it's an old legend, this means that the pendant is a priceless antique...”

“That's nice, Sigmund,” Emily replied, hurrying to pick up Victor, who had bumped into a chair and was making a face. “But what is 'the cursed land of Landorin'?”

“Probably nothing of importance, Emily,” Sigmund said. “I've heard the name, but I can't quite place it. Maybe we can ask Professor Raienji when he gets back, and we can also tell Lavie about it. She's apparently gone on a study trip with him to Darington.”

“Lavie's quite her own woman now, Sigmund,” Emily said, affectionately. “Staying at Lorean with Professor Sheldon, travelling on her own – I'm so proud of her. Aren't you, Victor?”

“La-vie,” Victor said, with a smile on his face. “Mama!”

“I’ll take that as ‘yes’, and so am I, Emily,” Sigmund said, with a smile.

“Where are we?” Lavie said, shaking her head.

They had stepped into the room that contained the Landorin Stone, and found it empty – but before they could do anything further, there had been a flash of light, and they had found themselves under attack from Hun’s mage friends, Kin and Kun. Fortunately, they were hedge wizards indeed, and it had not taken much effort for Bernadette and Burnfist to render them stunned and helpless. They had next turned their attention to a small device, about the size of a jewel-case, which sat in a corner.

“A Warp Cannon, but a very amateurish one,” Professor Raienji had said, instantly. “Ryan, attack it with your sword. A weak device like this will activate its transport mode when it is near destruction, and we will be able to follow our adversary to his lair, wherever it is.”

“You got it, Professor,” Ryan said, firing a blue beam at the device.

As the beam struck the device, there was a flash of red light, followed by an unpleasant wrenching sensation, followed by darkness. Lavie found herself looking at the face of a man, whose expression was far from benevolent.

“Good evening, my friends,” Michael Grayson said, pointing his cylinder squarely at Aline, who shuddered and jumped backwards. “I have been waiting for you.”

“Who are you?” Henrik said, stepping forward with his sword drawn.

“I will trouble you to speak respectfully in the presence of a Member of Parliament, boy,” Grayson replied. “I see Kartner has decided to play the traitor. He will be the first to fall.” He aimed his weapon at the priest, but Ryan fired with the Sword of Regret, knocking the weapon from his hands. Bernadette, moving with equal speed, cast a shield around Kartner, then moved to Henrik’s side as her shield encompassed the entire party.

“Nicely done, children,” Grayson said, with a low whistle. “It is almost a pity that you have decided to follow the Zion. Galvenia needs people like you.”

“Oh, really?” Lavie said, with a scowl. “Galvenia needs people like you like it needs a broken skull, you jerk! Where is the Landorin Stone?”

“Oh, how clever,” Grayson said, reaching into his pocket and drawing out a small black stone, about the size of a paperweight. “You are intelligent, young lady, but you are too late.”

“Fool!” Captain Burnfist thundered. “What is this place, anyway?”

“Grayfax Island, girl,” Grayson said, calmly. He pointed to a metal rod, which was half buried in the ground, near his feet. “The ancestral estate of the House of Grayfax. You have done well to get this far, but there is nothing more you can do. Soon, the Plague will strike Zion. Information will be sent out that it is we Galvenians who caused it. If the Zion do not declare war – a war in which we shall crush them – they will tremble and sicken, and we shall be victorious. Truly, my unfortunate uncle is avenged now.” He placed the Stone on top of the rod, and it perched there perfectly. A red glow surrounded the rod, and Bernadette fell to her knees.

“Bernadette!” Henrik exclaimed. “What's the matter?”

“I will protect her,” Thora said, casting a shield around her. Lavie stepped forward, and suddenly, the red glow flickered, then died out.

“W – What is this?” Grayson said, staring at the Landorin Stone.

“Ryan....” Lavie said, leaning against a wall of the cave for support. “Ryan, destroy the....”

“Are you all right, Lavie?” Ryan said, rushing to her side. Grayson reached for his weapon, but Sergeant Burnfist fired with her own sword, and Grayson withdrew his hand, groaning in pain.

“No time, Ryan.....No....don't kill me, girl.....Ryan will protect.....I will not let you!” Lavie whispered, falling backwards as Ryan rushed to catch her. “The Sword....”

“The pendant!” Hidoki Raienji exclaimed. “Miss Regale's pendant is neutralizing the Stone, but the Stone's souls are possessing her! Destroy the Stone, Ryan!”

With trembling hands, Ryan closed his eyes, and a blue beam shot out, striking the Stone. It was deflected from the Stone onto Lavie's pendant, which glowed briefly, then shattered, leaving only the chain around Lavie's neck. The shield around them fell, and Bernadette sighed.

“I'll kill you, boy!” Grayson said, as the Stone and its rod began to glow red again. “You're defeated, now!” He drew a pistol from his pocket and fired, but Ryan pushed Lavie out of the way, then fired with his sword again. This time, the beam knocked the Stone off its perch, and it flew through the air, landing at Ryan's feet.

“Looks like you're the one defeated,” Lavie said, her face pale but defiant, as she picked up the Stone. “Ryan, put the Stone into your sword, and defeat him!”

“Huh?” Ryan said. “What do you mean, Lavie?”

Lavie pointed, wordlessly, at a notch in the hilt of Ryan's sword. A look of understanding passed between them, and Ryan placed the Landorin Stone into the groove, where it fit perfectly.

“The Sword of Regret – of course...” Thora whispered. “Ryan, finish him.”

"You're the one who's finished, boy!" Grayson snarled, as both of them fired simultaneously. Grayson's bullet struck Ryan in the chest, but his beam struck Grayson in the throat, and both men fell to the ground.

"Ryan – Ryan, no!" Lavie said, rushing to him. "*Ryan!*"

"I – where am I?" Grayson said, bewildered. The look of hatred on his face was gone, and he stared blankly at the men and women before him. "The.....curse. Sweet Infinity...."

"I'll kill you!" Lavie said, drawing her bow. "You....Ryan...."

"Spare me...." Grayson said, helplessly. "I....."

"Please wait, my daughter," Kartner said, heavily. "This man, Grayson, was under the influence of a curse – a curse that struck his imprudent grandfather, Sir Jonathan, and lasted unto the third generation. He was tainted by the Stone, as his forefathers were, from the day Sir Jonathan opened that box. Do not kill him, but deliver him to justice."

"But Ryan..." Lavie said, a tear running down her cheek.

"Oof!" Ryan said, feebly, groaning in pain. "I believe that would be me, Lavie. Don't worry, I'm still alive." He glanced at his sword, and noted – despite the pain in his side, and to his surprise – that the Stone was no longer in the notch, but the gap had been filled over, and the handle was now smooth and ungrooved.

Both joyful and angry, Lavie rushed to his side, bursting into tears. "You *goof!* You *dope!* Don't ever do that to me again, Ryan Eramond, do you hear?"

"Easy, Lavie," Henrik said, as he helped Ryan to stand. "The bullet's gone through him, and we'll need to heal him, but he's alive and well enough. Once he's better, we can figure out how to leave this place."

"I will help him, my sister," Bernadette said, with a smile, as she bowed over Ryan and began chanting.

"Hooray, we win again!" Aline said, cheerfully, as she and Armin both began to dance, causing Ryan and Lavie to laugh despite their recent ordeal.

"Welcome home, Kartner," Marlborough said, as the two priests removed their vestments, and stood, clad only in their robes, in the vestry of the chapel at King's College. "I see you have fallen for the attractions of orthodoxy once more."

"You can be very annoying sometimes, Marlborough," Kartner said, with a friendly scowl. "But I accept the rebuke, gentle as it is. I may not have been cursed as Grayson was, but I was blind. While I still do not agree with all that you or Pious have to say, the alternatives are worse."

“A wise decision, Monsignor,” Marlborough said, as they both made for the College cafeteria, where his friend Doris awaited him with a steaming pot of coffee. “So tell me, Kartner. What do you make of our friends' adventures at Landorin?”

“There is much that is still mysterious to me, Marlborough,” Kartner said. “Ah, here comes someone who could shed light on the whole affair. Join us, Raienji.”

“With pleasure, Father,” Hidoki Raienji replied, as he sat down and poured himself a cup. “I am glad to say that all our friends have quite recovered, and that Freya and Thora have destroyed that rod as well. Even if more hedge wizards or megalomaniacs emerge, they have little to work with, and Landorin can now become the province of the archaeologists, who will learn much about the men of the First Generations.”

“So what happened to that pendant, Raienji?” Marlborough said. “I can guess, but your answer would be more authoritative.”

“You silly Galvenian,” Raienji said, affectionately. “There seems little doubt that, by some strange twist of fate, the pendant Miss Regale wore was indeed very ancient, and belonged to the Child of Peace. An old scroll that Sigmund found in his collection has confirmed this. Like the Landorin Stone, it was cursed.”

“Cursed in what way?” Kartner said, sharply.

“Cursed by the soul of the young girl or woman who died wearing it,” Raienji replied. “I'm afraid you Itarians were right about her. The Child of Peace was more likely a child of deceit, and your Saint Lyrra did well to mistrust her. Though she died horribly, she was far from an innocent victim. In a way, the pendant was a mirror image of the Stone.”

“But why was Miss Regale, who is not even a believer, not tainted by it?” Kartner said, shaking his head. “Even at a distance, and across three generations, the Landorin Stone cursed first Lord Grayfax, then Sheffield, then Michael Grayson. Why was she spared?”

“That is a mystery, Kartner,” Raienji replied, “but remember, Miss Regale is a descendant of nobles – Ryle of Factoria, Fina Delstar, and of course, the Lancasters of Galvenia. Perhaps her ancestors were protecting her.”

“I do not believe in ancestor worship, Professor,” Kartner said, a little huffily. “And neither do you, Marlborough, or at least I hope. Do you not have a better explanation?”

“I do, but it seems so obvious that I hesitate to offer it,” Marlborough replied. “Like you, Kartner, I do not believe in ancestor worship, but I believe that some of our ancestors can become saints – and when they do, they watch over us and protect us.”

“Saints?” Kartner flushed. “The lecherous Prince Ryle and the dragon-worshipping Lady Fina? The unbelieving Lancasters of Galvenia? Is this more Mazarus-inspired foolishness about anonymous followers of the Infinity, Marlborough? I will have none of it.”

“Easy, Kartner,” Raienji said, with a smile. “The best records say that Ryle, far from being a womanizer, was a devoted husband and father, even if he did have three wives. And Fina, the descendant of Gyrusian and Meldian nobles, did not worship dragons – rather, she was described as a dragon because of her bravery and fidelity. But I see Marlborough wants to say something else.”

“You are clever, Kartner, and it is a pleasure to see you back within the Church,” Marlborough said, with an elder-brotherly look at the younger priest. “Very well, you have earned the right to another explanation, which I believe is the true one. No object, even a cursed one, can master a man or a woman, unless they incline to evil themselves. Remember that our Church teaches that men have free wills. If a young man was responsible for the Landorin Massacre, it was because his heart already tended to violence and slaughter. If Sheffield betrayed his country, it is because he lusted for power, as his nephew did. If Grayson planned to unleash a plague, it is because he had already conceived evil in his heart against the Zion.”

“This is sound theology at last, Marlborough,” Kartner said, with a nod of approval, “but how does this apply to Miss Regale? Is she more than human?”

“Well, you see, Kartner,” Marlborough said, with a laugh, “it’s very obvious. Miss Regale, like all of us humans, has strong desires, as Sheffield and Grayson did, but they tend in a different direction – to good. There is nothing evil about the passions, as long as they are directed in the right way. She has risked her own life to save those of her friends, particularly Ryan Eramond, Bernadette Aquary and the Princess. And it was not a futile passion – her friends would have done the same for her, and in a sense, they did protect her. Such a force is extraordinary, Kartner. It is perhaps the greatest gift of the Infinity himself, and it can overcome the strongest conjurations, as the Princess did when she destroyed Samath’s Harvester of Souls. Lavender Regale may not be a saint, Kartner, but someday, if she continues to walk steadfastly along the same path, she will be at the End of the Way, praying for us and watching over us.”

Kartner was silent for a long time, as if struggling inwardly, and then spoke. “Perhaps, Marlborough,” he said, with a faint smile, “perhaps there is something to what you say. There are more things in Paradise and on Terra than we can encompass with our theology.”

“Of course there are, Kartner,” Raienji said, chuckling quietly. “Marlborough can be pompous, but he is generally right about such things.”

“My dear friends,” Princess Carranya said, holding her hands out, “I am so glad that you have returned safely.” They were in her own apartments, where they had been invited in honour following the successful completion of their mission at Landorin.

“Ryan did give us a few anxious moments, the dope,” Lavie said, with a laugh, “but with Thora and Bernadette on his case, he got better surprisingly soon.”

“Indeed I did, though it was Lavie who looked after me for a good while after that,” Ryan said, placing his arm around her. “And I’m glad Bernadette recovered so quickly. That pendant must have been quite powerful!”

“And to think you were wearing it all the time, my sister,” Bernadette said, smiling at her. “Truly, the ways of the Infinity are mysterious, and yet good.”

“And I’m the new Jack Swift, baby!” Armin said, doffing his cap. “Truly, I can now say with pride that Landorin will be known not for its goofy pendants, but for the exploits of Armin the Explorer! Woo!”

