

The Tome of Seus

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The War of the Realms

The Presidor's Test

The Draw

The Erculan Shell

The Escape

The Triple Metaphor

The Separation

The Entrustment

Seus opened his eyes and stared upwards at the shadows before him. He watched them moving, flickering across a soft orange light to cast strange patterns on the rough-hewn ceiling above. “Like children of the devil dancing,” he thought to himself, then quickly came to his senses. “Where am I?” he said, turning his head towards the light’s source to see a shape... a human shape. “Domenicus?”

Even from the back, the distinctive stocky frame of Domenicus was easy to recognise as he lit a torch on the wall with the flame from his lamp. “Yes, it is me,” he replied quietly, his deep voice lacking its usual authoritarian quality. “You are awake. Good.”

Seus struggled to turn his body toward Domenicus. “Where am I?”

“You are in the Cave of your uncle, Pejhos of Hataemaria.” Domenicus moved towards Seus. “But you must lie still. You have to give your wounds a chance to heal.”

“The Cave of Pejhos?” replied Seus inquisitively. “How did I get here?”

“Pejhos and I brought you. You are safe here for now.” He placed his hand on Seus’ shoulder, to encourage him to lie back. “I have to check your bandages.”

The cave was not as Seus had thought. As a boy he had imagined a dark and ghostly place, sculpted by endless streams of water, where the souls of ancient heroes kept watch over their mortal remains.

He looked around. The walls were not fashioned by nature, but freshly cut by the tools of men. There was no labyrinth of tunnels to connect the final resting places of sages and holy men. Instead there was the bed upon which he lay, and just beyond it, a stone table and wooden chair.

Domenicus reached inside his great coat and took out a box of candles. “There is water and bread for you over there,” he said, gesturing toward a leather bag next to Seus’ bed. “And I will leave these candles on the table, but try not to move unless you have to.” He lit one of the candles and placed it in a holder on the table.

“What am I doing here?” asked Seus.

“Don’t you remember? The Sewjhi Elders insisted that the Moran

Overlords put you to death.”

“Why would they want me dead?” asked Seus, with a look of bewilderment.

“They fear your wisdom. If the people were to follow you, the Overlords would make you head of the Elders, and they would lose everything.”

Seus began to recall some of the events of recent weeks. “Little do they know, I am not a man of politics,” he laughed. “But why am I still alive?”

“I tended to you during your hanging and Pejhos bribed the guards to say you were dead.” Domenicus grinned. “It pays to have friends in high places sometimes.”

“Does Myar know that I am alive?”

“Everyone believes you are dead. It is safer that way, but the Elders are suspicious. They have posted a guard outside this cave. They won’t be satisfied until they have seen your body for themselves.”

“And they are men of Duw, custodians of the Sacred Path. Such hypocrisy.” Seus grimaced as he rolled on his back. “I am doomed then.”

“Not at all.” Domenicus had other ideas and stepped toward a dark recess in the corner of the cave. “This tunnel leads to the next cave,” he whispered, waving his lamp in the entrance of a small passageway. “When they open the cave, you will be gone.”

Seus breathed a sigh of relief. “Back to Myar and my work.”

“You cannot stay in Eastpinel,” said Domenicus sternly. “That would mean certain death.”

“But my work here is unfinished. It is not possible for me to leave until I am done.”

Domenicus ignored Seus’ protest. “Pejhos is arranging for you to return to Crowllan, in the world above this world. Although I’m not so sure you will be any safer there.”

“Why is that?”

“There is talk that another great war is about to break out on the Northern Continent.” Domenicus bowed his head and stepped into the entrance. “I have to go now, but I will be back tomorrow, after I have taken news of your recovery to your uncle. Have patience and try to get some rest.”

Seus listened intently as the sounds of Domenicus shuffling along the narrow tunnel grew fainter, until, when they could no longer be heard, the silence was filled by a deep sense of loneliness. His thoughts turned to Myar and the distress that she must be feeling. If only he could see her and tell her that he was alive. He tried to lift himself, but the pain in his arms was too severe. He tried to sleep, but was far too restless. Finally he managed to lower his legs between the end of the bed and the table, and sat up.

The candle on the table was burning well. Seus focused on its gently flickering flame, so that after a time, when he closed his eyes, he could still see the flame. Gradually, the flame in his mind's eye began to take on the shape of a face. It was a deeply etched, kindly face, not unlike his own, but much older and with a long flowing beard. Seus realised that this familiar looking character was now sitting opposite him in the cave. Seus spoke.

“Who are you?”

“I am the Father spirit.”

Seus looked into the eyes of the Old Man. They were deep, but they were true. As he gazed, somehow he knew that this mysterious old gentleman had come to help, to answer his questions. “What am I to do? Do I stay and risk death... or do I leave before my quest is complete?”

The Old Man's eyes showed compassion, and then narrowed slightly. “Look at the table.”

Seus looked at the table. A pack of cards now sat where the candle had been. The Old Man cut the pack into three and then gestured to the pile on his left. “These are the cards of ancient times.” He glanced up at Seus before moving his hand over to the middle pile. “These are the cards of the here and now.” His hand moved to the right. “And here are the cards of that which is yet to be.” The Old Man looked up. “Tell me, which card

will you choose?”

Seus managed to reach forward and lift the top card of the middle pile. “The Prince of Serenity,” he replied.

The Old Man’s response was quick and sure. “Return the card.”

Seus dutifully returned the card and the Old Man shuffled the pack. “Where is the Prince of Serenity now?” he asked, placing the pack neatly back in the centre of the table.

“It could be anywhere,” replied Seus, looking puzzled. “What does all this mean?”

Now the Old Man began to vanish, his voice becoming distant as he faded. “A story can contain many tales, but at the same time it is one.” Seus could no longer see the Old Man, but he heard him call again... “Where is the Prince of Serenity now?”

Seus looked to the table. The Cards were gone.

~

During the next few hours, Seus reflected on his conversations of that day. Eventually he fell asleep, pondering why it might be that war in the Northern Continent should be imminent. Over in Marecia, the mightiest realm of all, one of the most powerful men on the globe was considering that very same issue.

Regenal, Marecia’s Weaponry Commander, was a tall, blond and well built man, whose constant use of battle attire gave the impression that the threat of attack was ever present. He regularly sat, feet up behind a great desk, staring at the ceiling and contemplating the future of a Marecian Empire. His room was dark but airy, bounded by panelled wooden walls and topped by windows that stretched from end to end. Behind him was a map of the Globe, strategically stabbed with dozens of miniature flags. Regenal heard a knock and looked to the door. He could see the bald head of his underling Lemo, rocking back and forth, making strange shapes through the crackled glass window of the office door. “Come,” shouted Regenal, turning his attention back to the ceiling as if he expected Lemo to have nothing of any consequence to convey.

Lemo opened the door, but before he could manage to make his announcement, a portly man, seemingly full of his own importance, pushed him to one side and entered the room.

“Cofellreker. What are you doing here?”

As head of the Weaponry, Regenal might have considered himself one of most important men alive, but when it came to who might be the richest, Cofellreker was without doubt the only contender. “I have something of importance that I would like to discuss with you,” he replied confidently.

Regenal knew Cofellreker well. Not only did he own the largest vault in the world, he also had significant investments in the armaments trade, and friends in Council. As a result he often attempted to interfere with decisions that Regenal felt were not of his concern. “Thirel wants to rule the globe,” proclaimed Regenal derisively. “He and his Izans are about to start a new War of the Realms, and you have something of importance to discuss with me!”

A haughty swagger rippled through Cofellreker’s body. “It seems my plan to destabilise the Northern Continent and enslave the Sewjhi people is working then.” He was obviously highly pleased with himself.

Regenal’s feet dropped to the floor with a thud. “Your plan!” he exclaimed in disbelief.

“With my backing Thirel will take over one realm at a time.” Cofellreker’s chest puffed up as if to compete with his protruding stomach. “Soon every Sewjhi individual on the Northern Continent will be enslaved in one of my Izan workhouses.”

A look of realisation spread across Regenal’s face. Cofellreker was indeed a greedy and evil man. “So you are behind Thirel’s rise to power.”

Cofellreker grinned. “Well I can’t take all the credit.”

“It won’t work,” retorted Regenal. “The Tribish Empire might be in decline, but the Izans are no match for them. And Tribian is an ally.”

“Oh come now Regenal. Do you mean ally, or aged competitor for supremacy? If Marecia can’t be seen to remove the competition, then

perhaps Thirel should have the opportunity to do it for us.”

Cofellreker was right, but Regenal saw no reason to side with him. “Council will be obliged to help Tribian if they have difficulty. My budget will be increased and Thirel will be snuffed out. Why should I listen to you?”

Plotting and selling were Cofellreker’s chief talents. “But what if Council was reluctant to get involved?” he asked, with a suggestion that he might be privy to some inside information. “With continued support from my Federation of Covert Rulers, Thirel could bring Tribian to its knees,” he lowered his voice and leaned toward Regenal. “And isn’t that what we really want?”

Regenal raised his eyebrows and thought for a moment. “Why would Council be reluctant to get involved?” he asked.

“The Federation have many members in key positions on the Council,” retaliated Cofellreker. “Don’t underestimate my powers of persuasion.”

“Where don’t you have influence?” asked Regenal dolefully.

Cofellreker was wiler than an old fox. He knew that a dejected rival made an unwilling customer. “In the Weaponry,” he admitted, allowing Regenal to glimpse the chink in his armour.

“And that is the way it is going to stay,” snapped Regenal, regaining his poise. Now he understood the reason for the visit. Council would have to seek the advice of the Weaponry over any decisions concerning the war. Cofellreker needed his support. “You can peddle your plans for domination of the globe elsewhere.”

“Let us be honest,” coaxed Cofellreker. “We both aspire to the same goal. You use martial prowess and we use economic and political coercion. What’s the difference?” He leaned forward for a second time. “If you and I were to join forces, we would all benefit from this new War of the Realms.”

Regenal still needed convincing that there was something in it for him. “How?”

“You agree to hold back from entering the war, and when Tribian beg us

for support, we make them pay ten times over.” Regenal showed no signs of responding. Cofellreker continued. “When the war is over Tribian will be ruined and you can take control of their empire, starting with the sap wells of Nari.”

Now Cofellreker was beginning to speak his language. He liked the idea of inheriting empires, but he had no interest in fire sap. “Why do we need Nariian sap when we have our own wells in Tasex?”

“The Tasex reserves are tiny by comparison,” explained Cofellreker. “Domination of fire sap is the key to domination of the globe.”

“The key to making you and your Federation even richer,” replied Regenal, demonstrating that he knew exactly whose side Cofellreker was really on.

Cofellreker leaned back in his chair with an unexpected display of confidence; as if he was about to deliver a morsel of information that would clinch the deal he was looking for. “If we don’t get their sap, someone else will, and you wouldn’t want it falling into the hands of Surisa, would you?”

Now Cofellreker’s plot began to strike a chord with Regenal. He knew that Surisa would make a formidable enemy if they weren’t so impoverished. He had never been one to concern himself with wealth, but he understood its workings. Sap made shekels and shekels bought armaments. “Are you sure that your pockets are big enough to take all the profits?” he asked with an obvious touch of sarcasm.

“Come on Regenal,” replied Cofellreker sensing victory. “This is an opportunity we can’t afford to miss. You and I can steer the Weaponry and the Federation in directions that are mutually beneficial. Once the war is over, the globe will be ours for the taking.”

The promise of developing his empire and at the same time shattering the Weaponries of rival realms was hard to resist. “It would have to be an unofficial union,” demanded Regenal cautiously. “Nothing on parchment.”

Cofellreker leapt toward Regenal’s desk like a lion about to seize its prey. “Of course. No one else needs to know what we are planning,” he said, extending his hand. “To the Mutual Agreement then.”

Regenal took his hand. “To the Mutual Agreement.”

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Relinquishing the opportunity for direct involvement in the forthcoming war did not mean that Regenal was about to become a passive observer. He intended to take an active interest. Within the hour he had a message on the desk of Cester Vicrees, Head of the Weaponry’s Closet Facility:

*The Izans are preparing to start a new War of the Realms.
Finish your business in Eastpinel and return to Marecia.
Regenal, Weaponry Commander.*

As Head of the Closet Facility it was Cester’s job to know everything, and he was already aware of the situation in the Northern Continent. Cester was feared by many, not only for his reputation as a ruthless agent of the Marecian Weaponry, but for a steely blue gaze so intense that it seemed he might cut flesh with his eyes.

It was a warm evening, even for Eastpinel. All the doors and windows were open. Cester picked up the note on his desk and slicked back his hair as he read it. “Beldou,” he shouted, summoning his underling. “Get in here now.”

Beldou Genta was the brother of Lemo. They were both of the Sewjhi Tribe and had fled the Northern Continent for Marecia when the Izans came to power. Beldou came scurrying in through the doorway. He looked very much like his brother, but the shock of wiry curls that framed his receding hairline gave him something of a comical appearance. “Yes Sir,” he said, cowering in the shadow of Cester’s lofty frame.

“I want you to make preparations for my return to Marecia.”

“Yes Sir,” replied Beldou. “And will I be returning with you Sir?” he asked, bowing his head to evade the possibility of eye contact.

“No. You will be going to Old Non.”

“The capital of Tribian Sir?”

“Yes Beldou, the capital of Tribian. When the war begins I will need eyes and ears there. Look at me.” Beldou looked up tentatively. “Can I trust you?”

“Yes Sir. Implicitly Sir. Is there anything else?”

Cester turned to look through the window and out across the desert hills. “Just one thing,” he replied wistfully. “It is time to conclude our work for the Sewjhi Elders.”

The Elders were made up of prominent citizens of Eastpinel. They all belonged to the Sewjhi Ministry, but over the years they had become a corrupt organisation. Pejhos was one of a few members of the Elders to retain his integrity, and his efforts to have Seus recognised as rightful leader of the Sewjhi Ministry were greatly resented by the others. Any threat to an authority considered to have a favourable relationship with Marecia was deemed to be a threat to the security of Marecia itself, and Seus was no exception. Cester had been sent to Eastpinel to assist conspirators within the Elders with the removal of Seus. “I want you to take a message to Pejhos,” he said, still gazing through the window.

“Yes Sir.”

Cester turned his attention back to Beldou. “Seus may think he has got the better of me, but if he dares to cast his voice from the shadowy depths of exile, it will be his woman Myar who pays the price.”

Beldou looked surprised. He took two small steps back before casting his eyes upward from his still bowed head. “But Sir, Seus was hanged by the Moran Guards. How could he survive?”

Cester was obviously no fool. “Did you see the body?” he snapped impatiently. “Now go and take the message.”

~

As Beldou began his journey to seek Pejhos, Domenicus was arriving at the guest quarters of his own home. When Pejhos opened the door, his eyes filled with anticipation and he hurried Domenicus to the room where he had been waiting. “Sit down,” he said impatiently, obviously anxious to hear the news. “Does he live?”

Domenicus was a considerate man, but not usually one to display any great emotion. “Seus is recovering well,” he said calmly.

“That is marvellous,” enthused Pejhos, his tanned face glowing through his straggly grey beard. “I knew he would survive. He had to if the quest of Seus is to be fulfilled.”

Domenicus had a more sombre attitude. “He could still succumb to infection.”

“He hasn’t come this far for the story to end now,” replied Pejhos, refusing to consider such a prospect. He filled two goblets with wine from a nearby carafe and handed one to Domenicus. “To the quest of Seus.”

Domenicus raised his goblet. “That is something I have been meaning to ask you for a long time,” he said quietly. “What is the story of Seus?”

Pejhos took a sip from his goblet and sat down opposite Domenicus. “The story is hopelessly entwined with my family history,” he said earnestly. “If I tell you, it must remain between us.”

Domenicus was not one to gossip, but Pejhos clearly harboured a deep anxiety about the details of his past. “Of course,” he replied reassuringly.

Pejhos relaxed a little and leaned back in his chair. “When I was a young man I went to live with my sister Nan, in the World above this one, amongst the privileged families of Crowllan.” He took a long sip from his goblet, as if it might be the fuel of his memories. “Nan’s husband discovered she was keeping secret company. He refused to lie with her thereafter, and upon learning that she was pregnant, threatened to take her life.”

Domenicus raised one eyebrow in an unusual display of concern. “What became of her?”

“I brought her here to Eastpinel, where Seus’ mother was born.”

“Yrma?”

“Yes.” Pejhos took another sip of wine. “And when Yrma reached the age of fifteen, I matched her to Jophes of the House of Dewi.” He paused

for a moment and looked directly at Domenicus. “You know my fortune has been blessed through my connections in the world above this one.”

Domenicus was curious as to where this was all leading. “Your fortune as a trader you mean?”

Pejhos nodded and drew a deep breath before continuing. “Well, during her betrothal period, Yrma travelled with me to Crowllan, and we stayed at the Sovereign Court.”

“I see,” said Domenicus slowly, anticipating that some kind of revelation might be about to follow.

He was right. Pejhos sat upright, placed his hands in his lap and delivered his confession. “Yrma became friendly with Prince Aurgravis, and by the time we arrived back in Eastpinel, she was heavily pregnant.”

For once Domenicus looked surprised, even shocked. “Women have been put to death for less,” he said. “How did you manage to resolve the problem?”

“I told Jophes that the father of the child was a powerful heir of Crowllan,” replied Pejhos. “And, as descendant of the House of Dewi, if he accepted the child, it would fulfil the prophecy of the awaited leader of the Sewjhi Tribe.”

“And what was his decision?” asked Domenicus, keen to discover the fate of Yrma.

Pejhos took a handcloth from his pocket. “It was difficult for Jophes. He had his family to think of, but he had no desire to condemn a child sent by Duw.” Pejhos mopped his brow with the cloth and then continued. “With a little persuasion, we managed to find a plan that allowed the marriage to go ahead.”

“And what became of the child?”

“By that time Nan’s husband had died. I took her back to Crowllan after the child was born,” explained Pejhos. “And the child went with her to be educated by the Iddurs.”

Pejhos felt as though a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

He glanced toward Domenicus with a slight sense of apprehension, but he saw no signs of judgement. Instead Domenicus returned a compassionate smile. “You did the right thing,” he said. “That explains much of the story, but what of the Quest of Seus that you spoke of?”

Pejhos stood up and recharged the goblets before returning to his seat to answer the question. The story that he was about to tell had never been told in the land of Eastpinel, and he took a few moments to settle himself before he began.

“Legend has it that one day, a young mason by the name of Seus, broke open a stone from Einim, the Mount of Cosmic Consciousness.” Pejhos took a sip of wine. “And as the stone parted, he discovered the seeds of Serenity within.”

“And this is who you named the child after?” asked Domenicus.

Pejhos nodded and continued with the tale. “The young man withdrew to the woods to consider what he had seen, and in time, word of his wisdom spread. Eventually he realised his quest, to pass his knowledge on to his people, and was appointed Cardinal of the Iddurs, Keepers of Truth. On his deathbed, his Sovereign asked him: *You are our Sun, what are we to do when you rise no more?*”

“What was his reply?”

“Seus replied: *Take four score stones of Einim Mount, each as tall as the tallest man, and build a new temple at the place where the sun and moon align.*”

Domenicus was intrigued. “That is incredible. Did they do it?”

“Yes. It took as many generations of Iddurs as it did stones.” Pejhos drew a breath. “But a magnificent temple was built, and there he was laid.”

“And what was the purpose of this temple?”

“The Temple was to serve as a testament to the selfless and far reaching vision of the Iddurs, and mark the place where they could count the days until, as the child of a future Sovereign, the Son Spirit of Seus would return.”

“That is why you named the child Seus!” exclaimed Domenicus, suddenly realising the implications of the story. “He fulfilled the prophecy of the Iddurs.”

“As well as the prophecy of the Sewjhi Tribe,” added Pejhos. “But I wasn’t certain at that point, and moreover, how do you tell people that a mere child is the Son Spirit? No one would believe you.”

“So what did you do?” asked Domenicus.

“I kept quiet. I said that he was my son and gave him the name of Joshepus so that no one would suspect.”

Pejhos seemed a little unsettled by the admission. He stood up and walked around the chair, gripping its back as though it was a pulpit. “Joshepus was a bright pupil. By the age of eleven he had mastered the knowledge of the Iddurs and become a Sage of Serenity,” he went on. “Then Aurgravis received word of a remarkable pupil, whose wisdom was greater than any of his teachers.” Pejhos grimaced in memory of his anxiety of that day. “And Aurgravis summoned Joshepus to his Court.”

“Did you take him?”

“Of course,” replied Pejhos. “But I won’t pretend that I was happy to have arrived at that day. Aurgravis was my friend, and by now he was Sovereign of Crowllan. I had no choice.” Pejhos returned to his chair and took another sip from his goblet. “I left Joshepus outside the great hall and went inside to face Aurgravis with the truth.”

Domenicus opened his eyes wide. “What did he say?”

“His reaction was quite strange,” replied Pejhos. “He gave me a look, as though I had simply confirmed something that he already knew. Then he rose from his chair and bellowed, *Bring me the boy.*”

Pejhos’ hands were becoming more animated and he put down the goblet. “The great doors swung open and there stood Joshepus. I was shaking, but he was as calm as a sea of glass. He walked straight up to Aurgravis and said, *Father.*”

Domenicus was now completely engrossed by the story. “And what did Aurgravis say?” he asked eagerly.

“Son, I shall tell you something passed down from Sovereign to Sovereign, since the days of old,” responded Pejhos, taking on the persona of the Sovereign. *“It was the promise of Seus that he would one day return to set a second task for his people. Do you know of this quest?”*

Now Pejhos took the role of Joshepus. *“Yes, replied the boy. This time it is hearts of stone that they must move.”*

Pejhos lowered his tone again. *“Then you shall be ordained Cardinal of the Iddurs, Keepers of the truth. Take the island of Falona in the Southern extremes of Lewas, and from there, spread your wisdom to the globe.”*

“So he went to the island?”

“No, he refused,” replied Pejhos. *“Father, he said. With your permission, I must seek three other Cardinals, wherever they might be scattered, and ask them to gather their people in preparation for the Day of Deliverance.”*

“And did Aurgravis accept this?”

“The Sovereign was clearly disappointed. *Can you not send your emissaries?* he asked, but Joshepus knew his mind. He looked to his father with determined eyes and said: *The sacrifice of those who toil in the fields provides the harvest upon which we all depend.*”

“So young and so wise,” professed Domenicus. “What did his father say?”

“Go my son and seek your Cardinals,” continued Pejhos. *“But promise me this. When the task is done, you will return to me.”*

“What was his reply?”

“I will return.”

“Was that the first time that Seus came back to Eastpinel?” enquired Domenicus. “To take his place in the Sewjhi Ministry?”

Pejhos nodded, but his attention was caught by the sound of insistent knocking at the door. “I wonder who that could be,” he said. “No one is expected.”

~

Outside, Beldou had concealed himself amongst the shadows of some trees. His search had led him to the house of Domenicus, but he was not the only one looking for Pejhos that night. Four men waited at the door of the guest quarters, and despite the failing light, Beldou clearly recognised them. Two of them wore the distinctive robes of Sewjhi Elders, and two more, dressed in the unmistakable uniform of the Moran Guards, stood menacingly at their sides.

Pejhos appeared at the door and Beldou strained to listen to the conversation, but he was unable to catch more than the odd word. Soon Domenicus joined them and the conversation grew heated, until suddenly, the guards seized Pejhos and marched him off towards the edge of the town. The Elders followed quickly behind and Domenicus bellowed into the darkness after them. “Fear not Pejhos, I will attend to your business.” Then he turned to close the door.

Beldou scurried across the road. “Are you Domenicus?” he cried, gingerly placing his hand on the closing door.

“Yes. Who are you?”

“My name is Beldou Genta. I have a message for Pejhos.”

“Pejhos has been arrested.”

“But it is important,” protested Beldou.

“You had better come in.” Domenicus led him into the kitchen and began to prepare a basket of provisions. “What is this important message then?”

“May I sit down?” Domenicus gestured to the seat opposite him. Beldou looked anxious. He sat down and cast his eyes to the floor, clasping his hands nervously as if he was trying to pluck up the courage to speak. “I work for Cester,” he said abruptly, then looked up with an apologetic, almost pleading look. “But I have been a follower of Seus ever since I came to Eastpinel.”

Domenicus was confused. He knew of Cester. “You can not work for Cester and be a follower of Seus.”

“Oh but I am,” pleaded Beldou. “It was me who warned Seus of the Elders plot to have him killed.”

Domenicus was still suspicious. “You look Sewjhi. Why would a Sewjhi man work for Cester?”

“I have to. My family are in jeopardy. If I don’t do his bidding...” Beldou began to struggle to find words. “Well...”

“I see,” replied Domenicus, realising Beldou’s predicament. “And what is it that you want with Pejhos?”

Beldou swallowed. “I have some bad news,” he replied, squirming in discomfort on his chair. “Cester has warned that Seus must never raise his voice in public again, or he will kill Myar.”

Domenicus looked at Beldou in disbelief. “Seus is dead. Have you not heard?”

“Cester does not believe it.”

“Come with me,” commanded Domenicus as he picked up the basket. “This could be just the persuasion I need.”

Beldou had no idea where he was going but dutifully followed Domenicus out of the house and along the road, answering questions as he went. “You have met Seus many times then?”

“Several times at least.”

“And do you believe in the word of Seus?”

“I believe that the wisdom of Seus will lead us from destruction.”

Domenicus was impressed with the reply. “I think he has come to save us from ourselves,” he said, turning to climb a short path that led up to a cave. “Now keep your voice down, the guards are close by.” Domenicus eased open the thick wooden door of the cave, handed Beldou a lamp and

nudged him inside.

The cave was small, but high enough to stand in. Domenicus dragged two large sacks away from the wall to reveal the entrance to a low tunnel. “In there,” he said sternly. Beldou stepped obediently towards the tunnel. “Wait,” said Domenicus, suddenly waving his finger towards another black hole in the side of the cave. “If I find you have been lying to me, I will seal you in that tomb before I go.”

Beldou looked terrified. He bent his head and scrambled through the tunnel. As he came out of the other side, he stood up and immediately saw Seus lying on the bed. “Seus, you are alive!” he exclaimed.

Seus recognised the voice. “Beldou. Is that you?” he asked, squinting through the light of the lamp. “What are you doing here?”

“He has something to tell you,” said Domenicus, brushing the dust from his cloak.

“Cester wants you to disappear,” spluttered Beldou. “Or he will make Myar pay.”

Seus looked shocked. “What is the likelihood of him carrying out the threat?”

Domenicus prodded Beldou to encourage him to answer. “Cester is being recalled to Marecia because of the Izan uprising, but he has long arms and a longer memory. Do not take his threat idly.”

“I see. Then I have no choice,” said Seus in obvious resignation. “It seems I will return to my father in Crowllan sooner than I expected.”

Beldou’s nerves were suddenly forgotten. “Crowllan is in Tribian,” he gasped excitedly. “I must make my way to Tribian, to be Cester’s agent in the Northern Continent. We could travel together.”

“And you can tell me the secrets of Cester along the way,” jested Seus, clearly recovering well from his ordeal.

Beldou already had news to share. “Cester thinks he knows everything, but there is one secret that he knows nothing of.” He lowered his voice as if the ghosts might gossip. “A secret that could lead to the destruction of

Marecia.”

“Aha,” exclaimed Domenicus. “I see you have your uses.”

Beldou continued. “The Izans are working on a new kind of shell, one that can wipe out whole cities at a stroke, and Thirel is planning to use it on Marecia.”

“How do you know this?” asked Domenicus.

“My family and friends are Sewjhi theorists,” explained Beldou. “Some of them work for the Marecians, and some of them for the Izans.”

Seus was deeply troubled by Beldou’s revelation. “We must stop the development of this shell or thousands will die.” He looked to Beldou. “Why have you not told Cester? Surely he would have the research sabotaged if he knew?”

“If Cester knew he would tell the Marecian Weaponry, and they would want it for themselves,” replied Beldou, clearly aware of his master’s capabilities. “The Marecians are no different to Thirel, I can assure you. If they get the new shell they will use it. There is nothing we can do,” he said dejectedly.

“We could get a message to the Marecian Presidor,” suggested Seus. “And trust that he has the authority and the integrity to destroy the Izans new shell.”

“It could work,” said Beldou, his enthusiasm rallying. “I have a friend, Darszil. He knows the famous theorist Teniesin, and he would be able to speak directly with the Presidor.”

“It will determine if the Presidor is a real leader,” added Domenicus. “Or simply a puppet to do the bidding of the hidden rulers.”

“Then let us put him to the test,” said Seus. “It is our only hope of ridding the globe of this evil weapon.” He looked to Beldou. “When can you send the message?”

“I can send messages day and night from Cester’s Bureau.”

Domenicus interrupted the conversation. “Then I suggest we leave,” he

said, urging Beldou towards the tunnel. "It is late and there is still much to do."

Seus called Domenicus back. "I have to see Myar before I go," he said firmly. "She has been with me since the day we first met in Diani."

Domenicus was clearly reluctant. "That will be difficult and dangerous for you both," he replied. "You must be gone before daybreak of the day after tomorrow, or you will be discovered for sure."

Seus was adamant. "I cannot leave without speaking with Myar."

"I will see what I can do," replied Domenicus, and with that he was gone.

~

Time passed slowly for Seus. Although it was little more than a day that he had to wait, he was greatly relieved to hear the sounds of another human finally echoing along the tunnel.

"I have come to prepare you to leave," said Beldou as he appeared, cheerfully swinging his lamp over a bundle of clothes. "Here put this robe on," he said, and turned to relight the torch. "You are to be my mother if anyone enquires."

"I don't think I will be able to make it through that tunnel," said Seus, struggling to put on the robe."

"Worry not. Domenicus will be along shortly to open the entrance."

"What about the guards?"

"The guards have been paid," replied Beldou. "They will have a fine tale to tell when the Elders arrive." Beldou was always in the mood for conversation. "Seus. Why did you not try to escape after I warned you of the Elders plot?" he asked, pulling up a chair.

Seus had become accustomed to Beldou's direct questions. He understood well the needs of a probing mind. "It is written that I will suffer, and my uncle believes in the prophecies."

"And what do the Iddurs think of such things?"

“The Iddurs have a saying, *Destiny and Chance are the parents of the Future.*”

“And is that what you believe?”

“The prophecies have been fulfilled, but they are words of men. The force of destiny is not yet a truth for me.”

“The Iddurs must be remarkable teachers of the Serene,” said Beldou, amazed by Sues’ ability to accept such a fate. “I have heard that they are also great theorists and have unravelled many of the mysteries of the cosmos.”

“Their Serenity is based on the search for understanding and truth,” replied Seus.

“Do they know how the draw works?” asked Beldou eagerly.

It was a long time since Seus had considered such matters. He closed his eyes for a moment to think of a way to explain the concept to Beldou. “The Iddurs consider that the draw consists of two forces,” he began. “The push and the pull.”

Beldou’s eyes widened. “And how does the push work?” he asked, keen to learn more.