“Spare us,” Lavie said, rolling her eyes, while Carranya burst into laughter.

“So let me get this straight, Bernadette,” Henrik said. “Both the Stone and the pendant were cursed, right?”

“Cursed with a very ancient curse, dear Henrik,” she replied, “which is why they affected me, though only briefly. But one of them is destroyed, and the other is now incorporated into the Sword of Regret, where it can do no more harm – in fact, the souls it contained are now free to meet their Creator, and its powers will merely add to those of the Sword of Regret.”

“I’m still not sure how that’s supposed to work,” Ryan said, admiring his sword, “but it is quite cool.”

“So what becomes of Landorin now?” Henrik said. “I’m sure the archaeologists will have their day with it, but once they’re done, can’t it become something more normal? I mean, Colonel Raienji’s men have destroyed the toy Warp Cannon that Master Kin set up there, and there are no more cursed objects. We ought to make it a place like any other.”

“A capital idea, Henrik,” Prince Wilhelm said, entering the room with a smile and embracing Carranya. “If children once suffered and died along the Landorin Stretch, why should they not smile and laugh now?”

“Dear me, Prince Wolfgang,” Lavie said, teasingly, “are you going to build a school there?”

“A school? How dreary, Lavie, though don’t quote me to Marlborough on that,” Wilhelm replied, with a grin. “No, I was thinking more of a museum. Children love legends and folktales, even when they’re about ghosts and monsters.”

“A museum?” Ryan said, with a whistle. “That’s pretty cool too, Prince Wilhelm.”

“I call dope on the whole idea, Striker!” Armin said, suddenly.

“Huh? Armin, that's Prince Wilhelm you're speaking to!” Henrik said, startled. “What is bubbling under that crazy cap of yours?”

“Listen to me, Wolfie,” Armin replied, forcefully. “I've been a kid, and so have you. Kids don't like museums! The last time I went to a museum, when I was a boy at the Academy, the only fun we had was getting lost in a labyrinth, and giving the teacher a scare! What kids like is amusement parks, especially scary ones. You've got tons of tunnels and creepy carvings down there in Darington or Landorin, or whatever you want to call it. Entertain us, Wolfie! If you can't give Darington back to Galvenia...”

“Armin!” Ryan said, noting that Wilhelm's eyebrows were now raised, and he was looking at Armin with a rather speculative expression.

“...then at least do something fun with it! Enough wars and massacres, dude, let's have monster houses and scary rides! Heck, ask that Tremfein cat to set up some Dreamscape Generators, and we can have kids fight back against the Landorin Massacrer, or whatever his name is!”

“Dear me, Armin,” Carranya said, wistfully, “there might be something to what you say. Francis and I recently went to one of those haunted houses in Caledonia, and it was such fun! Except for the spiders.”

“Ugh, count me in on that too, Carranya,” Lavie replied. “I hate bugs!”

“I agree with you, my flower,” Wilhelm said, with a laugh. “My good friend and former colleague, thou hast convinced me. Landorin shall become an amusement park, and I shall give you full credit for conceiving of it in the first place.”

“Woo! That's the Jack Swift blood for you, Wolfie! Hey, Princess, can I get a knighthood too? Sir Armin Swift would sound cool!”

“Perhaps, Armin,” Carranya said, with a laugh. “Provided the House of Lords approves.”

“It's an interesting idea, Armin,” Henrik replied. “Heck, if I flunk out of King's College, get me a job as a bouncer there!”

“Flunking out? The very idea!” Bernadette said, with a laugh. “Are you serious about this, Prince Wilhelm?”

“Of course, my good Bernadette, and I am sure it will prove popular,” Wilhelm replied. “It will be another Zion-Galvenia venture, like the *Paradiso* and our summer palace, and I will have Tremfein and his men help me with the special effects. In a generation from now, Landorin will hold as many terrors for children as a bowl of ice-cream, or a chocolate cake. Carranya shares my views, and once Raienji and his men are done with it, the work shall start.”

“Looks like our children will have their own adventures there, but of a more harmless sort!” Henrik said, with a laugh.

“Of course they will, Henrik,” Carranya replied. “And speaking of ice-cream, I believe the Court confectioners have a surprise waiting for all of us! After all, Lord Ryan does need some feeding up, like the wounded hero that he is.”

“Hey, I'm as big a hero as Lord Ryan is!” Armin protested.

“You have a point there, Armin,” Prince Wilhelm replied, laughing into his cloak.

“You're the best, Carranya,” Lavie said, as a proud Royal maid, bearing a large bowl, entered the room. “To Landorin, and to us!”

Enthusiastic cheers greeted this toast, which soon gave way to contented silence as the ice-cream was served.

iii. The Happy Mother of a Son (C.Y. 304)

“Bosley, by King Richard!” Ellesimar Vryce called out. He was walking outside his stone hut, his terrier Lucky trotting happily behind him, when he happened to spot the younger man walking down the road. “What good wind blows you here?”

“A wind of curiosity, my good Vryce,” Warren Bosley – mayor of Glendale – replied, tipping his hat to the older man. It was cold, and the wind made his round cheeks appear even redder than they normally were. “I was wondering, now that the smoke has cleared, if you could enlighten me a little about the recent happenings in your town. I’ve heard the official version from Lorean after they debriefed us all, but I believe you could tell me more.”

Vryce laughed. “I knew it,” he said. “Come on in, Bosley. There’s still a bit of hot ale for both of us, and I can’t say I’m not glad to discuss it with a fellow Mayor. I only thank Derren and Penelope that the Crown Prince is safe. Those clever devils. To think that, till the very last moment, we never knew what they were really after...”

“So it was true, then,” Bosley said, shaking his head. “I suspected as much, but both Erasmus and the Palace guards have, understandably, been tight-lipped about the whole matter. But I’ll join you for that ale, Vryce, even if your tale is a sad one?”

“Sad?” Vryce chuckled, as they entered the hut. “You could call it that, Bosley. Wickedness is always sad, somehow. But that’s not why I want to tell you about it. You see, in the midst of wickedness, there is also goodness – and courage. Wouldn’t you agree, Lucky?”

“Woof!” Lucky replied, thumping his tail on the ground with enthusiasm.

“If it would not incommode you too much, my good Jeffries,” Mayor Colin Erasmus of Alton said, rubbing his eyes which were still red from lack of sleep, “would you mind explaining the reason for this secrecy, and stop acting like a member of the Geheimpol?”

It was far from the most polite remark that Erasmus – normally the calmest of men – had made in his life, but there were extenuating circumstances. Few men can maintain their equanimity when roused from their sleep by loud knocks at four in the morning, and told – in hushed whispers – that they were wanted at the Royal Palace.

“I apologize, Sir,” Officer Jeffries – Chief of Palace Security at Lorean – said, looking gloomy, as he unlocked and opened the door in front of them. As Erasmus entered, he noted with surprise that the room was already occupied by his counterparts from Trinden and Glendale, both of whom appeared as sleep-deprived as he was.

“

v. Brother (C.Y. 342-347)

The Republican desert is a lonely place, but it had seldom felt lonelier to the four men – who sat huddled around the fire trying to warm themselves - than it did that night, in the year 347 of the Commonwealth of Saint Geraud.

“He will not come, will he, Zedicus?” one of the men asked, his expression grim. “When I think that he could have saved himself, but chose not to....”

A second man, older and holding his rifle in his hands, made an impatient gesture. “He could not have acted that way, Strata, my friend,” he said, slowly. “Though he wore the colours of his nation, that boy was as much a Wanderer as you and I. Am I not right, Zedicus? If anyone is guilty in this affair, it is those miserable Ghetzians. We must teach them a lesson.”

The man named Zedicus drew his cloak closer around him, and lifted the hood off his head. In the moonlight, the scars on his face seemed unreal, even ghostly. He shook his head, but said nothing.

“Rosmar is right, Zedicus”, the fourth man, younger and taller, said forcefully. “It is the Wanderer’s Way. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. A life for a life. Our brother has fallen, and we must avenge him.”

Zedicus glared at him, and raised his hand. “Listen to me, Exmus,” he said, in a tone that his comrades had never heard him use before. “You are young, and brave. But you are also foolish.” His expression softened, and he smiled. “In fact, I was not unlike you. But listen to me. Would our fallen brother have sought vengeance?”

“Zedicus...” the man named Exmus replied, stung by the rebuke.

“You know he would not, don’t you, Exmus? Now, my friends, let us face facts. A hero has fallen. But if he chose to fall, it was not so that we would take the Ghetzians as models worthy of emulation. He fought nobly, and we must not behave ignobly simply because he is no longer with us. Rather than seeking a vain blood feud, Rosmar, let us pay him homage.”

“You are right, Zedicus,” the first man said, drawing his sword and raising it to the sky. “I, Strata, leader of the Republican Wanderers, submit to your wisdom. Let us honour our brother.”

“Well spoken, friend,” Zedicus said, drawing his own sword. The other two men did likewise, and bright beams of blue light issued forth from their blades, coalescing into the image of a man – a man in uniform, his own weapon raised as if charging into battle....

“I will not deny that it suits you well, my brother,” the man in the priestly robes said, a worried frown on his face. His hands crept to the medallion of Saint Guibert that hung around his neck, as if seeking

reassurance from that venerable scholar of yore. “But I would be pleased to see you out of that uniform, and laying down that sword.”

“Would it be otherwise, my brother?” the man in uniform said, with a laugh and a twinkle in his blue eyes. “You and I have chosen different Ways, though we seek the same end.”

“Do we?” The priest seemed amused by his friend’s calm statement. “You fight for an earthly kingdom, Kaleb, but we have no kingdom in this world; rather, we wait in silence for the reign of the Infinity. What is this common end that you speak of?”

“Don’t be naive, your Eminence.” Kaleb chuckled. “You know very well that when the war comes...”

“So it is now a matter of ‘when’ and not ‘if’...” The priest shook his head. “And do not give me a title that is not yet mine, Kaleb. The Cardinalate is still a long way off.”

“Ah, Benedict, always modest. But don’t worry, my friend. The Pontiff will soon appoint you to high honours – if not during the war, then certainly after it. Terra will need men like you, to rebuild what was broken.”

“Does one rebuild a sand castle, Kaleb?”

“The Emperor would certainly say yes, Benedict.”

“The Emperor – oh, you mean that old story.” Benedict closed his eyes. “I revere the Emperor, but I would sleep much better if the Queen were still on the throne. King Derren means well, but he is blind to the true intentions of the Ghetzians – or the men of San Delas. His diplomacy will only bring disaster to us all.”

“Benedict!” Kaleb looked shocked. “You, of all people, decrying diplomacy? Do you want Derren to advocate a pre-emptive strike, like his illustrious namesake? Surely your religion opposes that.”

“You are right, Kaleb, and yet – I worry. The supporters of the Ghetzians and the San Delasians grow stronger in Itaria. Already, there is talk of secession. The Commonwealth refuses to interfere, and Derren has consistently prevented his ambassador from voting in our favour, despite your father’s best efforts. Is it not better to prevent war than to win it, my brother?”

“Father...” Kaleb smiled. “Father worries too much. When it comes to the crisis, Derren will show us his true colours. He is the son of Queen Carranya, after all. I have been his confidant for years, and I know him well. But let us not dwell on unpleasant matters. Instead, Benedict, let us congratulate ourselves. You are now the auxiliary Bishop of the See of Serin-Davenport, and I am Lieutenant-Colonel of the Rough Riders, and second-in-command of the Commonwealth forces. Our parents are proud of us, and rightly so.”

“I worry about Mother,” Benedict said, gently. “I have urged both her and Father to leave Itaria before the storm breaks, but she insists that their work cannot be interrupted. If the renegades seize power, they will have no pity on those loyal to the Pontiff – and my parents are foremost among them.”

“Oh, don’t worry about Aunt Bernadette, my good Monsignor,” Kaleb said, teasingly. “She could calm down a hurricane, simply by taking or singing to it.”

Benedict laughed, then looked at Kaleb intently. “Tell me, brother,” he replied. “What of your own mother? She would not calm the hurricane, but stare it down and shoot an arrow into it. Is the Government still trying to force her hand?”

Kaleb started. “What – do you mean, Benedict?” he said, the first signs of nervousness appearing on his battle-hardened soldier’s face.

“Oh, we of the Church know everything, Kaleb,” Benedict replied. “Especially when your own mother has been helping the Pontiff draft his latest encyclical.”

“How like Mother,” Kaleb said, with a loud laugh. “I tell you, Benedict, that woman is more loyal to your Church than half of your own priests.”

“That is sadly true,” Benedict said. “At any rate, it is certain that Benevolent XX’s next official pronouncement will be a condemnation of the use of inhuman weapons in warfare. It would hardly please the Galvenian government to know that one of their finest scientists – who has already refused pointedly to develop such weapons – is now joining the Itarians in condemning them.”

“And what of it?” Kaleb said, proudly. “My mother could stand up to anyone in the Cabinet, Father included. Besides, where is the need for Galvenia, or Zion, to develop dangerous weapons that may recoil on us? My mother, Benedict, serves the cause of science.”

“A dangerous cause, Kaleb,” Benedict replied, “because science is morally neutral. It cannot tell us what is right or wrong.”

“That is why we have good scientists, Benedict.”

“Very well.” Benedict sighed. “I do not doubt the goodness or the bravery of my Aunt Lavie – but I am afraid. So is Father, though he tries to conceal it from me. But let me not be a prophet of gloom, like the members of the Saintly Society of Saint Pico.” He smiled. “How is your sister, Kaleb?”

“Penelope?” Kaleb smiled fondly. “I sometimes feel that she alone, of all of us, has inherited the Journeymen’s genes from our father. Look at us. I’m a career soldier, who has served in Galvenia and Zion for most of his life. Kevin is a throwback to my grandfather, and now runs Eramond Delivery Services. But Penelope – the youngest of us – has been all over Terra, and has now stopped at King’s College for the shortest of pauses, before she resumes her journey.”

“Dear Penelope,” Benedict said affectionately. “Do you remember her first day at the Academy, Kaleb?”

“How could I forget?” Kaleb laughed. “In fact, I shall be going to visit her this evening, after she and Dr. Anderson finish presenting their latest findings to the Department of History. If you’re not too busy reading your boring books, would you like to come along?”

“To King’s College?” Benedict brightened. “Of course, my brother.”

“I refuse,” Pontiff Benevolent XX said, though his expression was nervous, and perspiration trickled down his forehead. “You may forge my signature, or seal the document with my cold, dead hand. But this proceeding is both irregular and blasphemous.”

“Listen to us, Pontiff,” the man in the dark suit said. “We do not want to make a martyr of you, for you are still the nominal Head of the Church of the Infinity, despite all your errors. But we need to be clear on certain issues. Are you with us, or against us?”

“I am with the Infinity,” he said softly. “The Infinity’s message was of justice and charity towards Him and our fellow men. I refuse to collude with you in an act that is both unjust and uncharitable.”

“Unjust?” A second man, to the right of the man in the suit and carrying a rifle, spat out the word. “Listen to me, Pontiff. Ever since that fool, Pious XXI, ascended the throne of Itaria, you have been promising us reform. We are tired of waiting. Accept our requests, or we shall compel you to do so. The Infinity is tired of your dissembling.”

“Why do you even bother?” a third man in black said, drawing his sword. “He has forfeited his right to speak for the Infinity by his actions. He is a child of the infidels of Galvenia and the apostates of Zion. We do not require the signature of a heretic. Kill him!”

Their leader motioned him silent, then leaned closer to the Pontiff. “Listen to me, Pontiff,” he said. “The men of San Delas and Ghetz support us. So does the Infinity. You can choose to go quietly by simply signing this document. If you oppose us, there will be bloodshed. Itaria will never be the same again. For the sake of your people, even if you do not fear the Infinity, sign this document.”

“I will not,” the Pontiff said, stoutly.

There was a knock at the door, and the three men looked up nervously.

“Who is that?” the third man began, walking closer to the door. He was suddenly flung back as the door swung open, and a man and woman entered.

“Just as I suspected,” Professor Henrik Spenson said, drawing his sword. “Bernadette, shield His Holiness!”

“Certainly, dear Henrik,” she replied, raising her hand. The third man swung his sword at the Pontiff, but it bounced away, as if blocked by a metal wall. In the meantime, Professor Spenson had drawn his firearm, and shot the second man in the shoulder, causing him to drop his rifle.

“Curse you!” the man in the dark suit said, his hand going to his belt. But before he could react, a wave of water struck him in the face, blinding him temporarily. Four more men, in the uniform of the Pontifical Guards, rushed into the room and immobilized the Pontiff’s three assailants before they could react, then led them away in fetters.

“Henrik...” The Pontiff caught his breath, and shuddered. “Once more, the two of you have saved my life. I thank you, my brother.”

“Thank the Infinity we reached you on time,” Henrik said, shaking his head.

“We were only doing our duty, Your Holiness,” Bernadette replied, softly. “But it is no longer safe for you to be here. I thank Saint Integra that the Zion were able to warn us of this plot in time. You must leave.”

Benevolent XX stared at her blankly, as if he could not believe what he was hearing. “Leave? So soon?”

“The men from Ghetz have landed on the east coast tonight, Your Holiness,” Henrik said. “Several men in the cities, led by the Reformers, have joined them and are rising in revolt. And we have it on good authority from Representative Arnoldus that some of their agents, together with rebels from San Delas, have infiltrated Itaria City itself. This place is no longer safe for you. General Raienji, who is helping several others escape before the blow falls, is offering you a refuge in Caledonia, under the protection of the Emperor. We will escort you to an airship that is waiting near the coast. From there, you may reign in exile.”

“In exile?” The Pontiff shook his head, and stood upright. “No, my dear Henrik,” he replied. “A Pontiff, like a captain, does not leave his ship even if it sinks. My place is here, with those who are still loyal to me and to the Church of the Infinity.”

“Your Holiness,” Bernadette said, with a tired smile, “the Emperor warned us that you would probably respond that way. His men are already on the way to defend the city, both by sea and air, since the Commonwealth is deadlocked. But I must warn you that the fight will be far more even than during the First Crisis. You see, the mage battalions have been rendered ineffective.”

“Ineffective?” The Pontiff walked to the window, looking out at the darkened streets outside the Pontifical Palace. “What do you mean?”

“During the First Crisis, your predecessor, Pious XXI, was defended with the help of the Zion mages. Unfortunately, it has been revealed to two of us in a vision – to me and to Father Orlandson, your chief exorcist – that those with the gift will no longer be able to use it, for the next forty years. Healing abilities will remain, but the ability to manipulate the elements will be withheld by the Infinity. In other

words, it is a contest between the Zion guns, and the guns of Ghetz. Many lives will be lost, Your Holiness. Father Marlborough wrote of this once, and now it has come to pass..."

"Marlborough..." The Pontiff hung his head. "My professors thought that the old man had merely turned cynical and bitter in his old age. We underestimate the gift of prophecy, my children. But now, leave. Your homes, your children, your lives are still ahead of you. Someday, when this insanity has passed away – as it must – perhaps we shall meet again."

"Very well, Your Holiness," Henrik replied. "If you are determined to stay, we are your loyal servants, and we shall remain with you, come what may."

"Henrik!" the Pontiff said, shocked. "Bernadette, has your husband gone mad?"

"Not at all, Your Holiness," she replied, calmly. "Even if my own powers will soon fade, and even if Henrik can no longer wield a broadsword, we will protect you. We defended the City in our youth, and we are ready to try once more, even if the attempt means failure."

The Pontiff held out his hand to Henrik and smiled. "The City of the Eternal God will not fall," he said, "as long as there are men and women of your kind to defend it. Come, my friends. Let us make our plans, for the hour grows late."

"No, Kaleb," King Derren said, rising from his throne with a start. "I refuse. This is imprudent."

"Would you have me play the coward then, Your Majesty?" Kaleb Eramond replied, his eyes flashing. "Let me not mince words. We have been lulled into a sense of false security by our earlier pact with the Ghetzians. They swore they would leave Itaria alone..."

"That was not part of the agreement," the King said, gently. "Your father will confirm that for you."

"Yes, he will," Kaleb replied, "and he will also tell me, on his word of honour, that he asked for a clause of non-aggression, and that it was omitted from the final document that you and President Schilder signed. Do not bring my father into this, Your Majesty."

"My apologies, Kaleb." King Derren shook his head. "It was not my intention to impugn his integrity in any way. He has served me faithfully, and I am glad to have him as War Minister now that – that it has come to this. And you, my young friend, should follow in his footsteps. Galvenia needs brave men to defend her, now that the renegades of the Itarian Confederacy and San Delas have joined hands and decided to attack us by air."

"Derren," Kaleb said, looking at him with the steady gaze that made his own men both fear and respect him, "listen to me. I am the provisional Commander of the Commonwealth Forces after the death of General Baruch on the Republican frontier. Galvenia has more than enough weapons to defend herself

against the Alliance's raids. Despite their despicable acts, our people stand firm. The same cannot be said of San Delas, the Cosmopolitan Republic, or the Ghetzian frontier. Thousands of people, including women and children, are being rounded up and massacred even as you and I debate. Those refusing to bow to the unholy alliance between the Cult of the Deity and the Reformed Itarians are being tortured. We cannot win this war unless the Imperium – of which Galvenia is a part – enters the attack decisively on that front. You may be King, Derren, but I am a soldier. Give me leave to go. Terra needs our forces."

"You have little chance of winning, Kaleb," Derren said, firmly, trying not to show how much his friend's words had swayed him. "The Alliance is too strong. And despite my father's brave words, you know that he has never been the same since Mother's death. His armies have their hands full keeping the Ghetzians out of the Varald Republic. Do you think they will be swayed by you?"

"The Emperor has already pledged his support to our cause, as has General Raienji," Kaleb replied, unflinching. "The Commonwealth has voted in favour of the intervention. And while you may be right about your father, he is still the brave man he was in his youth. Would that we could follow his example, and not waste time dithering!"

A frown crossed Derren's face, but he forced himself to smile. "You are right, Kaleb, as always," he said. "Forgive me if I have seemed weak to you at times. It is quite simply that I am reluctant to send you to your certain death – my brother."

Kaleb held out his hand to the King. "I am reluctant to leave you too, Your Majesty. And believe me, if I honestly believed there was a way to win this war more easily, I would choose it without hesitation, and remain in Galvenia – for your sake, for Mother and Father's, for Kevin and Penelope. But there is no alternative. Wish me good luck, Derren."

"Walk with the Infinity's blessings, Kaleb," Derren said, placing an unsteady hand over his friend's bowed head. "I doubt any of us will sleep soundly until you return."

"Then return I shall," Kaleb said, with a laugh, "if that is your wish, Your Majesty."

"Miss Eramond," the child said, creeping closer to the figure sitting by the window, "is it over? Have they really gone?"

Penelope looked out, and saw the first green flare light up the night sky over Davenport. Lifting the child up onto her lap, she pointed to the second flare, then smiled. "Yes, my dear, I think so," she replied. "They've gone. I don't think they touched the city at all, in fact! They probably were targeting the docks and the airstrip, but our soldiers must have kept them away. Now dry your eyes, and give me a smile. The lights should come on quite soon."

At this last sentence, several more children gathered around Penelope, and began talking excitedly. As they did so, the fluorescent lights in the room were switched on one by one, and Matthew Anderson entered, a broad smile on his face.

“Good one, Penny,” he said, replacing his radio transmitter at his belt. “They did no damage, and the 14th Royal Squadron took seven of them down. The Alliance will think twice before trying any monkey business with Galvenia, that’s for sure.”

Another of the children laughed. “Monkey business?” he said.

“Well, monkeys are quite common in Ghetzia, son,” he replied, tugging at his beard with a satisfied smile. “Maybe they’ve trained them to pilot their planes, because they’re lousy shots!”

“You’re funny, Mr. Anderson!” another boy said. “Does this mean we can go home now?”

“In a little while, boys,” he said, pulling out a pocket chess set from the inside of his coat. “But you know the drill during these raids, right? You don’t get to go home until you defeat me. Right?”

“It’s my turn today!” a girl aged about ten said, nodding vigorously. “I beat you last time, Professor, remember?”

“Can’t we play cricket today?” another girl suggested.

“Tell you what, Sally,” Anderson replied, “We’ll do both!”

This met with enthusiastic cheers.

“How can you remain so calm, Matthew?” Penelope said, smoothing down her hair and speaking softly, as the children rushed to the games cupboard and rummaged around for the necessary paraphernalia. “I keep up a brave face for the sake of the kids, but every time they begin a strike, I’m terrified!” She shuddered.

“So am I, Penny,” he replied, taking her hand. “It’s just that I was one of those men born with a poker face. What I wouldn’t give to be back at King’s College now, and to wake up and find that this wretched war were over. That would be my second best dream.”

“Second best?” Penelope said, curiously.

Matthew looked at her meaningfully, and she coloured, but said nothing.

“At any rate,” Matthew said, quickly, “the news from the Varald Republic is good. The Ghetzian forces have been pushed back to the very frontier between Varald and Ghetz, and the Cosmopolitan forces – bolstered by the Commonwealth’s reinforcements – have held off the San Delas assault quite miraculously. If the strike on the Ghetz heartland works...”

“It would be wonderful,” Penelope said, disbelievingly. “Just imagine, Matthew – an end to it all, after four years. I can hardly believe it, and yet...”

“Yes?”

“Yet I feel that, even if we won, that would not be enough. Things have changed, Matthew. The world we all grew up in is gone. Something precious has been lost – lost forever.”

Matthew smiled at her and patted her hand. “Not forever, Penelope,” he said, encouragingly. “Haven’t our studies taught us anything? Kingdoms and empires will rise and fall, and be buried under Terra, for our successors to unearth and study. But ordinary people live on. Long after Carranya, Derren, and Wilhelm are footnotes in a history book, Galvenia – or at least Galvenians – will endure. Believe me.”

“Do you really believe that, Matthew?” Penelope said, brightening.

“History teaches it, Penelope,” Matthew replied. “Long after the Journeymen were destroyed to a man at Inderness, your ancestors were out of it all, living a peaceful life in Galvenia. Do you remember?”