“It is the same force that holds the pebble in the sling when it is moving,” replied Seus. “As long as the sling is moving towards the pebble, they will remain together.”

Beldou looked to Seus with a blank expression. “I do not understand.”

Seus reached into his basket of provisions and took out an apple. “Imagine this apple is the globe.” He pointed to the stalk and pulled it out. “And this is you.” Seus placed the stalk upright on the surface of the apple. “If there was no draw of the globe and you jumped, you would not return to the apple, but you would embark on a perpetual journey into the depths of the cosmos.”

“I think I am beginning to see.”

Seus continued. “The force of the push is like the force of the sling. The globe is moving towards you all the time.”

“Aha. I see,” said Beldou at last. “And what of the other force of the draw? The pull.”

Beldou’s enthusiasm for knowledge seemed bottomless. “This is the force of attraction that holds the universe together,” replied Seus. “We can witness its existence by the effect of the moon on the oceans of the globe.”

“And how does it work?” he asked.

As Seus opened his mouth to reply, his attention was caught by the sound of stones being moved at the entrance to the cave. Beldou was still gripped by the discussion about the draw. “How does the pull work?” he asked again.

Seus smiled. “As one mystery is resolved, another is revealed,” he replied. “Domenicus must be here.”

Domenicus stood outside, watching the guards struggling in the darkness to open the tomb. With one great effort they heaved away the final stone, and then leapt back as if the light that burst from within the cave might burn them. All remained speechless as Beldou stepped out, his robe glowing brilliantly in the light of the torch. “Domenicus,” he beckoned. “Come, he is ready.”

They took one arm each and lifted Seus to his feet. “We must get you away from here now,” said Domenicus loudly, then he lead him away from the guards to a secluded part of the grounds. Beldou returned to the cave.

“Where is Myar?” asked Seus anxiously.

“Do not worry yourself. All is in hand,” replied Domenicus. “Now rest yourself on this stone. I will be back in a moment.”

No sooner had Seus settled himself than Beldou reappeared leading Myar towards him. Seus stood immediately. “Myar,” he called, and she looked up in bewilderment, tears still streaming from her dark and sorrowful eyes.

“Seus. My life!” she exclaimed rushing to hold him. “You are alive.”

“Careful,” replied Seus holding out his hands. “I am a little delicate and I have a long journey ahead of me.”

“Where will you go?”

“I will return to my father in the World above this one,” replied Seus. He wiped the tears from her pretty cheeks. “But first I have something to ask of you.”

“Anything,” said Myar. “Anything.”

“It may put you in great danger, but I would like you to be my Cardinal in Eastpinel.”

“Yes, of course. But the others will never accept a woman with such an entrustment.”

“Their beliefs are too entrenched in the old Sacred path,” replied Seus. He looked deep into her eyes. “You are my heart, my soul and my wisdom. You are the only one. They will follow you if I ask them.” He looked to Beldou. “Will you tell the others that I will meet them by the lake to the North in one week?”

“Yes,” replied Beldou.

“Then it is settled.” He looked to Myar, lowered his head and kissed her gently on her lips.

“We must go now,” interrupted Domenicus, handing the reigns of an ass to Beldou and settling another for Seus to ride.

The tears welled again in Myar’s eyes. “Will I ever see you again?” she asked as Domenicus led Seus away.

“One day, in the land of my fathers, we will meet again.”

~

Seus was no stranger to moving on, but this time was different. Never before had he been devastated by a separation. Never in all his travels,

from Crowllan to Eastpinel and on to seek his Cardinals amongst the Sages of the East. Never had he been so utterly in love. “Where are we going?” he asked Domenicus, putting on a brave face and trying to look forward.

“To the Jailhouse to get Pejhos. The Elders took him shortly after we left you.”

“Jailhouse,” replied Seus, clearly startled by the news. The ass stumbled on the path and Seus winced. “I hope Pejhos is all right.”

“Is it your arms?”

“No. The pain is in my side.”

“Ah,” said Domenicus in a jesting tone. “I don’t think you should be too hard on the guard who hung you. Some of them know the workings of the body extremely well you know.” He laughed. “They will spare your bones, for a price of course.”

The road widened and the jailhouse came into view, silhouetted against the ghostly blue of the night sky. “He had seen many a hung man drown in the water of the lungs,” said Domenicus, continuing with his gruesome tale about the guard. “When you were taken down he pushed us to one side, drew a lance and then pierced your side to let the fluid out. I think he saved your life.”

“Then I must be grateful for my pains,” said Seus recovering from the jolt. “He was clearly a skilled physician.”

“Oh yes, he had done it many times before,” replied Domenicus with a grin. He turned to look at Seus directly, struggling to maintain a sincere expression. “But you were the first living patient that he had tried it on.”

Seus smiled, but his amusement quickly turned to concern as they approached the place where Pejhos was waiting. The jailhouse was a tiny stone building on the outskirts of town. There were no windows and the sturdy wooden door was well sealed. “This is no place for a man of my uncle’s age to spend time,” he remarked, and then drew a sharp breath as a thin man in a dark robe suddenly stepped out of the shadows.

“You took your time,” grumbled the man.

Domenicus was clearly expecting him to be there. “Just get on with it,” he retorted impatiently. “The guards will be back before dawn.”

The man lit a torch and handed it to Domenicus, then he crossed the path and began to fumble with the bolts on the jailhouse door. Beldou waited with the animals while the others gathered in the doorway. “I thought you could open any door. And close it again,” said Domenicus anxiously.

“I can, but I need more light.”

Domenicus held up the torch and within moments the first bolt fell to the floor. “Here, take this flask,” he said to Seus. “Pejhos will be weak and thirsty, and you will be food for his eyes.”

As the door opened, Seus stepped inside and saw Pejhos cowering on the floor, his hand raised to protect his eyes from the shock of the torchlight. Seus sprinkled water onto his face. “Look, it is I, Seus. Do not fear.”

“It cannot be,” replied Pejhos, stumbling backwards in confusion.

Seus bent down and spoke quietly. “Here is the cloth that you placed on my eyes when you took me to the tomb.” Pejhos took the cloth and held it to his face. He recognised the scent of the ointment. “Come, I will take you home,” said Seus, offering Pejhos his hand.

Domenicus stepped forward to help. “You must go with Beldou to his house,” he whispered to Seus. “They will be searching the roads as soon as they find the cave is empty.”

“Pejhos is sick. I should go with him,” protested Seus.

“Pejhos is tired but he has no wounds,” insisted Domenicus. “We have a good start and can travel quickly, but you must rest before you leave.”

Beldou knew that Domenicus spoke wisely. “No one will look for you at my house,” he said. “And you can follow on later when the roads are clear.”

By the time they reached Beldou’s house, Seus knew that Domenicus had made the right decision. Beldou made him comfortable and then prepared to return to the tomb to pass on the message as promised. “I

have much to do and dawn approaches,” he said making for the door. “Meet me in Hataemaria, at the house of Pejhos in two days, and from there we can begin our journey North.”

Seus called him back. “Beldou. Did your friend Darszil manage to get our message to the Presidor?”

Beldou hesitated before replying and returned to sit on the bed. “Eventually.”

“And has he told Council of the Izan shell?” asked Seus expectantly.

“No,” replied Beldou. “The Presidor is going to the Weaponry today.”

Seus shook his head. “Then horror is upon us.”

“He hasn’t failed his test yet,” replied Beldou with a positive voice. “The Presidor and Council have to agree to any new Weaponry developments.” Beldou stood again and moved toward the door. “He may well recommend that the weapon is destroyed.”

~

News of the Izan shell reached Regenal as he and Cofellreker were discussing progress of their ‘Mutual Agreement’. Lemo tapped the door of Regenal’s office and waited nervously. “Yes,” bellowed Regenal with unnecessary vigour.

Lemo entered the room clutching a parchment. “Sir, you have an urgent message from the Presidor. He is on his way.”

“What’s Rostevelo complaining about now?”

“He’s not complaining this time Sir.” Lemo grasped the letter with both hands and brought it closer to his eyes. “The great theorist Teniesin has warned him that the Izans are working on a secret weapon called the erculan shell.” He looked up aghast. “With a destructive potential hitherto unimagined.”

“How would Teniesin be privy to such Izan secrets?” asked Cofellreker dismissively. “It sounds like idle talk to me.”

“No Sir.” Lemo looked back to the letter and scanned it quickly. “One of their theorists, Darszil, defected to our side when the Izans came to power, and he still has contacts over there.”

“I see,” replied Regenal dropping his feet to the floor with a thud and casting a scowl towards Cofellreker. “You didn’t think of that when you backed Thirel, did you?” He turned to Lemo. “That will be all.”

Regenal was not at all pleased with the news and blamed Cofellreker directly. “If they get this shell working, your secret mischief will have cost us everything,” he said scornfully.

“You aren’t supposed to have secrets,” interrupted the Presidor, striding through the still open door and taking a seat. He looked directly at Regenal. “And what are you going to do about this shell?”

Regenal disliked Rostevelo. It was nothing personal. He simply despised all silver tongues, particularly Presidors who naively believed they were masters of all. “We must join the race for erculan supremacy,” he said, banging the table to assert his authority. “And we must win, whatever the cost.”

“How do we know that this erculan shell isn’t just a myth concocted by the Izans to set us on an expensive tail chase?” quipped the Presidor.

Regenal stood up and glared menacingly in Rostevelo’s direction. “You listen to me Mister Presidor.” He moved away from the desk and began to approach Rostevelo. “We have to assume that this erculan appliance is real, and that the Izans are working flat out to develop it.”

“Yes, of course,” came the timid reply, but Regenal wasn’t done.

“And if they get the shell before us, it won’t just be the Northern Continent that they use it on.” By now Rostevelo had a look of terror on his face and was beginning to back away, but Regenal continued his advance, poking Rostevelo with his finger as he spoke. “Marecia will be finished. Do you understand? Finished. Do you want that on your conscience?”

“No, no. Of course not,” bleated Rostevelo in a final display of submission. “We have a meeting on the sixth day of the twelfth moon. I’ll put it to the Council then.”

Regenal cast a snarling glance towards Cofellreker, just in case he had ideas of jumping to the Presidor's defence, and then returned triumphantly to his seat. "I want a new department of the Agency of Progressive procedure, codenamed..." He turned his attention to his favourite spot on the ceiling and began to snap his fingers as if it would magically summon a name for his project.

"Something elegant," suggested Cofellreker, trying to break the tension in the room.

"The Erculan Swan," said Regenal at last. "We will call it the Eswan project." He looked to Rostevelo. "And I want our best theorist, Nicero Merif to head the team."

"I'll see what I can do."

Regenal looked as though he was going to scold the Presidor again, but Lemo appeared at the door and distracted him. "We have urgent news from the Closet Facility Sir."

"Well don't just stand there dithering like a demented fool. Spit it out man."

"They have it on good authority that Pjaan is about to launch an attack on one of our Weaponry bases. Treasure Bay Sir."

Rostevelo was quick to seize the opportunity to restore his worth. "The Council will never agree to the expense of your Eswan project if they think war is imminent."

"Then we won't tell them," barked Regenal, shaking Rostevelo with his callous proposal. "You wanted the job. Face the reality."

"Better to suffer a minor defeat than to risk the destruction of Marecia by the Izans," coaxed Cofellreker. "Tribian is already on its knees. It is time for us to enter the War of the Realms anyway, and Treasure Bay will be the perfect excuse."

Rostevelo suspected that Regenal and Cofellreker already knew about Treasure Bay, but was not bold enough to make the accusation. "But if the attack comes before we have issued a High Alert, our fleet will be as

good as sitting ducks,” he said, determined to make some kind of protest.

Cofellreker intervened again. “All the old ships can be sacrificed, and we can build some nice new ones,” he said, showing the gold in his teeth.

“Oh yes. Now I see. Power and profit is the game here,” replied Rostevelo derisively.

“Square up Rostevelo,” snapped Cofellreker, his patience also beginning to wear. “The war pie will soon be needing a bigger dish. Better to get your fingers sticky than to have them burned.”

Rostevelo knew exactly what Cofellreker was suggesting. “Shipbuilding will make a good investment,” he said wistfully. “But I can’t put my shekels into ships and have blood on my hands. I will have to make arrangements to deal with the casualties at the very least.”

“I think we can allow that,” said Cofellreker, looking to Regenal for confirmation.

Regenal was too much of a strategist to agree to the pact without conditions. “Preparations for casualties could raise the alarm, and I won’t compromise the Eswan project for your conscience.”

“I’m sure our Presidor is capable of keeping his preparations secret,” said Cofellreker, keen to settle the deal.

“All right Rostevelo,” conceded Regenal. “My Eswan project for your casualty arrangements.” His voice developed a threatening tone. “But understand this. If word gets out, it will be your neck that stretches.”

~

The Presidor did not have to maintain his secret for long. By the time Seus arrived at the house of Pejhos, word was travelling the globe like a fire in a forest. The housekeeper opened the door. “Have you heard the news?” she asked, dispensing with her usual polite customs. “Treasure Bay is under attack and all of Marecia are demanding entry into the War of the Realms.”

“Does Pejhos know the news?” asked Seus.

“No he is still weak. Nothing that a few more days in bed will not cure though. See for yourself,” she said, pushing the door of a side room open.

Seus was pleased to hear that his uncle was making a good recovery. “Then I shall not trouble him with unpleasant tidings,” he said, stepping through the door and sliding past the housekeeper’s buxom frame. “Thank you for taking care of him.”

“Ah, Seus, you are looking well,” exclaimed Pejhos, greatly relieved to see his nephew again. “Where have you been?”

“Well, I started out yesterday after the roads cleared,” apologised Seus. “But I met two of the followers along the way and decided to return to speak with the others.”

“That was dangerous,” scolded Pejhos. “But you are here now, sit with me.” He pushed himself into an upright position. “You know all of this mess is my fault. It was my ambitions for you that led to such pain and suffering, and what for? If there is anything I can do to right my wrong, you must tell me.”

“You have done nothing wrong,” insisted Seus. “But there is one thing that you can do for me.” He clasped the hand of his uncle. “I would like to appoint you Cardinal, Keeper of the Truth in the World above this one.”

Pejhos was astonished by the request. “You are the rightful Sovereign of the word of the Iddurs,” he protested. “I cannot take your place. What will Aurgravis say?”

Seus persisted. “I will speak with my Father. I am sure he will understand.”

“But how can I? I am an old man.”

“And you are a wise man,” continued Seus. “I have spoken to the followers. Some of them are ready to go with you, to help you with this mission. The others will stay here to assist Myar.”

“So Myar is to be Cardinal of Eastpinel,” said Pejhos thoughtfully, realising the implications of Seus’ request. “With your Cardinals in the East and West, the second quest of Seus would be done.” But Pejhos was

still puzzled. “What are you to do?”

“I must find Einim, the Mount of Cosmic Consciousness, and consider the final quest of Seus.”

“Then I accept.”

The two men turned their heads as the door creaked open again. “You have more visitors,” said the housekeeper. “You are popular today. Shall I make refreshments?”

“Yes. You must feed our guests well while they are here,” replied Pejhos.

Seus could see Beldou hovering in the hallway. “Ah, Beldou, come in. Have you concluded your dealings in Eastpinel?”

“Oh yes Seus. I am ready for the trip. And you?”

“Soon Beldou. Soon,” replied Seus. “And did the Presidor recommend destruction of the Izan shell?” he asked, eager to discover the outcome of the Presidor’s test.

“Marecia want the shell for themselves. There is nothing we can do now,” replied Beldou shaking his head.

“There may be something that we can do,” said Seus. “If the tyranny continues, then so shall the toil,” he added encouragingly. “We can discuss it on our journey to Crowllan.”

Beldou nodded in agreement. “The struggle is not over then,” he said, and quietly left the room.

Seus turned to his uncle. “You must get some rest. And do not be in a hurry to rise.” He smoothed the sheet where he had been sitting. “We will leave in a day or so, but you must be in good health before you set off for Crowllan.”

Pejhos gripped his nephew’s hand to prevent him from leaving. “I understand your wisdom,” he pleaded. “But there is one thing I need to know if I am to be your Cardinal.” Seus kneeled to listen. “How can I offer the people salvation in Serenity, when they are surrounded by temptation and evil?”

“This globe is but a stepping-stone upon the path to salvation,” replied Seus calmly. “We must tread carefully, or the stone may wear thin before the last soul is counted across.”

“But few will understand,” persisted Pejhos. “And others might yield for fear of the enormity of time.”

“Gather your brothers and sisters. Tell them, if the journey is to continue, each man and woman must learn to seek the truth. Property will not pay for their salvation, nor procure a future for their children. They must prepare themselves for The Day of Deliverance approaches.”

Pejhos looked relieved and rested his head. “Do not worry,” he assured Seus. “Your wisdom is safe.”

As Seus stepped out of the room, he noticed a young woman resting on some travelling bags in the hallway. “This is my sister Sedine,” said Beldou. “She will be accompanying us on our journey.”

Sedine was in her mid twenties, dark, striking and attractive. As she stood her long hair fell about her slender shoulders and she smiled a smile, prettier than a field of flowers in the golden light of a summer’s eve. “Are you Seus?” she asked, holding out a dainty hand.

“Yes. I am Seus. Pleased to meet you.”

The Atmanntha Task

The Theorist's Petition

The Fourth Measure

The Meccer

The Return

The Greater Universe

The Temptation

The Forfeit

Seus and his companions were making good progress towards Tribian, despite the discomfort of his wounds. Beldou had been instructed by Cester to check for messages at every Marecian Outpost along the route, and upon arriving at the first major settlement he left Seus and Sedine at their lodgings to carry out his instructions.

It was hard for Beldou to imagine Cester being the subordinate of anyone. He was an extremely authoritative and quietly intimidating individual. Even Regenal struggled to remember who was the superior at times, and for the most part treated Cester as an equal. Never the less, just like Beldou, Cester had to take orders.

As his feet received the first blush of Marecian dust, Cester was summoned to the Weaponry Headquarters. Upon arrival at Regenal's office, the two men clasped hands. "Good to see you again," said Regenal in an unusual display of mannish affection. He had obviously missed Cester's comradeship. "Take a seat."

Cester pulled up his usual chair and leaned back as if he had just arrived home. "Treasure Bay has gone to plan I see."

Regenal knew that Cester was astute, but he was greatly impressed by such an intuitive remark. "Yes. It got Marecia into the war at the right time. Cofellreker and his cronies in the Federation have been making plenty of shekels out of it."

"What's this I've been hearing about Cofellreker and his friend Septcrot Hubs?" asked Cester. "Is it true they've been funding Izan experiments?"

"Yes. They call it their Sugenechi Programme. Superior Genetic Imperialism," replied Regenal, always keen to discuss issues of brutality. "They're performing live experiments on their workhouse slaves, to determine new methods of population control for undesirables."

"And how are their treacherous investments going down with the Presidor?" asked Cester, showing more interest in their disloyalty to Marecia than their atrocious treatment of the Sewjhi people.

Regenal's political allegiances were firmly rooted in the Realmist camp, but for once he agreed with the Presidor and the Autonomist opposition. "Rostevelo has seized Izan shekels held in Septcrot's vault," he said with a smirk. "And Council is about to outlaw the practice of trading with the

enemy.” Regenal’s grin subsided. “I doubt it will hamper Thirel’s plans though,” he continued. “Cofellreker is too clever for that.”

Cester had some gossip. “I have heard that Thirel, despiser of the Sewjhi people, is a quarter Sewjhi himself!”

“Ha. That’s just loose coins,” laughed Regenal. “I have it on good authority that Cofellreker is Sewjhi.”

If Cester was surprised by the revelation, he managed to conceal it well. “Why would he be investing in the annihilation of his own tribe?” he asked, maintaining a dispassionate expression.

“It’s as though he wants to wipe out all traces of his origins,” explained Regenal. “What a betrayal. Condemning his own kind to slavery and death in the name of trade.” He shuddered. “It turns my stomach, and I’ve seen plenty of evil doings.”

“What about the sacrifice of Treasure Bay in pursuit of Weaponry tactics?” asked Cester, reminding Regenal that he and Cofellreker were not so very different.

Cester’s cold analysis brought the conversation to an instant halt. “Enough of the idle talk,” said Regenal sharply. “I haven’t brought you here to gossip.”

“So why the rush to bring me back?” asked Cester, abandoning the discussion. He had had no intension of risking his position of privilege by invoking Regenal’s volatile temperament.

“We’ve started a new project called Eswan.”

“And what is Eswan all about?”

“A new shell based on the erculan principle. If it works, we’ll be able to wipe out entire realms with a handful of strikes.”

Cester raised an eyebrow. “I see,” he said in a modest display of surprise. “And this new shell is going to be our key to weaponry domination of the globe?”

“Yes, but the biggest fruit always has a worm in it,” replied Regenal.

“And what’s that?”

“The Izans have a head start.”

Cester was quick to realise the implications of the news. “So there’s every chance that they’ll beat us to it.”

“Exactly, and Marecia can’t afford to let some jumped up little tyrant in the Northern Continent steal our opportunity to rule the realms.” Regenal leaned across the desk and looked straight into Cester’s cold, blue eyes. “Find out what they know.”

“Of course,” replied Cester, maintaining his composure with comparative ease. “What priority do I give this assignment?”

“Top priority,” snapped Regenal, then he reclined in his chair and lifted his feet onto the desk. “Eswan will be expanded to incorporate your new operation, and renamed The Atmanntha Task.”

Regenal had a penchant for naming projects. Cester was curious as to whether there was any practical purpose to the inauguration of yet another department. “Why the new name?” he asked.

“Security Cester. Security. Some of our best theorists are Izan defectors. From now on the cloak of secrecy will have to be tightly drawn.”

Cester nodded in agreement. “Persecution of undesirables hasn’t always paid off for the Izans then,” he smirked.

“We treat defectors well enough,” responded Regenal. “But if they fall out of step, we send their families back to the Izans.” He dropped his feet and turned to Cester. “I want you to encourage more of their theorists to change sides.”

“Steal their research and secure ours.”

“Yes,” replied Regenal. “And keep a close eye on your agents as well. Moles don’t just dig on one side of the field,” he continued. “No one except those directly involved should know details about our progress with the shell. Agreed?”

Cester accepted the point. “Agreed.”

Regenal banged the bell on his desk and within moments Lemo had entered the office. “Yes Sir?”

“Do you have my update on the Eshell progress?”

“Yes Sir,” replied Lemo, raising the parchment he was carrying to his eyes. “Merif has succeeded in initiating an auto-linking erculan response Sir.”

“And what does that mean?” demanded Regenal, clearly irritated by the terminology of the practice.

“He says the shell will work, but more development is needed Sir.”

“It would appear that Marecia is ahead of the Izans,” boasted Regenal with a superior look on his face.

“We don’t know what progress the Izans have made,” said Cester cautiously. “And I will need a better understanding of erculan principles if I am to fulfil my duties effectively.”

“Lemo,” barked Regenal, as if his underling might have been in some distant room. “Call Eppeinmhore to give us a briefing”. He looked to Cester to explain. “Eppeinmhore is a bright, young and well travelled theorist.”

“Is he Sewjhi?” asked Cester.

“Yes, but he was born in Marecia. I’m thinking of putting him in charge of the Eshell.”

Cester nodded. “Let us see if he can impress us then.”

~

Regenal may have been wise to regulate the flow of information to Cester’s agents, but he had foolishly failed to extend the same restrictions to his own staff. Within minutes of leaving Regenal’s office, Lemo had secretly despatched the latest news to his brother, and Beldou was about to collect his message.

He and his fellow travellers were following the well-trodden path of Pejhos, staying as guests of his trading partners along the way. Their journey had been tiring, and as they reached the first milestone, Seus and Sedine were glad for the opportunity to settle into comfortable quarters.

After washing and eating, there was little to do but rest. Seus sat on his bed, staring toward the floor. Since leaving Eastpinel he had become distant. Beldou was convinced that his reluctance to engage in conversation was due to the pain of his wounds, but Sedine was not so sure. She sat down on Beldou's bed and took Seus by the hand. "I had to leave my love when we fled to Marecia," she said quietly.

Seus looked into her eyes. "The wounds of the flesh heal faster than the anguish of the heart," he replied. "And do you still feel the pain?"

"I still miss him," she said encouragingly. "I wonder what he might be doing? Who he might be with? How many children he might have?" She squeezed his hand gently. "But now I have learned to look forward."

The door opened. "Ah, you look better for resting," said Beldou, pleased to see Seus in the mood for conversation.

Sedine blushed a little and stood up. "I shall leave you two to talk," she said and edged towards the door. "I hope you have something good to say, Seus needs cheering, not depressing."

Beldou sat on his bed and waited for Sedine to close the door. "The Marecians are making advancements with the shell," he said in a hushed voice. "What was your idea to halt their progress?"

"If Council knew of the shell, they might vote to have it destroyed."

Beldou thought for a moment. "They probably would, but how are they going to find out? The project is being kept from them by the Weaponry, and they would not believe it from any one else."

"Is Darszil working on the shell?"

"Yes."

"If he was to persuade the other theorists to petition Council, they would

have to take the news seriously.”

“That may not be possible now,” said Beldou. “The Weaponry is considering putting a new theorist in charge, Eppeinhore, and he is in favour of the development of the Eshell.”

Seus was surprised to hear of someone with a Sewjhi name being in favour of development of a weapon for the obliteration of the multitudes. “Why?” he asked.

“Eppeinhore sees the Eshell as a way of avenging the suffering of the Sewjhi tribe at the hands of the Izans.”

“Does he think the shell will only kill Izans?” asked Seus, aghast at the naivety of a man about to be credited with such a responsibility. “What about the innocent people of the Northern Continent? Old men, women and children. They are not the enemy of Eppeinhore.”

“Eppeinhore has no relatives on the Northern Continent. His family moved to Marecia a long time ago,” explained Beldou. “He thinks of Izan subjects as he does the Izans.”

“They have no more of an opportunity of rising against their oppressors than he has of refusing to do the bidding of his masters,” continued Seus. “Does he not know that Marecia has a hand in the suffering of Sewjhi tribe?”

“He is like most Marecians,” replied Beldou. “He knows nothing of Marecia’s devious strategy.”

“Do you think Darszil could change his mind?”

Beldou knew of Eppeinhore’s reputation. “He will not be preached to by a subordinate. Darszil will never talk him round.”

“Then we will have to hope that he doesn’t get the job,” replied Seus, looking up as Sedine stepped back into the room.

“Can’t you boys talk of anything but politics?” she asked, quietly pleased to see the familiar Seus returning.

“Well what would you have us talk of?” asked Beldou.

Like her brothers, Sedine had always taken an interest in the principles, but being female, she had never had her opinions taken seriously. She and Beldou had discussed Seus' explanation of the draw, and she was excited to have the opportunity to prove her worth in such matters.

"Well?" asked Beldou again, eager for an answer.

Sedine looked to Seus. "Beldou told me about your notion of the draw," she said with a bashful smile. "But I can see a problem with the theory of the Iddurs."

Seus was intrigued and impressed by Sedine's inquiring manner. "Then you must tell me of your concerns," he replied encouragingly.

"You say that the globe is moving towards you all the time, and that is why you return to it when you jump upwards," said Sedine.

"Yes," replied Seus. "This is the force of the push."

"If that was true, people on the other side would fall off, because the globe would be moving away from them."

Seus drew a breath. Sedine obviously required a better explanation. "To understand the push, you must be able to see the universe in five measures. Four measures of space and one of time."

"The theorists say that the fourth measure is a complicated place, beyond our understanding," said Beldou, keen to maintain a stake in the conversation. "They say that strange monsters reside there."

Seus found it hard to conceal his amusement at Beldou's vision. "The fourth measure is no more complicated than the other measures," he explained. "Once you have learned to see."

"Can you teach me to see?" asked Sedine, eagerly.

"Seus nodded and began. "You understand the concept that the globe is moving towards you."

"Yes yes," replied Beldou impatiently.

“Consider that the globe is also moving towards the man on the far side at the same time.”

Sedine was unable to accept such an outlandish idea. “That is impossible. It can not move in opposite directions at the same time.”

“There is one way that is possible,” continued Seus.

“How?”

“If the globe was growing,” he replied. “Getting larger all the time.”

“That is ridiculous,” responded Sedine. “The laws of the three measures would not hold good. Armies of people would be required to redraw maps for people on ever lengthening journeys.” She looked to Beldou for support.

“I think we should hear him out before we jump to conclusions,” said Beldou, trying to regain his standing after his talk of monsters.

Sedine calmed herself and looked to Seus again. Seus continued. “Imagine that the universe is a glass sphere,” he said.

Sedine looked into Seus’ eyes. He smiled a patient smile. No one had ever shown her such consideration and respect before. She closed her eyes and began to visualise a giant glass sphere, filled with stars and globes. “Yes I can see it,” she said.

Seus continued his explanation. “You are standing on one of the globes in the sphere. The position of your globe can be determined by its height, width and depth within the sphere.”

“The law of three measures,” said Beldou, his eyes also tightly shut.

“Yes,” replied Seus. “Now imagine that the sphere is constantly growing, and as it does, the suns and globes within it are also growing at the same rate.”

The concept that Seus was trying to explain slowly began to make sense to Sedine. “Yes. We are unable to detect the changes because, as our globe gets bigger, so do we, and everything around us.”

Beldou began to get excited and opened his eyes. “The law of the three measures still holds good. There is nothing to tell us that the universe is expanding.”

“Except the draw of course,” responded Seus. Beldou had clearly grasped the idea but Seus wanted to complete his lesson. “Go back to the glass sphere.”

Beldou closed his eyes again and tried to relax. “All right. I am back,” he said after a few moments.

“Now I want you to become a giant, step out of the sphere and hold it at arms length. The sphere and all the stars within it are growing slowly in your hand.”

“I can see that,” said Sedine, firmly gripped by Seus’ principle.

“Now, to define the position of your globe within the sphere at any moment in time, you will need not three, but four measures of space.”

Seus waited for a response, but neither answered. He prompted them. “The height, the width, the depth and...”

Sedine had the answer. “The size of the sphere,” she exclaimed, glancing at Seus in jubilant admiration.

Beldou also realised the point. “Of course,” he said. “The fourth measure of space is scale. It is so simple. There are no monsters.” He looked to Seus. “You have discovered the fourth measure of space.”

“I think I should give credit to the Iddurs for that,” replied Seus, greatly relieved to have completed his lesson.

Beldou could hardly contain his excitement. “I could squeeze time to tell Darszil.”

“I think you should leave Darszil to consider more immediate problems,” said Seus. “Let us hope that it is he, and not Eppeinhore who is promoted to leader of the erculan shell project.”

~

When Eppeinhmore arrived at the Weaponry he was undoubtedly aware of his prospective promotion. His suit was pressed, his hair was slicked and he was eager to make an impression. Lemo greeted him at the gatehouse, then ushered him into a suitably prepared room to deliver his briefing.

“Aha. Our theorist is here,” bellowed Regenal as Eppeinhmore entered the room. “There’s the board,” he said, gesturing toward the front of the room. “Don’t keep us waiting.”

Regenal and Cester were sitting opposite a chalkboard with their arms folded. Eppeinhmore realised that he was being tested for his ability to deliver under pressure. Determined not to sacrifice his prospects by stumbling at the outset, he picked up a piece of chalk and began immediately, drawing unidentifiable symbols on the board as he spoke.

“Grebenshie, the great Izan theorist, had realised that highly purified twin elements can produce a powerful explosive response...” Eppeinhmore glanced over his shoulder as if to check that his audience was following.

“Yes,” urged Regenal. “Go on man.”

Eppeinhmore continued. “...providing the process is suitably restrained by a special dense fluid.” He finished his strange graphic display by stabbing the board with the chalk, then stepped back as if to admire his work.

“Is that it?” enquired Cester, somewhat surprised by the concise nature of the explanation.

Eppeinhmore turned to face the two onlookers. “That’s it, in a nut shell,” he tittered, apparently amused by his own sense of wit.

“So why don’t we have the shell?” demanded Regenal, reminding Eppeinhmore of the seriousness of the job in hand.

“Well, to start with dense fluid is hard to produce. Even if enough could be made it would never be efficient enough to be practical.” A look of pride spread across Eppeinhmore’s face. “But we discovered that common girphate could be used instead. That’s how Merif was able to initiate the first erculan response.”

“Is there any possibility that the Izans know about common girphate?” asked Regenal.

Cester interrupted. “No chance. If the Izans had initiated a response, my contacts would know about it.”

Regenal looked back to Eppeinhmore. “So what’s stopping us from building the shell?”

“The other problem is finding a pure enough process for division of the twinned elements. This is where we think Grebenshie has the upper hand. This was always his area of expertise.”

Cester jumped in. “So we have one half of the secrets and the Izans have the other.”

“Yes.”

“And if Grebenshie learns of common girphate, the Izans will have the shell?”

Eppeinhmore thought for a moment before replying to Cester’s second question. “Yes.”

A distinct hush fell upon the room as they each quietly considered the outcome of such a prospect. Regenal broke the silence. “It is apparent that the conclusion of the war will be determined by who gets the shell first,” he said, taking to the floor and gesturing for Eppeinhmore to sit down. Regenal paused for a moment to study the scribbles on the board, seemingly bemused by the existence of such a strange and powerful language, and then he turned to face the other two. “Eppeinhmore.”

Eppeinhmore sat upright in his chair. “Yes Sir?”

“We’re going to step up the development programme and I’m putting you in charge.”

“Yes Sir,” replied Eppeinhmore dutifully.

“And Cester.”

Cester showed none of the signs of subordination that Eppeinhmore

obviously felt compelled to convey. “Yes Regenal,” he replied coolly.

As head of the Closet Facility, Regenal had considerable respect for Cester, although he was always prepared to pull rank when it suited him. Between them they had been responsible for Weaponry policy, official and unofficial, for as long as anyone could remember. “How do we get hold of Grebenshie’s secrets?”

Cester was never short of ideas. “The United Forces are making ground on the Northern Continent. We should step up operations there,” he said with absolute confidence. “Seize the Izan laboratories, remove any records and then destroy their facilities.”

Regenal saw the opportunity to instigate another operation and cast his eyes upwards for inspiration. “Right, Cester,” he began after just a few moments of consideration. “You will head a new intelligence operation code named the Salso Mission. Capture their theorists, interrogate their key people and incarcerate the rest.”

Cester wasn’t particularly impressed. He’d seen it all before. Regenal hijacking his ideas by creating a new department to implement them. “Yes Sir” he replied with more than a hint of condescendence in his voice.

Regenal was too insensitive to respond to such subtlety of wordplay and continued to enthuse, banging his hand on the chalkboard to emphasise the severity of the situation. “Whatever it takes. We must get control of this appliance.”

~

Seus and his party were moving ever closer to Tribian. Their journey across the Northern Continent was carefully planned to avoid areas of conflict, but even so, their nerves had been sorely tested each and every time that they passed through an Izan checkpoint.

For the final trek the weary travellers had pressed on through the night, and by the time they saw the sun rise above the North West coast of Crafen, Sedine was far too tired to appreciate the view.

All three retired soon after finding their lodgings, but Beldou managed little sleep. His last orders were to report to the new Salso Headquarters

as quickly as possible, and he had become increasingly restless when they were not on the move. “I think Cester will be after my blood if I don’t get to Old Non soon,” he said to himself, looking out of the window and watching the light slowly fading on yet another day.

Seus was awake and Sedine was stirring. “You should go to the nearest Outpost and send him a message,” suggested Seus in an attempt to relieve Beldou’s anxiety. “We have to await the favour of the wind before we can cross the Tribish Straits. Cester will understand.”

“The Izans have taken every Outpost in Crafen,” replied Beldou brusquely. “It is too dangerous.”

“And waiting makes me nervous,” added Sedine, sitting up in her bed to join the conversation. “Thirel has pledged to hunt down every Sewjhi on the Northern Continent. I won’t settle until we are in Tribian.”

“The Izans are not going to suspect you of being Sewjhi now,” replied Seus. “Cester’s parchments have served you well.”

“Only because the guards were too idle to check them against the records,” countered Beldou. “Who is to say that we are not already on their death list? It was one of Cester’s cronies who gave the Izans the meccer.”

Seus had no idea what Beldou was talking about. “What is the meccer?” he asked.

“A powerful mechanical counter that can log us all one by one,” replied Beldou. “The Izan’s exploitation of the Sewjhi people would not be possible without it.” He drew a deep and sorrowful breath before continuing. “And it was Cofellreker’s Information Management Bank that gave it to them.”

Seus was taken aback by Beldou’s declaration, and Beldou was overwhelmed by the thought of the suffering caused by the people for whom he worked. A sudden tapping at the door broke the uneasy silence. “Food is being served downstairs.”

“The landlord must have been a good friend of Pejhos,” commented Sedine, pleased to have the opportunity to lighten the melancholic mood. “He is looking after us very well.”

“Shall we get ready then?” asked Seus, following her lead.

“You two go,” replied Beldou, plainly in no mood for eating. “I could use a quiet time.”

Downstairs was a cosy room that overlooked the picturesque harbour from which they were to sail for Crowllan. It was early evening and the light of the setting sun flooded across the water and in through the latticed windows, picking out the beams and filling the room with an alluring orange glow. Seus and Sedine made towards a cheerfully crackling fire at the far end of the room and chose a table with a view.

The food was good, the freshest that that they had tried for a long time, and the company was most agreeable to them both. “Do you think Beldou will ever be truly happy?” asked Sedine.

“Beldou will be happier when he is doing something to bring the war to a close,” replied Seus. “The suffering of the Sewjhi tribe will only end with the war.”

“And the grip of the Weaponry on our family will be gone with it,” she added.

Many Sewjhi people had escaped the tyranny of the Izans by agreeing to work for Marecia, only to discover that the Marecians brandished the threat of repatriation like a deadly weapon. Their choice was harsh. Do the bidding of their masters, or they and their loved ones would be returned to the Izans. Some, like Beldou, were constantly tormented by their dilemma. “You will be a great support to Beldou in Old Non,” said Seus encouragingly.

“But I do not want to go to with him,” confessed Sedine with a tear welling in her eye.

“Why ever not?” enquired Seus, surprised by the unexpected disclosure. “He needs someone to look after him.”

“And who will look after you if I go?” Sedine looked directly at Seus, then reached across the table and took his hand. “Can you not see my heart?”

Seus was drawn by her deep, beseeching eyes. Without Myar he was tired, lost and lonely, and in all certainty, Sedine was falling in love with him. “I have my quest and nothing to offer you,” he said quietly.

“Your task is almost done,” she reasoned. “And we would have each other. That is enough.”

Seus was still unsure. “It is too soon for me to make such a choice, and your future would be in doubt.”

Sedine became flustered as she saw Beldou enter the room. “I would be safer with you than I would be in Old Non,” she pleaded in a hushed voice. “Our opportunity will soon be passed and I might never see you again. Please Seus. Promise me you will think about it. Promise me.”

Seus gripped her hand and offered an affectionate smile. “I promise,” he whispered as Beldou pulled up a seat.

“Hello. You two look comfortable.”

“And you look a little happier,” responded Seus, pleased to kindle the embers with Beldou.

“Yes. All this waiting can be very trying,” he replied, almost apologetically.

“You will feel better when you have eaten,” said Sedine.

Beldou nodded and smiled. He sometimes found Sedine’s sisterly concern a little smothering, but always managed to show his appreciation. “There is a contact here,” he said turning to Seus. “I will try to get a message through tomorrow.”

“And can you get a message to Darszil?” asked Seus.

“I can try,” replied Beldou. “What did you have in mind?”

“I think we should ask Darszil to go ahead with his petition against the Eshell. Council will take it seriously if enough of the theorists are prepared to speak out.”

“What about Eppeinhore?” asked Beldou. “He is in charge now and

will never agree.”

Sedine interrupted. “The Landlord is coming over,” she whispered.

Seus nodded to Sedine and then grinned at Beldou. “Does Epeinhore need to know?” he asked in a rare display of guile, and then sat back in his chair.

The Landlord arrived full of spirit and eager for conversation. He placed a bowl of steaming soup before Beldou and looked him in the eye. “Have you heard the news?”

Beldou bowed his head in gratitude for the food before replying. “Not for some time,” he replied inquisitively, eager for any snippet of gossip about the war. “We keep our own company when we are on the road. It is safer that way.”

The Landlord lowered his voice and leaned on the table with both hands. “The Marecian troopers are here, sweeping across from the West,” he declared jubilantly. “And Surisa is advancing in the East.” He wiped a spot of soup from the table with a symbolic stroke of his cloth. “Thirel and the Izans are on the run.”

Beldou’s complexion turned distinctly ashen and he lost his grip on the spoon. “What is the matter Beldou?” demanded Sedine as soon as the Landlord was out of earshot.

“We have friends in the village of Charighole. What if the Surisans get there first?”

Seus was puzzled by Beldou’s concern. “The Surisans are there to liberate them,” he said, trying to reassure him. “Your friends are sure to surrender without a fight.”

“No. You do not understand,” replied Beldou. “Our friends work at the Izan erculan facility. Marecia will never let Surisa capture the Izan secrets.”

“What can Marecia do if the Surisan troops get there first?” asked Sedine.

“They will attack Charighole with ships of the air,” he replied solemnly.

“And kill everyone before the Surisans arrive.”

“There must be something we can do,” said Sedine as she realised the seriousness of the situation. “Can you warn them?”

Beldou stood up. “I must try to send my message to Lemo tonight.”

~

Beldou was right about Marecia’s determination to capture or destroy the Izan facilities. Regenal had summoned Cester and Cofellreker to his quarters to discuss the success of the Salso mission, but word of the sudden downfall of the Izans had arrived before them. “War on the Northern Continent is over,” announced Regenal bluntly. He turned to Cester. “I hope you have some good news for me.”

“Yes,” said Cester, his scant reply instantly creating an air of suspense.

“You’ve captured Grebenshie,” surmised Regenal eagerly.

Cester was a little irritated by Regenal’s presumption. “No,” he replied dismissively. “But...” His eyebrows lifted and his lips veiled a smile wholly uncharacteristic of a man renowned for his lack of emotion.

“Well? Well?” demanded Regenal with a mixture of impatience and anticipation.

“We’ve got his secrets,” revealed Cester in quiet triumph. “The plans are on their way to Eppenmhore as we speak. We’ll have the shell in a matter of days.”

Regenal was ecstatic, but hated giving anyone praise, even Cester. “Pity it wasn’t soon enough,” he muttered, struggling to conceal his elation.

“A double victory,” observed Cofellreker. “Very impressive.”

Regenal ignored Cofellreker’s tribute and stood up. “We underestimated the capabilities of the Surisan forces,” he said, waving his hand over the map behind his desk. “We may have gained the Izan secrets, but we’ve lost our greatest opportunity.”

Cofellreker was a little confused. “We have the shell, Tribian is on its

knees and the Izans are defeated. Where's the problem?"

"If this shell is going to be of any use to us, we have to demonstrate that we aren't afraid to use it," snapped Regenal, irritated by Cofellreker's ignorance of the Weaponry perspective. "Who are we going to use it on now that the Izans have surrendered?"

"Why not drop it on Pjaan?" suggested Cester coldly. "We could tell Council that the Eastern conflict will drag on otherwise."

"Of course," replied Regenal with an undeserved bloom of self-satisfaction spreading across his face. "In retaliation for Treasure Bay."

"And once the globe has seen the Eshell, they'll be shaking in their shelters," added Cofellreker, finally realising the value of such a demonstration to their Mutual Agreement.

"But we still have to justify our decisions," cautioned Cester. "The Levy Givers may be fools, but they won't support the use of a weapon like the Eshell every time we need to bring some jumped up little tyrant into line."

For once, it seemed Regenal was a stride in front. "All is in hand Cester. All is in hand," he said, thumping the bell on his desk with a final rapturous display of satisfaction.

Lemo feared trouble whenever he heard Regenal beating the bell, and arrived almost immediately. "Yes Sir?" he spluttered, flinging the door open with a look of trepidation on his face.

"Bring in the Presidor," demanded Regenal. He turned to Cester. "We need to get this plan through Council before Pjaan surrenders as well."

Everyone expected to see Rostevelo step into the room, but Muntar, his Deputy Paramount appeared at the door. "I want the head not the heel," complained Regenal indignantly.

Muntar was not a young man. His hair was receding and his eyesight was plainly poor, but life's experiences had bestowed upon him a sense of fearless conviction, and he could pull it on like an old jacket. "Rostevelo died of a cranoburst this morning," he said without a sign of remorse. "I'm in the saddle now."

Having openly criticised the Weaponry's wastefulness and the Federation's interference in Council affairs, Muntar had no friends amongst his new associates, but he was Presidor. Regenal's attitude changed immediately. "Sit down Muntar," he said pointing to a vacant chair. "What do you know of the Erculan shell?"

"Very little," confessed Muntar. "But there is a lot of talk in Council at the moment. One of your theorists has just circulated a petition against it on moral grounds."

"That must be Darszil. Too late to get all ethical now," exclaimed Regenal in disgust. "Take no notice of his foolish petition. We need the shell to end the Eastern War."

Regenal's denunciation of Darszil added no weight to his argument. "And there is talk that the development costs are spiralling out of control," said Muntar, continuing to float viable objections to the Eshell.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Cofellreker, rushing to Regenal's assistance. "The most effective way to reduce weaponry expenditure is to end the war. And trust me, Council would rather save their purse than the lives of those dirty little invaders."

Regenal rallied his composure and looked Muntar straight in the eye. "Even the Autonomists wince when they remember Treasure Bay. No one will cry over a few yellow bellies."

Muntar was not easily persuaded. "There is a possibility that Council will not sanction the use of such a weapon in light of the petition."

"What's the matter with that silver tongue of yours Muntar?" asked Regenal, frustrated by the persistent objections. "I hope you're not forgetting whose side you're on. You'll find yourself out in the cold if you continue to pour the lives of young Marecians into an unnecessary conflict."

Regenal's warning drew blood. Muntar had no intension of making himself unpopular. "You have a good case," he conceded, and stood up to leave. "I will put your recommendations to Council. Until next time then."

As soon as Muntar was through the door, Regenal began complaining about him. "I hate silver tongues. They think they run the realm."

"Well, Marecia is supposed to be an autonomic union of States," tittered Cofellreker. "And Muntar is the commonly chosen leader, even if he did fall into the saddle."

Cofellreker's sarcastic attempt to remind Regenal of the principles of the Marecian Charter was not well received. "We run the circus, not the clowns."

"Actually I wanted to talk to you about the circus, but it was the global circus I was thinking of."

"What global circus?" asked Regenal.

"There will be a scramble for power now the war is over," explained Cofellreker. "I have an idea that will put us at the top of the pile."

"The Eshell will do that," said Regenal.

"And how long will it be before Surisa has their own Eshell?" said Cofellreker dismissively. "I'm talking about a Realmic Union Treaty. It will give us the edge we need in matters of global manipulation."

Regenal looked bemused and Cester redefined Cofellreker's vision in terms that he could relate to. "A posse of Realms to maintain global order."

"I see," said Regenal, rousing his wits. "But how would you ensure that Marecia was in the saddle?"

"We could site the headquarters on Marecian soil," suggested Cofellreker. "I will provide the Land." He looked to Cester. "That way you can eavesdrop on the other realms to ensure we have the upper hand in any negotiations."

Regenal had a better understanding of Weaponry tactics than political coercion. "But will it work?" he asked.

"If it does, Marecia will have virtual control of the globe," said Cester, obviously in favour of the idea. "But there's one small problem."

“What’s that?” asked Cofellreker defensively, quite convinced that his plan was foolproof.

“Muntar,” replied Cester. “He might be prepared to take our advice now, but once he finds his feet things could be very different, and you will need his approval.”

Regenal knew exactly how to deal with the situation. “Muntar had a good reputation as a trooper, but he must have a dark side.”

“Well he didn’t creep into his shoes by plain dealing,” commented Cofellreker. “His loyalties lie elsewhere.”

“Not for much longer,” said Regenal, turning to Cester. “Find his dark side, dig out his indiscretions and prepare a case for his downfall. Muntar needs to learn how things work up here.”

Cester locked his fingers and slowly bent them backwards, until the joints made a nasty cracking noise. “My pleasure,” he said.

~

News of Muntar’s compliance spread across the globe faster than the shock waves of the shell itself. Beldou was one of the first to receive word and rushed back to the lodgings to tell the others. “The war is over,” he announced in a solemn tone as he walked through the door of their room.

“Why do you look so downhearted?” asked Seus. “Surely you must be relieved.”

“Yes,” replied Beldou. “But it came too late for the people of Charighole.”

“Did the Marecians attack them?”

“Yes. They struck the village from the air, killing people indiscriminately.”

“What about our friends?” asked Sedine, greatly disturbed by the news.

“Marecia captured the facility before Surisa could get there. They were taken for interrogation.”

“Well at least they are alive,” said Sedine with a sigh of relief. “But why did Marecia need to attack the village if they were going to capture the facility anyway?”

“The Marecian Weaponry has a lust for blood,” replied Beldou with a curled lip. “And there is worse.” He sat on his bed and shook his head slowly. “They have used the erculan shell to end the Eastern War.” Beldou looked to Seus and saw his face turn white. “I’ve heard that seventy thousand people were killed,” he said, struggling to continue. “And as many buildings destroyed.”

“It truly is an evil weapon,” said Seus. “Darszil must be distraught.”

“He is,” replied Beldou. “But Eppeinmhore is untroubled by the carnage he has caused. Apparently he has one regret, that he didn’t finish the shell in time to use it on the Izans.”

Seus was greatly troubled by Beldou’s disclosure. “I think I will sit outside for a while,” he said, and quietly left the room.

The accommodation at the front of the house opened onto a long veranda, which spanned the full width of the upper floor of the building. During the day, sounds from the street below would rise upwards to connect the lodgings with the bustle of the quay wall, but at night the veranda was a peaceful place.

It was a clear night and all the stars were sparkling. Seus looked across the harbour and watched in awe as a full moon slowly crept across the sky. As he watched, he wondered how such a night could be possible, when somewhere, under the same moon, so many would be suffering the consequences of the Marecian shell.

After a while, Seus noticed the Old Man standing on the veranda. He moved towards Seus and settled himself down on some sacks. “Good evening,” he said. “You seem to be deep in thought.”

Seus was a little startled and sat up. “Yes, good evening,” he replied, gathering his thoughts and trying to settle down again. “I was just wondering if the universe has an end.”

The Old Man grinned. “Nothing too complicated then,” he said, and then suddenly cast his attention to the floor. Seus looked down to see what it was that had caught his interest. They both watched as an ant emerged from one of the sacks and began to cross the wooden floor between them. At first it seemed to be following some predetermined path, but then veered off to investigate the bare foot of the Old Man.

“The ant could be forgiven for believing that the terrain upon which he walks has no end,” said the Old Man, breaking the silence. “For the ant, a journey to the shores of this land would be unthinkable. As unimaginable as a journey to the outer most star would be for us.” He paused to look at Seus. “But what lies beyond the shores of this land?”

“The ocean,” answered Seus looking a little puzzled.

“And beyond that?”

“The globe, other globes and stars,” he continued.

“Were you able to observe your universe in the way that you see the universe of the ant, you would discover that it too has shores.”

Seus immediately realised what the Old Man was saying. “So the universe is not infinite then,” he said, looking for confirmation of his reasoning.

The Old Man nodded and smiled a kindly smile. “But to begin to contemplate the nature of infinity, you must consider the existence of another greater universe, beyond the shores of your own.” His voice began to fade into the distance and Seus found it hard to see him. “And another beyond that... And another beyond that.”

“Seus.”

Seus turned his head. “Ah, Sedine. I didn’t hear you come out.”

“It is a beautiful evening. I am not surprised that you were lost in your thoughts.” She sat down next to him and looked longingly into his eyes. “Have you considered our future together?”

Seus took her hand gently. “I am very fond of you but I must forfeit the

opportunity of such happiness,” he said with deep compassion in his voice. “It would be selfish of me to submit to such temptation.”

Sedine’s heart was profoundly wounded by Seus’ rejection, and her stomach turned at the thought of her impending loss. She understood what Seus was suggesting, but she still believed that their love would flourish if only he would give her the chance to prove herself. “What is wrong with convenience, comfort and companionship?” she pleaded. “Is it not what being together is about?”

“Your heart would be mine, but mine would not be yours,” explained Seus. “When two people share one heart, they help each other to become better people.”

“You would help me to become a better person.”

Seus was not ready to make such a commitment. “Somewhere in Tribian, perhaps in Old Non, you will find your heart,” he said, and kissed her gently on her cheek.

Now it was Beldou’s turn to take the evening air. As he stepped out onto the veranda he noticed immediately that Sedine was tearful. He paused momentarily and considered quietly withdrawing, but Seus caught his eye. “Some good news at last,” said Beldou, breaking the silence. “We sail for Oloe in Crowllan at dawn.”

Seus was greatly relieved to hear the news, but Sedine found no comfort in the prospect of their departure. “Is that where we go our separate ways?” she asked, struggling to fend off the tears.

“No,” replied Seus with a sympathetic smile. “We will travel northwards across Crowllan together.”

Beldou sat down beside his sister, to offer his comfort before continuing the conversation. “Do you know Oloe?” he asked.

“I remember it well enough,” replied Seus reassuringly. “But once we touch ground in Crowllan, you must never call me Seus.” He adopted a somewhat serious expression. “You must take great care to call me only by my Tribish name. Joshepus.”

“Why is that?” asked Sedine, wiping a lingering tear from the corner of

her eye.

“It is unheard of to call someone Seus in Tribian. Nobody but the King himself would understand.”

Sedine was happy to accept the explanation and turned her attention back to their journey. “How far will we travel together?”

“Two, perhaps three days,” replied Seus. “We will follow the river north to the first crossing point. Then we will head west until we come to a stone circle. From there we can follow a track to the house of my father and my return will be complete.”

Sedine was unsettled by the thought that their journey would soon be concluded. “Will we ever see you again?” she asked, hopeful that the opportunity to win the heart of Seus would not be lost forever.

“Perhaps,” replied Seus softly. He looked to Beldou. “Will you continue to work for Cester now that the War is over?”

“I am not sure what will happen when we get to Old Non, but as soon as the opportunity presents itself, I will leave.”

“Cester’s grip on you will be weakened now,” encouraged Seus. “If he asks you to stay, you and Lemo would have the opportunity to prevent further suffering.”

“How? What could we do?” asked Beldou, inspired by the prospect of a new purpose.

“The tyranny will continue,” said Seus in earnest. “Why not the toil? The erculan nightmare has become a reality that no good man would wish upon another.”

“Yes,” replied Beldou. “We could help to unite the people of the globe in a fight against erculan warfare.” He looked to Seus. “But without your guidance, I would be of no use.”

Seus was flattered by Beldou’s comment. “Then we must stay in touch,” he said, smiling at Sedine. “Although I am sure you could manage perfectly well without me.”

Sedine's eyes lit up. "No we could not," she said. "We will have to meet quite often."

The Secret

The Failed Charter

The Correlation of Time

The New Arsenal

The First Minster

The Lesser Universe

The New Love

The Realisation

Seus had been right to worry about the erculan threat to the people of the globe. Surisa was determined to secure an authoritative position in the new global order and considered acquisition of the Eshell vital to their ambitions. After losing the Charighole facility to Marecia, they had made development of their own erculan device a top priority.

When Cester heard the news he was incensed. He had his own ideas about the prospects for Marecian superiority and invited Regenal and Cofellreker to a briefing at the Closet Facility to discuss their strategy.

It was unusual for Cester and Regenal to meet anywhere other than the Weaponry Headquarters, but Cester had insisted that it was necessary for him to make his case effectively. Cofellreker was the first to arrive, followed by Regenal with Lemo in tow. As they stepped through the office door, they were surprised by the size of the room. Regenal and Cester exchanged glances, but the obvious lack of verbal greetings suggested that they both had a reason to feel apprehensive about the meeting.

The floor had been cleared of all but three chairs, positioned to face a raised platform at the head of the room, and Cofellreker had already made himself comfortable in one of them. Cester was standing beside an empty desk in the middle of the platform, next to an easel with a large scroll attached. He nodded to his visitors and gestured for them to take a seat, but Lemo was anxious about joining his superiors and waited nervously by the door.

This was the set-up that Cester used to brief members of the Closet Facility and was obviously designed to place him in a position of authority. Regenal was quite uncomfortable with the apparent reversal of roles. "I hope this is going to prove enlightening," he said, cracking the silence with a stern voice to remind Cester who had the higher rank.

"Of course Regenal. Please, take a seat," replied Cester politely, while signalling for Lemo to shut the door and join the others. As soon as Lemo was seated Cester began. "The war of the Realms is over and Marecia has emerged as the most powerful Realm."

Regenal wasn't about to be lectured to by Cester and he determined to make an equal contribution to the meeting from the outset, whether or not he had anything of consequence to add. "Yes. We're looking good Cester. We're looking good," he said loudly.

Cester continued without reaction to Regenal's remark. "And since the War began, the games we have been playing have been very much global in their thinking."

"Exactly, and I've got to admit, it's been quite exhilarating," added Regenal, trying again to provoke an interaction.

Cester was undaunted and flung back the first leaf of the giant scroll to reveal the words, 'Global Supremacy'. "So I propose that we extend the Mutual Agreement accordingly," he announced with a look of pride.

Regenal's eyes opened wide and he stared at the words on the scroll. "What do you know about the Mutual Agreement?" he demanded.

This time Cester had to respond. "It is my job to know everything, and I am a member of the Federation," he replied assertively, giving himself time to flip another leaf and bring the discussion back on course. "Total control of the Globe," he went on. "That's the objective."

The tactic worked. "Obviously, that's the objective," said Regenal, keen to demonstrate that the notion wasn't new to him. "But Surisa isn't going to just lie back and let us take over their realm, are they?"

"No, of course not."

"Then how do you propose to defeat them?"

Cester flipped the next leaf of his scroll to reveal a large map, with arrows pointing toward the Realms of the Baiaran Globe. "We follow Thirel's plan. Take over a little at a time, starting with the smaller, more useful Realms."

Regenal took the idea quite literally and saw it as too incredulous to be plausible. "But that's exactly what we're supposed to have been fighting against," he protested. "Weaponry rule. Council and the Levy Givers would never agree."

"It doesn't always have to be about invade and subjugate," said Cofellreker, unable to contain his frustration at Regenal's blinkered perception of global supremacy. He began to wag his finger. "One thing that Thirel has shown us. Never start a war that you can't afford to lose."

“Gentlemen, please,” said Cester, trying to reassert his influence. “No, we need to be far more subtle than that.”

“So what have you got in mind?” smarted Regenal.

Cester puffed up his chest and brushed his hair back with his hand. “While the old empires of Tribian and Crafen crumble in the dust, we soar like an eagle over their lost realms.”

Regenal was an imperialist through and through, and couldn’t resist toying with the idea of extending his authority. “Prey on the weakest and most useful realms,” he said, nodding his head thoughtfully.

“Yes,” replied Cester, relieved at the opportunity to move the discussion forward. He flipped another leaf of his chart. “With a combination of Weaponry prowess, economic coercion and unscrupulous tactics, we rule the minor realms from behind the scenes,” he exclaimed, banging the words ‘economic’ and ‘coercion’ on the scroll as he spoke. “Make their leaders rich and powerful if they comply. Destroy them if they don’t.”

Cofellreker thought the idea was little more than a re-interpretation of his Mutual Agreement, and Regenal wasn’t particularly impressed either. “That’s all very well,” he said reluctantly. “But how do you intend to achieve global supremacy without eventually going head to head with Surisa?”

“Support their enemies, steal their allies and undermine their purse,” retorted Cester confidently. “It will take time, but eventually Surisa will fall,” he said, casting a furtive grin to the floor. “And when they do, we take the spoils, starting with their sap fields.”

Now he was talking Cofellreker’s language. “Good idea,” he said, gloating at the prospect of acquiring Surisa’s greatest asset.

“But what’s the point, they don’t have any sea ports there. How are you going to get the sap out?” asked Regenal.

“Ha,” scoffed Cester. “Have you no vision? We can build a giant sapduct through Saint Gafhan to Kaspitan, and ship it from there.”

Cester’s proposal was indeed ingenious, but Regenal was too irritated by

his arrogance to see the idea in a positive light. “It’s just a dream Cester. The War of the Realms is over,” he said, shaking his head in a dismissive fashion to remind Cester who gave the orders. “We don’t have the power to go meddling in foreign affairs during peacetime. And as much as I dislike it, the Weaponry has to be seen to be accountable to Council. It can’t be a law unto itself.”

Regenal’s objection was highly pertinent, but Cester was undaunted. He smiled a smile that laid bare his talent for cunning. “What if we create a new facility to do our dirty work?” he replied. “Unaccountable to Council. In control of its own purse. Above the Law.”

Regenal was momentarily stunned into silence. “That’s ridiculous,” he said finally. “It’s against the Charter of the Realm.”

“Think of the advantages that the facility would bring to the Mutual Agreement,” continued Cester. “The three of us could create a Secret Agenda, and together we would be unstoppable. Just like we were during the war.”

“I like the idea of a Secret Agenda,” agreed Cofellreker. “It fits in perfectly with my plans for the Realmic Union, to create a homeland for Sewjhi refugees.”

Regenal was quite staggered by Cofellreker’s proposal. “Have you lost your mind? Only yesterday you were financing their elimination!” he exclaimed. “What use would a homeland for the Sewjhi tribe be to us?”

“We would be creating an eternal ally,” explained Cofellreker. “A centre for distribution of armaments. A platform for Weaponry assaults.” He looked to Cester with a wicked eye. “And we could put it right in the heart of the Baiaran Globe.”

Cester realised the implications immediately. “The perfect way to destabilise the Baiaran Globe and gain control of their sap fields,” he said, realising Cofellreker’s motives. “And the ideal place for my new facility to cut its teeth.”