“Yes, I do,” she said. “Thank you, Matthew. I only wish that – that Kaleb was home safely. Mother and Father both keep a stiff upper lip, as we Galvenians do, but I know they feel the same way. Kaleb, my brother...”

“And so do I, Penelope. We will all sleep safely in our beds soon – you and your family, these wonderful children here, my fellow professors and I at King’s College, and all our brave men fighting for the future of Terra. Come, now, we have a few games to win!”

“You’re incorrigible, Matthew,” Penelope said, with a chuckle, as she set up the pieces on the board.

“So it is to be tonight, is it, Zedicus?”

The man in the cloak smiled, and his smile spoke both of fatigue and of satisfaction. “Yes, Eramond,” he said. “Tonight, the efforts of the past two years come to an end. For weeks and months, we have fought slowly and cautiously, winning small battles, inflicting small wounds. But now, the time is at hand. If your forces break the line at the Ghetz hinterland, they will be isolated on both sides, and will be forced to surrender – or at least to accept a disadvantageous cease-fire.”

Kaleb whistled. “You seem to know far too much military strategy for a Republican mercenary, Zedicus, and yet – I trust you. I trust you like I would trust a fellow countryman. Truly, my great-grandfather was right – the bonds that are forged in battle, Zedicus, are among the ties that truly bind. That is what he told my father when he was just a child, and now I am learning it for myself. Without your men, we would have taken at least a year more to reach this crucial point.”

“A fellow countryman?” Zedicus laughed. “Someday, Eramond, if we both survive this war, I might surprise you.”

“Oh no, you wouldn’t,” Kaleb replied. “I had you tabbed as a Galvenian long ago, despite your fluency with Republican languages and your knowledge of every corner of this strange country. You see, Zedicus, I am a psychologist in my own modest way.”

“A psychologist?” Zedicus looked at his younger companion with approval. “If I may be indiscreet, Eramond, how did you find that out?”

“Simple, Zedicus.” Kaleb laughed, and placed his hand over the pistol at his belt. “It was a year ago, when we were both listening to Radio Galvenia, and they were broadcasting the annual Queen Carranya Memorial lecture, delivered by my own mother in honour of her scientific endeavours. Your face lit up with pride, my friend. No Republican would take such pride in the achievements of a Galvenian scientist. Only a born Galvenian would.”

Zedicus laughed. “Is that so? I see that I must watch not only my words but my expressions when you are around, Eramond. But I will keep no secret from you. Yes, I was born and brought up in Galvenia. But the story of how I arrived here is long, and we need to move soon. Come, the rest of the Wanderers are waiting for us.”

“It sounds like it might be interesting,” Kaleb said with a grin, as the two men left their tent and headed for their armoured vehicle. “As soon as we have taught the Ghetzians a lesson, you must tell me all about it, my brother.”

In history books, it would be recorded as the Second Battle of Ghetz, which would lead to the Peace of Zhemu and the end of the Second Terran Crisis. In a pitched battle between the Ghetzian and San Delas armies – armed to the teeth and supported by air cover – and Kaleb’s men, supplemented by the Republican mercenaries who called themselves Wanderers, the tide swung first one way, and then another. But after three days of continuous fighting, and the loss of far too many lives, the Imperium’s men broke through and captured the base at Ghetz.

But to Zedicus – and to several others, waiting anxiously at home in Galvenia – it would be remembered for an entirely different reason.

Realizing that defeat was inevitable, the Ghetzians raised the white flag. There was much celebration in the camp of the Imperium, until they realized that their rearguard was being attacked from the air – a last-ditch, futile attempt by the Ghetz army to take as many men with them as they could.

Later, military historians writing their eulogies would point out that the decision of Kaleb Eramond – Commander of the Imperium’s forces – to turn back and try to save them was a foolhardy one, though it was universally lauded as a brave act at the time.

“Zedicus...” Kaleb’s words were the lowest of whispers, but the older man was kneeling by his side, straining to hear. “Is that you?”

“Yes, Eramond,” Zedicus said, closing his eyes. “I am sorry, my brother. There is nothing I can do for you, except ensure that you return to your Galvenia – though not alive. You fool.” The word was spoken affectionately, as if a father were gently admonishing his son.

“A fool?” Kaleb smiled weakly, his hand going to the bleeding wound at his side. “Isn’t that....what we all are, Zedicus? It’s strange....somehow, I *knew*....”

“Knew?”

“Knew that it would end today.....Zedicus..” He handed an envelope, stained with blood, to his companion. “Zedicus...last night, I wrote this. Please, if you value our brotherhood, and the years we fought together, make sure that this reaches my family. I care little what happens to my remains – not an Itarian saint, after all...” He laughed. “There is a fatality in names...Father...Mother...Benedict, Kevin....Penelope, my little sister...I wish I could have seen you....one....last....”

His eyes closed, and he spoke no more.

You know what you must do now, my brave Wanderer.

“Your mother shall see you again, Eramond,” Zedicus said, as he motioned to his comrades to carry Kaleb’s body away. “I swear it by the most solemn vow that a Wanderer can swear.”

Mother and daughter sat together silently, reading the last paragraphs of the letter once again.

I have spent my life scoffing at the supernatural – much like Father before me – but I do believe that it is granted to many of us, at times, to look into the future. Perhaps it is a gift from the Infinity, or perhaps it is a punishment for my presumption. But I see that in the years to come, things will be different – and not necessarily better. The old songs of the Church of the Infinity will sound bittersweet rather than comforting; the flags of Galvenia and Zion will no longer thrill us the way they once did; and the Commonwealth, Lord Geraud’s beloved child, will soon be reduced to a mere club for the rich and powerful.

Thinking of this, I sometimes wonder if our struggle, here in the Republic and back home in Galvenia, was worthwhile. But then, I realize that it was not for the Church, or the Imperium, or the Commonwealth that my comrades and I fought. It was for people like you and me, Mother – you and Father, Kevin and Sheila, Uncle Henrik and Aunt Bernadette, my friend Benedict and his brothers and sisters – and you, Penelope, my dearest sister. I know that your bravery, in keeping the Galvenian flag flying, has far surpassed anything that I have done. It is easy to be brave when one is wielding a gun and riding an armoured vehicle, after all.

Perhaps I have been a soldier too long, and do not know how to put these thoughts of mine into words. I feel I shall not return. But if I do not, Penelope, live well for my sake – and may the rest of your life, rather than my deeds in battle, be the true legacy of the Eramonds.

Yours always,

Kaleb

“Mother,” Penelope began, then wrung her hands. “Kaleb...I don’t know what to say. Neither does Father. I wish I could live up to what he expects of me, but...”

“Oh, Penny,” Lavie said, letting her only daughter rest her head against her, and drying her own eyes. “I’m sure you will. It’ll just take you a little time. And even if you don’t quite live up to his exacting standards” – she smiled gently – “I’m sure that, as my very own daughter, you will die trying! You’re still young, my child, and I’m sure Professor Anderson will agree with what Kaleb and I are saying.”

“Mother!” Penelope said, laughing and crying at the same time. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, it’s just a way of speaking, Penny, my dear,” Lavie said, rising a little stiffly, and making a brave attempt to smile. “Now come along, they’re waiting for us at the Hall of Heroes.”

With a grateful look at her mother, Penelope gathered up her hat and coat, and the two of them joined Ryan – waiting in his Ministry car, silent and solemn – and drove slowly to the memorial service for the soul of Kaleb Gerald Eramond.

The ceremony over, the four men sheathed their swords, and sat down around the fire. Rosmar and Exmus departed to prepare the evening meal, leaving Zedicus alone with his second-in-command.

“Tell me, Zedicus,” Strata said, poking the fire with a stick. “That man, Eramond. Who was he?”

“A brave man,” Zedicus said, closing his eyes. “A loyal servant of Galvenia. The worthy son of his mother – and his father. Why do you ask?”

“Zedicus,” Strata said, “I know you perhaps better than any other Wanderer. You cannot put me off with a glib phrase like that. Tell me the truth. Was that boy your son?”

“My son?” Zedicus began to laugh quietly. “I have no son, Strata. I have wandered the Way ever since I came of age. I have no family – not any longer. Eramond was a brother in arms. I admired him for his courage and his loyalty. He would have made a fine Wanderer.”

“Zedicus, do not fence with me,” Strata replied. “You and I have fought with hundreds – thousands, even – of brave and loyal men. But your tie to this man was different. He was a brother to you. Am I allowed to learn the truth behind this, Zedicus? Who was he?”

“Ah, my boy,” Zedicus answered, employing the term that an older Wanderer would use when teaching his younger companion, “the question is not ‘Who was he?’, but ‘Who am I?’ And that is a question that I will now answer, Strata, though I am afraid it will bore you.”

“Bore me?” Strata chuckled. “Zedicus, you have been my mentor for decades now. Even if you were to confess that you were an Itarian seminarian, I would still admire you.”

“Very well, my brother,” Zedicus said, leaning closer. “You have earned the right to hear the truth. This story begins long ago, in a town called Davenport...”

Do not feel sorrow, my friend. You have done your best. I am still with you.

vi. Smoke and Fire (C.Y. 359)

“I thought I would see you here, Patriarch,” the man said, wrapping his cloak more closely about him. “I am glad that you were able to attend, despite the state of our world.”

“My friend,” Patriarch Hercules Arnoldus said, balancing his mitre on his head as the wind threatened to push it out of place, “how could I *not* attend? In a way, this situation is of my own making. If I had not put in my pennies, then...”

“Then the Itarians would have elected another Benevolent XX, or even another Pious XV,” the man replied.

“Exactly. That boy, my good Towers, had no notion that he would ever come this far, when we first met. It was I who introduced him to the spiritual treasures of the Cosmopolitan Republic, and who put him in touch with those of my brethren who have made their peace with Itaria. At that time, he was content to be an ordinary pastor, unlike me. I have always been ambitious; my own sister will tell you, with her habitual smile, that even as a lad, I enjoyed showing off.”

“I find that hard to believe, Patriarch. And yet, which of us is free of ambition? Even I, here to cover the election for the *Galvenian Church Reporter* instead of toiling at a humbler task, cannot be found free of the taint.”

“Ah, but is it a taint in this case?” Patriarch Hercules laughed. “We are outsiders, you and I, even though I am technically a ‘guest of honour’. Today, it is the College of Cardinals who will decide. And honestly, if it were not for that young man, I would put all my money – my father, like all sailors, enjoyed games of chance from time to time – on someone like Cardinal Enzo, or even Armand of Caledonia.”

“So you still consider Spenson a dark horse, do you, Patriarch?”

“I could hardly do otherwise, Towers. Even today, when I spoke to some of the Cardinals, the most open-minded of them still repeated the usual litany of the old churchmen. He is Galvenian. He is young. He is friendly with the Cosmopolitans, and even favours reconciliation with the Reformers. He has blue hair. His parents were students of Marlborough. None of these is a fatal impediment, but strung together, they do give cause for doubt and pause.”

“Even to you?”

“Of course not.” He chuckled. “If I were a Cardinal – which I never will be – I would try my best to convince them that he is the man for the job. After all, he cannot help having blue hair. His youth will ensure a longer reign. And his parents saved Benevolent’s life.”

“There speaks the mentor.” Towers closed his eyes. “Tell me, Patriarch – you who know him well. Whom would *he* elect if he were given the choice?”

“Oh, he would make a totally impractical choice – someone like Yousuf of Ghetz, who has been denied permission to attend the election by his government, or Xonga of San Delas. They are both fine men, but my Itarian friends would find him harder to swallow than even Spenson.”

“You are a realist, venerable Patriarch,” Father Towers said. “My uncle would have admired you.”

“Indeed, I believe I would have enjoyed meeting him; I have studied several of his books in my day.”

The sound of a trumpet brought their conversation to a standstill.

“That’s our cue, Patriarch,” Towers said, taking out his notepad. “I’ll be in the press enclosure. But I don’t think this will end with the first vote. There will be a deadlock.”

“Do you think so?” Hercules laughed. “I have a higher opinion of the Infinity’s guidance than that, my friend. But let us make a friendly wager. If a second vote is needed, I shall buy you dinner tonight, in any restaurant of your choice. If not, then you will. Do we have a sporting agreement here?”

“You’re on,” Father Towers said, as the two men shook hands and left in different directions. “When the smoke rises, then we shall know who the lucky man is.”

“A word with you, Armand.”

Cardinal Armand – Archbishop of Caledonia, supreme head of the Church of Infinity in Zion, and second only to the Pontiff in importance, as far as the Itarian religion was concerned – turned around, and looked at the speaker with consternation. “What is it, Cardano?”

Cardinal Jerome Cardano – secretary to the late Pontiff Leon VIII – met the other man’s gaze steadily. “Listen to me, Armand. I know that it is perhaps not right to speak to you in this way – you who may be my Supreme Head in a day or two. I merely want to ask you this: are you certain of what you are doing?”

Armand shook his head. “Let us sit down and discuss this quietly, Cardano,” he replied. “Like you, I am troubled.” The two men retreated to a small chamber, used as a reading room by members of the Council for the Holy Book, and sat down uneasily.

“Now, my friend,” Armand went on, “what exactly is that question of yours supposed to mean?”

“Oh, Armand,” Cardano said, shaking his head, “you and I have been part of the game for too long. Surely you do not mean to ask me that. I am speaking, quite simply, of the future of the Church of the Infinity. Many cynics predicted that it would die a natural death after the Reformers overran half our country – indeed, they still hold it to this day. But despite this, the Faith continues to endure; our numbers in Galvenia and Zion have seen a resurgence, and the Cosmopolitan Itarians are reaffirming their loyalty to us. Even some of the Reformers have begun to concede that they went too far, and have

condemned the recent outrages in San Delas. My question is this, Cardinal. What should our response be? Should we wait cautiously like Leon did for eleven years, afraid to rock the boat? Or should we strike out, as our forefathers did, leaving the comfort of the Republican desert for an unknown island?"

"I do not follow your meaning, Cardano..."

"Let me make things clearer. Of late, there are many dangerous ideas floating around the College of Cardinals, and even among the Bishops. Some of these are similar to those of the Reformers: the subordination of the Faith to state authority, the use of force in a pre-emptive fashion, a greater role for laypeople, Women's Devotion groups, re-translations of the Holy Book..."

"It was Marlborough who started the re-translation craze, Cardano." Armand chuckled.

"Marlborough was one of *us*. These others subtly distort the meaning of the text, leaving many of our doctrines on an uncertain footing. But that is not what I wanted to discuss. There are other ideas, Armand, which are double-edged. Some of them – such as closer ties with the Cosmopolitans and a reaffirmation of our social and moral doctrines – are not too bothersome, but others – such as adapting to the spirit of the times – are sheer idiocy of the kind popular in Zion and Galvenia after the war."

"I am aware of all this, but what would you have me do?"

"Listen, Armand. I know there are some, like Morley in Lorean, who would love nothing better than to have the Church become a social prop, a mass of rituals and feel-good speeches with no relevance to our daily lives. I also know that there are some, like Enzo..."

"Careful, Cardano..."

"...who wish to rule the Church and the faithful in the way that Salzo and his animals rule San Delas, or the dictators of Ghetz rule their country. I do not deny that such a vision is seductive to many of us – perhaps even to you and me, old friend."

"What you say is true," Armand said heavily. "Infinity forgive me, even I have been tempted in that way. But what is the alternative? Enzo, for all his flaws, is safe. He will be terribly reactionary, and people will compare him unfavourably to men like Pious or Benevolent, but still...who else? A loose cannon like Xonga?"

"Xonga? Infinity forbid," Cardano said. "I admire Xonga, but the College of Cardinals would never stand for him. Let us look closer home – for though all men are equal in the eyes of the Infinity, we have not learnt that lesson, despite two wars. My suggestion is of a man who is orthodox, but in touch with the realities of a world that is weary of war, wary of authority, and doubts even the Infinity Himself. It is not a question of changing our doctrine – Infinity forbid! – but of presenting it in a different language."

"Old wine in new bottles?" Armand chuckled. "You are clever, Cardano, and I see where many of Leon's ideas came from. But I agree with you: we are old men, and though Leon was a good leader, the time

has come for a change. Not a revolution – the world is weary of revolution – but a change nonetheless. Come, let me hear your idea.”

“Very well, Armand. I hoped you would say that. And, wise as you are, I assume you know the man I am speaking of, don’t you?”

Armand laughed – a cheerful laugh that took at least ten years away from his aged, stout frame. “Truth be told, Cardano, I was about to approach you and the other Pontificals with the same suggestion. You merely happened to anticipate me. It will be an interesting journey if we do succeed, but I think the Infinity will smile on our plan.”

The two men shook hands. “Of course, Armand,” Cardano replied. “I ought to have known. Let us see if this proposal of ours is mere smoke, or if the fire of the Infinity truly lies behind it.”

“You win, my good Towers,” Patriarch Hercules said, with a wry smile, as he sat down in front of his steak. “The Infinity works more slowly than my fevered imagination.”

“It was a foregone conclusion, Patriarch,” Father Archibald Towers said, sipping his glass of wine with satisfaction. “I must admit that I am as disappointed as you are about this result. But let us face facts. The Galvenian Cardinals themselves are a divided lot: that clown, Morley...”

“Should you really be criticizing a superior in such terms, Towers?” Hercules said, with a broad grin that even his flowing beard could not hide.

“It’s not criticism to tell the truth, Patriarch. Morley would turn the Faith into a television show; it would be amusing to look at, but would offer little of substance. It would be as bad as the religion of the Guided, or even the welfare movement of Socius’ followers. But he is influential, and four of the seven other Galvenian cardinals will side with him. Spenson himself will probably vote either for Xonga, or for a safe candidate like Armand if his mother has spoken to him.” He laughed. “The Zionese are far more on his side than he realizes, and among the Itarians, the Pontificals will endorse him rather than see Enzo reign. But Enzo’s party is powerful, and unless some of them come around, I still see him winning by a narrow margin. Alternately, it will be Armand as a compromise candidate.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“It is. He would be the man in the middle of the road. I once met an old journalist who had a picturesque turn of phrase, when I visited Zion. He said that those who stood in the middle of the road eventually ended up – pardon the crudity, Patriarch – ‘road kill’. Armand would be road kill.”

“And Spenson?”

“He would at least fight, as his father and mother did. Armand is old. Spenson is young for a Cardinal.”

“Too young, some would say. But I’m sure I must sound like a stuck record on this particular issue. Is there anything we can do to help things along?”

“Patriarch!” Towers raised his eyebrows. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

“I am merely saying,” the Patriarch said, wiping his lips with his napkin and smiling serenely, “that the Infinity is all-good and all-loving. However, he does not expect us to remain idle, Towers. To borrow a phrase from Lady Lavender Eramond, my sister’s dear friend, he would be far from content if we were to ‘sit on our duffs and do nothing!’ Enzo is powerful, but power breeds envy. If he could be brought to compromise himself...”

“Unfortunately, my good Patriarch, the man is a pillar of rectitude!” Towers said, with annoyance. “Are you merely jesting?”

“A moral high horse, Towers, is a comfortable perch, but it is also the prelude to a mighty fall.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“Towers, you disappoint me. Don’t you read the papers any longer?” Hercules said, pointing to a newspaper that lay on the table beside their empty plates, carrying the news of Senor Salzo’s latest exploits along the Cosmopolitan border. “Does this suggest anything to you, my friend?”

“Yes, it does,” Towers said, his lips curving into a smile. “Truly, the Infinity has blessed you with wisdom, Patriarch.”

“A rest day?” Cardano grumbled. “Foolishness. This is but a ploy on the part of Enzo’s party. If Lombardi is ill, his vote can always be collected by one of the guards.”

“Nevertheless, we are checkmated, Cardano,” Cardinal Xonga of San Delas observed, running a hand through his unruly mop of curly hair. “The rules say that a rest day is permissible if a vote is deadlocked, and if one or more of the members of the Pontifical Council is ill. Those are Pious’ own rules. I deplore Enzo’s ploy, but we cannot do anything. In the meantime, my country continues to be fascinated, as one is by a demon, with power and its trappings.” He sighed. “We are emulating the Varald Directorate, not the Infinity.”

“I agree with Xonga,” Cardinal Morphy of Kannschloss observed. “This will merely give Enzo and his men time to spread doubts among those who are uncertain. As things stand, Spenson obtained twenty-seven votes out of sixty-four in the first round, Enzo thirty-one, and the remaining six were scattered – four to Armand, one to you..”

“That was Spenson,” Xonga replied with a smile.

“Indeed. And the one vote for Sakamura was a noble gesture on your part, Xonga, but futile. The Itarians will never stand for an Old Zionese Pontiff.”

Xonga chuckled. “In retrospect, I ought to have voted for Spenson. The question is, what do we do now? Logic would say that we unite behind Spenson, but would that be enough? Even his own countrymen find him too old-fashioned.”

A member of the Pontifical Guard knocked at the door of their room.

“Come in,” Morphy said, calmly. “What is it, soldier?”

“Beg pardon, Your Eminence,” the guard replied, “but there’s a man from the *Galvenian Church Reporter* who wants your views on the siege of Thabes by Salzo’s armies. Shall I let him in?”

“A journalist?” Xonga frowned. “What does he want from us? We are in the middle of a conclave, guard. Tell him to speak to Enzo and his men. They have no shortage of words.”

“I agree, Xonga,” Cardano said. “We are men of learning, and we will not oblige him with a witty phrase. Let Enzo pontificate, since he wishes to be Pontiff. And tell him” – his expression clouded over, and he raised his voice – “that we have no truck with Salzo and his goons, no matter how many times he claims to serve the Infinity. He is a man of blood, and his alliances with the Ghetzians and the Reformed prove him to be far from our Faith.”

“Can I quote you on that?” a voice said, from behind the door, in cheerful tones.

“Good heavens!” Morphy exclaimed. “Sweet Infinity, Towers, is that you?”

“Indeed it is, Your Eminence,” Father Towers replied, entering the room. “I repeat, may I quote Cardinal Cardano on the recent tragedies that Salzo is involved in?”

“My young friend,” Cardano said, looking at him speculatively, “what are you trying to tell us?”

“I should think my meaning was quite clear, your Eminence,” Towers said, inflappably.

A meaningful look passed between Cardano and Xonga, then he nodded. “Yes, you may. And good luck interviewing Enzo. You may want some clothing to protect yourself from the amount of hot air he blows in your direction.” He laughed.

“Thank you, Cardinal – and rest assured, I shall not quote you on that,” Towers replied, as he quickly left the room.

“Morley, we have no choice.”

Cardinal Morley of Lorean shook his head, and looked at the paper disbelievingly. “The fool,” he said. “The confounded fool. How can he hope to face the Zion or even half his own men after such a statement? This upsets all our plans, Traxler.”

Cardinal Traxler of Darington – one of the four men known as “Morley’s Four”, enthusiastic advocates for the modernization of the Itarian Church – nodded mutely.

“And yet – it was such a beautiful plan. Elect Enzo. Let him destroy himself by giving him enough rope. Let us undermine him subtly. And then, when the popularity of the Church is at its lowest ebb, we offer them the solution. A modern Church, Traxler, not old musty Itarian chants. A new way of being a Church. It is why we are here. To block men like Spenson and Armand, who would confound our plans thanks to their wretched ‘moderation’. And now, when we are ready to hand Enzo victory – he has already agreed to reward us for doing so, unaware of what our intentions really are – he goes and mouths off like a brash seminarian, defending Salzo and his military regime. The fool!” He threw the paper against the wall of the room, scowling.

“Morley,” Traxler said, uneasily, “the four of us have a proposal.”

“What is it?” Morley replied, sullenly.

“Let us vote for Spenson, Morley. He is a Galvenian, like us. I know he does not agree with us on many matters, but he would be better than Enzo. Besides, Enzo is a lost cause. Four of his party have defected to the Zion-Galvenia camp after he praised Salzo’s ‘strong rule’, ‘iron hand’, and ‘support of the Faith against compromisers and rebels’. Even the Zionese sympathetic to him are beginning to support Armand’s call to back Spenson and block Enzo once and for all. Our chances are better with Spenson.”

“You fools!” Morley said, his eyes flashing. “Do you even realize what Spenson stands for? Behind his message of union and conciliation, he is as orthodox and hide-bound as Pious or Benevolent. Sweet Infinity, his mother is even a teacher of Itarian chant! He will be popular – too popular. He will spell our doom. That infernal reporter – I do not know who he is, but may he burn in the Pits forever!”

“Careful with that, Morley,” the aged Cardinal Keene of Trinden-Hartridge replied. “Look, old boy, the five of us have come a long way. We’ve tried to create a new religion, one that is three parts Socius and two parts Ininitus. We’ve schemed and plotted. But maybe it’s time to acknowledge defeat. Spenson’s a good lad. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m going to cast my vote for him now. Our Church needs a leader, even if we don’t coincide on everything.”

“You, Keene, dare to say that?” Morley replied hotly. “What of the rest of you? Traxler? Berkeley? Knightson? Answer me!”

“They’re on my side, old boy. Come now, Morley. Be reasonable. The Infinity’s ways are mysterious. Maybe some time in the future, when we’re long gone, the world will be ready for our message. But for now, I say – back Spenson. I’ve been uneasy about that bloke Enzo from the start, and if he starts backing Salzo, I say we stop backing him.”

“Treason,” Morley said, irritably. “Rest assured that I will not forget this – and as for that reporter, Towers, he will be ministering to alcoholics in Trinden for the rest of his priestly life.”

“Not treason, Morley,” Keene said, with a smile, “but reason. Everything comes to the one who waits, as Aramondrius said. Now cheer up, there’s a good fellow.”

“Good heavens, Ryan!” Lavie said, as Maria cleared the teacups from their table. “Did you see the paper today? That Enzo really is a goof!”

“Enzo? The Itarian cardinal?” Ryan frowned. “Hasn’t he become Pontiff already, Lavie? What’s *he* up to?”

“Pontiff? Pish posh!” Lavie said, brightly, handing him the paper. He adjusted his glasses, then read with some effort. “See, Ryan, it says here that he publicly endorsed Salzo’s actions, and that many of the Cardinals are likely to turn against him! Do you realize what that means?”