“I see,” conceded Regenal. “It could work, but how do you intend to get your new facility past Council and the people?”

“The same way we always do. Feed them a ‘story of righteousness’.

That's what Muntar is there for."

"It'll have to be one hell of a story," said Regenal cynically, turning to Cofellreker for concurrence. "Even for a silver tongue like Muntar."

"Not at all," countered Cester confidently. He sat down in the chair behind his desk, clasped his hands together and leaned forward slowly. "Threats to the security of the realm begin in peacetime as well as war time. And the powers of the Closet Facility are no longer adequate to protect us from the likes of an Izan uprising."

"That's very true," conceded Regenal.

"Then if we want to continue to defend the security of the realm, we will need a new facility with greater powers. A facility with the authority to conduct its affairs at home and overseas with the utmost discretion."

Regenal was obviously becoming intrigued by the idea. "Yes of course. If it was separate from the Weaponry they might just go for it," he replied, rubbing his chin and casting his eyes upwards in thought.

Cester knew what he was thinking, but for once was prepared to do his utmost to prevent Regenal from stealing the thunder. "And seeing that it's my idea, I would like to name it," he said in a determined voice.

"Oh," spluttered Regenal in surprise, unable to think of a reasonable objection. "What did you have in mind?"

Cester's insistence on having the meeting on his home territory had paid off, and it showed. His unspoken aspiration, to create an unbridled power that he alone would wield beneath the facade of autonomy, was now separated from realisation by little more than a formality. He leaned back in his chair, put his hands behind his head and looked upwards, almost in mockery of the way Regenal might in such a situation. "I think I will call it, 'The Independent Closet Authority'."

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While Regenal and Cester were discussing their power struggle, Beldou was struggling with trouble of a more fundamental nature. Seus and Sedine had found the crossing to Crowllan quite fair, but for Beldou, being tossed in a small boat, even in a moderate sea, was a far from

comfortable experience.

As they entered the lee of the harbour, Oloe seemed cold and gloomy. The sun had fallen behind the towering cliffs and a rising wind funnelled through the estuary, yet to Beldou, nowhere could have seemed more inviting. He had never been so glad to fall into his lodgings and take his rest.

The three voyagers had agreed to make an early start on their long trek into the Crowllan heartlands, but by the first light of the following morning, Beldou was back to his usual self and had other ideas. He promised his sister that he would not be long and set off to make contact with Lemo.

Much to Sedine's annoyance, Beldou failed to keep his promise. As the morning wore on she became increasingly restless. "Where have you been?" she demanded when Beldou finally reappeared. "We should have set off long ago."

"I had a chance to exchange messages with Darszil," he replied apologetically and picked up her bag in an attempt to calm his irate sister. "I really couldn't pass the opportunity by."

Sedine scowled at her brother and Seus quickly stepped in to move the conversation along. "Did you get any news from Lemo?" he asked.

"Yes. There is something that we should discuss," replied Beldou, trying to make a case for the hold up. "Perhaps we should talk along the way."

Before long they were heading northwards, along the pretty wooded valley of the Oloe River. The path was well trodden and mostly firm under foot, but rarely wide enough to afford Beldou the opportunity to speak with Seus. They followed the river until it was little more than a babbling brook, then crossed to the opposite bank and began a long climb out of the valley.

As they neared the summit, the land began to level and the trees gave way to an open moor. Seus stopped to survey the area. Close by, a group of animals were quietly grazing, and beyond them, a collection of large stones glistened in the sunlight. Seus pointed to the stones. "Look, the Circle of the Keepers of Truth," he said excitedly. "We can stop there to rest."

As they approached the circle, Beldou became curious as to the purpose of the construction. “What is it for?” he asked.

“It is a vision of the future,” explained Sues. “Where a Keeper of the past awaits the Keepers yet to be.” He walked up to the largest stone. “This is the Northern Cardinal.” Seus touched the stone then suddenly laughed. “This is the stone of Pejhos!” he declared, turning to smile at his companions.

Beldou looked around. It clearly meant something to Seus, but to him it meant very little. The circle consisted of four tall white boulders, interspersed by four smaller stones, all set in a vague approximation of a circle. “I thought that there were just four Keepers,” he said.

“The third quest of Seus is to return once more to unite the Cardinals,” continued Seus. “The Cardinals will then invite other Keepers to join the circle, until eventually it is complete, like this one.”

“It is not a very round circle,” said Beldou, still somewhat mystified by the explanation.

“There is a reason,” replied Seus emphatically. “The stones are also sign posts.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the stones of Pejhos and Myar align with the island of Falona,” replied Seus, drawing an imaginary line between the north and south stones with his hands. “And that is where Pejhos will become the new Cardinal.” His attention was caught by something at the foot of one of the stones and he kneeled down to investigate.

By this time Sedine had unpacked their food and laid it out neatly in the centre of the circle. “What are you looking at?” she said, calling to Seus. “Food is ready.”

Seus joined the others to eat. “These are stones from Einim,” he said, opening his hand to reveal three small rocks. “They must have lain here since the circle was first built.” He handed Sedine and Beldou one each. “The people of old say that if you keep a stone of Einim, you will be able to visit your loved ones in their dreams.”

“That is a lovely idea,” said Sedine, rubbing the dust from her stone with some degree of affection.

Beldou was much less impressed with Seus’ story, but he thrust his stone into his pocket even so. “I am more interested in the Iddur’s notions of the principles than the tales of their old folk,” he said, keen to steer the conversation toward a less fanciful subject. “I have been talking to Darszil about your theories.”

“I see,” replied Seus. “And what does he have to say?”

“There is a postulator called Marifend who claims that the universe has ten measures, and that it is growing.”

“Marifend must be a wise and forward thinking man,” said Seus.

Beldou was encouraged by Seus’ response. “And Blubeh the stargazer has determined the rate of expansion of the universe,” he went on. “By observing light bending as it passes our globe.” Beldou’s expression suddenly changed to one of bewilderment. “But how can light bend?” he asked.

Seus thought for a moment and then picked up an apple. “Hold your hand up,” he said to Beldou. Seus took careful aim and threw his apple directly toward Beldou’s open hand.

“Well caught,” said Sedine, a little surprised by Beldou’s deftness.

“If I throw the apple in a perfect line it will strike your hand,” continued Seus. “But what would happen if you were slowly moving to your right?”

Beldou was hesitant, but Sedine knew the answer. “By the time the apple arrived, his hand would be gone,” she replied. “And the apple would strike his body.”

Seus nodded. “Imagine a beam of light leaving a distant star, destined to brush the surface of the globe as it passes.” Seus waited a moment for the two listeners to make the connection.

“Go on,” said Sedine.

“The beam of light sets out for the surface of our globe and travels in a straight line, but by the time it arrives, the globe has grown.”

“And the beam of light now strikes the globe instead of skimming its surface,” shouted Beldou, delighted to have grasped the concept.

“Precisely. To an observer such as Blubeh, the beam of light would appear to have bent in towards the centre of the globe.”

Now Beldou felt confident enough to reveal the next morsel of theoretical gossip from Darszil. “But the great theorist Teniesin disputes the concept of cosmic expansion. He claims that the light is bent by the effects of the draw as it passes our globe.”

“An interesting idea,” replied Seus. “And does he have any observations to substantiate his claim?”

“If Blubeh is right, we should be able to determine the age of the universe from the rate of expansion,” replied Beldou, pleased to appear so well informed.

“And can we?” asked Sedine expectantly.

“When Teniesin performed the calculation, he found a great discrepancy with accepted wisdom,” continued Beldou. “Thus disproving the theory of cosmic expansion.”

“Perhaps Teniesin has made a miscalculation,” concluded Seus

Beldou had never heard anyone suggest that the great Teniesin could be wrong before. “What do you mean?” he asked enthusiastically, excited by the prospect of being able to settle such a scholarly debate with his friend Darszil.

“When the arrow leaves the bow, does it always travel at the same rate?”

“No. At first it speeds up, and then it starts to slow down.”

“Then perhaps the rate of expansion is like the speed of the arrow.”

“I see,” exclaimed Sedine, always quicker off the mark than her brother.

“If it is different at different times, Teniesin’s calculation would be worthless, because he only used one measurement.”

Beldou was not far behind. “So Teniesin hasn’t disproved the notion of an expanding universe,” he said, and took a great bite from his apple. “I can’t wait to tell Darszil.”

“And will you have anything to discuss with Lemo?” asked Sedine with a touch of sarcasm, reminding Beldou of his broken promise of that morning.

“Ah,” said Beldou sheepishly. “There is something for us to discuss.” He turned to Seus with a grim face. “It seems that Surisa will soon have the Eshell.”

Seus was greatly disappointed by the news. “So we are facing the prospect of obliteration of the masses if a battle for supremacy ensues.”

“They are not foolish enough to use the Eshell against each other and will probably fight it out in the minor Realms,” replied Beldou in an effort to restore some hope. “But the word is, it will be a ‘Long Winter’.”

“And how will they set realm against realm?”

“With political ideals,” replied Beldou. “Autonomic versus Collective strategies.”

“Of course,” said Seus cynically. “The Collective East will pursue their evil plot to enslave the people of the Decadent Globe, while the Autonomic West will strive to engulf the East in their empire of corruption.”

Beldou nodded in agreement and looked to Seus with sadness in his eyes. “What does it matter who rules the globe, when those in power have corrupt motives? Collectives, Decadents. What is the difference?”

“I suppose it is a question of methods of control,” suggested Seus. “The Collective agenda creates the illusion of equality while the Autonomic agenda creates the illusion of freedom.”

“Well Cester intends to strike a deathblow to the concept of Autonomy,” said Beldou.

“What is he proposing?” asked Seus, concerned by Beldou’s statement.

“He wants to start an organisation called the Independent Closet Authority, to facilitate the secret ambitions of the hidden rulers.”

“Surely that is against the Charter of the Realm,” replied Seus. “And Council would have to agree.”

“Then we will just have to trust Council to uphold the principles of freedom and Autonomy,” replied Beldou. “Because if Cester gets his way, the Charter of the Realm will be nothing more than used parchment.”

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Beldou was not the only one awaiting news of Cester’s proposal. “Has Council approved my new facility yet?” asked Cester, breezing into Regenal’s office with the confidence of a man about to take charge of his own destiny.

Regenal was in a bad mood. “I’ve sent Lemo to get a progress report,” he replied curtly, and threw a pile of parchments onto his desk in apparent frustration. “What are we going to do with all these Izan theorists that we seem to have inherited?”

“Put them to work,” insisted Cester, surprised at Regenal’s failure to see the benefits of their wartime windfall. “They hold the keys to an incredible new arsenal in the making.”

“Such as?” enquired Regenal, seemingly uninspired by Cester’s forecast.

“Such as the fuelled projectiles that Barunnov has been working on.”

“What’s so marvellous about fuelled projectiles? Nachi have had them for years.”

“Yes, but Barunnov’s projectiles can be steered during flight,” explained Cester. “And he claims they can launch moonships, because they carry their own atmosphere.”

Regenal was beginning to see the potential of the idea, but wasn’t about

to change his stance. “Never mind moonships. Can they be used to launch Erculan shells?”

“Well the Izans used them to drop conventional shells on Old Non,” replied Cester. “I don’t see why not.”

Regenal had found the perfect use for Barunnov’s projectiles. “Put him to work,” he snapped. “We need to be ahead of the game when Surisa gets the Eshell.”

“And what of the other projects?” asked Cester, daring to try Regenal’s mood further.

“What other projects?”

“We have theorists who are developing poisons as weapons,” explained Cester.

“And don’t forget the Sugenece Program,” said Cofellreker, suddenly appearing in the doorway. “The theorists from the workhouses shouldn’t go to waste.”

“Put them all to work,” replied Regenal, greatly irritated by yet another unannounced arrival. “But treat them as captives of conflict.” He banged the bell on his desk. “Where is that oaf Lemo?”

Cofellreker ignored Regenal’s outburst. “They won’t like being treated as captives now that the war is over,” he said.

“Well if they don’t like the conditions we can always put them on trial for crimes against humanity,” retorted Regenal, clearly in no mood to compromise. “Go and tell that to your friend Muntar the miser.”

Since the war, the strings of the Weaponry purse had been tightly drawn, and although it was largely an inevitable situation, Regenal blamed Muntar. Unlike Regenal, Cofellreker had forged a convenient relationship with the fledgling Presidor. Regardless of how lean the calf might be, Cofellreker’s plate always seemed to be full of meat, and Regenal despised his success.

“It’s time to put the Secret into action,” said Cofellreker, tempering Regenal’s resentment with a glimpse of triumph. He turned to Cester.

“So if Muntar gets your ICA through Council, how do you propose to fund it?”

“Don’t expect any shekels from the Weaponry,” interrupted Regenal. “My purse is flapping in the wind.”

Cofellreker was more forthcoming. “Council might provide basic support,” he suggested. “But they won’t fund projects that are unaccountable.” He looked to Cester again for a reaction.

A cold smile spread across Cester’s face and he cast a sideward glance toward Cofellreker. “I’ve spoken to the Bostrems,” he said calmly. “And their Occrisan cousins are willing to take control of oherni production in Crafen. I propose we take over the stupe trade.”

Regenal was shocked. “Trading in stupes is counter law!” he exclaimed. “And the Bostrems are crooks. You can’t do that.”

Cester raised an eyebrow. “Everything we do will be counter law,” he argued.

“Very clever,” conceded Cofellreker. “Crafen and the Bostrems have been stuffing their purses with oherni shekels for far too long.” He looked to Regenal with an insistent face. “It is time for us to take over.”

“The Weaponry could never be associated with such practice,” responded Regenal, concerned by the nature of Cester’s proposal.

“Obviously,” scoffed Cofellreker. “Isn’t that the whole point of the ICA?” He looked back to Cester. “How do you propose to do it?”

Cester continued to outline his plan. “We get the necessary armaments into Crafen and the Occrisans will seize control of the processing plant in Port Mariesell.”

“And the profits from the entire output of the Garden of Fortune will soon be passing through our vaults,” declared Cofellreker excitedly.

Regenal still had reservations. “What about the Crafen authorities?”

“Crafen are beholden to us now,” replied Cester. “And oiling palms and bending arms is my speciality. Get the ICA passed and the globe will be

ours.”

All attention turned as Lemo arrived breathless at the door. “Sir,” he spluttered apologetically. “The Presidor is refusing to put the ICA to Council.”

Regenal’s face turned crimson. “Cester,” he fumed. “Have you unearthed Muntar’s dark side yet?”

“Yes,” replied Cester, rising from his chair like a cobra about to strike its victim.

“Then get over to the Palace of Propriety and explain the benefits of cooperation to Muntar.”

“At once,” replied Cester, then he turned around and calmly left the office.

The Palace of Propriety rested in its own grounds in Shanntigow, the Capital of Marecia. It was a magnificent white building, more like a castle than a state house. Upon arrival, Cester was received by a courtier, and two rather well built attendants. “The Head of the Closet Facility Sir?” enquired the courtier politely.

Cester was unimpressed by such pretentious ceremony. “Yes,” he replied brusquely. “I’m here to see the Presidor.”

The courtier bowed and signalled for his attendants to leave. “Please, follow me Sir.”

The journey took them deeper into the palace, where the sounds of their footsteps echoing along the winding corridors seemed to be the only evidence of the existence of life. Eventually they arrived at an entrance hall. The courtier turned to his right, opened a large double door and gestured for Cester to enter the room. “I will let the Presidor know that you are here Sir,” he said, and then bowed politely before stepping backwards to close the doors.

Cester surveyed the room. It was spacious and luxuriously appointed, with high ceilings and an immaculately polished floor. The seating was covered in a material with a sumptuous deep red pile and carefully arranged around an ornate convenience table in the centre of the room.

Muntar's hand began to quiver and he suddenly withdrew it. "All right," he conceded reluctantly. "But I can tell you now, if I put your proposal to the test, it won't get through."

"Why?"

Muntar was a little surprised by Cester's apparent naivety. "Because unaccountability is against the spirit of the Charter of the Realm," he explained. "It's anti-autonomic to give a facility powers that can't be challenged by Council."

"Don't give me that autonomy routine. It's because there's nothing in it for them," retorted Cester. "I know how you silver tongues work. You go back and tell them it's in the interests of the Realmic Traders. Never mind Marecian security. That will make them change their minds."

Now Muntar's innocence became apparent. "And how do you make that out?"

"Show me a Councillor who doesn't have his sticky little fingers in the pie of at least one Realmic Trader." Muntar could hardly deny Cester's insinuation and nodded reluctantly in agreement. "So you go and tell them. The Information Closet Authority will be devoted to the promotion of Marecian Traders in the new global marketplace." Cester leaned back in his seat as if he expected the discussion to be concluded by his next comment. "And if they vote for it, they'll all be very rich."

Muntar wasn't convinced. "You might be able to bend a few political arms here and there, but you can't force people in other realms to buy our products."

Cester was seething, but it barely showed. He gave Muntar a cold stare and stood up. "We tell them that our products are the best. Our people are the happiest, richest and most content in the globe." He threw his hands onto the table and looked Muntar straight in the eye. "They'll soon aspire to the Marecian ideal."

"Yes, you do have a rather persuasive way about you," said Muntar withdrawing into his seat. "You might be right."

Cester had heard all that he needed. "Of course I'm right," he said,

making for the door. “You let me do the thinking.”

Muntar called after him. “And what am I supposed to do?”

Cester turned in the doorway to answer. “You just make sure I get what I want.”

~

The Presidor faced a dilemma. Get the ICA approved by Council, or accept ruin, and Muntar had no intension of falling from grace. Beldou broke the news to Seus as their little party set out on the final trek across the moors. “Cester has his secret facility,” he said with dejection in his voice.

“How did he manage that?”

“Muntar persuaded Council to bolster Marecian defence measures,” came the facetious reply. “But his Realmic Security Decree quietly opened the doors to Cester’s dreams.”

“And they were duped?” asked Seus, astonished to learn that Council could be so naive.

“Apparently,” replied Beldou. “Fifty three to forty five votes. The Charter has failed the people.”

“It is a pity that such ingenuity cannot be put to a less sinister purpose,” noted Seus, concerned by Beldou’s rising disenchantment with developments in Marecia. “Did you manage to exchange words with Darszil?” he asked, attempting to lift his mood.

Beldou suddenly looking pleased with himself. “Oh yes. He was very impressed with your notion of measures. He asked if there might be another measure of time.”

Seus smiled. “Actually, the Iddurs once suggested that there might be innumerable measures of time. They considered it a question of correlation.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sedine, quickly gaining interest in the conversation.

“That there is a time for our universe, there is a time for the greater universe and there is a time for the lesser universe.”

Beldou was a little startled by the response to Darszil’s question. “The lesser universe,” he said. “What is the lesser universe?”

“Consider that our universe is an element of another greater universe.”

“Yes,” replied Beldou impetuously. “I understand that concept.”

Seus continued. “In this universe there are beings, not unlike us, and to them our globe is inconceivably small.”

“You mean giants,” said Sedine with a hint of cynicism, implying that Seus’ explanation might be a touch too simplistic for her understanding.

“Yes. Giants of unimaginable proportions,” continued Seus undaunted. “And were those giants to possess great glasses that could peer in to study our globe, they would still fail to see us.”

“Why?” asked Beldou, now completely captivated by the talk of giants.

“Because to them, our civilisations would come and go in the blinking of an eye.”

“I see,” said Sedine cautiously. “Their measure of time would be in correlation with their measures of space, and not with ours.”

Seus nodded in agreement, but Beldou was still a little confused. “I think I understand,” he said with a questioning voice. “But what is the lesser universe?”

“To those of the greater universe, we would reside in the lesser universe,” explained Seus.

“And are we the giants of some other lesser universe?” asked Beldou, finally embracing the symbolic tale.

“Perhaps we are,” replied Seus, quietly turning his attention to the landscape of the moors.

The three travellers had entered a great circle marked out with stones, but Sedine and Beldou had been too engrossed in conversation to notice. Beldou stopped in his tracks and continued to share his thoughts. “So when we place a log on the fire to keep ourselves warm at night, we might be initiating the destruction of an entire cosmos,” he said with a sudden sense of wonderment.

“Or generating the conditions for the creation of countless civilisations,” suggested Sedine.

“Absolutely,” replied Seus, acknowledging their postulations. He pointed toward the large stoneworks of a distant hill. “Look. We are crossing the Great North Axis.”

Sedine dropped her bag. “A perfect place to take our rest,” she said, and began to lay a cloth in preparation for their travelling fare.

Beldou was hungry and set about cutting some bread, but his thirst was for more conversation. “What is the Great North Axis?” he asked.

“A passage straight and true,” obliged Seus. “Connecting places that were of importance to the first generation of Iddurs.” He opened a flask of wine and started to unpack their cheese. “Were we able to follow the line, it would lead to Falona, and on to Einim, the Mount of Cosmic Consciousness. The place where I am going.”

“And can such a line actually be followed?” asked Sedine.

“Oh yes. The nearest high point in the distance will be marked, even on islands when the Axis crosses the sea,” replied Seus. “Remember the stone you have come from, and you will know which is the next.”

“How did the Iddurs know where to put the markers?” asked Beldou.

“By studying the sky from the ground, they learned to see the ground from the sky.”

“And what happens when the mist descends?” asked Beldou with a mischievous smirk.

Seus was plainly amused by Beldou’s comment, and quietly relieved to lighten the conversation. “Some say that they can feel the earth passages

ringing in their bones,” he replied with a smile. “But the rest of us must wait until the mist has cleared.”

It was a glorious day, typical of the best that the moors had to offer. The three friends were soon rested, packed and ready to return to the path. “Do we follow the Great North Axis from here?” asked Sedine, looking reluctantly towards the uphill trek to the north.

“My father’s house is in a more westerly direction,” replied Sues reassuringly. He gestured to a less daunting trail. “We should arrive in time to see the sun set.”

As they continued across the moors, Sedine wondered why so many cottages seemed to have been abandoned and so few animals could be seen grazing. “Where have all the people gone?” she asked Seus.

“To work in the mines,” he replied with sadness in his voice. “Now the trade ships bring mutton from Lewas in the north, and wine from Crafen in the south, but I don’t think the people are any happier.”

“Well at least there is no conflict here,” commented Beldou. “Or is there?” he asked, stopping to study the ghostly vision of a settlement that was gradually emerging from the milky distance. “Tell me that is not where we are going?”

It was indeed where they were going. The village was built like a fortress, with a host of wooden buildings scattered within the confines of a sturdy outer wall. As they made their approach, Beldou became unnerved by the babble of raised voices emanating from within, but Seus was full of confidence. He marched boldly through the gateway and led his party towards a great stone citadel at the summit.

A guard stood before the oaken doors of the main building. Thick set, bearded and muscular, he was a fearsome looking fellow and quite untroubled by the approach of strangers. “Who are you?” he asked with barely a glance.

“I am Joshepus, son of Aurgravis,” replied Seus, and he humbly bowed his head.

The guard’s demeanour changed immediately. “Follow me your Lord,” he said, and banged the timbers of the doors until they began to creak

apart. Inside the entrance chamber, a frail old courtier struggled to his feet. "The son of the Sovereign is here," announced the guard. The courtier bowed politely and shuffled off through an archway into the darkness beyond.

The sound of the heavy doors closing behind them echoed through the gloom of the chamber and Beldou began to feel quite uncomfortable. Sedine calmed him by making light of the situation. "Lord!" she said, playfully curtsying to Seus. "So you are the Prince of Crowllan."

Within moments the courtier had returned. "The Sovereign will see you now," he said in a frail voice and led them through the archway and on into the great hall.

Aurgravis was an imposing figure. He sat bare chested at the head of the hall, dressed in dark fur that was laced with leather. His once yellow hair had been swept back to reveal a noble face, but a face that struggled to contain the delight of a father reunited with a long lost son. "Have you completed your task?" he asked Seus, shattering the ambience of the room with his compelling voice.

"Yes. I have found my Cardinals," replied Seus. "Two in Diani, and another remains in Eastpinel." Seus bowed his head. "And with your permission, Pejhos will return to spread the wisdom from Falona."

Aurgravis leaned forward and his body stiffened for fear that he might be about to lose his son again. "Then what are you to do?" he asked.

"I must go to Einim, and there I will contemplate the final task of Seus."

Einim was little more than a few days travel and the Sovereign looked relieved. "Perhaps I have the answer then," he said, presenting an earnest face. "As my eldest son, the Realm of Crowllan will soon be yours."

Seus stepped back and raised his head. "The realm of an Iddur is his soul," he insisted.

Aurgravis was clearly disappointed, but he had great respect for his son. "And you are the oldest soul that I have met," he replied, accepting Seus' decision without question. "And what of your companions?"

Seus stepped to one side. "These are my trusted friends, Beldou and

Sedine. From here they must find their way to Old Non.”

“Do you know your way?” asked the Sovereign.

“No Sir,” replied Beldou.

“Then you would be wise to travel to Talderhan and cross the tidal river with Seus. The road of the Northern bank is better laid.” Aurgravis clapped his hands to attract the attention of the courtier. “Make sure our guests are comfortable,” he said, and looked to his visitors with a spark of fire. “Tonight we will feast.”

~

When Seus and his fellow travellers set sail from Talderhan, Beldou had wondered if he and Sedine might have been wiser to chance the rocky road of the southern bank. The tidal river was more like a sea, so wide that they had to change ships on the windswept island of Dylun. The island served as a trading post and offered sailors little in the way of comfort, but as the intrepid companions finally entered the tiny wooded cove of Port Falona, Beldou felt a sense of peace that made the entire journey seem worthwhile.

The ferrymen headed for a mooring where a small boat was already waiting to take the passengers ashore, and on the beach, two men in fawn robes patiently watched their approach. “Is the reception for us?” asked Sedine as they drew alongside the skiff.

“Word travels quickly in these parts,” replied the oarsman, politely helping Sedine into his boat. “And you mustn’t worry about your baggage. We will see to that.” He passed Seus and Beldou some salt encrusted sandals. “You will be best to take off your boots and roll up your tunics before we land.”

As soon as the bows struck the silver beach below, Beldou was over the side, quickly followed by Seus who held out his arms to Sedine. “These men are Iddurs,” he whispered, and carried her past the water’s edge to meet the waiting dignitaries.

“Thank you Seus,” she said gratefully as he set her down.

Beldou watched as the two Iddurs turned to Seus with expressions of

shock. "His name is Joshepus, Prince of Crowllan," he said, remembering Seus' warning that his name would cause offence. "She means no harm."

Neither of the Iddurs acknowledged Beldou's plea. "Follow us," instructed the elder man in a somewhat abrupt tone, and he and his partner made off across the beach.

The two men proceeded along a wooded path, which eventually opened into a quaint village clearing. Beldou noticed a man fetching water from the pool of a hillside stream. He dropped his bucket and gazed in curiosity at the new arrivals, but the Iddurs did not stop. They marched on, out of the woods and up to a solitary building that stood imposingly at the crown of a nearby hill.

The house was surrounded by stones and seemed isolated by comparison to the cosy village below. As the younger Iddur opened the doors, Beldou wondered if their punishment for causing offence might be imprisonment in this cold and lonely place.

The doors swung open to reveal an obelisk in the centre of the room, illuminated by a shaft of light from the tallest window of the southern wall. "This is Seus, the Father Spirit," said the elder man, stepping into the building to draw attention to the image of a man, carved into the face of the great stone block. "It is said that the likeness is true in every respect."

"You are the Son Spirit. You have returned," said the second man, and bowed his head to Seus.

Seus walked up to the stone. The hair was unfamiliar, and so were the clothes, but there was no mistaking it, the face was that of his own.

"And this is your Minster," continued the elder. "The House of Seus, Cardinal of the Iddurs. We have tended this secret place for one hundred generations."

Beldou and Sedine were quite stunned by all that they had seen and heard, but Seus was perfectly calm. "My name is Seus, but my Minster is not constructed of stone," he replied quietly.

The elder seemed utterly disenchanted with the reply, and offered a

protest. “Outside lie the bones of the Cardinals who have patiently awaited your return. If you live, surely this must be your house.”

Seus said nothing, but gestured for the others to follow him out onto the hill. As the little group gathered before him, Seus waved his hand, across the hill, above the trees and toward the horizon all around. “This is my Minster,” he continued. “Created by the almighty, invisible hand of the heavens.”

~

While Seus was preparing the Iddurs to receive Pejhos as their Cardinal, Regenal was contemplating ways to remove Muntar from the Presidor’s chair. He had called a meeting of the Secret to discuss the matter. “The polls are due, and we should take this opportunity to choose a candidate,” he said, opening the meeting with a forceful statement. “But whatever happens, we must get a Realmist into the saddle.”

Cofellreker invariably found the domestic policies of the Autonomists to be more beneficial to his shekel making schemes. “It makes little difference whether we have an Autonomist or a Realmist in the saddle,” he declared. “As long as we are in control.”

Regenal disagreed. “We need another war or the Armaments Traders will be shutting down,” he retorted, banging his hand on the table as though he could intimidate Cofellreker with a display of ill temper. “And if that happens, you and the Federation will feel the squeeze as much as anyone.”

“An Autonomist Council would never agree to another war,” said Cester in support of Regenal’s argument.

Cofellreker was not easily intimidated, but neither was he one to put principles before shekels. “Having the people behind a Realmist Presidor would certainly make things easier for the Secret,” he conceded. “Who did you have in mind?”

“Weinshore,” replied Regenal decisively. “He distinguished himself as Commander of the United Forces during the war. He would make an ideal Presidor.”

“Even if the people did vote him in, who would we fight?” asked

Cofellreker, struggling to see the practicality of Regenal's strategy. "We have no enemies."

"Oh yes we do," contested Regenal. He stood up to cast his hand over the vast territories of the North East. "The Collective Globe is our enemy, and Nachi already has an eye on Areko."

"Areko is nothing to us," said Cofellreker in surprise.

"Close your eyes on Areko, and next time you wake up, Nachi will be marching into the Garden of Fortune," warned Regenal.

Now Cofellreker understood the plot. Control of the Garden of Fortune was vital to the Secret, but he still considered Regenal's proposal to be impractical. "The people are tired of war," he said. "Even a Realist Presidor would have difficulty raising support for another conflict. What possible excuse could you find?"

"The Collies are a threat to the freedom and Autocracy that we have just fought so hard to protect," asserted Regenal. "And Weineshore has the authority to get that message across."

"Let the Collies take one little place like Areko, and the rest of the decadent Globe will tumble like a house of cards," added Cester, strengthening Regenal's case for conflict.

Cofellreker was impressed. He hadn't realised that Regenal was such a forward thinker. "Yes they might swallow it," he said thoughtfully. "But can we get a man like Weineshore into the saddle right now?"

"We can if you raise his profile before the people," insisted Regenal, now confident of receiving Cofellreker's support.

"I could ask young Hubs to promote him," responded Cofellreker.

"Who is this Hubs?" asked Regenal, always suspicious of new people.

"Septrot's son Gregeo," replied Cofellreker reassuringly. "He's a sap man. Ruthless, tenacious and full of charm. If anyone can get Weineshore elected, Hubs can."

~

The prospect of another conflict made Lemo extremely nervous and he was quick to despatch word to his brother. Beldou received the message shortly after arriving on the mainland of Lewas, and hurried off to break the news. As he turned into the harbour, he saw Seus and Sedine waiting by the quayside. “Weinshore is fronting the polls,” he panted. “And Marecia will be starting another conflict if he gets in.”

“All the more reason to continue with the toil,” responded Seus expectantly. “Will you and Lemo maintain the struggle?”

“Lemo might look timid, but in truth, he is the brave one,” confessed Beldou. “I am not sure that I can stomach such work without your support,” he continued, reminding them all that their time together was coming to a close.

“We could write to each other,” suggested Sedine optimistically. “And meet as often as we can.”

Beldou looked to Seus with sadness in his eyes. “I will miss you,” he said.

Seus was touched by the sincerity of Beldou’s admission. “Old Non would be a good place to begin the move to shelve the shell,” he replied encouragingly, and picked up his bag. “I am sure you will find considerable support there.” He smiled a kindly smile and pulled the stone of Einim from his pocket. “And I will never be far from you.”

The three set off amid a gloomy silence, up the winding trail to Pencroes, the place where they would finally go their separate ways. Sedine was the first to speak. “What did you think when you saw the ancient carving of Seus?” she asked. “Have you seen it before?”

“I have seen other less familiar carvings, but never noticed the likeness,” explained Seus. “But seeing the carving at Falona has confirmed a personal truth.”

“What is that?” asked Beldou, his curiosity rising.

“That the process of life may be governed by chance, but that destiny also plays a hand.”

“Now I understand how the truth of the Iddurs functions,” said Beldou, dropping his bag as they reached the crossroads of the summit. “And it seems that we are destined to part at this place.”

Seus looked around to get his bearings. “I will continue along the Great North Axis,” he said, and then pointed to the east. “And you must take the long road to Old Non.” He turned to Beldou. “But the struggle against evil is an even longer path. Let us walk it together.”

“Together,” replied Beldou, clasping Seus in an emotional embrace. “Wherever we might be.”

“Can we meet again in Falona?” asked Sedine, tears welling in her eyes.

Seus held out his arms to comfort her for the last time. “I will return to Falona when I am done,” he said, and kissed her gently on the forehead. “Take great care.” With that he picked up his bag and made for the marker stone of a distant hill.

The path to Einim was narrow but well trodden. As Seus moved northwards, the skies began to darken and rain soon followed, softening the earth underfoot. Before long he was struggling to make ground, and decided that he should seek refuge in the first village that he encountered. As he reached the stone of the next summit, Seus looked across the valley below, and there in the blue beyond, bathed in a glorious swathe of shimmering light, he saw Einim for the first time.

Heartened by the extraordinary vision before him, Seus continued down the muddied path towards a shallow ridge. As he neared the edge, his feet slipped, and with no chance to break his fall, his head crashed down hard against the rock below.

“Hello Seus,” said the Old Man. “You have come to consider the Third Quest.”

Seus was a little dazed. “Yes. To unite the Keepers,” he replied, quickly coming to his senses. “When the circle is complete, the Day of Deliverance will have dawned, and all will be able to see that the road to truth is the way to salvation.”

“Then you must realise, you will have no memory of the teaching of the Iddurs when you return.”

Seus' face turned ashen. The realisation that he would have no memory of the past sent a shiver through his spine. "How am I to complete the quest if I know nothing of it?"

"Rediscover the truth, and you will rediscover the quest."

"Where do I start to look?" asked Seus in desperation, quite unable to envisage a solution to his dilemma.

The Old Man's reply echoed into the darkness. "This much you will remember." Seus waited for the Old Man to speak again, but instead he heard another voice calling. It was a sweet voice, but anxious and insistent. "Open your eyes. Open your eyes."

Seus peered out from the darkness to see a woman with long, golden hair leaning over him. Her skin was smooth and pale, and her generous lips bore a show of concern that only enhanced her beauty. She called to a young man standing nearby. "Tarun. He is alive."

"I will cut a stretcher," came the reply.

As her deep, alluring eyes returned to meet his gaze, Seus felt their two souls touch. "My name is Amme," she said, and cradled his head tenderly in her arms. "What is your name?"

"Seus," he replied softly, and closed his eyes once more.

The Takeover of Nari

The Counter Plan

The Hands of the Universe

The Dawn of the Aucer

The Moran Offensive

The Fertile Age

The Lament

The Judgement

As Cester and Cofellreker stepped into Regenal's office, he lifted his feet onto his desk and cast them a look of self-satisfaction. "Weineshore is in the saddle and war in Areko is raging," he boasted. "Time to take over Maviten and the Garden of Fortune."

"I think it's a little too soon for that," said Cofellreker, testing the hollow of his favourite chair. "I am as keen as anyone to get my hands on the spoils, but Marecia has already lost a hundred Legions keeping Nachi out of Areko. Even Weineshore would have trouble making a case for going into Maviten now."

Regenal looked to Cester for an opinion. "We have agreed to let Crafen maintain control of the Garden," he said in support of Cofellreker's reluctant stance. "In exchange for them turning their glass eye to our oherni operations in Port Mariesell."

"Crafen are struggling against the dreadist forces in Maviten," said Cofellreker, expanding on Cester's point before Regenal could make an objection. "I suggest that we leave them to cook and move in on the sap wells of the Baiaran Globe instead."

"You and your sap," sneered Regenal, annoyed by the objections to his plans.

"Sap is not just about shekels," countered Cofellreker defensively. "It is about control."

"We need to extend our influence in the Baiaran Realms," added Cester. "And Nari is in turmoil. We should start our exploits there."

"Why would Nari be in turmoil?" asked Regenal in surprise. "We supported the Sovereign during the war and he made plenty of shekels out of it. It's time Alphaivia threw Tribian out and paid us back."

"The people have tired of watching their Sovereign grow fat from the sap while they starve," explained Cester in mock pity. "They are backing Qesdamos, the new Presidor and his call for the realmification of the Nariian wells." He leaned forward to emphasise a point that he knew would strike a chord with Regenal. "And Surisa is backing him."

"I see," said Regenal, stroking his chin in thought. "If the Surisans want to support Qesdamos, then perhaps we should back Alphaivia."

“And get the do-good silver tongue Presidor out before he causes any more trouble,” added Cester with a snarl.”

“All right,” conceded Regenal, now determined to beat Surisa in the race to exploit Nariian sap. He dropped his feet and sat forward. “How will we do it?”

“Tell Alphvia that Surisa is determined to get his sap wells,” suggested Cofellreker. “And even if he triumphs over Qesdamos, they will take his wells by force.”

“Our barter blocks have put Surisa in a desperate position,” said Cester, seeing the potential of Cofellreker’s ploy. “Alphvia would swallow the story whole.”

“But how will that help?” asked Regenal, unable to see any advantage in the deception.

“We could supply Alphvia with enough artillery to deter a Surisan offensive, if he agrees to let the Marecian sap traders into Nari,” chortled Cofellreker. “He loves his artillery.”

“How do you intend to justify the costs of this fairy tale to Council?” enquired Regenal with more than a hint of scepticism.

Cofellreker’s imagination needed little encouragement where shekels were involved. “Tell them it’s necessary to ensure the safety of Marecian subjects trading in Nari,” he replied with a look of triumph.

“Use Levy Giver’s shekels to protect your sap traders you mean,” replied Regenal, casting Cofellreker a look of disdain. “And what about Qesdamos? How can we be sure that the people won’t choose him over the Sovereign?”

“Alphvia can have Qesdamos arrested for colluding with the Collectives,” said Cester, putting the final piece of the plan into place.

Regenal needed no more persuasion and summoned Lemo with a rap of his bell. “Get a message to Alphvia,” he said as Lemo appeared at the door. “Qesdamos is finished.”

Lemo duly attended to the request, but the Sovereign of Nari wasn't the only person that he informed. Beldou had just settled into the position of underling to the Chief Marecian operative in Old Non. His duties were primarily confined to passing coded information to and fro, and that suited him perfectly. He singled out Lemo's message without raising the slightest attention, and took it home to transcribe.

He and Sedine had moved into the west wing of a large house, near to the centre of Old Non. The accommodation was comfortable enough, with half panelled walls, heavy white doors and a fireplace in every room, but Sedine found Old Non gloomy and uninviting.

Her day began at market, then back home to chop wood. The afternoon was spent tending the fire and preparing a hearty soup for Beldou's return. By the time he stepped through the door, Sedine was more than pleased to share his company. "Hello Beldou."

Beldou smiled, but dispensed with the formalities. "I have a message from Lemo," he said waving a parchment excitedly.

"Well what does it say then?" asked Sedine with an unusual measure of enthusiasm.

Beldou sat down in a large old chair next to the crackling fire, and began to study his message. "Nari are taking control of their sap wells," he began slowly. "The Presidor wants to bring the people out of poverty."

"Good news for a change," replied Sedine.

"Yes, but Cester and his cronies are going to have him arrested," continued Beldou. "So they can take the spoils for themselves."

"Perhaps you should warn him," suggested Sedine.

"That would be dangerous."

"No more dangerous than passing messages between yourselves," argued Sedine. "If you are going to take risks, it may as well be for some good purpose."

"A counter plan," said Beldou thoughtfully. "I wonder what Seus would say."

“I think Seus would be proud of you,” she said, sitting herself down on the opposite chair. “Talking of Seus, I have some news.”

Beldou was intrigued. “What have you heard?” he asked eagerly.

Sedine leaned forward to warm her hands before starting in a tone of intrigue. “I met a woman at market, and she says that the Iddurs are now calling themselves Seusians. Followers of the Serenity of Seus.”

“Really,” exclaimed Beldou. “Pejhos must have arrived on Falona and begun to spread the word. Perhaps we will soon be saved,” he said optimistically. “Did you tell her that you know Seus?”

“No. I only met her today,” replied Sedine, and she leaned back in her chair. “I wonder if Seus knows that his word is spreading?”

~

Amme and her son Tarun had taken Seus to their little cottage in the village of Felinawe, but despite making a good recovery, he still had little recollection of his previous life. As the weeks went by, Amme had shown him that a future was possible, even when the past had been lost, and caring for someone with a similarly thoughtful nature had brought joy to her heart.

Once Seus was back on his feet, Tarun made himself scarce. He had fallen for a girl called Nisa who lived on the farm where he worked, and they had become inseparable.

Seus made himself useful by carrying out repairs to the cottage, and word of his talents soon reached the villagers. They began to arrive with all sorts of items, from chairs to barrows, and boats to lutes. If it was made from wood, it seemed Seus could repair it.

Their days were busy and long, but in the evenings, Seus and Amme would sit by a cheering fire, content with their own company and happy to have found each other. Sometimes Amme would knit, more by feel than by sense of sight, and he would watch her as she worked. With a simple white tunic, and golden hair glowing in the light of the lamp, he often considered that she had the appearance of an angel. On other occasions, Seus would turn his mind to reconstructing the fragmented

image of his past.

“You know Seus is the name of a sage,” said Amme one evening, breaking the comfortable silence. “A sage who will somehow return to save his people.”

Seus was amused by Amme’s vision. “I think a sage without a memory would be little help to anyone,” he replied, making light of the obvious analogy to his own mysterious arrival.

Amme was undeterred by the remark and continued with her tale. “They say that each time the soul of Seus dusts this lonely globe, a comet will make its approach.” She gave Seus a curious look. “Was there a comet in the sky when you were born?”

“I have no idea about that,” he laughed. “Sometimes I get the feeling that I was drawn to this place though.” He cast her an affectionate smile. “But I think it must have been to meet you.”

“Enough of your nonsense,” replied Amme with a grin and downed her needles. “Look,” she said, clearing a circle from the misted glass of the window behind her chair. “That crag is called Einim. The place where Seus received his wisdom.”

Seus went over to the window and peered out towards the distant hill. The sight of Einim silhouetted against the moonlit sky seemed strangely familiar to him. “Tell me more,” he said.

Amme returned to her chair and took up her needles. “Well, legend has it that Seus was born in a nearby village, about ten measures south west of here. As a boy he would climb the hill behind his cottage and sit for hours, looking towards Einim where the Axemen worked.”

“Why would he do that?” asked Seus, now fully engrossed in the story.

“The stone of Einim rings like a bell when it is cut,” explained Amme. “As the Axemen worked, they made strange, enchanting rhythms that would drift out across the valleys below.”

“And how did he discover the wisdom?” asked Seus.

“When the boy grew up he went to Einim in search of work, and on his

very first day, he broke open a stone and discovered the seeds of Serenity within.”

Seus sat back in his seat. Something in Amme’s story had stirred a distant memory in his mind. “I must go to Einim myself,” he said wistfully.

“You see,” replied Amme with a smile. “I knew you were here for a reason.”

The following morning Seus set off for Einim Crag. The journey was not too long, but after a brisk morning walk, Seus found the climb to the summit quite tiring. He lay on a great stone to take his rest and, as he watched the clouds moving slowly across the sky, he determined to break a stone in order to find the seeds of Serenity once more.

The mount was littered with stones. Seus quickly chose three and set them in a table like arrangement. Then he took another, as large as he could manage to raise above his head, and brought it down on the pile below. A great bell like sound reverberated across the moor, but alas no stone was broken. He tried again and the same thing happened. After three attempts Seus sat back down feeling somewhat dejected. Suddenly he heard a voice behind him. “In the time of Seus, men were acquainted with methods of breaking stone.”

Seus was a little startled and turned to see a man with long white hair standing close by. “I remember you,” he said. “You are the Old Man that I see in my dreams.”

“You may possess the soul of the Father Spirit, but that does not mean that you will recall his experiences,” continued the Old Man in a calm and knowing voice. “Why do you wish to break the stone of Einim?”

“It is said to contain a vision of the seeds of Serenity, and I have come to find that truth again.”

The Old Man nodded sympathetically. “Experience and truth are found in different places,” he said. “You should seek the truth within yourself, not within the stone.”

“And what if I find a different truth?” asked Seus.

The Old Man smiled. “There is only one truth,” he replied, and then he was gone.

~

‘Lips can lie, but eyes only speak the truth’ muttered Lemo to himself as he stood outside Regenal’s office. It was his responsibility to deliver a briefing before Cester arrived, and news that the arrest of Qesdamos had failed was top of the agenda.

“Come,” shouted Regenal in his usual brusque manner.

Lemo entered the room, clutching a sheaf of parchments and fearful that Regenal would somehow know that Qesdamos had been warned. He bowed his head to speak. “Cofellreker’s Information Management Bank are developing a machine to replace their meccer,” he said, opening the briefing with a less consequential piece of news.

“What machine?” asked Regenal, surprised to hear mention of Cofellreker before a meeting with Cester.

“An automatic counter they call the aucer Sir,” replied Lemo, struggling to control his shaking hands. “He wants you to support the development program.”

“What’s so special about this aucer?”

“It has a core that performs calculations with no moving parts,” replied Lemo, and lifted the documents closer to his eyes. “They say it may one day out manoeuvre the brain.”

“And what possible use can it have?” scoffed Regenal. “Is he going to get it to enjoy his meals for him?”

“He is going to use it to keep records of every person who has shekels in his vaults,” replied Lemo.

“So why do we need to pay for his machine?”

“If he is successful, the Weaponry can use the aucer to spy on the people.”

Regenal was not convinced. “Bah,” he shouted dismissively. “He’ll have to do better than that.”

“And they say it is capable of steering Barunnov’s erculan projectiles,” continued Lemo, finally looking up from the quivering parchments.

“All right. Give him the support,” replied Regenal with a sudden change of heart. “Now send in Cester.”

“There is something else Sir,” spluttered Lemo, still fearful that Regenal would detect the treachery in his eyes.

“Well go on man. Get it out.”

As Lemo fumbled through the parchments, Cester appeared at the door and spared him the ordeal of breaking the news. “Alphvia has bungled the arrest of the Presidor,” he declared with a bitter voice, and cast Lemo a sideways glance. “Qesdamos must have known they were coming for him.”

Lemo felt his legs go weak. “Shall I go now Sir?” he pleaded.

Regenal was accustomed to Lemo’s nervous disposition and dismissed him with a wave. “That fool of a Sovereign knows nothing of security,” he said, looking back to Cester. “What’s happened?”

“Qesdamos has turned the board. The Sovereign’s Guard were overpowered by Nariian troopers when they tried to make the arrest.” Cester threw his eyes upwards in disgust. “Now Alphvia has fled Nari fearing that the Presidor will arrest him.”

Regenal was not a happy loser. “Qesdamos must pay for this,” he raged and slammed the table with his hand. “What’s the plan?”

Cester’s icy face thawed with a menacing grin. Plotting was his forte. “We discredit the Presidor and replace him with a puppet leader,” he replied, revelling in the opportunity to exercise his talents.

“How can we discredit Qesdamos?” asked Regenal. “He’s the people’s hero.”

“We could assemble a group of mercenaries,” suggested Cester. “And get

them to attack symbols of Realmic Pride.”

“That isn’t going to work,” balked Regenal.

“It will if they shout ‘Rule Qesdamos the Collective’ while they wreak their havoc,” pronounced Cester with a look of evil anticipation. “We stop at nothing. Kidnap, blackmail, slander. Whatever it takes.”

“And how do you intend to reinstate Alphvia?” asked Regenal, beginning to see the potential in Cester’s plot.

“We organise a demonstration, demanding the removal of the turncoat Presidor. Then we arrest Qesdamos, bring back the Sovereign and let him take the credit for restoring the honour of Nari.”

“Who will we get to make the protest?” asked Regenal.

Cester’s eyes flashed a look of steely brilliance. “We use the same people that we used for the riots, and get them to protest against their own atrocities.”

Regenal was impressed with Cester’s audacity. “That is a very clever plot,” he said, wiping his brow excitedly. “But you’d better round up the meanest black hearted sons of devils to bolster that Sovereign Guard. We can’t have them bungling another arrest.”

Lemo sat in silence, listening intently from the other side of the office glass as Cester and Regenal finalised the details of their plot. Despite his constant fear of discovery, Lemo’s resolve to frustrate the tyrannical designs of the Secret was as strong as ever, and by that evening, word of the new developments had reached Old Non.

“I have bad news,” announced Beldou as he returned home from work. “The ICA are going to discredit the Nariian Presidor and reinstate the Sovereign.”

Sedine seemed undisturbed. “The people of Nari are no fools. They will see straight through the plot.” She gave Beldou a look of reassurance. “The Sovereign is despised. It will never work.”

“I am not so sure,” responded Beldou. “Cester will bribe the parchments and Nariian officials to spread lies about the Presidor, and probably

much worse. Trust me, Qesdamos is in trouble.”

“Then you should send the Presidor another warning. Let his contacts know of the plot so that he can prepare himself.”

Beldou sat in his chair and stared into the fire before him. “Yes. You are right. We should finish what we have started.”

“Are you hungry?” asked Sedine, making for the door.

Beldou ignored her question. “I have more bad news,” he continued, raising his voice in order to maintain the conversation. “The word of Myar has been lost forever. Wiped out in the World below by the new Minster of Moran.” He hung his head in deep sorrow. “Myar is dead.”

Sedine dropped her cloth and returned to the sitting room. “And now they are here,” she declared in a solemn voice, realising the implications of her own news.

“Who is here?” asked Beldou with a startled look.

“The Moran Minster,” she explained. “Ashra, the girl from the market tells me that a man called Gauteinus has been sent to convert Tribian.” Sedine sat down opposite Beldou and put her hand on his. “Gauteinus says that the Moran Sacred beliefs are the true word of Seus, and the people are listening to him.”

“So the foundations of the Serene are to be replaced by the dogma of the Sacred,” said Beldou with sadness in his eyes. “We must talk with Seus.”

~

Seus was enjoying his new life to the full, blissfully unaware of the problems of the greater globe. He awoke to find Amme looking a little pale, but she assured him that it was nothing unusual and sent him off to get provisions. The sun was shining and the people of the village all seemed pleased to see him, but Seus was keen to get home. As soon as his basket was full, he bade farewell to the store man and started back towards the cottage.

Just before he reached the final bend of his journey, Seus saw a group of chickens foraging in the hedgerow. As he drew nearer to the cackling

brood, he realised that they were from Amme's cottage. It was not unusual for the chickens to escape and they rarely wandered very far from home, but as he drove them around the corner, he noticed that the cottage gate had been left open.

Seus stopped for a moment to study the garden, casting his eyes along the path and up to the cottage door. Amme would never leave the door off its latch, but today it was ajar, and Seus knew immediately that something was wrong. He dropped his basket and ran along the lane as fast as he could manage.

Inside the cottage, Amme was lying on the bed, with Tarun and her physician in waiting. Her eyes were closed and Tarun was dutifully mopping her brow. "It is butterflies heart," he said with a look of desperate anxiety on his face. "She has had it for years."

Amme stirred. "Is that you Seus?" she whispered in the weakest of voices.

Tarun stepped back to let Seus go to her side. "Yes my love," he said, taking her hand in his. "I am here."

Seus cast a questioning glance toward the physician, but the physician shook his head. He looked back to Amme. Her complexion was always fair, but now her face was whiter than the purest snow. He thought how beautiful she looked and kissed her delicately on the cheek.

She managed a faint smile. "I am so glad that we found each other," she said softly.

"And I am glad too," replied Seus, struggling to find a calm enough voice. He squeezed her hand gently and kissed her again.

Amme's eyes began to open. She looked up and studied his face for a few moments, before looking deep into his eyes. "I love you," she whispered, and then slowly, reluctantly, she closed her eyes for the final time.

In the days that followed, Tarun and Seus struggled to come to terms with their loss. Tarun had taken responsibility for organising the funeral and Seus felt that it was for the best. Eventually, unable to find any kind of solace in his world, Seus set off along the road to Einim.

The sky was moody, dark and overcast, but Seus did not notice. He took his rest on a great stone beneath the summit, looked across the moors below and felt the tear streams of his deepest sorrow start to tumble down his face.

Suddenly, a voice split the air of solitude that surrounded him, like a crack of thunder in the still of night. “What is the reason for your lament?”

It was the Old Man, but Seus could not see him through his sodden eyes. “I sit in judgement of myself,” he replied. “I should have noticed.”

“What should you have noticed?” asked the Old Man.

“I could have saved Amme,” replied Seus, peering out through a watery haze. “The berries of the thornbush will cure the problems of a butterfly’s heart. If only my memory had been quicker. If only I had paid more attention.”

“Judge yourself too harshly, and the punishment of regret will obscure the prospects of hope,” said the Old Man.

“What else can I do?” asked Seus, somewhat bewildered by the reply.

The Old Man put his hand on Seus’ shoulder. “What would Amme ask of you?”

That evening, Seus sat by the fireside pondering the words of the Old Man. When Tarun arrived and settled himself down in his mother’s chair, Seus felt a great sense of relief, but he did not speak. “If there are stars in the sky, the funeral will be tomorrow evening,” announced Tarun quietly. “Just as she wanted.” He stared into the flames of the fire and felt the tears begin to well. “What am I to do without her?”

Seus took the stone of Einim from his pocket and held it in his hands, until it was quite warm. “Many years ago in a valley called the ‘Gardd O Efenen’, when the first tribe walked this earth, a dying woman appointed her son ‘Keeper of the Fire’.”

The story of the fire caught Tarun’s attention, but his eyes remained fixed on the flames that danced before him. Seus continued. “It was a

very important job, as the survival of the tribe depended on it. As far back as anyone could remember, the fire of the Gardd O Efenen had never been allowed to go out.”

Tarun leaned forward and placed a log onto the burning embers. “And does the fire still burn today?” he asked.

Seus nodded. “Life is like the fire. It can be divided, it can multiply, but once it goes out it can never come back.”

“Does that mean that I will never see my Mother again?” asked Tarun.

“The fire that was in your mother has been burning since the beginning of time, and that same fire burns within you now,” explained Seus. “Your mother has taught you well. Look after the fire. Teach your children love and respect and the fire of the Gardd O Efenen will continue to burn.”

Tarun looked up from the flames and nodded gratefully towards Seus. “I will see you tomorrow evening then,” he said in a solemn tone, and made for the door.

Seus was the last to arrive at the funeral. He felt that Tarun and the people of the village would prefer some time together to say their goodbyes to Amme. He waited at the foot of the hill until he saw the villagers begin to assemble on the windward side of the funeral pyre, and then began to make his way up the hill to join them.

Tarun stood with his arm around Nisa, his tear-stained cheeks glistening in the flickering light of a burning torch. As Seus reached the summit, he looked to Tarun, but neither could find words to speak. Instead they shared a few moments to contemplate the sorrow reflected in each other’s eyes. Tarun turned his back to the gathering, walked slowly forward and thrust the torch deep within the pyre.

The branches of the pyre began to squeak and groan, then the flames spread, slowly at first, but then faster, until the cloth wrapped body of Amme was finally engulfed in a blazing wall of light. Driven backwards by the heat, the congregation stood in silence, shielding their eyes from the intense glare, yet captivated by the dazzling spectacle before them.

Seus quietly withdrew from the throng and made for the path to the valley below. As he turned to look back at the burning pyre, he saw

Tarun coming towards him. “Seus,” he called. “The house is yours. Nisa and I are happy at the farm and Mother would want you to stay.”

“That is very kind,” replied Seus, touched by Tarun’s generosity. “I will be moving on though.”

“Where will you go?” asked Tarun.

“I am not sure yet,” confessed Seus. “But wherever it might be, I will carry the memory of your mother in my heart.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes. Of course,” replied Seus.

“Do you know why my mother wished to be cremated here, on a starry night?”

Amme had spoken with Seus about many things, and her wish to be cremated was amongst them. “Your mother believed that the light of her burning body would carry her soul beyond the realms of the universe, to the place from which it came.”

Tarun looked perplexed by the answer to his question. “But what is the point if the soul has already left the body?” he asked.

Seus thought for a moment. “Sometimes there is only symbolism to keep our wisdom and our aspirations alive,” he replied. “Perhaps, one day, we will all make our escape this way.” He held out his arms to Tarun. “Take care of Nisa.”

The two men clasped each other firmly in a fond embrace. “And you be careful not to fall on the path and bang your head again,” joked Tarun.

Seus smiled, more at the brave face of his friend than at his words. “Good bye. I will think of you often,” he said, and set off down the hill to spend his last night in the cottage.

As Seus made his way along the path, he noticed two people, a man and a woman, resting on travelling bags at the foot of the hill. At first he thought little of it, but as he drew closer he saw them stand, as if they were preparing to greet him. “Seus,” said the woman as he came within

earshot. “We have heard the news and are so sorry.”

Clearly they knew him. Seus studied their faces. “Beldou and Sedine,” he said, finally recognising his friends. “How are you?”

“Tired from our journey,” replied Beldou. “But better for seeing you.”

The little group hugged for some time, comforted by their timely reunion. “Come with me,” said Seus, picking up Sedine’s bag and making off towards the cottage.

“Do you have plans?” asked Sedine, curious to know if Seus would be staying on in Felinawe.

“It seems that the globe is mine,” replied Seus. “I thought that I might start by returning to Falona.”

“The globe that you remember is gone,” warned Beldou. “I think it would be better if you returned to Old Non with us.”

“What has changed?” asked Seus.

“Tomorrow will be soon enough,” replied Sedine in a gentle voice. “Tonight we must try to remember the good times.”

~

The journey to Old Non began along the Southern track, back towards Falona and the place where Seus and his companions last parted. The day was bright and by the time they arrived at Pencroes, the grass had dried and the air was warm. Beldou suggested that they stop at the crossroads to eat.

It seemed like old times to Sedine. The problems of the globe may have weighed heavily on Beldou’s mind, but she had enjoyed every moment of the time they had spent trekking across the wilds of West Tribian with Seus.

As Beldou and Sedine busied themselves with preparation of the food, Seus sat in quiet contemplation of his past. Somehow the most distant memories seemed to be the least painful, and his mind drifted back to the days of his childhood, spent in Tribian with his Grandmother and his

Uncle. Falona was but a short distance and Seus found it hard to resist the temptation to return there and look for Pejhos. “Perhaps it is time to tell me just how the globe has changed,” he said, finally recalling Beldou’s warning of the previous evening.

Beldou looked to Sedine for her approval before answering the question. Sedine nodded in reluctant agreement and Beldou turned to Seus with a sombre face. “Myar is dead,” he replied bluntly. “The Moran Minster have declared her to be a heretic and eradicated all traces of her word.”

Sedine was troubled by Beldou’s insensitivity and cast him a scowl, but Seus seemed strangely resigned to the news, as if he had somehow anticipated what was to come. She offered him some bread and filled his beaker from their flask. “You must keep up your strength,” she urged, concerned that he might simply be too shocked to show a reaction.

Seus took the bread and smiled gratefully. “And what has become of Pejhos?” he asked, with a placid voice. “Did he come to Falona?”

“Pejhos brought your word here, just as you asked,” replied Beldou. “But now he too is gone.”

“Did you not know that the Moran Minster had arrived in Tribian and imposed itself on the people?” asked Sedine quietly.

“And in your name,” concluded Beldou indignantly.

Seus was stirred by the disclosure. “Why do they need to impose my word when Pejhos had already given it freely?” he asked.

“The Morans claim that Pejhos was misguided,” replied Sedine. “They say that you are the Son of Duw, and they have your very word, written by those closest to you.”

“Are we not all sons and daughters of Duw?”

“They claim that Duw watches over us from his celestial realm,” continued Sedine. “Where those who become Moran Seusians will be reborn after death.”

“Aha,” exclaimed Seus, grasping the situation. “The notion that the soul is eternal and unyielding.” He smiled the smile of mockery. “But who is

this man who sits in the clouds stroking his beard, despatching mortal messengers to trade eternal life for blind faith? This is not the Duw that I recognise.”

“That is the image they have created,” replied Sedine, relieved to see Seus taking such an interest in conversation again.

“The wisdom of the Iddurs is developed through observation and contemplation, not delivered as dogma,” insisted Seus.

“But what of their Authority?” asked Beldou. “They say that it is your divine word, written by those who you chose.”

“Myar was my chosen Cardinal. Their authority is not divine,” declared Seus ardently. “It is clearly contrived to protect them from challenge.” Seus paused for a moments thought. “And to open the way for the expansion of their Sacred Empire no doubt.”

Beldou felt that Seus was ready to hear more of the Moran offensive. “They have also discredited the name of the Iddurs, with talk of heathen idols and human sacrifice.”

“The Iddurs retained the stories of the idols as they taught respect for the air, the water and the land. Not so they could be worshiped.”

“And what of human sacrifice?” asked Sedine.

“That is pure fabrication. Even the Sovereignities of Tribian were persuaded by the Iddurs to abandon the principle of a life for a life.”

“Even so, the way of the Iddurs is no longer the way of the people,” said Sedine with sadness in her voice. “Moran dogma and the Sacred word has replaced the Serene.”