“We get Armand as our next Pontiff, right?” Ryan said, smiling back – no matter how weary or old he felt, Lavie could somehow bring a smile to his face. “Good old Armand. Henrik always speaks highly of him.”

“No, silly,” Lavie said, rolling up the paper and swatting him with it playfully, causing Penelope and Matthew to giggle. “It means that they might have to opt for someone quite different. How about Benedict?”

“Benedict?” Matthew looked at his mother-in-law with admiration. “You know, Lady Eramond, that’s not such a bad idea. Benedict’s a good chap. Mark my words, I wouldn’t be surprised if Towers had something to do with it.”

“I agree,” Penelope replied, warmly, for Benedict had been her constant companion in childhood.

“Stop calling me that, you goof,” Lavie replied, affectionately. Emily came running towards her, and she picked her up. “Listen, all of you. Emily will tell us who’s going to be. Come and sit on my lap, sweetie. Now tell me, Emily. You have to choose the next Pontiff of Itaria. Do you want mean Mr. Enzo, or Uncle Benedict?”

“Uncle Benedict!” Emily said, her eyes brightening. “Uncle Benedict brought me such a nice book last year, Gran!”

“There you have it, guys,” Lavie replied, with a chuckle. “Emily has spoken. The case is closed.”

“Very funny, Mom,” Penelope said, as Emily jumped off her grandmother’s lap and ran towards her.

Whatever one might say about Cardinal Pietro Enzo – who looked at the results of the second ballot with a wry smile on his face – he was gracious in defeat.

“The votes have been counted, my fellow Cardinals,” Cardano observed, pointing to the electronic board that displayed the tally. “And I am glad to announce to all of you, before we light the fire, that we have a new Pontiff! Here are the final tallies. Cardinal Enzo of Itaria has twenty votes out of sixty-four. Cardinal Morley of Galvenia has one.”

“The old fool voted for himself, did he?” Xonga muttered, causing his neighbour, Cardinal Armand, to chuckle.

“And elected with a clear majority of two-thirds by the College of Cardinals, with forty-three votes, is Cardinal Benedict Spenson of Galvenia! *Habemus Pontifex!* I now call upon the College to acclaim our new Pontiff” – he pointed to Benedict, who had turned a deep red – “before we proclaim this good news to the people.”

Enzo rose to his feet and began to applaud, and the remaining sixty-two Cardinals – with the exception of Morley – began to clap enthusiastically. He raised his hand, and the microphone was handed to him.

“Venerable brothers,” Enzo replied, “the Infinity works in mysterious ways, but He is always good, and He is always just. It is a tremendous honour that has been conferred on you, Your Holiness, and a tremendous responsibility as well. Know that the College of Cardinals will always be your pillar and support, and that we pledge loyalty to you. And may the Infinity be praised forever.”

Loud applause greeted this speech, and the Papal crown was handed to Benedict, who put it on rather tentatively. He walked steadily up to the fire in the centre of the room, torch in hand, and lit it – setting in motion the system of smoke and fire which would soon tell the people of Itaria City that they had a new Pontiff. The task accomplished, he was about to speak, when there was a knock at the door.

“What is it, guard?” Cardano said, surprised.

“Beg your pardon, Your Eminence,” the guard replied, “but there’s someone here with a special delivery for you all!” He laughed.

“A special delivery?”

The doors were flung open, and in came Bernadette, accompanied by Sister Amelia Rushden, both beaming and wheeling in an enormous cake.

“Sweet Infinity!” Cardinal Keene said, with a laugh.

“Good afternoon, your Eminence,” Bernadette said, bowing reverently, “and good afternoon, son – or should I call you ‘Your Holiness’ now?” She laughed lightly, and tapped the floor with her stick. “We

thought you might like some refreshments after all those deliberations! I hope you enjoy this, my venerable friends, for Amelia and I have been working hard at it!”

“Infinity bless you, Mother,” Benedict said, as he burst out laughing. “You do think of everything.”

“Truer words were never spoken, Your Holiness,” Cardinal Armand said, as he enthusiastically reached for the cake.

EPILOGUE: HOME

*“For I am a stranger in your house,
a nomad like all my ancestors.”
(Psalm 39, v. 12)*

A week after Lavie had shown her granddaughter the final photograph, the two of them took a trip to Davenport. They said little to each other during the journey, but Lavie held on to Emily protectively, and had a distant, yet peaceful look on her face.

As the train arrived at Davenport Station, Lavie got up with a start.

“What’s the matter, Gran?” Emily said, anxiously.

“Nothing really, dear,” Lavie replied, taking her by the hand, as a kindly porter helped them with their suitcases. “It’s just that I haven’t been here since – since Grandpa left. I’ve always meant to bring you here someday, so that you would see for yourself, and understand.”

“Understand what, Gran?”

“When the time comes,” Lavie said, with a smile, “it’ll all be clear. Now come along, Emily darling. We’ll just freshen up a little, and then we’ll pay Ryan a visit. He’s been waiting for us quite a while, the goof!”

“Goof?” Emily laughed. “That’s funny, Gran!”

“I’m sure Grandpa would agree with you, Emily. Now hand me your little suitcase, dear. First up, we’ve got to grab a bite! It won’t be as good as Maria’s cooking, but Davenport Station’s quite nice, though I say so myself. After all, my brother was one of those who helped it come up in the first place.”

“Great-Uncle Victor?” Emily said, with a laugh. “Is he here too, Gran?”

“I’m afraid not, dear,” Lavie replied. “He’s had to attend a meeting of the Board of Directors for the whole Imperium, at Darington. We’ll meet him once we get back to Lorean. Now come along, and stay close to me! Dear Davenport’s become quite a crowded place. I wonder what Daddy would have thought of this!”

“But didn’t he want Davenport to become a big city, Gran?” Emily asked, mischievously, as she looked at the crowds of passengers bustling around the platform.

“Not *this* big,” Lavie said, and they both laughed.

“Lavie, my sister!”

The voice was older, but it was still as steady – and faintly musical – as it had been sixty years ago, and Lavie recognized it instantly. Though she was in a graveyard, she began to run, Emily following close behind, and the speaker – though walking with the help of a stout stick – moved as fast as she can in the opposite direction. As she watched the two old women embrace, Emily felt that, despite their appearance, they were as young as her own friends from school.

“Bernadette!” Lavie exclaimed, a broad smile on her face. “When did you arrive here, naughty girl?”

“Just this morning, my Lavie,” Bernadette said, affectionately, replacing the glasses on her nose. “Henrik and I thought we’d come down and pay Ryan a visit, but this is a most pleasant surprise!”

“Indeed it is, my friend,” Lavie said, wiping one eye as Emily helpfully offered her a handkerchief.

“Goodness, my dear child,” Bernadette exclaimed, “you’re just like your grandfather!”

“Gran’s told me so much about you!” Emily said, as Bernadette gathered her up in her arms. “And Mummy also told me how nice you are. Should I call you Great-Aunt Bernadette? It sounds sort of clumsy...”

“Lavie and Penelope are too kind,” Bernadette said, with a blush. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you, Emily. And please call me Bernadette! ‘Great-Aunt’ just makes me feel my age, and that’s not a pleasant sensation when you’re an elderly woman, you know.” She laughed.

“You’re funny, Bernadette!” Emily said, beaming at her. “Where’s Professor Henrik? Gran’s told me so much about his broad shoulders!”

“Dear me, Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette said, laughing out loud, “what have you been telling this child?”

“Oh, just the adventures of our restless youth, Bernadette,” Lavie replied, lightly.

“I believe you’re looking for me, child,” a tall man said, walking up to them slowly, carrying an elegant stick of his own, and dragging his right leg. “I’m afraid one of those broad shoulders of mine is drooping a bit, but I’m in pretty good shape for my age, thanks to Bernadette. It’s a delight to see you, Emily. Ryan and Lavie have told me so much about you. I’m only sorry we couldn’t get permission to leave Itaria in time to see him at the end.”

“Ohmygosh, Henrik, what happened to you?” Lavie said, with alarm, noting that Henrik was walking with a stick as well, and that his right arm hung loosely at his side.

“Just a blocked blood vessel, Lavie,” Henrik said with a laugh. “But hey, look at it on the bright side, now Bernadette and I can both carry sticks! The Brotherhood of the Stick, that’s us. Armin would be proud – I’m the last of the Compadres standing! I wonder what he and Ryan are up to now.”

“Dear Henrik,” Bernadette said, smiling at him. “Even at a ripe old age, you still cannot be serious about your own health. But I’m not complaining – I’m only glad that you recovered soon enough for us to make this journey together, at last. The Infinity is good.”

“I’ll have to agree with you on that, my sister,” Lavie replied, “all things considered.” They all walked over to a recently laid grave, where they knelt down, remaining together in silence for some time, reading the inscription in front of them:

To the eternal memory of Ryan Eramond

(C.Y. 281 – C.Y. 361)

Loyal Servant of Galvenia, the Commonwealth, and the Imperium

*Beloved husband of Lavender,
father of Kaleb, Kevin and Penelope,
grandfather of Henrik, Sheila and Emily*

“Our past determines who we are. It helps shape our present, and guide our future.”

“Always do the right thing.”

We will never forget you.

Immediately above this were the graves of Ryan’s parents, and his grandparents – and next to his was another marker, which had been lovingly tended:

This memorial stands in honour of Kaleb Gerald Eramond (C.Y. 306 – C.Y. 347), who lies buried in the Hall of Heroes at Lorean.

*Commander of the Galvenian Rough Riders,
Colonel in the Commonwealth Special Forces,
Beloved son of Ryan and Lavender,
and brother of Kevin and Penelope*

“Freedom will exist as long as there are men brave enough to defend it.”

“Uncle Kaleb,” Emily whispered, as Lavie knelt down by the marker, and laid a bouquet of King’s Tears on it. “I wish I’d known him, Gran.”

“You will someday, but – please, Infinity – only after you’ve lived a long and full life, as I did, my child,” Bernadette said, consolingly. “Do you remember Aline, Henrik? She always used to wish that we had ‘long and interesting lives’. How true that turned out to be.”

“Gran told me about Aline, too!” Emily said, with a smile. “Goodness, I feel like I know all of you, Bernadette, even though this is the first time we’re meeting!”

“Dear old Professor Aline,” Lavie said, with a laugh. “I did make her famous, Emily, and I’m sure she and her sister are still sniping at each other in Paradise right now.”

“Who’s that, Gran?” Emily said, suddenly, noting a man who was kneeling by a far-off grave.

“Another mourner, Emily,” Henrik said, gently, lifting himself up with an effort. “Come, let’s not disturb him. Are we heading for your place now, Lavie?”

“Of course, guys,” Lavie said, with a laugh. “Dear Ryan. I wish he was here with us now. But hey, I shouldn’t complain; it’s good enough that three of the Six are still standing, even after all this time!”

As they rose and began to leave, they noted that the man had now made his way to Ryan’s grave, and had placed a simple wreath on it.

“Look, Gran,” Emily whispered. “He knew Grandpa, too.”

“I wonder who he is,” Bernadette mused.

The man stood up with a sigh, and dusted off his cloak – an old-fashioned green affair which had clearly seen better days, but which still bore the stamp of good workmanship.

“He was a good man,” he said, to no one in particular. “Perhaps I can finally acknowledge that, now.”

“Why do you say that, sir?” Henrik said, turning to look at the man. He was grey-haired, and about the same age as Henrik, if not older – there was an ageless quality about him. Beneath his cloak, he wore the simple clothing of a Davenport sailor or labourer, and he had a sword at his belt, as soldiers of old did before the days of firearms and projectiles. His face was covered with scars, as though he had braved danger several times, but the look in his eyes was peaceful.

“Because, my friend,” the man replied, with a smile, “it is better to accept the truth late, than to die denying it.”

“Wise words,” Bernadette said. “Pardon my asking this, sir, but Ryan Eramond was a dear friend of ours. Were you acquainted with him?”

“Not very well, madam,” the man replied. “I did know him quite a while ago, albeit briefly. I’m afraid I have led rather an itinerant life. It has its pleasures, as you may guess, but it does take its toll on relationships.”

“As I well know,” Henrik said, with a laugh. “It has been long since my wife and I were unsure whether our home was here in Davenport, or in Itaria with our son and daughter. It is but recently that we decided to return here, mainly because of my health.”

“You’re going to stay on?” Lavie said, excitedly. “Wow, Bernadette, you never told me about this!”

“I wanted it to be a surprise, Lavie, my sister,” Bernadette replied. “We’re going to return to our little house near King’s College, and Henrik will see if he can wangle a visiting professorship of some sort, as dear Father Marlborough once did. We’ll be neighbours, just imagine!”

“Bernadette, that’s just...cool!” Lavie said, brightening despite her surroundings.

The man smiled. “I see I have intruded upon a happy moment,” he said, with a nod. “It may surprise you to learn this, Mrs. Eramond, but I knew your son quite well.”

“My son?” Lavie said, in a faltering voice. “Kaleb?”

“Yes, madam,” the man replied. “We fought together – or, should I say, on the same side – for most of the last year of the Second Terran Crisis, in the Fulton Republic. It is an enduring regret of mine that I could not save his life, for men like him are greater than any Imperium or Commonwealth – or so I believe.” He shook his head. “I am only thankful that the Purpose allowed me to recover his body, and those of his brave comrades, after they fell during that cowardly Ghetzian bomb raid. Without his bravery, the war on the Fulton front would have been lost.”