Seus took a sip from his beaker and leaned back, seemingly calmed by Sedine’s apparent resignation. “You have challenged such hypocrisy before,” said Beldou, attempting to revive the passionate mood. “Will you return to challenge them again?”

“The day will come when all people will realise that the Sacred truth lies at the end of the Serene path,” replied Seus. He looked into the eyes of Beldou and smiled his kindly smile. “We must be patient.”

When the three friends finally arrived in Old Non, Seus gazed around in wonder, overwhelmed by the complexity of the city and the grandeur of its buildings. To him, the bustling metropolis was like the beating heart of an immense living sculpture, and as they entered a small quadrangle near the centre, he took his rest on a long seat to study the details of his surroundings.

“Humanity is blessed with a creative talent that is quite extraordinary,” he said, as Sedine and Beldou joined him on the bench. “Dexterity, language and reason are unparalleled gifts.”

“You like Old Non?” asked Sedine with a note of surprise.

“Indeed I do,” replied Seus. “But I wonder if we have any idea what it is that we are actually building.”

“Forever the thinker,” said Sedine fondly, and then she continued with a tentative voice. “The Moran Minster is near here. My friend Ashra will be there and she would like to meet you.”

“It would give me a chance to light the fire and get the place warm,” said Beldou, picking up his bag and making off without debate.

The Moran Minster was an imposing building. The huge arched doors opened into an impressive entrance, and high above, great spires capped its lofty crown. Seus waited by a stone bench while Sedine went inside to find her friend.

Within a short time, the two women appeared at the entrance. Sedine urged Ashra to go forward, and as she made her approach, Seus noticed that she was extremely shy. Ashra curtsied and stole a look at her teacher’s face. “It is true,” she said, quite overwhelmed by his presence. “You are Seus.”

He took her hand and held it gently until she was calm. “How are you Ashra?”

“I am well, but you are cold,” she replied with a mixture of surprise and concern.

Seus smiled. “I am quite used to this weather now,” he replied. “Please,

sit with me. What is it that you wish to ask?”

“Sedine told me that you would not enter the Moran Minster.”

“I prefer to wait here,” replied Seus politely.

“But this is where I go to be close to you,” she explained. “Why is it that you will not enter your own house?”

Seus looked to the building before him, with its extravagant stonework and pretentious carvings, then he looked back to the face of Ashra, wide eyed, caring and sincere. “My house is not built of stone,” he whispered. “But of the warmth of the spirit of fellowship.”

“Then where do I go to find you?”

“The true Minster resides in the heart of all those who follow the path of righteousness. It is not inspired by the want of land or power or grandeur, but by the desire for love, compassion and truth.” Seus cast a glance toward Sedine, then he looked back to Ashra and took her hand once more. “That is the place that I see in your eyes. That is the Minster to which I know you truly belong.”

Seus stood up to leave and Ashra looked to him with beseeching eyes. “Where will I find you if I need you again?”

“Seek others who tread the path of righteousness,” replied Seus with compassion in his voice. “And I will be there in their hearts.”

~

When Sedine arrived home with Seus, she was cold and tired, but greatly heartened to find a warm room, filled with the enticing aroma of freshly made broth. Beldou had arranged three comfortable chairs around the hearth, and the two weary travellers sat themselves down to thaw while he served them with his hearty fare.

“Thank you,” said Sedine as she finished her soup. “That was better than I could have managed.”

Beldou looked a little embarrassed to receive such praise from his sister. “Careful now,” he replied. “Seus will think that I don’t usually make a

contribution.”

“That was very agreeable,” said Seus, interrupting the conversation. He handed Beldou his bowl. “And you need not worry. I know that you are a most considerate person.”

Beldou blushed and quickly took away the bowls. When he returned, the room was silent. Sitting by the fire had reminded Seus of happy days, but gradually his thoughts had become more and more melancholy. Sedine noticed his sorrowful look and caught Beldou’s eye, nodding to encourage him to start a conversation.

Beldou was quick to respond. “If the universe expands like the arrow flies,” he began. “Will there come a time when, instead of speeding up, it begins to slow down?”

Seus had heard Beldou’s question, but it took several moments of quiet contemplation for the words to acquire any meaning. “Yes,” came the eventual reply, rewarding Beldou with a somewhat succinct affirmation of his theory.

“And what will become of the draw?” persisted Beldou.

“There will be no draw,” replied Seus.

“And without the draw, can there be life?”

Now Seus could see the purpose behind Beldou’s questions. He was clearly a forward thinking individual and Seus considered how he might illuminate his vision further. “Think of the universe as a mother,” said Seus thoughtfully. “The mother is not born fertile. Neither does the mother die fertile.”

“So the universe is like a mother of life?” anticipated Beldou.

“Yes. And the fertile age of the universe is but a part of its life,” concluded Seus. “When there is no draw, the universe will no longer nurture mortal life.”

Beldou seemed both pleased to have his question answered, and perplexed by the nature of the conclusion. Now it was his turn to sit in quiet contemplation.

Sedine broke the ensuing silence with another question. “So the draw is transient?”

Seus nodded.

“And dependant on the five measures that you have shown us?” continued Sedine.

Seus nodded again.

“But if Marifend is correct, and the universe has ten measures, where are the other five?”

Seus was quite taken aback by Sedine’s question. This was a subject that he had afforded scant consideration. “We can only postulate as to the whereabouts of the lost measures,” he replied, somewhat evasively.

“And where might they be?” asked Sedine, intent on testing his intellect.

It was clear that Sedine required nothing less than an opinion to satisfy her curiosity. “Perhaps we should consider another of the metaphors of nature,” replied Seus after some contemplation. He held out his hand, as if the solution was within his grasp. “Look at your left hand. How many fingers does it have?”

“Five,” answered Sedine.

“And if you look at your left hand in a mirror, what do you see?”

Sedine thought for a moment, and then smiled as she realised the response that Seus was looking for. “An image of my right hand,” she replied.

“Then perhaps the universe has two hands, each with five measures,” continued Seus. “And the right hand is a reflection of the left.”

“In the fourth measure?” enquired Sedine.

Seus nodded in confirmation, but Beldou seemed perplexed. “I don’t understand,” he protested. “How can one hand be a reflection of the other in the fourth measure?”

Beldou clearly required a simpler explanation and Seus paused for thought. “Close your eyes and imagine the moment that our universe began to expand.”

Beldou closed his eyes. “Yes I am there.”

“This is the last time that the two hands of the universe came together, in a mighty and thunderous clap,” explained Seus. “And from this point on, the left hand began to expand in the fourth measure.”

“Yes yes,” answered Beldou a little impatiently.

Seus continued with his explanation. “If the right hand is a reflection of the left in the fourth measure...”

“It would begin to contract in an opposite fashion to the left,” declared Sedine, finishing off Seus’ sentence in triumphant exuberance.

Beldou seemed to find the idea difficult to accept. “That would make the other half of our universe an unimaginably small place.” He observed with a note of scepticism.

Sedine was much happier to embrace the notion than Beldou. “And time would travel backwards,” she added.

“You make quite a good postulator yourself,” said Seus, impressed with Sedine’s conclusion. He looked across to Beldou and realised that he was battling weary eyes. “Perhaps we should retire now,” he suggested.

The following morning, Beldou and Sedine were woken by the appetising aroma of fresh bread, toasting on the open fire. Before long, the three companions were gathered together once more. “What do you two have on the agenda for today?” asked Seus cheerfully.

“I have a meeting with the Shelve the Shell campaign,” replied Sedine proudly. “It has a lot of support in Old Non now.”

Seus was impressed. “You must tell me more,” he said.

“There will be plenty of time when Beldou has gone to work,” replied Sedine, picking up the plates and smiling at Seus.

Beldou seemed agitated. “Are you expecting a backlog of work after your absence?” asked Seus, sensing that Beldou was in a hurry.

“I am hoping for news from Lemo,” he replied. “The Sovereign of Nari has been deposed and Marecia are plotting to reinstate him.”

“Why?” asked Seus, his curiosity aroused.

“So that they can plunder the Nariian Sap wells,” explained Beldou.

Memories of such matters had lain dormant in Seus’ mind for a considerable time, but his aspirations for social justice had remained steadfast. “How do they intend to achieve their goal?” he asked.

“By arresting the Presidor,” replied Beldou pulling on his coat. “But Lemo and I have warned him of the plot and he has surrounded himself with loyal supporters. You have a good day,” he said in conclusion, and with that he was away to his work.

~

Unbeknown to Beldou, Cester’s men had already executed their challenge, and at that very moment, Lemo was escorting Cofellreker to Regenal’s office to discuss the outcome. “Ah, Cofellreker is here,” said Regenal, turning to Cester as the office door swung open. “About time.”

“What has happened then?” asked Cofellreker, ignoring the usual protocol.

Regenal slumped back in his chair with a rueful look. “The Presidor’s men were brave, and in great numbers,” he announced in apparent disappointment, but a broad grin soon belied his feigned concern. “However, they were no match for our little army.”

“We must have killed three hundred,” added Cester boastfully.

Cofellreker was not impressed by the bullish remark. “I hope the Nariian people don’t find out that Marecia was behind the plot,” he responded. “It won’t be the end of the story if they do.”

“We had the Nariian Commander waiting in the Marecian Outpost,”

snarled Cester indignantly. “When the battle was done, he rode into the city and claimed victory in the name of the Sovereign.”

“Very clever,” conceded Cofellreker with relief. He rubbed his hands together greedily, like a child with a bag of spiced sugar. “Soon the Nariian wells will be pouring shekels into our purse.”

Regenal gave Cofellreker a look of disdain. “You have your sap,” he barked. “Now I want Maviten.”

“And I suppose you think Council will agree to a war against Crafen in the process,” mocked Cofellreker.

Cester was not so cynical, and as usual, he had a plan. “If the Maviten Liberty Troopers were to be given a little, shall we say, Secret support, they might just defeat Crafen,” he explained.

Regenal seized on the idea immediately. “And when Crafen is ousted, Marecia would be obliged to step in, to keep the Collies at bay,” he said, delighted by his own apparent cunning. He turned to Cester. “Just the job for your ICA.”

Cester shook his head slowly. “A low key skirmish in Nari is one thing, but a full scale battle against Crafen is quite another,” he protested. “The ICA purse is far too shallow for such an adventure.”

“I could muster a little surreptitious assistance,” offered Cofellreker in a surprising change of attitude. “Perhaps a cash of armaments for the Liberty Troopers,” he said wistfully. “That should tip the scales against Crafen.”

Cofellreker did nothing for nothing, and Regenal anticipated a snare in the meadow. “What would you want in return?” he asked sceptically.

“Your help to explore the offshore sap wells of Maviten when the war begins.”

Regenal beamed the broadest of smiles. “You have a deal,” he said, stepping over to his map and stabbing Maviten with a flag. “If the plan works, the Garden of Fortune will be ours.”

The Treacherous Deed

The Seusian Presidor

The Ethereal Jewel

The Flight Fight

The New Prophet

The Nature of Duw

The Sacrifice

The Risk

When Cofellreker arrived for the next meeting of the Secret, he was in the company of a handsome young man. “This is Hubs,” he announced, striding into Regenal’s office with his usual air of self-importance. “We have him to thank for getting Weineshore elected.”

Hubs was quite tall, of smart appearance, but with a roguish sparkle in his eye. He pushed himself forward with all the arrogance of a young bull and extended a hand to Regenal. “Pleased to meet you Sir.”

Regenal was impressed by Hubs’ demeanour. “Capable and confident,” he said casting Cofellreker an approving glance.

“He’s looking for something a little more exciting to get his teeth into,” responded Cofellreker. “So I thought it would be a good idea for him to sit in.”

“Well let’s see if Weineshore can get us a war then,” said Regenal.

Cofellreker looked a little uneasy. “The Maviten dreadists might have ousted Crafen...” he began tentatively.

Regenal cut into the conversation. “I like that. Liberty troopers one day, dreadists the next,” he said with a wry smile and gestured for Hubs to take the spare seat. “Cester is away on a little mission. You might as well have his chair.” Regenal looked to Cofellreker. “Now how about us going into Maviten and sorting these Collie dreadists out.”

“It’s not going to be that simple,” continued Cofellreker.

“Why not?” asked Regenal indignantly. “We’ve done it in Areko.”

“Crafen want Maviten to have their independence,” explained Cofellreker. “They called together all the realms and came up with a plan to make it work.”

“A plan to keep us out you mean,” observed Regenal with a dismissive tone. “So what is this plan?”

Cofellreker drew a deep breath. “Nachi’s ruler Nhichomi has been granted temporary control of the North.”

“And what about the South?”

“We’ve got our puppet Imed in there,” continued Cofellreker. “Pending regional polls to choose new leaders.”

“And when things settle, there will be a Realmic Poll,” added Hubs. “To let the people decide if Maviten is to be reunited as a Collective or an Autonomist realm.”

“I see,” said Regenal, rubbing his chin. “Well at least we have control of the South. That’s a start.”

“Imed is unpopular and will be voted out,” said Cofellreker.

“Imed is in charge and can rig the regional poll,” snapped Regenal, annoyed by Cofellreker’s defeatist tone.

“What is the point? He can’t rig the Realmic Poll,” retorted Cofellreker in his own defence. “We all know that Nhichomi will win in the end.”

“We can’t let Nachi get control of the Garden of Fortune,” roared Regenal in frustration. “Where is that Cester when you need him?”

“What could Cester do?” persisted Cofellreker. “We have no excuse to go in. Crafen have sabotaged our plan.”

“If Nhichomi unites Maviten in peace, Areko will have been for nothing,” declared Regenal, banging his fist on the desk. “All Weineshore’s bleating to Council about stopping the advance of the Collectives and his ‘house of cards’ theory will be exposed as fabrication.”

Regenal was right. Marcia had already lost a hundred legions in Areko, and peace in Maviten would expose their deaths as needless. Hubs had been determined to show his worth as a schemer, and seized the opportunity to make an impression. “We might not have an excuse to take the North,” he began. “But what if Nhichomi was to try to take the South? That would give us a pretext for war.”

Regenal was intrigued by Hubs’ idea, but Cofellreker was dismissive. “Why would Nhichomi start a conflict? All he has to do is sit back and wait for the polls to hand him Maviten on a platter.”

Hubs raised an eyebrow and bared his teeth with a grin. “Provocation,” he said, showing his flare for cunning. “Incite the north into a conflict.”

It was rare for Cofellreker to be rendered speechless, but for once he could find no objections. “The boy has hidden talents,” responded Regenal with a gleeful smile. “How do you suggest we do it?”

“Spread lies in the South about the evil Collectives in the North,” enthused Hubs. “Sabotage their infrastructure and assassinate their leaders. Force them to take retaliatory action.”

“A little Secret raid here and there,” said Regenal, nodding in agreement. “That should set the trap.”

“And what if Nhichomi refuses to take the bait?” asked Cofellreker regaining his composure. “He might just sit tight and hold out for the polls.”

“We get Imed to stall the polls and keep up the pressure until Nhichomi bites.”

Hubs seemed to have all the answers, but Regenal was not quite convinced. “I foresee a crack in the glaze,” he declared with a look of caution.

The expression on Hubs’ face went blank. “What’s that?” he asked, plainly disheartened by Regenal’s comment.

“Nhichomi is no moderate,” replied Regenal. “If it wasn’t for our erculan cannons being trained on Nachi, he’d reclaim Maviten tomorrow and there would be nothing we could do about it.”

Cofellreker seemed bemused. “Where’s the problem? We have the shell and he doesn’t.”

For once it was Regenal who showed foresight. “But what if Surisa was to give Nachi the shell? They are Collective allies after all.”

“The deterrent would be gone and we would lose the Garden,” said Cofellreker, realising the implications of Regenal’s remark.

Hubs endeavoured to offer a solution. “We could send the Presidor to

Surisa,” he began. “To persuade Khurvheshc that giving the shell to Nachi would lead to an erculan exchange.”

“Yes. Marecia versus the Collective Globe,” mused Regenal. “Khurstheshc may have a reputation for being hot headed, but he won’t be keen to share his new shell if it means risking erculan devastation.”

Cofellreker had no confidence in the Presidor as a diplomat. “Weinshore is a Weaponry man, not a Silver Tongue,” he observed. “If you put him in the same room as Khurvheshc you’ll have another War of the Realms anyway.”

“Then send Onnix, the Deputy Paramount,” suggested Hubs. “He’ll have Khurvheshc purring like a cat.”

Regenal nodded slowly. “Let’s hope you’re right,” he said, sitting back in reluctant acceptance of the plan. “Because if the Collies stick together, we might as well give up the Garden now.”

At that moment their attention was drawn by a knock at the door. “Come,” bellowed Regenal.

Lemo entered the room and began to read from a parchment. “Barunnov has concluded his work on the erculan projectile Sir.”

“Excellent,” replied Regenal. “Just in time.”

“Now he is pressing to develop a projectile that is capable of flight beyond the grip of the draw,” continued Lemo in an apologetic tone.

Regenal leaned forward to share a mocking grin with his colleagues. “You mean he’s spouting moonship nonsense again.”

“Apparently Surisa has already begun development of such a projectile Sir,” added Lemo with an earnest face. “To launch a moonship capable of attacking us from space.”

Regenal was incensed. “We beat them to the shell,” he said, rising to the Surisan challenge. “Give Barunnov what he wants and let the Flight Fight commence.”

~

Beldou had heard of Surisa's plan to launch a moonship. It was a bright morning and as he strolled to work, he wondered if Lemo might have sent word of Marecia's reaction to the news. Upon arrival, Beldou noticed that the tiny wooden stool that normally resided beneath the hat stand of the main lobby was missing, but he hung up his coat and proceeded towards his office without further thought. As he opened the door, his mood of cheery expectation suddenly evaporated. "Cester!" he exclaimed, and his face turned grey with fear.

Cester was seated behind the desk with his arms folded, and there before him was the little stool, strategically positioned in readiness for Beldou's belittlement. "Take a seat," he commanded calmly, but his voice conveyed an undercurrent of menace.

Beldou's mind began to race. Had his messages from Lemo been intercepted? Did Cester know of their attempt to save Nari from Marecian oppression? He sat down slowly and cast a look of terror towards his master.

Cester stood up and walked around the desk, his lithe and lofty frame towering above Beldou's quivering body. "That sister of yours has been causing me some concern," he began, sitting himself down on the wrong side of the desk. "I've had to detain her, and some of her acquaintances, for conspiring against Marecia."

Beldou was immediately aware of the problem. Sedine had been one of the chief instigators of the movement to 'Shelve the Shell', and many significant leaders had committed to attend their debut rally in Old Non. "She is young and full of ideals," he pleaded. "She means no harm."

"She is a meddling fool who has solicited considerable support. Even Tribian's ruling Worker's Party are on her side," snapped Cester, irritated by Beldou's impertinent remonstrations. "Do you think the Collies are going to give up the shell because a handful of prissy picketers from Old Non don't like it?"

"No Sir."

"Then you had better do as I say."

"Yes Sir. Anything Sir."

Cester placed a finger beneath Beldou's chin and raised his head, ensnaring Beldou within the chilling clutch of his merciless gaze. "I want the name of the perpetrator of this campaign," he said coldly, and then narrowed his eyes as if to raise the intensity of his influence. "Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir. Yes Sir," replied Beldou, desperate to evade Cester's grip.

"I'll expect you tomorrow morning," said Cester dropping his hand. He curled his lip. "And remember, Sedine is depending on you."

Beldou's immediate instinct was to return home. He was no athlete, but he ran the entire distance. Seus was busy scarfing a shim of timber into a table top when Beldou bust in. "Sedine has been arrested," he gasped. "Cester has cast her into the dungeons of Old Non."

Seus carefully placed the splint that he had been preparing onto the table and led Beldou into the main room. "Sit down by the fire," he said in a reassuring voice. "Now, tell me what has happened."

"Cester knows that Sedine is involved with the campaign," said Beldou nervously. "He wants the name of the leader in return for her freedom."

Seus sat down opposite Beldou. "Some of the supporters are very influential members of Tribish society," he said after a few moments of contemplation. "If you were to speak with them, they might be able to secure Sedine's release."

"That would take too long," said Beldou. "I must have a name by tomorrow morning, or who knows what Cester will do."

"I see," said Seus decisively. "Then there is nothing else for it. I will go to the Jailhouse in the morning and exchange myself for Sedine." He cast Beldou a solemn look. "After all, I am responsible for her predicament."

"You are the conscience of us all," replied Beldou, "But Cester has a long memory and he does not make idle threats. If he realises who you are, you will never return."

"That is a chance I will have to take," replied Seus. "Myar risked her freedom for mine. Now it is my turn to do the same."

Beldou disagreed. "Myar was as committed to spreading the wisdom of the Iddurs as you," he determined. "Hers was a choice of the head, but sacrifice is a choice of the heart."

Seus smiled. "Perhaps it is a little of both," he suggested. "But what does it matter? Tomorrow Sedine will be free."

Beldou was quietly reassured and thrust his hand into his pocket to find the stone of Einim. Whenever he held the stone he felt a strange sense of belonging that was as comforting as it was difficult to understand. "I have heard that a man called Mathemo is claiming to be the new Seer," he said, suddenly remembering the less pressing news of recent days. "He has started the Minster of Milsa in the City of Camec."

"I know of Camec," said Seus. "It lies along the great axis of the cosmos."

"Apparently Mathemo's following has grown so rapidly that the Council of Camec have cast them out," continued Beldou. "Although I am not sure why."

"Perhaps they are concerned that Mathemo will take control," replied Seus. "But they should have nothing to fear from a man of Duw."

Beldou was a little surprised by Seus' generous reaction to the news. "Does it not concern you that there is a new prophet, who people are beginning to follow in great numbers?" he asked.

"It is not important whether the word of Seus or the word of Mathemo should prevail," replied Seus. "What is important is that life itself shall prevail, through faith in the pursuit of truth and righteousness."

"Mathemo has claimed that there is one Duw," continued Beldou. "And one day all men will come before him to stand in judgement."

He has obviously spent considerable time in observation and meditation," said Seus. "It may be that Mathemo has found the voice within, and wishes to tell others of his discovery."

"Apparently he has heard the voice of Duw himself."

Seus seemed concerned. “It is a reasonable rationale that there is one Duw, that all must one day recognise or perish, but mistaking the voice within for the voice of Duw may lead away from the path of righteousness,” he said, shaking his head. “I hope this personification of Duw is not in the pursuit of power.”

“Do you mean that Mathemo could be misguided, like the Moran Minster?” asked Beldou.

“Let us hope this is not the case,” replied Seus.

Beldou and Seus managed to busy themselves until the day was done, but neither slept well that night. The following morning Seus began preparations to return the table to its owner, after which he planned to visit the Jailhouse to make the exchange.

Before Beldou left, he went into the spare room to speak with Seus. “I may see you at the Jailhouse,” he said with a trembling voice. “But if we do not meet, please take care.”

The two men hugged for a moment. “You need not worry,” said Seus encouragingly. “All will be well.”

Beldou looked to Seus. “Shave your beard before you go,” he said with half a smile. “Or Cester will be sure to recognise you.”

As Beldou entered the lobby of his workplace, one of the Clerks greeted him. “Beldou,” he whispered. “The Worker’s Party have complained about Cester’s interference in Tribish affairs.”

Beldou was intrigued. “Why are you telling me this?” he asked.

“Because Cester has agreed to release his captives and not play the maverick on Tribish soil again,” continued the Clerk. “He will return to Marecia today.”

“And what does Marecia want in return?” asked Beldou, quite sure that some kind of deal had been struck.

“Tribian is to withdraw support for the campaign, and leave Marecia to deal with the problem of erculan proliferation.”

“I understand,” said Beldou shaking the hand of his newfound friend. “Thank you for that.”

When Beldou entered his office he felt surprisingly confident, and Cester noticed. “I take it you have heard that the do-gooders are to be released?”

“Yes Sir,” replied Beldou as subserviently as he could manage.

“But not Sedine,” sneered Cester with quiet delight. “She is not a Tribish subject.”

“Then what is to become of her?” asked Beldou, shaken by the surprise disclosure.

“You have three choices,” replied Cester sternly. “I will release her if she agrees to spy on the campaign for me.” He tossed his head backwards and scowled in Beldou’s direction. “Or she must leave Old Non and never have anything to do with subversive activities again.”

Beldou was overwhelmed with mixed emotions. Sedine would be freed, but Seus was about to offer himself in exchange for her release, and for no advantage. “What is the third choice?” he asked, wondering if there might be a more acceptable option.

“Buy yourself a black suit,” replied Cester with a look of malicious pleasure.

~

Cester’s return to Marecia was greeted by Regenal with quiet relief. The execution of Hub’s plan had born fruit, but Regenal still preferred the guile of the hawk to the haste of the buck. He had called for a meeting of the Secret and Cester was the first to arrive. “Well, what have I missed?” he asked, as Lemo showed him into Regenal’s office.

“Surisa has refused to give Nachi the Eshell and our little sabotage missions have forced Nhichomi into retaliation,” boasted Regenal, as if the recent success might have been all his. He pushed his chair back from the desk and folded his arms. “As long as we keep stalling the polls and continue the Secret raids, we will have our war in Maviten.”

“Yes, but how long will it take?” asked Cester. “The oherni crop is ready

and we can't get it out. If we don't do something soon Nachi will take over and we will lose everything.”

Regenal had only considered the situation from the Weaponry perspective. While he could afford to wait for war to develop, Cester could not. The ICA desperately needed funding, and oherni was the only substantial source of shekels available. “What do you suggest?” asked Regenal.

Cester pointed to Regenal's map. “If we can't access the Garden through the North, what about using Maviten's neighbour, Olas?”

Regenal looked to his map. “But Olas is a Collective realm,” he said with surprise.

“Olas is a nothing realm,” declared Cester dismissively. “We could arm the tribesmen and force the Collectives out without any trouble.”

“I suppose we could,” agreed Regenal, always interested in expanding the Weaponry's area of jurisdiction. “I think you might have something there.”

“And if we process the stupes in Olas, we could cut out the operation in Port Mariesell altogether,” added Cester. “And double production within the year.”

Military tactics were Regenal's forte, but the machinations of interrealmic trading were something of a mystery to him. “Where are you going to find customers for all this oherni?” he asked, mocking Cester's ambitious scheme.

Regenal's lack of imagination was more a source of amusement than a cause of irritation to Cester. He had given the question of oherni trading a considerable amount of thought. “As the conflict with the North develops, the number of Marecian troopers in Maviten will be steadily rising.”

“And what of it?” asked Regenal, failing to see the relevance of Cester's observation.

Cester rarely displayed any obvious signs of emotion, but a discernable air of self-satisfied superiority spread slowly across his face. “The Levy

givers can pay the troopers wages,” he began. “And they can hand their shekels over to us in exchange for stupes.”

Now Regenal was really impressed. Hubs might have shown an aptitude for plotting, but Cester’s audacious scheme clearly set him apart. “How will you get the stupes back for the home market?” asked Regenal, struggling to find any kind of a fault with the plan.

“The ICA’s ships of the air will be taking supplies out,” explained Cester. “It would be a pity if they had to return to Marecia with empty holds.”

It seemed that Cester had left nothing to chance. As Regenal leaned back to consider the glorious future, he noticed the unmistakable frame of his fellow collaborator looming through the crackle glass window of the office door.

“That snake Toscar has taken over Bacu,” announced Cofellreker indignantly as he burst through the door. “He’s liberated the cane slaves and the Federation members are having to pay fair wages.”

Regenal laughed aloud. “It’s such a shame for them,” he scoffed. “Does this mean they will be poor?”

Cester had no more sympathy with Cofellreker and his cronies than Regenal, but he could see that the news would have more serious consequences for the Secret. “We can’t have a Collie lover ruling a place like Bacu,” he declared. “It’s far too close to Marecia. Toscar’s island could become a Weaponry base for Surisa.”

“Invade Bacu and eliminate Toscar,” said Regenal, realising the implications of the news. He swiped his map with the back of his hand. “Firm and fast. That’s the answer.”

“On what pretext?” argued Cofellreker. “You might be able to justify Maviten on the grounds of defence, but no-one wants to hear talk of invasion. Weineshore would never get it past Council.”

Regenal and Cofellreker both looked to Cester in hopeful expectation. “The polls are due soon,” he said in a calm, unruffled voice. “Perhaps it is time we had a real Silver Tongue in the saddle.”

“Yes,” enthused Regenal. “Hubs’ side kick Onnix has proved himself worthy as Deputy Paramount. He’d be able to swing Council towards an invasion.”

“All right. Let Onnix take his turn,” said Cofellreker approvingly.

Regenal wanted some kind of assurance. “How can we be certain that Onnix will win?”

“I’ll get the Federation to support his campaign,” replied Cofellreker with a confident grin. “It’s as good as done.”

~

All of Tribian seemed to be talking about Marecian oppression, but for once Beldou was more concerned with affairs closer to home. He had managed to intercept Seus at the Jailhouse while Cester was busy releasing the detainees, but his worries were far from over. Sedine still had to meet Cester’s demands.

Despite his best efforts, Sedine had stubbornly refused to discuss her options, but when Beldou found an ultimatum from Cester waiting on his desk, he determined to make her face reality.

Seus and Sedine were preparing supper when Beldou arrived home and he marched straight into the kitchen to confront his sister. “Cester wants a decision,” he said, gripping her by the arms to emphasise the urgency of his message. “If you do not make your choice by tomorrow, he will make it for you.”

Sedine sat down at the table. “Tell him I will be his spy,” she said with a belligerent voice. “And then I will feed him false information.”

Beldou’s face began to redden with frustration. “Cester is no fool,” he snapped. “That is not an option.” He looked to Seus for support. “The only safe choice is to leave Old Non.”

“We could return to Lewas together,” suggested Seus in an effort to alleviate the tension. “I am not really a city man.”

Sedine’s eyes widened. “All right,” she conceded with a sudden look of delight. “Where will we live?”

“We could go back to Felinawe,” replied Seus. “I can find work there.”

Beldou was amazed by Sedine’s impulsive decision. “I have some savings,” he said, keen to encourage Sedine further. “Find a little house and I will join you at the first opportunity.”

“What about your work?” asked Sedine.

“No one is indispensable,” replied Beldou. “And I have to leave sometime.”

Sedine beamed the broadest of smiles. “You two settle yourselves by the fire,” she said, bubbling with enthusiasm. “I’ll serve up.”

The mood of the house was raised with relief. Seus banked up the fire while Beldou brought in more logs and soon they were all comfortably seated in front of a crackling fire.

“I have heard that Mathemo has taken his revenge,” said Beldou, gladly returning to his usual role of bearer of tidings. “He has led his followers in an uprising against the Council of Camec.”

“How does this man of Duw justify such an act of aggression?” asked Seus.

“He claims that the word of Milsa is the word of Duw,” replied Beldou with a grave expression. “Camec is now under Milsaic rule and he has slain his Sewjhi neighbours for their objections.”

“It is a strange Duw that recognises the rights of men of war and ignores those of the peaceful,” said Seus with disappointment in his voice. “Mathemo has laid bare his mortal failings. Mathemo has lost his way.”

While Beldou was appalled by Mathemo’s persecution of his Sewjhi brother’s, he did understand the motivation behind his desire to return to Camec. “If the Council cast him out for his beliefs, is he not right to stand up for those beliefs, and the rights of his followers to reside in their City of birth?”

Seus seemed a little perplexed by Beldou’s question. “It reminds me of the story of the orphaned brothers, cast out of their village for stealing,”

he replied after some consideration. “The youngest was blind and learned that humility and the compassion of others were secrets to his survival.”

“And what of the eldest?” asked Beldou.

“The eldest was filled with anger and cursed those who had thrown him out,” replied Seus. “If he needed something he did not ask, but he took that which did not belong to him. Sometimes even the life of another.”

“What became of them?” asked Sedine.

“The youngest was taken into the bosom of the people and spent his days surrounded by love.” Seus leaned down and placed another log onto the fire before continuing. “The eldest fought with every man who opposed him. Eventually he became leader of the village, but his heart was filled with hatred until the day he died.”

“What does this have to do with Mathemo and the rise of Milsa?” enquired Beldou, unsure of the moral of the tale.

“If we were all like the angry brother, vengeful and filled with hate, what would become of us?” asked Seus.

“We would fight to the last,” replied Beldou.

“Then tell me, who is the blind man?”

“Cester,” said Sedine in an instant.

Seus smiled. “Yes, Cester is the blind man,” he agreed and turned to Beldou. “And what trouble has Cester caused since his return to Marecia?”

“His ICA is provoking unrest in Maviten, in order to provide an excuse for war,” replied Beldou. “And Marecia’s puppet Imed is stealing the wealth of the realm and leaving the masses to starve.”

“Surely the situation will change when the polls take place,” commented Seus.

“Imed is stalling the polls and beating and killing those he suspects of opposing him,” said Beldou with a look of anguish. “He has even

incarcerated children caught singing songs about him.”

“Marecians are due their own poll,” observed Seus with hope in his voice. “If Weineshore is replaced by a moderate, the situation in Maviten could become more favourable.”

Beldou was in agreement. “There is a Seusian called Deykenn standing for the Autonomists,” he said with a rising sense of optimism. “Followers of the Moran Minster are pursuers of peace. If Deykenn gets in, he will see to it that Maviten gets its polls.”

“And he is bound to listen to the voice of reason and do something about the erculan threat,” added Sedine.

“Then we should make every effort to take the erculan campaign across the water,” declared Seus. “If the people of Marecia are made aware of the consequences of an erculan conflict, they will be more likely to vote for Deykenn.”

“He already has the Seusian vote,” enthused Beldou. “The call for peace might just tip the scales in his favour.”

~

Beldou’s prediction that Deykenn would win the polls proved to be accurate, but it wasn’t the Seusian vote, or the support of the peace movement that finally tipped the scales, it was vote rigging by the Bostrems.

The new Presidor’s inaugural briefing had been arranged to take place at the Weaponry Headquarters, but when Cester, Cofellreker and Hubs arrived at Regenal’s office, they were expecting to meet with Onnix.

“Get that Deykenn in here now,” roared Regenal when Lemo broke the news. Lemo scuttled off to summon Deykenn while Regenal cast a scowl towards Cofellreker. “What happened to your plans to get Onnix into the saddle?” he demanded.

“I think we all underestimated Deykenn’s power of charm,” spluttered Cofellreker apologetically. “There has been unprecedented exposure of the candidates to the people this time, and Onnix is obviously no match for Deykenn’s polished tongue.”

“And I have heard that the Bostrems were involved in vote rigging,” added Cester in Cofellreker’s defence.

Regenal was livid. “We can’t have the Bostrems getting the better of us,” he fumed, slapping the table in disgust. “They will have to pay for this.”

“Oh they are going to pay,” snarled Cester. “Deykenn’s crook of a father promised them a puppet if they got his son in.” Cester leaned back and folded his arms, as if he were about to deliver a judgement. “But I believe he had already promised his mother that he would put the Bostrems behind bars if he won the polls!”

“Never mind who Deykenn takes after,” snapped Regenal in frustration. “What are we going to do about this mess?”

“I think it is important that we get Deykenn on our side with Maviten,” said Hubs, trying to focus the conversation on matters of policy. “And get him to recommend the invasion of Bacu to Council.”

“Deykenn won’t sanction an invasion,” scoffed Cofellreker, quick to forget his embarrassing campaign fiasco. “He’s an idiotic idealist.”

“Then perhaps we should try another tack,” suggested Cester. “Persuade him that Toscar should be eliminated,” he pulled a sardonic grin. “In the interests of freedom and justice.”

Lemo knocked the door. “Come,” shouted Regenal.

The door swung open and in walked Deykenn. He wasn’t particularly tall, and his demeanour was far from intimidating, but he had an appearance so handsome in the flesh as to be totally captivating. “Gentlemen,” he said, taking command of the room with just one word. “I am your new Presidor.”

Cofellreker offered the Presidor his chair and Deykenn accepted, pulling it back to block the doorway and position himself directly opposite Regenal. “Now then boys,” he began with a voice as smooth as velvet. “Let’s talk.”

All eyes turned to Regenal. “We recommend that you maintain Weineshore’s policy to deter the advance of the Collectives,” he began.

Deykenn tilted his head and offered a look of acceptance, but he made no verbal response. Regenal continued. “And in the interests of security we should remove Toscar from power. Having a Collective realm so close to our shores poses a serious threat to Marecia.”

Deykenn stroked his chin and nodded slowly. “And how do you propose that we remove Toscar?” he asked after some consideration.

Regenal’s confidence was boosted by Deykenn’s positive response. “We send in a mongoose to kill the snake,” he replied with gleeful arrogance.

Deykenn nodded again. “I am prepared to continue Weineshore’s stance against the Collective advance,” he said, then suddenly rose to his feet. He stepped forward, leaned on Regenal’s desk and looked him straight in the eye. “But I won’t sanction a murder plot. If we get into that kind of thing, we’ll all be targets.”

The room fell into silence as Deykenn made for the door. Cofellreker pulled his chair out of the way and Deykenn turned to look back. “You know where to find me,” he said, and closed the door quietly behind him.

“We’ll have to do something about him,” snarled Regenal indignantly. “We can’t have a pretty boy peace lover dictating Weaponry policy.”

Cofellreker seemed far less concerned by Deykenn’s manner and viewed the meeting as a partial success. “The Presidor is with us on Maviten,” he said optimistically. “It’s just Toscar that we need to deal with.”

“What about a Secret invasion of Bacu?” suggested Hubs, keen to make his mark with a solution.

“The ICA can’t afford it,” declared Cester emphatically.

Cofellreker was not so dismissive. “I could raise funds from the Federation. There’s plenty of people who would like to see Bacu returned to a slave colony.”

“But where are you going to find the necessary manpower?” asked Regenal, still clearly disgruntled by the meeting with Deykenn. “You can’t use Weaponry troopers for a Secret mission.”

“What about the Bacun Bad Boys that Toscar threw out when he took

over?” asked Hubs. “They would fight to get their rackets back.” He walked over to Regenal’s map. “I could round them up and storm Bacu from The Boar’s Cove.”

“You’d need a ship,” said Regenal, beginning to take the idea seriously.

“Could we call it Sadall, after my home town?” asked Hubs, seemingly confident that his plan was about to become a reality.

“You can call it anything you like,” replied Regenal. “As long as you fill it with troopers and get it to The Boar’s Cove.”

Cester could foresee a problem. “Toscar might not have a great Weaponry,” he said in a reticent tone. “But he has already defeated the Bad Boys once.”

“What if we had support from ships of the air?” asked Hub’s, determined to push ahead with his invasion plan.

A broad grin spread across Regenal’s face. “It could be arranged,” he replied wistfully. “I’ll have a word with my Airfleet Commander, Rhascel Balec.”

~

“Deykenn has done it!” declared Beldou jubilantly.

Seus and Sedine had been waiting in a quiet corner of the local inn and beamed with delight when Beldou arrived with the news. “That is marvellous,” exclaimed Sedine. “At last we will see an end to the murderous campaign in Maviten?”

Beldou sat down and cast Sedine a look of regret. “The Presidor seems unaware of the ICA’s activities,” he replied. “And now they look set to invade the island of Bacu.”

“Is that not counter law?” asked Seus.

“The ICA are a law unto themselves,” replied Beldou. “Who can stop them?”

“If the people of Marecia knew the truth, Deykenn would have all the

authority he needs to revoke their power of destiny,” suggested Seus. “The ICA would be finished.”

Sedine was as ready as ever to do what she could. “Then we must organise a protest,” she enthused. “To raise awareness of the plight of the people of Maviten.”

“You can not get involved in any protests,” retorted Beldou sternly, still mindful of Cester’s ultimatum. “And plans for a protest are already underway in Maviten itself.”

“What protest is that?” asked Seus.

Beldou donned a sombre face. “A Maviten Sage intends to burn himself alive,” he replied with regret in his voice. “To bring the cruelty of Imed’s occupation to the attention of the globe.”

Seus looked horrified. “Tell them that we will organise demonstrations in the Decadent Globe,” he said, desperate to avoid the violent surrender of the Seer’s life. “Demonstrations that will raise the attention of the Parchments and can not be ignored by the Silver Tongues.”

“I will pass on your message,” replied Beldou with a sorrowful look. “But I expect that the sacrifice will go ahead with or without your blessing.”

Seus shook his head. “We can only hope that no lives are given in vain.”

Beldou slumped in his seat. The elation of the Deykenn appointment had been all too quickly overshadowed by the seemingly insurmountable problems of the globe. “Who is the Duw that allows such punishment of his people?” he asked with anguish in his heart.

Seus took a sip from his goblet and settled back in his chair. Beldou had not expected an answer to his question, but he and Sedine soon realised that Seus was about to oblige. “If you ask who is Duw, you assume that Duw is a person,” he began, breaking the mood of quiet anticipation. “But Duw is not a man or a woman.”

“Then what is Duw?” asked Beldou.

“Duw is beyond the comprehension of us all,” replied Seus.

“Even you?”

Seus smiled. “Even Me,” he replied, amused by Beldou’s vision of him as all knowing.

Sedine was not so willing to accept Seus’ elementary explanation. “Then how do you know that Duw exists?” she asked, confident that Seus had more to offer.

Seus gestured to a painting on the wall. “Look to the globe. The mountains, the sky, the seas. These things can be explained by the tree of measures,” he paused and pointed to a vase of flowers on the table before them. “But look at the plants, the trees, the animals. Each blade of grass holds something precious that elevates it beyond the laws of the physical. A pure, eternal and unyielding energy that we cannot touch.”

“The force of life,” enthused Beldou. “The soul.”

“Precisely,” said Seus in confirmation. “And in this simple realisation we discover that, because something cannot be seen or touched, does not mean that it does not exist.”

“If such an energy cannot be described by the tree of measures, how can it be described?” enquired Sedine, now intrigued by Seus’ theory.

“We must determine that it is described by some other measure,” explained Seus. “A non-physical measure. An ethereal jewel, the facets of which we have little understanding.”

“So the universe is divided into the physical and the ethereal,” continued Sedine, determined to learn more. “Are they interdependent? Would life exist if it could not manifest in the physical?”

Seus smiled again at the fond recollection of this same debate in his younger days. “Would the physical exist if it could not be perceived?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied Beldou, keen to maintain his stake in the conversation. “If the universe is older than its inhabitants, it must have existed before it was perceived.”

“Then we must assume, during that early time, before the universe entered the fertile age, the essence of life must have lain safe somewhere,” continued Seus.

“In the ethereal jewel?” asked Beldou, beginning to grasp the concept of the existence of non-physical measures.

“Yes,” replied Seus.

Sedine’s curiosity was still roused. “Why then did it need to cross over?” she asked.

Seus gazed towards the painting, crossing the mountains to return to Eastpinel and his last conversation with Pejhos. “Perhaps from observation, we can deduce that life in its purest form, must manifest itself in the physical universe in order to begin to evolve.”

“So the mortal body is the vehicle of evolution?”

Seus nodded in agreement. “And evolution is part of the journey of life,” he added.

“And does Duw reside in the ethereal measures?” asked Beldou.

“This much we can determine,” replied Seus looking somewhat relieved to have arrived at a conclusion. “Duw is life and is within us all.”

~

Many a life was lost on the shores of Bacu when Hubs’ troopers began their invasion, but all did not go to plan. Rising condemnation of Marecia’s hostilities had reached the ears of the people, and their Presidor was aware of the changing mood. Moments before the invasion, Rhascel Balec had requested the Presidor’s authorisation for his Airfleet mission, and Deykenn had refused.

Regenal was livid and called a meeting of the Secret to determine their next move. “Your invasion was a washout,” he barked, firing up the meeting as soon as Hubs had closed the office door.

“We have your Airfleet Commander to thank for that,” retorted Hubs, jumping to his own defence.

“Put a shoulder to the coffin,” said Cofellreker, implying that Regenal was also partly to blame for the fiasco. “If Balec had involved the Weaponry without official approval, Deykenn would have had his neck on the block.”

Regenal had been foolish to expect his subordinate to risk his head without assurances, but he was not prepared to concede the point. “Balec owes us for this,” he snarled unrepentantly. “Trust my words, he will pay.” He sat upright to deliver the opening announcement. “Surisa has agreed to protect Bacu from another invasion.”

“How?” asked Hubs, concerned that his hopes for a second invasion might be dashed.

“They have put forty erculan cannons onto Bacun soil,” answered Regenal indignantly. “And pointed them all at Marecia.”

Cofellreker was visibly alarmed. “We can’t risk a conflict now,” he said with a look of terror. “We’ll all be blown to pieces.”

“Where is your backbone?” sneered Regenal. “This is the perfect opportunity to kick the Collies out of Bacu once and for all.” He slammed the desk bell to summon Lemo. “Surisa has made a direct threat to our Realmic Security. Even Deykenn can’t object to retaliatory action.”

Lemo arrived almost immediately. “Yes Sir.”

“Is Deykenn here yet?” asked Regenal, plainly game for a clash of horns.

“Yes Sir.”

“Then send him in.”

Deykenn arrived to find a modest chair awaiting him, sandwiched between the less than welcoming frames of Cofellreker and Hubs. Cester had taken position behind the desk, alongside Regenal, in order that Deykenn should be surrounded by his hawkish opponents. “Have a seat,” said Regenal in a formal tone. “I take it you have been briefed about the Surisan cannons.”

Regenal's attempt to assume command of the situation did nothing to unnerve the Presidor. "I am aware that Khurvheshc has taken steps to deter us from further invasions," he replied with a clear note of cynicism, and settled himself into the chair.

"This situation would never have arisen if you had sanctioned the Airfleet mission," baulked Regenal in a forthright display of contempt.

"The situation was caused by your illegal invasion," replied Deykenn emphatically.

"Never mind the history," retorted Regenal, clumsily avoiding further battle with Deykenn's advantaged tongue. "We can't tolerate such a threat to our security. The cannons will have to go."

"I quite agree," said Deykenn with a smirk.

Regenal recoiled in surprise. "Then we recommend a full scale invasion of Bacu," he began, finally seizing upon Deykenn's mood of apparent accord. "We should take Toscar and the cannons out once and for all."

Deykenn scanned the faces of all in the room, to see if anyone else had an opinion. No one spoke. "Such actions could lead to an ircular conflict," he said firmly. "And that is a risk that I am not prepared to take."

"You've been listening to too many Shelve the Shell songs," smarted Regenal in a vague and pitiful attempt at sarcasm. "I suppose you think Khurvheshc will move his cannons if you ask him nicely."

Deykenn smiled a broad smile, baring his amusement at Regenal's childish retort. "I propose a nautical barter block," he said, dropping the smile. "Toscar will send the cannons back when his people begin to starve."

"Khourvheshc doesn't care about Toscar's people," declared Cester, trying to restore some credibility to Regenal's argument. "He might just leave the cannons where they are. He's mad enough."

"Then we will have lost nothing but time," retorted Deykenn, confident of the worth of his decision. "We'll give him until the next moon to respond, and if he still refuses to move the cannons, let him know that we

will declare war on Surisa.”

Regenal was aware that Deykenn’s bluff was likely to bear results. “Khurvheshc has got a nasty snarl for a dog with no teeth,” he whispered to Cester. “He’ll back down and Deykenn will be a hero.”

Deykenn wasn’t finished. “And I want something done about your puppet Imed,” he continued, interrupting Regenal’s private concurrences before he had time to muster a defence. “The people of Maviten must be given the opportunity to choose their own destiny.”

All of the aspirations of the Secret were being wiped out by one unwelcome do-good Silver tongue, and Regenal was beginning to feel increasingly powerless to stop him. “You can’t keep the Collies at bay with flowers,” he raged in frustration. “Marecia needs a leader with a bull’s hoof, not a cats paw.”

Deykenn held his ground. “No one believes that nonsense about the house of cards anymore,” he said, suddenly rising to his feet. “Imed is an embarrassment to Marecia and I want him out.” He made for the door and turned to cast Regenal a final glance. “Immediately.”

“He means it,” said Cofellreker as soon as the door was shut. “What are we going to do?”

“We could throw out Imed and put his Generals in charge,” suggested Cester. “That would buy us some time.”

“But Deykenn will be back barking when he realises he’s been patronised,” said Hubs. “He clearly intends to pull out of Maviten and subordinate the ICA.”

“And if he succeeds, the Secret will be over,” added Cofellreker.

Regenal stood up slowly and straightened his tunic. “It’s him or us,” he said with a determined face and began to pull the blinds down on the office windows. Cofellreker looked to Hubs and Hubs to Cester, but no one spoke. Finally Regenal returned to his chair, leaned forward and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Let’s kill him.”

Cester scoured the other faces for signs of reservation. “The Bostrems want revenge,” he said in a calm voice. “There is talk of them ambushing

the Presidor on the streets of Maviten.”

Hubs could feel Cester’s cold eyes lingering on him. “We could give them a little help,” he said, intent on demonstrating his commitment to the Secret.

Cofellreker was already comfortable with the treacherous surrender of life for the greater cause, and immediately took the idea in his stride. “We will have to ensure there are no links back,” he added with a cautionary tone.

“Naturally,” agreed Regenal. “We can use Occrisan marksmen. Bring them in, do the deed and get them out.” He looked to Cester. “What about the venue?”

Hubs interrupted. “Sadall would be perfect. We have connections there and Balec’s brother is the Principal.”

Regenal’s face lit up. “I will see to it that he cooperates,” he said turning to Cester. “And we’ll need the cooperation of the Borderless Interrogation Force, to keep the local boys at bay.”

“Leave that with me,” replied Cester.

“How do we get Deykenn to the venue?” asked Hubs.

“The Deputy Paramount looks after the Presidor’s diary,” replied Cofellreker. “And Shojonn hates Deykenn.”

Regenal seemed concerned by Cofellreker’s proposal to involve another Silver tongue. “Yes, but can he be trusted?”

“Shojonn would do anything to get his butt in the saddle,” replied Cofellreker with a voice of certainty. “And he will give us Maviten when he gets in. He’s one of us.”

“What about shekels?” asked Cester. “The ICA purse is still struggling.”

“The Boar’s Cove backers still need a return on their investment,” replied Hubs. “I’m sure Onnix could persuade them to dig a little deeper.”

“Right then,” said Regenal, sitting back to savour the plot. “I’ll have my

men whisk away the body and no-one will be able to point any fingers.”

“There’s just one problem,” said Hubs, interrupting Regenal’s moment of vengeful pleasure. “We need a dupe.”

“Details, details,” said Cester, irritated by Hubs’ presumptuous observation. “The ICA have been experimenting with Activist Coercion Techniques.” He cast a look of superiority towards Hubs. “And we’ve been grooming a little Collie activist called Dowsal for just such a job.”

“Perfect,” said Regenal, realising the value of Cester’s ingenious project.

“And if we say Dowsal killed Deykenn on Toscar’s orders, we’ll have our excuse to invade Bacu,” added Cester.

Regenal leaned back slowly and cast the others a look of supreme contentment. “Let’s do it.”

~

As the shock of Deykenn’s death began to reverberate around the globe, people of all realms reeled in disbelief. Beldou was one of the first to hear and rushed home to break the news to Seus and Sedine. “Deykenn is dead,” he said with a grave face. “And Lemo thinks that Cester was behind it.”

Sedine was visibly shaken and slumped into her chair. “We should make for Lewas as soon as possible,” she said to Seus with a drained expression. “If Cester can kill the Presidor then no one is safe.”

Seus nodded in agreement and then looked to Beldou. “We have lost a great man,” he said with a deep sense of sadness.

“At least we had some success before he went,” said Beldou, in an effort to raise the spirits of his companions. “Marecia, Surisa and Tribian have agreed to stop testing erculan shells in the open air. That would not have happened without him.”

“And the risk of erculan conflict seems to have subsided,” added Seus. “I think both sides must have found the Bacun cannon confrontation a little too uncomfortable.”

“That doesn’t mean that the threat is gone,” argued Beldou, aware that the globe was still a volatile place. “We must keep up the pressure, but it will be a long and lonely struggle without Deykenn.”

“We have Assilees,” said Sedine with a note of optimism returning to her voice.

“Who is Assilees?” asked Beldou.

Sedine looked to Seus to answer Beldou’s question. “Perhaps the greatest and most enlightened leader of all time,” he replied. “Yet Assilees comes from Hepiitooa, the smallest of Realms.”

“How has he helped us?” enquired Beldou, surprised that he had not heard of such an influential figure.

“He spoke of the folly of the erculan shell when he addressed the Realmic Union,” replied Seus with a look of reverence. “And he has encouraged Deykenn’s efforts to abolish tribal bigotry.”

“Then we must hope that he can maintain a restraining influence on Marecia,” observed Beldou. “Because Shojonn has already begun preparations to escalate the war in Maviten.”

“It is unlikely that Assilees will have any influence over the Maviten situation now that Deykenn is gone,” said Seus, surprised by Shojonn’s policy of aggression. “Hepiitooa is too small a realm.”

“Marecia think the globe is theirs to do with as they please,” said Beldou shaking his head in disgust. “Word has it that half their troopers are on oherni, supplied by the ICA!” he exclaimed. “There must be something that we can do.”

“What about the forthcoming Marecian polls?” asked Sedine hopefully. “I am sure that the people will shun any Silver Tongue who advocates continuing the war, especially with so many young lives at stake.”

Beldou was not so confident. “Godelwart is standing for the Realmists, calling for more troopers to be sent in,” he explained. “And Shojonn might be singing the song of peace, but he is dancing to the tune of the Weaponry. It’s bad or worse I fear.”

“The food of the condemned has a foul taste,” said Sedine, feeling an overwhelming sense of dejection beginning to return.

Seus tried to raise her spirits. “Pressure is still there from the campaign,” he said in a plain and positive voice. “We must not allow the loss of Deykenn to stop us now. If the people keep up the fight, Marecia will be forced to withdraw.”

“What else can we do?” asked Beldou.

Sedine was more in touch with the feeling of the people than Beldou, and her mood began to rally. “Some of the young minstrels are already spreading the word across the songsphere,” she replied. “We should give them every assistance.”

“And we could put pressure on the Autonomists,” added Seus. “To call for an unprejudiced investigation into the Deykenn murder.”

“Of course,” enthused Beldou, realising the merit of the suggestion. “Deykenn’s brother Torber is sure to want revenge, and he is very tenacious.”

“If anyone can get to the bottom of the murder, Torber can,” encouraged Sedine.

Beldou placed a log onto the pile of flagging embers before him, and watched them crumble beneath the weight. “Just one small piece of evidence to link the ICA to Deykenn’s death, and the Secret will collapse.”

The Empty Purse

The Minstrel Prophets

The Fate of a Sun

The Malgrowth Weapons

The Campaign

The Lost Archetype

The Dilemma

The Resolution

The promise of a simple and idyllic life in Lewas held great appeal for Sedine, and Seus had wasted no time in making preparations for the move. “I have word from Tarun,” he said, returning home one morning with a letter in his hand. He set himself down beside the fire and began to open the envelope.

“What does it say?” asked Sedine excitedly.

Seus scanned the letter. “Tarun and Nisa have moved into Amme’s house,” he looked up with a pleased expression. “We can have their rooms at the farm.”

Beldou was disturbed by the imminence of the move. “I will miss you,” he said, receiving the news with a confusion of emotions.

“And I will miss you,” responded Sedine sympathetically. “But all is well. The young minstrels are spreading the word, and pressure against the Maviten conflict is rising,” she continued. “It is only a matter of time before Marecia is forced to withdraw, and then you can join us.”

Beldou did not share his sister’s optimistic outlook. “Talk of freedom and independence might be gripping the globe, but the fight for peace and justice is far from over,” he said, looking to Sedine with a dejected expression. “Dowsal has just lost his chance of freedom forever.”

“What do you mean?” enquired Seus.

“He has been murdered by a Bostrem called Brutensine.”

“Why?” asked Sedine with a look of horror.

“They say that Brutensine was overcome by a fit of patriotic rage and wanted to avenge his Presidor’s death,” replied Beldou. “But I do not believe that.”

“Why else would he do such a thing?” asked Sedine.

“According to Lemo, Dowsal had proof of a conspiracy, so they killed him.”

“What proof?” asked Seus.

“He was secretly working for the Borderless Interrogation Force, or so he thought,” explained Beldou. “While Dowsal was busy being duped, they threatened to repatriate his Surisan wife. She could betray her husband and help with the set up, or lose her children.”

“So what went wrong?”

“Dowsal was suspicious and wrote to the Surisan Council telling them everything he knew,” replied Beldou. “During his interrogation they realised their mistake. If Dowsal went to trial and the contents of the letter became public, the set up would be exposed,” Beldou shook his head. “Dowsal had to go.”

“But how did they force Brutensine to murder him?” asked Sedine. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Brutensine played a part in the set up,” replied Beldou. “If he had refused, they would have charged him with conspiracy to assassinate a Presidor, which would have meant certain death. He had no choice.”

“What is to stop Brutensine from talking?”

Beldou laughed. “There is always another Brutensine waiting in the wings.”

Seus was quite disturbed by Beldou’s revelation. “Do you think that we will ever get to the bottom of this?” he asked.

“Perhaps,” replied Beldou. “If the Autonomists win the next poll.”

“The Realists have no chance,” declared Sedine confidently. “Marecians have had enough of conflicts that do not concern them.”

“I have heard that Torber is standing for the Presidor’s chair,” added Seus. “If he gets in, we will find out who was behind Deykenn’s murder.”

“I believe Torber will fail,” declared Beldou with a resentful tone.

“How can you be so sure?” asked Sedine.

“If Torber gets in, the ICA will be finished,” asserted Beldou, “and they

would never take that chance.”

“What are you saying?” asked Seus with a worried face.

“If Torber wins the candidates poll, I believe they will kill him too.”

~

Killing Marecians had become a normal activity for the Secret, and amid increasing scrutiny of the Deykenn murder case, methods that left no obvious trail were receiving considerable attention.

Cester had been the driving force behind development of several innovative elimination techniques, but Cofellreker was always the one to realise the economic advantages of such ideas. “I want to discuss one of the offshoots of the new arsenal,” he said, breezing into Regenal’s office in advance of the next meeting.

“Well take a seat then,” replied Regenal, quite used to Cofellreker’s unannounced arrivals.

Cofellreker wasted no time in getting to the point. “I need some shekels to develop an offshoot of your malgrowth project.”

Regenal was a little taken aback by the request. “What offshoot is this?” he asked, surprised that any idea of consequence would have escaped his notice.

“A germ that creates an eclipsed Life Protection System in apes,” replied Cofellreker. “It needs Council funding to bring it to the point of human field tests.”

“How do you know it will cross over from apes to people?” enquired Regenal, unsure that Cofellreker’s vision of the project was worthy of a request for Council funding.

“We tried it on a Blackskin,” said Cofellreker with a look of malevolent pride. “And he died.”

“That’s all very well, but we already have an effective malgrowth weapon,” balked Regenal with waning interest.

“What kind of weapon?” snapped Cofellreker, irritated by the ill-considered dismissal of his proposal.

“A virulent germ that can be injected,” replied Regenal. “It worked on Brutensine. Why would we need another?”

Cofellreker was confident that his new weapon was far too useful to be ignored and persisted with the case. “This one is contagious,” he boasted. “We could cull millions of Cafirans with this germ and push down the price of minerals. It will be good for our purse.”

“Good for your Federation’s purse you mean,” snapped Regenal, maintaining his resistance. “How do you know it won’t come back to haunt Marecia?”

“Oh it’s very selective,” replied Cofellreker. “It is passed on by copulation. The Blackskins of Cafira will only spread it amongst themselves.”

Regenal saw a glint in Cofellreker’s eye that he hadn’t seen since the days of the Sewjhi persecution. “Your ability to turn a shekel from the pockets of tribal obliteration is truly astonishing,” he said with a raised eyebrow. “But I’m still not convinced. How would we spread it?”

“We could use my Global Wellbeing Authority,” replied Cofellreker, amused by the irony of his proposal. “Under the guise of an immunisation programme for poor unfortunate Cafirans.”

“How much do you want?”

“Ten gold shekels.”

“Ten gold shekels!” exclaimed Regenal. “That is too much to ask.”

Cofellreker was determined to win the day and drew his trump. “If it works in Cafira, we could use it on the dirty little same sexers in Marecia,” he said with a devious undertone. “Wipe them all out.”

Homosexuality was the Weaponry’s pet intolerance and Cofellreker knew it. “Consider it done,” said Regenal, without need for further persuasion, and turned his attention to a knock at the door. “Come.”

Cester and Hubs entered the office and Cofellreker stood to greet them. “Congratulations on getting Onnix into the saddle,” he said, daring to look Cester in the eye. “I take it you were responsible for Torber’s demise.”

“Torber’s death was wholly unpredictable,” responded Cester with a sardonic smile. “How could I have any control over a murdering lunatic like Rashin?”

“Never mind the old news,” said Regenal, banging his desk to call order. “Torber might be gone, but the Autonomists are still bleating to the tune of the Peace Movement.” He cast a glance towards Hubs, then turned an eye to Cester and lowered his voice. “Word has it that they have evidence linking some of the Bacun Bad Boys to the Deykenn job.”

Hubs was clearly worried by the disclosure. “If it is true, we will all be sunk,” he said with a grave face. “I think we should break into the Autonomist Headquarters and steal the evidence.”

Cester nodded approvingly, but Regenal had serious reservations about the plan. “The Autonomist Headquarters are in the Waretage Hostel. A public place,” he said in an uncharacteristically high tone. “What if you are seen?”

“Onnix is expendable,” declared Cester coldly. He looked to Hubs. “Get him to sanction the break in, and if anything goes wrong, we’ll say that the ICA were acting on his orders.”

“What if he doesn’t agree?” asked Regenal.

“Oh he’ll agree,” replied Cester reassuringly. “He has as much to lose as anyone.”