“It was *you*?” Lavie said, staring open-mouthed at the strange man before her. “Sweet Infinity! I – received a letter from the Commonwealth High Command telling me how he had been brought back safely by Republican raiders, just before the Ghetzians struck again, but....Sir, this is an honour. As a mother, I cannot express how thankful I am...” She covered her face with her hands.

“I did not do it alone, madam,” the man said, gently. “My comrades were as brave as I. I was just their designated leader. It is the way I have chosen – to support those who work for good, in war and in peace. Sometimes, I succeeded. Sometimes, I failed. But I can at least tell the Purpose, when I stand before him one day, that I lived – and died – trying.”

“That sounds just like you, Gran,” Emily said, suddenly. “Tell me about Uncle Kaleb, sir.”

“There is much to say about him, child, but the time has not yet come,” the man replied. “You remind me of someone I knew, long ago.”

“What is your name, sir?” Lavie said, drying her eyes and looking at the man with gratitude.

“My name?” He looked at Lavie intently. “Those of us who choose to wander the Way surrender our names on the day we perform our first true deed of valour. But since it would be inconvenient for us to address each other using pronouns alone” – he laughed – “we are allowed to choose a name of our own, from among the names of the First Generations. You may call me Zedicus.”

“Zedicus?” Henrik said, curiously. “Wasn’t he a legendary figure who perished, along with his daughter Lexus, at the hands of the Man of Regret in his darkest days?”

“Indeed,” Zedicus said, looking at Henrik with admiration. “Like my namesake, I once lost something very precious to me, through my own inadvertence and foolishness. But unlike Lexus, she did not die – it was just that our paths along the Way diverged, never to meet again. In his goodness, the Purpose had pity on me, and gave me another companion, as he did to the Man of Regret.”

“Sir,” Lavie said, wonderingly, “you speak like a wise sage out of one of my father’s books of legends, and yet – you are a man like all of us. Surely you once had a name, a family, a home.”

“A home?” Zedicus smiled at her. “A Wanderer has no home, except the Upper Way, if the Purpose deems him worthy to reach it. You Itarians” – he looked at Bernadette’s pendant – “would call it Paradise. It is a place where the desires and conflicts of this world are no more, and where even those who were bitterly opposed in this life may walk together as friends. But you are right, Mrs. Eramond. It seems hard to believe, to those who only know me as Zedicus, but I once was a young man, just as you were a young girl. How far away those days seem – the days when I was still someone’s son, someone’s enemy, someone’s classmate.”

“Classmate?” Lavie stared at him, her jaw truly dropping this time. “Ohmygosh....no, it can’t be....”

Bernadette smiled. “I grow slow in my old age,” she said, leaning on Henrik’s good arm for support. “I ought to have realized it much earlier. Welcome home, Juno, my brother. I hoped we would meet again one day, before it pleased the Infinity to take me.”

“Juno?” Emily said, disbelievingly.

“Indeed, my friends – if I may still call you that,” Zedicus replied. “I am afraid I am not as hardened as I believe. That old name still brings back memories, some of which are quite pleasant. But I have not been Makarov Juno since the days of the Second Crisis, and it is as Zedicus that I will go to my rest, and – please the Purpose – to the Upper Way.”

“Ohmygosh,” Lavie said, at a loss for words. “Juno – it was *you* who brought Kaleb back?”

“Yes, Miss Regale,” Zedicus said, with a laugh. “Flaming lands, it feels strange to call you that, but that is the name I always remember you by. I did what I could for your son, in reparation to you – and to Eramond, whom I misjudged in my youth. It is the Wanderer’s Code. A life for a life. A tooth for a tooth. A good deed for a good deed.”

“So you did become a hero, after all,” Emily whispered.

“A hero?” Zedicus spoke sternly, but the expression in his eyes was gentle. “Some would call me that, child. Others would call me a mercenary or a fool. It matters little. I know that I have done well, and if I have returned to Davenport, it is because I know that I will soon reach the End of the Way. I came here to see my father and mother one last time – but I see I have met my sister as well.” He smiled at Bernadette. “And there is another reason.”

“What is it, Makarov?” Henrik said, with a smile.

“Spenson,” Zedicus replied, with a laugh, “I see I shall never cure you of the habit of using that name. Listen to me. Through the many years after my defeat at Unity Isle, I lived the life of a Wanderer, doing good where I could. Though it was a hard life, I had a companion. Today, she will leave me and journey to the Upper Way herself, to claim the saint’s crown that she has earned many times over.”

“A companion?” Henrik said, looking at Juno’s sword – which he had now drawn – with awe.
“Bernadette, it must be...”

“Hush, dear Henrik,” Bernadette said. “Let us listen to Juno.”

“Or rather,” Zedicus said, burying his sword in the mound beside his mother’s grave, “listen to her, my friends.”

There was a blinding flash of blue and orange light from the edges of the sword, and a woman – or, rather, an apparition of one – appeared in the air, floating above the sword. She was smiling at all of them as if she had found her long-lost brethren at last, and none of them dared speak. There was a wound in the left side of her chest, but it was healed, and it seemed as if she was slowly moving upwards. Her lips moved, and though there was no sound, they could all hear her in their minds – or, perhaps, in their hearts.

You have done well, Juno.

“Thank you,” Zedicus replied. “I see I cannot cure you of using my old name, either. Are you and Spenson perchance related?” He laughed.

“Are you Saint Lyrra?” Emily said, wide-eyed.

Dear Emily, the woman said, affectionately. I am no saint – at least not yet, child, but that is indeed my name. Listen to my story. Thousands and thousands of years ago, I was a young girl like you. I had a father, a brother, and a man whom I loved. But he was false to me, because he loved the glory of this world, and the acclaim of the battlefield. He thought being a warrior was the mark of nobility, and counted kindness as weakness. The lust for war is terrible, my friends – it is a thing of the Pits themselves.

“We have learnt that lesson in letters of fire, Saint Lyrra,” Bernadette said, shaking her head. “Will you no longer be with us, now?”

Dear heart, I will be with you – and those like you – until the end of this world, for such is the decree of the Purpose. When I yielded to despair, and threw myself on a sword when I learned of my lover’s perfidy, the Purpose passed sentence on me. He pitied me, and promised me that one day, I would reach the Upper Way – provided I could assist and protect a man whose heart was as good as mine, despite being as flawed as I was. I have found him at last, and soon, he will receive his reward. And I will receive

mine, my friends. Now, I belong not only to him, but to all of you who believe in the Purpose and pray for peace. Fear not, Juno, Bernadette, Lavender, Henrik, Emily. As long as people like you live, the Purpose will bless you and the world you live in.

“Thank you,” Zedicus said, again. “You have truly earned your reward, my lady. Go to the Purpose, who awaits you. Perhaps we shall meet again soon.”

The woman’s smile was mischievous, almost girlish. *I am sure we will, Juno, and I quiver with anticipation! Goodbye, my hero.*

“Goodbye, Lyrra,” Juno said, kneeling down beside the sword, as Lyrra ascended into the sky, slowly disappearing beyond the clouds that covered the graveyard, her garments shining as bright as the sun.

“Wow,” Lavie said, softly, waving goodbye as Lyrra disappeared from their sight. “I know next to nothing about saints and angels, Juno, but I can tell that she really cared for you. I hope she’ll see you again someday.”

“If the Purpose so wills it, I hope for the same, Mrs. Eramond,” Juno replied. “But how did you come to that conclusion, may I ask?”

“Oh, we girls have our secrets, you know,” Lavie said, with a laugh “I still remember how it feels to care that way about someone, you see.”

“And I am glad you do, Mrs. Eramond,” Juno replied, with a nod. “I thank you for being there to witness this moment, and for listening to me, but now I must be on my way.”

“Where are you going, Juno?” Henrik said, kindly.

“There is an old hut at Straukpass, where my master once lived,” Juno said, smiling at Emily, whose hand had crept around the sword that lay embedded near the tombs. “It is perhaps dusty, but dust matters little to a man who has come to the End of the Way. Goodbye, my friends. Perhaps we, and Saint Lyrra, will meet again in a better place where the madness of war is no more.” He turned to leave, walking slowly down the path that led to the city gates.

“Mr. Juno, one minute, please!” Emily called out, causing him to pause.

“What is it, child?” Juno said, surprised.

“Mr. Juno, I can see that – you also were a brave person, like Grandpa and Gran. And you talk to saints, too. Will you – bless me?”

“Bless you?” Juno looked at Emily in amazement, then looked at his hands. “These hands have wielded weapons and shed blood, little girl. They were not meant to bless.”

“That’s not true,” Emily said, gently. “Father Towers, who’s a great friend of Daddy’s, says that only good and blessed men can talk to the saints. And Grandpa was a soldier, too!”

“Ah, you crazy Itarians,” Juno said. “If it pleases you, child, I shall.” He placed his hands over Emily’s head in a gesture of benediction, as she moved closer to him.

“And now I must leave,” he said, raising his hands after a moment. “Farewell, young Emily. May you be as brave and as loyal as your grandmother.”

“Thank you, Mr. Juno,” Emily said, solemnly. “I will – or I’ll die trying!”

“Juno, wait,” Lavie said, smiling as she gathered Emily into her arms. “Straukpass is far away, and even if you’re a great hero, you’re not getting any younger. Why don’t you stay with us for a while?”

“With you?”

“At Casa Regale,” Lavie explained. “Henrik and Bernadette will also be glad to stay with us for a while, I’m sure. And later, come back with us to Lorean. After all, whatever happened all those years ago, you brought Kaleb back to me. Nothing can erase that. If you need a home, Juno, we can give you one. You’re Bernadette’s half-brother, you know!”

Juno hesitated, and reached for the sword that he had left behind, replacing it in his sheath. “Are you serious, Mrs. Eramond?” he said.

“Of course,” Lavie said, holding out her hand.

Juno paused for a long moment, closing his eyes, then held out his hand to take hers. “Of course, Miss Regale, of course,” he said, with a smile. “It is as I hoped. The Sword of Justice will pass to a worthy man or woman again. Emily, take the Sword.”

“Me?” Emily exclaimed.

“Yes, you,” Juno replied, holding out his other hand to her. “Not long ago, as I set out on this journey to Davenport, Lyrra told me that I would meet the descendant of an old friend – a friend who would extend her hospitality to me. She asked me to give the Sword to this person, who would put it to good use if danger threatened Terra once more. I thought she was being fanciful, but now I know she was prophesying.”

“Are you serious, Juno?” Henrik said, shaking his head.

“Have you known me for a jokester, Spenson?” Juno said, calmly. “And I thank you, Miss Regale. Truly, the Purpose has blessed you – he has made you the one to fulfil his promises, not only to Eramond, but to me. Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned there.”

“There are many lessons that we learn all too late, my brother,” Bernadette said, kindly, as they began to walk towards the old Regale mansion. “But the wonder of it all is that, often, we manage to learn them in good time.”

“That’s nice, Bernadette,” Emily said, running ahead of them and holding the Sword, which felt surprisingly light in her hand. “Come, Mr. Juno, Gran’s going to show us her old house! Isn’t that exciting?”

“Very funny, Emily,” Lavie said, as she and Juno continued to walk together towards the house.

“To quote Lyrra,” Juno said, with a laugh, “my heart quivers with anticipation. Lead on, child.”

“The Way of Justice and the Way of Love,” Bernadette murmured, as she and Henrik followed behind. “They may never unite fully in this life, but there is always a world to come.”

“Indeed, my love,” Henrik replied, looking at Emily and the sword with a distant smile on his face.

CODA: THE END OF THE WAY

(C.Y. 365)

*“Blessed are the peacemakers:
they shall be called sons of God.”
(Matthew, ch. 5, v. 9)*

Coolness.

Refreshment.

For the last few days, it was all that the young girl was aware of. A refreshing, almost intoxicating sense of coolness – not a chill, but the indescribable relief that someone who’d been out in the sun, dying of thirst, experienced when they drank their first sip of water; the relief that a town felt when a heat wave finally began to break, with the arrival of a summer shower.

She was at a loss to explain it, but she revelled in the sensation. It seemed to her that she had never felt anything as refreshing, and as she lay back, her head sinking into the pillow, pulling the clean white sheets around her, she wished it would never end. She wished she could remain this way, at peace with herself and the rest of the world, forever.

But of course, she realized, it was all a dream, and soon she would wake up, and feel the pain and the burning once more. Her eyes opened slowly, reluctantly, and fixed themselves on the person who was now stumping her way to her bedside. She was an elderly woman, her hair completely white, who peered at her kindly out of a thick pair of spectacles, and who held a stout stick in one hand. There was a scar near one eye and another over her forehead, resembling old burns, and she walked with a limp, though she seemed vigorous for her age.

“Good morning, my child,” the old woman said, gently. “We’ve been waiting for you to wake up for quite some time now, you know.”

“Where – am I?” the young girl replied, shaking her head helplessly. She did not remember anything. All she knew was that she had been dying – she did not know of what – and that, all of a sudden, the sense of impending death had been replaced by the coolness. Somehow, she felt that the old lady and the coolness were mysteriously connected.

“Now, don’t worry too much,” the old woman replied. “You’re at Saint Integra’s Hospital for Women and Children, in the province of Darington – you and your younger brother. You’ll be all right now, child, though you did give us our share of sleepless nights.” She laughed – a kind, friendly laugh, more relieved than accusatory. “Do you remember anything of what happened?”

Brother? Suddenly, she remembered – and then knew that she had tried hard, until the very end, not to remember. It had begun with the war. There was always war in her country, but this war had been

worse than the others. It had claimed her father, and only she was left – she and her little brother. Then the sickness had swept across San Delas, and the families of those who had fought on the losing side – like her father – were refused help by the Leader. He had a name, but she only knew him – and feared and hated him – as the Leader. Foreign soldiers had fought him, but she could not keep track of their names. *Zion. Galvenia. Cosmopolitan. Varald. Ghetzia. Itaria.* Some of them were the Leader’s friends, others were not. She could still hear the announcements, blaring across the streets of her town.

“The Zion and Galvenian forces are foreign invaders,” the Leader would say. “The Cosmopolitans are traitors. Anyone who accepts their help will be executed without a trial. And if anyone claims to be an Itarian priest, but does not submit to the decrees of the Leader, he is a spy and a renegade.”

So she had remained indoors, trying her best to take care of her brother, until the day when the sickness had affected her too. It was not a sickness like the ordinary fevers and colds of her girlhood – it was a relentless burning, a fire that spread through all her limbs. She remembered little after that, until the coolness.

The Leader. If she was being helped, she was surely in the hands of the invaders, and the Leader would never forgive her. She looked around furtively, seeking an exit of some sort.

“Don’t be afraid,” the woman said, placing a moist towel across her head – and, again, there was that delicious sense of coolness. “You’re a very brave young lady, Dolores, and it’s thanks to you that your brother is safe. You’re thousands of miles away from that wicked man and his armies. May the Infinity forgive him, and on the day he is finally defeated, may he find mercy.”

Dolores. She remembered her own name. *Pedro.* That was her brother.

“Where is Pedro?” she asked, blankly.

“He’s playing with some friends of mine in the next room, young lady,” the old woman said, with a soft laugh. “He really is a very pleasant child. Seeing him makes me feel quite young again, you know. It wasn’t that long ago that I was a girl like you, really. Just seventy years ago.”

“Seventy years?” The girl shook her head. She had a hard time imagining seventy days, let alone years, in her current condition. “What is your name, Senora?”

“I see you’ve quite recovered, child,” the old lady replied, with a twinkle in her eye. “A few days ago, when we first spoke, you thought I was your mother.”

“Mother?” The girl laughed nervously. “I am sorry, Senora. I was – ill at the time. I – have no mother. She passed away when I was little. I often wished she was...still alive. You were kind to me, so I thought...”

“Oh, I don’t mind, girl,” she replied. “And you’re not so far from the truth, you know. I don’t set much store by titles, but the good Sisters here call me the Mother Counselor. They’re just being kind to an

aged woman, though. Call me Mother if it makes you feel better. My own children are all grown up now, and they surely wouldn't mind!"

"Mother." The girl repeated the word, tentatively. "And what is your name?"

"Have you forgotten, my dear child?" she replied, noting that the girl was trying to sit up, and helping her do so. "My name is Bernadette. Many of the people in your village were saved by a group of Imperial soldiers who'd been sent to rescue your towns from Senor Salzo and his armies. They found that some of you were sick with the fever, and rushed you by air first to a base, and then here to Galvenia, for your own protection. We've been looking after you ever since. It was almost three weeks ago."

"Three weeks?" The girl stared at Bernadette in amazement. "I did not know it was so long. I – thank you, Mother, for looking after me. You are very kind."

"Oh, don't say that, young Dolores," Bernadette replied, with a chuckle. "I just do the best I can, you see. And I've brought up several children of my own, so I know what you young things need. Here's something to eat, and after that, you'd better rest and recover some of your strength, dear. There are some things I need to tell you about, but they can wait."

"Thank you, Mother," the girl said, simply.

Two more days passed, and now there was neither heat nor cold. Dolores felt quite herself now – well enough to spend a few hours each day with Pedro, who was quite recovered from his illness, and was noisy and playful, as little brothers generally are. Mother would come and visit her for an hour each day, asking her about her health, her family, her sleep. Though she was still exhausted, the burning was gone.

On the third day, she waited eagerly for Bernadette to come. "Mother," she said, as the old woman set aside her stick in a corner of the room, and walked slowly up to her bedside, "there is something I want to tell you."

Bernadette smiled. "I thought as much, my child," she said. "What is it?"

"I had a strange dream, Mother," she replied. "I was surrounded by light – pure, dazzling white light. It surrounded me, and I felt warm and safe."

"An elemental dream," Bernadette said softly, too low for her young companion to hear. "Did you see anything else, Dolores?"

"After some time, I felt the light – call to me, Mother," she answered, "and I – followed. I felt as if I was flying. After travelling for some time, I found myself in a strange place."

Bernadette looked at her intently. "What sort of strange place, my dear?" she asked.

"It was a city – a lovely city, Mother," the girl said, simply, "where all sorts of men and women walked the streets – Kings and Queens, soldiers and peasants, all greeting each other, all friends. They greeted me as one of their own as I walked amongst them, until I came to a little park."

"A park?"

"Yes, a park. There was a man there, old and venerable, like one of our village elders before Leader Salzo had them all executed. Despite his age, he was tall and strong, and though he seemed happy, he kept looking around, as if he had been waiting for someone for a long time."

Bernadette leaned forward. "What did this man look like, my child?" she said, a quaver in her voice.

"He was wearing a long robe, like a priest or a scholar," Dolores replied. "I felt sorry for him, because he was the only one I saw who seemed to – need something. Everyone else seemed peaceful and at rest. I asked him what he wanted. He laughed and said he was waiting for someone very dear to him, someone who would have joined him, except that she still had work to do in another place. He asked me to walk on, and not to worry."

Only a careful observer would have detected the tremor in the older woman's hand, which was remarkably steady given her age. "And what happened next, Dolores?" she said.

"Next, a man and woman in rich clothing came by, and laid their hands on me," she said. "I did not know them, but the man was dressed in silver, and the woman in gold. They seemed like a King and a Queen from a story-book to me, Mother. They told me that I had done well, and asked me to walk on a little further."

"A little further?" Bernadette smiled. "And what did you see at last?"

"How did you know that it was the last thing I saw, Mother?" the girl replied, surprised.

"Oh, I'll explain it all to you soon," she said, passing a hand over her eyes. "Now tell me what you saw."

"I saw a young woman, Mother. She was a little older than me, perhaps, but very beautiful, and she had long brown hair. With her were two men. One of them seemed young and brave, and carried a sword, though he hurt no one with it, and everyone admired him. Even the King and the Queen whom I saw bowed before him. Another was old, with many scars of healed wounds, and carried no weapon. He was wrapped in a cloak, and following him were many people, Mother – ordinary people like myself, older women, children, and even soldiers. The woman seemed to be friends with both the men, and they walked together, at peace with all they saw. Perhaps they were her father and her brother. Next to the man with the sword was a little boy, playing with the young woman, a little like my brother Pedro." She smiled. "The young woman waved at me, and embraced me, and told me that the two men used to be enemies, but now fought no longer. As she spoke, I saw a figure in the sky, like an angel, but dressed in

blue; she watched over all of them, and blessed them, and told them that their prayers would be answered. She came to rest above the old man. Then I woke up, wishing you were beside me..."

"There is simply no doubt," Bernadette said, excitedly. "My child, you possess a rare gift – the gift of healing. A dream such as yours, following a serious illness, is often the sign that such a gift has been awakened. It was thanks to your gift that you saved your brother's life."

"I?" the girl said, staring at the Mother Counselor in astonishment. "How can that be, Mother?"

Bernadette laughed. "I can understand your surprise, my dear Dolores," she replied. "I was quite surprised when a wise woman told me, as a young girl, that I had the gift too. I've lost it with age, but I can still recognize it – and train you to use it well. Talents like yours have been rare in these past years, but to find someone who has them in such a pure form – and in a place such as San Delas – is quite remarkable. Perhaps it is a sign that the Infinity, praise His name, has not lost patience with us yet."

"I do not understand," the girl said.

"You will, in good time," Bernadette said, embracing her. "And perhaps someday you, like the friends of my youth, will use your abilities to bring hope to this tired world of ours. But now, I will tell you some simple facts about being a Healer, and we'll take it from there."

"Thank you, Mother," the girl replied, tears of gratitude coming to her eyes.

As Bernadette stepped out of the girl's hospital room, she was greeted by two middle-aged women, both of whom looked at her with affection. One of them, with a gentle and weather-worn face, shoulder-length brown hair and blue eyes, was wearing the robes of a scholar from King's College. The other, tall and handsome, had orange-red hair that stuck out at improbable angles from her head, and was carrying a book with her.

"Mother!" the second woman said, excitedly. "I can see you've been up to something. Now tell us all about it. Penelope and I have been waiting here for over an hour!"

"Oh, dear Barbara," Bernadette replied, as her daughter offered her an arm for support, "I have no secrets from the two of you. I've just spent a good deal of time with one of our patients, a refugee from the Republican Wars. She has healing abilities of a very high order, though she's never been trained properly."

"The Republicans?" The first woman tossed her head indignantly, and watching the gesture, Bernadette thought wistfully of her own youth, and of the friend whose daughter now stood before her. "Hmph! Who would've thought that they'd take the torch of tyranny from the Varald? That dope Salzo deserves to be executed! He's a monster!"

“My, you do sound like Lavie, Penelope,” Bernadette said, kindly. “She also had a fondness for that particular epithet.”

“Well, he *is* a dope, Bernadette,” Penelope said, firmly. “Even Emily knows that. When she saw him making a speech about the evils of the Imperium on television, she said, ‘Mummy, that Mr. Salzo doesn’t seem like a nice person at all!’ Out of the mouths of babes comes wisdom, as the Old Republicans say.”

“Dear Emily,” Bernadette said, affectionately. “She is growing up to be a fine young woman, Penelope, and I don’t just mean her sword skills. Anyway, this girl, Dolores, has all the signs of being a Light Healer, girls. Ordinary healing abilities in youth, an elemental dream – and a vision of Paradise, which is granted only to a few of us. Even I only met the first two criteria.” She laughed.

“That doesn’t make you any less remarkable,” Barbara said, loyally. “And I’m glad you’re happy here at Saint Integra’s, Mother, especially now that Father’s...” She stopped, realizing that she had stumbled on a delicate topic. “I’m sorry, Mother....”

“Oh, don’t be, my daughter,” Bernadette said, gently. “I know he’s waiting for me in his new home, and I’ll be with him in good time.”

“Don’t *you* go and leave us now, please, Bernadette,” Penelope protested, shaking her head sadly. “You’re our last link with the past, with those wonderful days before that awful Second Crisis. Everyone else is gone – Daddy, Mom, Kaleb, Uncle Henrik, the Queen.....I miss them all, Bernadette. I wish I could take things as calmly as you could. I know you and Mom were like sisters, and yet, it was you who was doing the comforting when – when I lost her.”

“Oh, Penelope,” Bernadette said kindly, embracing her god-daughter, “it all comes with age. But let’s not dwell on such topics now, shall we? I’m sure you and Barbara have plenty to tell me, as does Emily. Why don’t we head home and chat for a spell, as my own great-aunt used to say? Anyway, they only need me back here tomorrow morning.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea, Mother,” Barbara replied, as they walked away from the hospital premises.

As she left, Bernadette looked up at the skies, and smiled. *The Infinity is good, she thought. Dear Henrik, I know you’re waiting for me, and I’m sorry I’ve kept you waiting, but I still have things to do. And though the dreams we dreamed in our youth are no more, and Terra is not what it once was, I still dare to hope. Though neither the Commonwealth nor the Imperium can change the hearts of men, there is always hope. Hope for young children like Dolores and her brother. Hope for the people of San Delas. And the hope that one day, soon, I will be with you again, Henrik.*

“Mother?” Barbara said, with a look of concern. “Are you all right?”

Our Ways in this world can be quite different, but in His mercy, the Infinity calls us to be with him, here and hereafter – and to be at peace. We may never have perfect peace in this world, but those who strive for it will be rewarded. Like you, dear Henrik. Like Ryan. Like Wilhelm and Carranya. Like you, Lavie. Lavie, my sister, my friend, my true companion. That was you, I know...

Bernadette closed her eyes.

And – like you, Juno, my brother. Yours was a long and arduous way, but your achievement was perhaps the greatest of them all – to have conquered yourself. And now, you have your reward. No more loss, no more pain, no more conflict. No more tears. Peace, at last. Peace.....

Infinity bless you all, my friends – Henrik, my love....Lavie, my sister....Ryan, Carranya, Wilhelm....even you, Juno. Together, we created something precious....something that will never truly be lost forever. I know you're watching over us, along with Saint Lyrra, and protecting us. You have come to the End of the Way, where you will live forever.

“Bernadette?” Penelope took one of her hands in her own. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing at all, my dear girls,” Bernadette replied, her eyes open, her smile widening. “Come on, now. Let’s be on our way.”

Fin