Regenal seemed to be reassured by Cester’s plot and leaned back in his chair. “That brings me to the main point of the meeting,” he said. “What of Maviten? We can’t keep it going forever in the face of so much opposition.”

“Open up the ocacine business in Augranica instead,” suggested Hubs.

“It takes time to establish a new product in the stupe trade,” responded Cester. “The ICA needs to maintain its oherni dealings in the meantime.”

“Do you have a solution?” asked Regenal.

Cester donned his wily face. “The Warlords of Saint Gafhan are already running a small oherni business. We could help them to expand.”

“Saint Gafhan is under Surisan control,” observed Cofellreker.

Cester’s strategy was well considered. “If we promise the Warlords home rule, and give them a little support, they will kick the Surisans out,” he concluded jubilantly.

“Shift the fight against the Collies to Saint Gafhan and take the oherni operation with it,” added Regenal. “Very clever.”

“It fits our plan to bring Surisa down and connect their sap wells to the global market,” said Cofellreker, remembering Cester’s proposal for a giant sapduct with some excitement.

“The Peace Movement will just shift their protests from Maviten to Saint Gafhan,” declared Hubs, somewhat resentful of Cester’s ingenious plan.

“The Peace Movement is becoming problematic,” conceded Cester. “Especially since the young minstrels started to spread the message. Nonnel in particular is beginning to make a real nuisance of himself.”

“And Yamler,” added Hubs, keen to prove that his finger was also on the pulse. “He comes from Camajia, one of the cane islands off Bacu, and his following is spreading like a fire in a drought.”

“Yamler is making things difficult for us in Camajia,” added Cester in concurrence. “Spouting Assilees talk of freedom and eradication of prejudice.”

“So why don’t we just kill them?” asked Regenal, seeing elimination as the obvious solution to their problem.

Cofellreker looked to Cester. “That is a job for one of your Activists,” he said, hoping to discover more of the ICA’s secret project.

“It didn’t work very well with the Deykenn job,” argued Regenal with more than a hint of reluctance. “We are still watching our backs over that

one.”

“Coercion Techniques have come a long way since Dowsal,” said Cester defensively. “We’re using hypnosis to create activists from people with obsession disorders now.”

“I suppose that makes it foolproof?” said Cofellreker with a grin.

Regenal failed to see the joke and continued the conversation with a serious face. “How can you be so sure it will work?”

“Remember Torber?” asked Cester. “Rashin doesn’t.”

“I knew you were behind the Torber job,” declared Cofellreker with a long awaited look of satisfaction.

“Hypnotised obsessives make the perfect dupes,” explained Cester. “They can’t remember anything, and even if they did, who would believe a mental patient?”

“I don’t think you should use the same method for both minstrels,” said Regenal, adding a note of caution. “We don’t want to arouse unnecessary suspicion.”

“Then why not stick one of them with malgrowth cells,” suggested Hubs. “Like we did with Brutensine.”

Regenal was in agreement, but his eye was drawn by the appearance of Lemo’s fractious frame, rocking to and fro outside the office door. “Come in,” he shouted.

Lemo entered the room in trepidation. “I have bad news Sir.”

“Then spit it out man,” commanded Regenal.

Lemo looked to his clutch of parchments. “The Association of Sap Producers has imposed a barter block on the Decadent Globe,” he began. “In protest against our continued support of Asirel in their conflicts with the Baiaran Globe.”

“Who is behind this loathsome revolt?” demanded Regenal.

“Alphvia, the Sovereign of Nari has spoken of Marecian exploitation Sir,” replied Lemo nervously. “And the Baiaran Realms have united and raised the price of sap tenfold.”

“So Alphvia dares to bite his Master,” said Regenal, his face reddening with rage. He signalled for Lemo to leave and turned his attention back to the meeting. “This is a matter of the utmost importance. I propose that we invade Baiara and take control of their sap wells.”

“We have no excuse,” said Cester, quick to show the voice of reason. “The entire Baiaran Globe would unite against us and the rest of the Globe would probably sympathise with them.”

“Then what can we do?”

“We could offer the ASP a deal,” suggested Cofellreker. “Accept their demands if they agree to deposit their newfound wealth in our vaults.”

“Or use it to buy Marecian armaments,” added Cester.

Regenal cast Cofellreker a look of disdain. “That might save you and your Federation members, but it will be of little comfort to anyone else,” he protested. “If we agree, the Decadent Globe will be plunged into depression and the Realmic Purse will soon be empty.”

“What choice do we have?” asked Cofellreker.

For once, even Cester was at a loss. “They do seem to have the advantage,” he confessed. “But we need to find a way to prop up the purse.”

“Then we will just have to squeeze the Third Globe harder,” concluded Cofellreker with a look of ruthless delight. “Starting with Shodeira.”

~

Worries about Marecia’s empty purse could not have been further from the minds of Seus and Sedine, but the effects of the Secret’s aggressive policies seemed to constantly encroach on their lives. “Yamler has malgrowth,” announced Sedine, returning home from her daily visit to the market. She was tired, cold and almost at the point of tears.

Seus was immediately concerned, as much for Sedine's state of mind as for Yamler's well being. "Can he be cured?" he asked, taking Sedine's coat and leading her towards her favourite chair.

"He is refusing treatment on Sacred grounds," she replied in a dejected tone. "But it probably wouldn't make any difference. Apparently he has the most virulent form of the germ and there is little hope of a cure."

Seus looked up as he heard the main door opening. "Beldou will be devastated."

Sedine cast her brother a solemn look as he entered the room. "Have you heard the news about Yamler?" she asked, before Beldou had a chance to offer his usual greeting.

"Yes," he replied woefully, and quietly took his place by the fire. "There never seems to be any good news these days."

"It will be a terrible blow if we lose him," continued Sedine. "He is an incredibly talented minstrel."

"And such a brave crusader for the Peace Movement," added Beldou. He looked to Seus. "Talking of crusaders, I have heard that the Moran Minster has issued a call to arms for all Seusian Realms."

"What ever for?" asked Seus.

"To instigate a Sacred Campaign," replied Beldou. "To drive out the new Milsaic establishment in Eastpinel." He shook his head sorrowfully. "We do live in a troubled globe."

"But I thought the Milsaic and the Seusian Councils had a harmonious relationship in Eastpinel," said Seus with a puzzled expression.

"Yes, but the ruling moderates have been expelled by Jeskul activists from the North," explained Beldou. "And Seusian worship is no longer being tolerated. The Moran Minster is promising that Duw will reward all Seusians who join the Campaigns to seek revenge."

"It is hard to understand the success of the Sacred dogmas at times," noted Seus. "The Milsaic and Moran Minsters both claim one Duw, by whom we will all be judged. Surely they pray to the same Duw."

“The faithful are fools,” responded Sedine derisively. “What kind of a Duw calls his flocks to arms and then calls them to judgment for their sins?”

“This is a Duw of mortal creation. A Duw with a veiled intention,” replied Seus in a subdued voice.

“I suspect that these Sacred Campaigns will prove to be more about material acquisition than divine petition,” observed Beldou. “Sometimes I think that there is little to choose between the dogma of the Sacred and the tyranny of the Secret.” He cast Seus a look of sadness. “But I will certainly miss our little discussions about such matters when you have moved to Lewas.”

Seus smiled his kindly smile. “Well at least we have won the day for Maviten,” he responded, in an effort to raise the spirits of his mournful friends. “Marecia have withdrawn their troopers.”

Beldou nodded in agreement. “Yes. Onnix did manage to do something good before he was exposed.”

“What do you mean, exposed?” asked Sedine, intrigued by Beldou’s statement.

Beldou realised that he had untold news. “The ICA were caught breaking into the Autonomists Headquarters,” he began excitedly. “And Onnix was overheard discussing plans to block an investigation into the break in.”

“Why did the ICA want to break into the Autonomist Headquarters?” asked Seus.

“To retrieve incriminating evidence, allegedly connecting them with the Deykenn murder,” replied Beldou. “And Onnix was overheard discussing the plot. Had he been called to give evidence, they would have all been sunk.”

“Do you think they will kill Onnix?” asked Sedine, realising the desperate position of the ICA.

“Oh no,” replied Beldou. “They have had enough trouble burying silver

tongues lately, but Onnix and his Councillors had no alternative but to resign.”

“Who has taken his place?” asked Sedine.

“Dorf, the Deputy Paramount,” replied Beldou. “And as soon as he was in the saddle, he pardoned Onnix and they all got away with it.”

“That might solve their immediate problem,” observed Seus, “But surely the Autonomists will continue to delve into the activities of the ICA?”

“Hubs was promoted to Public Figurehead of the ICA,” explained Beldou. “So that he and Dorf could throw dust in the eyes of any would-be investigators.”

“But Dorf must face the polls,” observed Sedine, her spirits rallying. “The Autonomists are bound to win, and we will finally get our investigation.”

Beldou laughed. “Cofellreker is too clever for that,” he replied. “He has been grooming his crony, Tarrec for the saddle. Tarrec is an Autonomist, but he will only get to be Presidor if he agrees to do the Secret’s bidding.”

“You mean Tarrec will block calls for a new investigation?” asked Seus.

“Not just that,” replied Beldou. “They want Tarrec to help them to exploit the Third Globe, because the Marecian purse is at an all time low.”

“What more can they do to exploit the Third Globe?” asked Sedine with a look of disbelief.

“Take Shodeira for example,” said Beldou, quickly responding to Sedine’s protestation. “Marecia is putting pressure on them to release a dreadist called Gambeu from jail. Once he is out, the fight for independence will begin in earnest.”

“And how will independence benefit the Marecian purse?” asked Sedine, unsure of the workings of the plot.

“When Gambeu gets into power, Marecia will have the puppet they need

to bleed Shodeira for every last shekel,” explained Beldou.

“How can Marecia be sure the people will choose Gambeu as their Presidor?”

“They are portraying him as a heroic liberty trooper, who was imprisoned and cruelly castrated by his oppressors,” explained Beldou. “He’s promising to return the land to the people, but once he is in power it will be a different story.” Beldou shook his head in frustration. “And there is little that we can do to stop it.”

“It seems that you and Lemo have a hard task ahead of you,” commented Seus. He leaned forward to stoke the flagging embers of the fire, and then sat back with a look of resignation. “We will miss you as well.”

“You will have to visit us,” said Sedine, offering Beldou a little comfort. “As often as you can until you are ready to join us.”

“This place will be empty without you. When will you be going?” he asked with a sad heart.

Sedine cast Beldou a compassionate glance. “We leave tomorrow.”

~

Beldou’s prediction that Tarrec would take the polls soon came to pass. The new Presidor’s triumph was secured by a pledge to end Marecia’s exploitative dealings with evil tyrants, and talk of independence had spread amongst the oppressed.

Tarrec proved to be a man of failed commitments, but his promise had stoked the fire of revolution in Nari. Kiohimen, the celebrated Milsaic leader, was recalled from exile to form a fledgling Council, and the Sovereign Alphvia had fled to Marecia to escape the wrath of his people.

“We have a problem,” announced Regenal, calling the next briefing of the Secret to order. “Kiohimen has declared Marecia to be *The Great Evil*, and that could place our armaments deals with Nari in jeopardy.”

“Perhaps it was a mistake to grant Alphvia safe harbour in Marecia,” observed Hubs, delighted to find fault with a policy that had not been of his making. “The Nariians wanted to put him on trial. It is bound to have

antagonised them.”

“It is important to demonstrate that Marecia does not desert its friends in times of trouble,” contested Cester. “Otherwise tyrants like Alphvia will be harder to recruit in the future.”

“Never mind the future,” snapped Regenal, unimpressed by Cester’s defence. “We could lose our best customer to the Surisans.” He banged the table in resentment. “And our access to Nariian sap.”

“Then perhaps we should give the Surisans a little distraction,” suggested Cester in an effort to restore his credibility. “It’s about time we raised the heat in Saint Gafhan.”

“Precisely,” agreed Regenal. “That’s why I’ve made an appointment with the Presidor.” He curled his lip with expectant delight. “We’re all going over to the Palace of Propriety to see just how far we can bend that feeble arm of Tarrec’s.”

Cofellreker and Cester had become familiar faces at the Palace, and as soon as they arrived, the posse of four were shown into the Presidor’s office where Tarrec was anxiously waiting. “Come in gentlemen,” he said, offering Regenal a nervous hand.

Regenal had long considered Tarrec too short and too liberal for a Presidor, and his limp handshake did nothing to redeem that impression. “Draw the curtain,” barked Regenal to Hubs, in objection to a shaft of light emanating from the window behind the Presidor’s desk. “We don’t want to see the silhouette of our leader, we want to see his face.”

Tarrec was taken aback by Regenal’s impertinence, but was far too unsure of himself to declare umbrage. “What can I do for you?” he asked, gesturing for his guests to take their places before him.

Regenal got straight to the point. “The Nariians have declared Marecia to be evil, and are likely to shift their trade allegiances to Surisa.”

“Surely that is their prerogative,” replied Tarrec, looking somewhat mystified by Regenal’s statement.

Regenal was irritated by Tarrec’s naivety and looked to Cester for support. “The Baiaran sap wells are the key to global superiority,” he

said, calmly explaining the situation. “And if Surisa moves in to Nari, they will set their sights on Marecia’s downfall.”

Tarrec was noticeably concerned by Cester’s prediction. “You don’t think it would come to that do you?” he asked.

“We’re not playing in the school yard Tarrec,” replied Regenal swiftly. “In the real globe you survive by destroying your enemies.”

“What should we do?” asked the Presidor with an uneasy look.

“Step up efforts to hasten the collapse of Surisa,” replied Regenal. “Before they have a chance to capitalise on Nari.”

“How?”

“Support the Warlords of Saint Gafhan,” recommended Cester in quick support. “Give them the means to oust their pro-Surisan masters.”

“Things are bad enough in Saint Gafhan now,” protested Tarrec, eager to air his knowledge of interrealmic affairs. “If we give the Warlords more armaments there will be a blood bath.”

“Exactly,” said Regenal with a look of gleeful anticipation. “We’ll give Surisa a war they can’t afford to ignore, and they can’t afford to fight.”

“Council won’t support assistance for dreadist forces,” said Tarrec defensively. “Not even against a pro-Surisan regime.”

“Then keep it secret,” suggested Cester.

“That is political suicide,” protested Tarrec indignantly. “How long do you think I could keep something like that from Council?”

“Just long enough,” replied Cester. “When the home war starts, we’ll tell the globe that we expect a policy of non-intervention to be respected by all outside realms.” He flashed his customary merciless smile. “Then when Surisa moves in to restore the peace, we’ll claim it is an unprovoked act of aggression.”

“Then you can make support to the Warlords official,” added Cofellreker. “And nobody will be any the wiser.”

“I don’t like it,” said Tarrec, daring to show his reluctance.

Regenal glowered at him. “You don’t want to be remembered as the Presidor who instigated the collapse of Marecia, do you?”

Tarrec sat back in his chair and took a moment to consider the possible repercussions of taking a passive stance. “All right,” he conceded finally. “But don’t think I can make a habit of supporting dreadists. Council won’t swallow the same hook twice, and the Realmic Purse is at an all time low.”

“We might be able to do something about that,” said Cofellreker, seizing the opportunity to make a contribution to the meeting. “We want you to help Gambeu to achieve independence and give the new realm an appropriate identity.”

“How?”

“By renaming Shodeira after the lost city of the Hanso tribe, Mabbizew.”

“And how will that help the Marecian purse?” asked Tarrec.

“We will lend Gambeu the shekels to develop Mabbizew’s infrastructure,” explained Cofellreker. “On the proviso that he uses Marecian Traders to carry out the work.”

“Every little helps,” observed Tarrec with a note of sarcasm.

Cofellreker continued undeterred. “And once they have suitable byways, we can get their crops to port and sell them for a vast profit.”

Tarrec had been a farmer himself, and understood the business of crops well. “I admire you cunning,” he scoffed. “But how can you make your fortune selling meal?”

“Oh Mabbizew won’t be producing meal,” replied Cofellreker with an arrogant smirk. “They will be growing cane and cocobot leaf, for us to process into high value commodities.”

“And what will the people of Mabbizew eat if they turn their fields over to cane and cocobot?” asked Tarrec, puzzled by the apparent conundrum

of Cofellreker's proposal.

"They can buy their meal from the Marecian farmers," replied Cofellreker with a look of devious fulfilment. "And if you persuade the rest of the Third Globe to sign up for the plan, every last shekel they earn will be going into the Marecian purse."

"Very clever," conceded Tarrec. "But it's all rather underhanded and manipulative. I don't think an Autonomist Council would want to be party to a covert revival of slavery."

Regenal did not share Cofellreker's passion for shekels, but he was aware that an empty purse made for an impoverished Weaponry. "Now let me give you a little lesson Tarrec," he began, casting the Presidor an intimidating scowl. "The Third Globe is filled with goats and dogs."

"Yes?" responded Tarrec, quite unsure of the point of the observation.

"Well you milk goats and you kick dogs," concluded Regenal. "Now knuckle down and do what is best for Marecia."

Before Tarrec could raise any further objections there came a knock at the door. "Enter," he said, struggling to find an appropriately forthright voice.

"Sorry to interrupt Sir," said the Presidor's aide, bursting through the door with an earnest expression. "The Marecian Outpost in Nari has been seized by the Nariian youth, and hostages have been taken."

"What do they want?" asked Tarrec with a look of distress.

"They want Alphvia and his ill-gotten gains extradited, so that he can stand trial for crimes against his people."

Regenal laughed out aloud. "They might get Alphvia back, but they'll never get their hands on the spoils," he said in a mocking voice. "Cofellreker has those safely locked away in his private vault."

Tarrec ignored Regenal's jibe. "I don't think we should give in to Nari," he began cautiously. "But equally, we can't continue to supply them with armaments, or buy their sap."

“Then what do you suggest?” asked Regenal, somewhat amused by the Presidor’s apparent stance.

Tarrec cast his mind back to Deykenn’s handling of the Bacun cannon affair and found the confidence to continue. “I propose a barter block,” he said decisively. “With no armaments going in and no sap coming out, Nari will be forced to release the hostages.”

“Don’t be a fool Tarrec. That would be playing into the hands of Surisa,” complained Regenal. “This is the perfect excuse to storm Nari and take control of their sap wells.”

Tarrec held fast. “The Autonomist Council will never pass another invasion plan,” he affirmed. “The Boar’s Cove is still too recent a memory, and we can’t afford it anyway.”

Even Cester had to agree with Tarrec’s appraisal. “Invading Nari is not an option,” he declared reluctantly. “I think a barter block is our only option, at least for the time being.”

Cofellreker might not have been the greatest of strategists, but sometimes his talent for making shekels provided a guiding light for the Secret’s ambitions. “We could do a deal with Nari’s neighbour, Ussheni of Qria,” he suggested. “Let Ussheni have Nari’s armaments, and in return we would expect cheap Qrian sap.”

“Nari and Qria are not exactly the best of friends,” observed Tarrec. “If you give Ussheni armaments, they will be at each other’s throats in no time.”

A reluctant smile suddenly belied the customary displeasure of Regenal’s grimaced lips. He was far from content to see Tarrec get the upper hand over the Nari situation, but the prospect of fuelling a war in the heart of the Baiaran Globe was enough to secure his agreement. “We have a plan then,” he said abruptly, and stood up to leave.

Regenal remained tight lipped throughout the return journey to the Weaponry Headquarters, finally breaking the uneasy silence as the little band of conspirators reassembled in the sanctuary of his office. “It was Tarrec who stoked the fire of revolution in Nari,” he announced in a voice charged with vengeance. “And I want him out.”

Cofellreker was surprised by the proposal. He might have expected Regenal to demand the ejection of Kiohimen from Nari, but not to call for the removal of his own Presidor. “You have to admit, Tarrec’s done just about everything that we have asked,” he protested. “Even though it’s made him unpopular.”

“It’s not what he does, it’s what he stands for,” retaliated Regenal. “All that talk of fundamental privileges. People begin to think they’ve got entitlements and look what happens.” Regenal looked directly at Cester. “Now how do we get rid of Tarrec?”

Cester stood up and scanned the faces of the others with his icy gaze. He needed to conjure the extraordinary, and his talent for quick thinking wasn’t about to disappoint. He turned his attention to Cofellreker. “I suggest that you persuade the Presidor to sanction a rescue bid for the hostages.”

“Those Nariians are no fools,” retorted Regenal. “You’d never get the hostages out alive. The people would be outraged.”

“Indeed they will,” replied Cester in a voice laden with cunning and evil. “And that will be the end to the hostage problem, and Tarrec.”

~

As Regenal’s band of handpicked troopers set off to rescue their compatriots from the outpost in Nari, Seus and Sedine were crossing the Great Tidal River of West Tribian to enter the realm of Lewas. The journey was pleasant, the weather was fine, and the two hardy travellers reached Pencroes in time to set up camp.

Before long, the first star of the evening had flashed its presence in a gradually darkening sky, and the now familiar chill of a clear Tribish night had descended upon their hilltop home. Seus placed a blanket around Sedine’s shoulders and they watched the final golden glow of the day melt into the tranquil sea below. “Look at all those stars,” said Sedine, lying back to view the heavens. “Mother universe is certainly flaunting her splendour tonight.”

Seus nodded in agreement but he did not speak.

“Will there really come a time when the universe is no longer able to

support life?” asked Sedine in a contemplative voice.

“The stars in the sky will not burn forever,” replied Seus. “One by one their fires will go out.”

Sedine sat up. “Does this mean they will fall from the sky and crash toward the centre of the universe?” she asked with a look of apparent alarm.

“The fertile age will end before the heavens collapse,” replied Seus, and then he paused to consider the question fully. “On cold nights, before a crackling fire, have you ever seen a glowing ember fly from the heart of the fire?”

“Yes,” replied Sedine with a voice of expectancy.

“And if the glow of the ember dies before it has landed, does its journey cease in mid air?”

“No of course not,” she replied. “The ember continues to fly away from the fire.”

“Then perhaps we could predict that a failing sun would do the same,” explained Seus.

“I see,” responded Sedine, grasping the significance of the analogy. “Its position in the sky will not change because it is still flying away from the centre of the universe, as we are.” She paused for a moment to picture a dying star in her minds eye. “But it will be hard to see, as it is no longer burning.”

“And perhaps it will get smaller,” added Seus thoughtfully. “If it is no longer expanding.”

“But if this is the eventual fate of all the suns of the universe, what is the point of our struggle?” she went on. “We could not survive in a cold universe with a diminishing draw.”

For Sedine, the study of the Principles had begun to merge with the contemplation of the Serene, and Seus was greatly impressed. “If we are to survive beyond the fertile stage, we must transcend our mortal state,” he replied with a look of quiet delight.

“How?” asked Sedine, still a little unsure of the connection between the two disciplines.

“Through sacrifice, evolution and the quest for truth,” he replied.

Despite the chill of the night, Seus and Sedine slept soundly and morning was soon upon them. The task of breaking camp quickly followed first light, and their journey was underway before the warmth of the day could dispel the mists of the valleys below.

By noon they had passed through the village where the first Seus was said to have been born, and by evening time they were settled into the rooms of the little house at Docmael Farm. Tarun and Nisa had set the fire, and when their day was done, they joined Seus and Sedine for the first evening in their new home.

“Congratulations on your move and welcome to Lewas,” said Tarun, raising his glass to the newcomers. “Will you be carrying on your work with the Movement or settling down to rural life?”

“Something of both I hope,” replied Sedine.

Seus cast her a disapproving look, in an effort to remind her of Cester’s promise. “Maviten is over,” he said in a firm tone. “I think we will be concentrating on matters of our own survival for the moment.”

Nisa suspected that Sedine’s passion for righting the wrongs of the globe probably outweighed her enthusiasm for rural life. “But surely all that momentum could be channelled towards another cause, before the impetus is lost,” she suggested.

Sedine was pleased to have found an ally in Nisa. “Augranica is being plundered by a Marecian puppet, just as Maviten was plundered by Imed,” she said, looking to Seus with pleading eyes. “We could help their Council to build schools and hospitals, and return the land to the people.”

Seus was concerned about Sedine’s rekindling interest in the spirit of revolution and hesitated to reply, but Tarun had no such reservations. “They certainly deserve our support,” he said encouragingly. “But people have to identify with a crisis in order to be motivated.”

“What do you mean?” asked Nisa.

“The Maviten protests were maintained because Marecians were dying as well as Mavitene, and people blamed the Realmists,” explained Tarun. “I don’t think the Augranican situation would receive the same support.”

Sedine had little interest in politics. She was motivated by concern for her fellow humans, but she understood Tarun’s point perfectly. “Where do you think we should direct our attention?” she asked.

“The Marecians have persuaded Tribian to take their erculan shells,” replied Tarun indignantly, clearly offended by their impertinence. “If they end up going head to head with Surisa, they want to make sure the conflict is waged on our soil, and not their own.” He cast Sedine a look of profound sincerity. “Why not revive the ‘Shelve the Shell’ protests?”

Seus saw temptation in Sedine’s eyes. “Nowhere seems to be safe from Marecian interference these days,” he said, quickly steering the conversation in a new direction. “Have you heard any news of their attempt to rescue the hostages from their Outpost in Nari?”

“The rescue failed before it even started,” replied Tarun in a derisory tone. “Typical of Marecian troopers. All mavericks and no masters, but at least the hostages are still alive.”

“Tarrec looks like winning the day with his diplomatic solution anyway,” added Nisa. She smiled the smile of hope and ambition. “And if he secures the release of the hostages by peaceful means, the Autonomists will have an unbeatable advantage at the next polls.”

~

The prospect of Tarrec winning a second term as Presidor was too much for Regenal to bear, and as if to make matters worse, the Augranican Council had ousted the old pro-Marecian regime and declared independence. “What are we going to do about Augranica then?” he bellowed as Cofellreker entered his office. “We can’t have a do-good Collie Council spoiling our investments in the ocacine trade.”

Cofellreker seemed startled by Regenal’s outburst. “I think that is more a matter for our friend here,” he replied, redirecting the question towards

Cester.

Cester was sitting quietly in his usual place, but was always ready to make an offering where plotting was concerned. “Kill their reformists, sabotage their projects and when they fail to deliver on their promises, install another puppet,” he replied emphatically, as if the execution of his idea was little more than a customary procedure. “And then the Augranican ocacine trade will be ours for the plundering.”

“Ha,” scoffed Cofellreker. “Who is going to fund this ambitious project? Council won’t support another dreadist campaign.”

“We simply give the old regime a few armaments,” replied Cester with the confidence of a veteran. “They’re experienced, right there on hand, and if we promise them a slice of the cake, we won’t have to pay for the ingredients.”

Regenal was quite satisfied with Cester’s proposal. “All right gentlemen,” he said, moving the agenda on. “But what are we going to do about Tarrec?”

Tarrec was Cofellreker’s protégé and he was reluctant to pass comment, but Cester had no such allegiances. “We could put Hubs up for the next polls,” suggested Cester with a rare note of enthusiasm. “He’s ruthless, loyal and has more than proved himself by fending off unwanted scrutiny.”

“Yes but would he win?” asked Cofellreker. “The people are still suspicious of the ICA and Hubs is remembered as being their figurehead.”

Cofellreker had a point “Who else do we have?” asked Regenal, reluctantly dismissing Hubs as a candidate.

“Neagar would make a perfect puppet,” suggested Cofellreker. “He used to be a performer and he will appeal to the people.”

Regenal knew of Neagar and he wasn’t convinced. “Neagar has spoken out against the ICA’s power of destiny,” he said in objection. “The people will expect him to challenge the ICA if he wins the polls.”

“They expected Tarrec to stop selling armaments to Nari,” retorted

Cofellreker. “But he did as he was told.”

“But Neagar is naive,” continued Regenal. “He thinks that the Presidor’s job is to serve the interests of the people, not facilitate the ambitions of the Secret.”

Cofellreker looked to Cester with a wry grin. “I’m sure you could find a way to enlighten him.”

Cester relished the opportunity to bring a prospective Presidor into line and nodded to Regenal in agreement. “Neagar it is then,” said Regenal decisively.

“And if we install Hubs as the Deputy Paramount, he can take over if anything untoward was to happen to Neagar,” persisted Cester, adding a touch of polish to the plan.

“You might be underestimating Tarrec’s chances at the polls,” said Cofellreker, drawing Regenal’s attention to a potential flaw in the plan. “If he secures the release of the hostages, he’ll be seen as a hero and wind up back in the saddle.”

As always, Cester had a solution. “Perhaps we should do a little deal of our own,” he suggested. “And persuade Nari to delay the release of the hostages until after the polls.”

“Why would they agree to do that?” asked Regenal with a look of surprise.

“Because we will promise to re-instate their armament supplies if they help us to get Neagar into the saddle.”

“That would mean supplying armaments to both sides in the Nari, Qria conflict!” exclaimed Cofellreker. “We would never get away with it.”

“Why not?” asked Cester. “If we get found out, Neagar can take the tumble and Hubs can step into the saddle.”

“I like it,” said Regenal, turning to Cester with a look of approval. “Send Hubs to do the deal.”

~

The success of the clandestine meeting between Hubs and the dignitaries of Nari spread great disappointment across the globe. “Neagar has won the polls,” said Tarun one morning, tarnishing the delight of an otherwise glorious day with his news.

Seus was busy loading a table onto the farm cart and stopped to return a look of concern. “And what of the hostages?” he asked.

“They were released just moments later,” declared Tarun in apparent relief, but his voice was filled with gloom and scepticism. “Are you off to town?”

“Yes. I will see you later,” replied Seus, also struggling to conceal his disappointment at Neagar’s blatantly ill-gotten victory. He had soon completed his morning’s tasks and decided to journey to Einim in an effort to lift his mood of disillusionment.

The road between Docmael farm and Einim led past a small and picturesque lake, where Seus often stopped to rest and remember happy times. Sometimes he would walk to the water’s edge and search for a stone to skim across the surface, in hope of making contact with the other side of the lake, and today was such a day.

Seus looked down and saw the perfect stone, small enough to fit into the palm and suitably rounded. He picked up the stone and cast it out, watching intently as it bounced its way across the lake, before sinking a little short of the opposite shore.

A voice suddenly rang out, disturbing the tranquillity of the surroundings and calling Seus to his senses. “The day approaches when the choice of salvation over destruction must be made.”

Seus was not startled. He had become accustomed to the unexpected arrival of the Old Man. “I know,” he replied. “Time is getting short. But what can I do?”

“You must reveal the path,” replied the Old Man. “For the journey of each individual will lay a stone in the path to salvation of us all.”

“Yes, but how?” asked Seus. “I have Sedine to think about. Am I to abandon my responsibilities for a blind compulsion to lead the

unwilling?”

“There may be a resolution to your Dilemma,” replied the Old Man with a kindly smile. He picked up a stone and waded out into the shallows, until the water was high above his knees, then he too cast his stone.

Seus watched as the stone skipped a path straight and true, as if revealing a chain of invisible stepping-stones that led across the water to the safety of the distant shore. “A stone can bounce many times,” said the Old Man, turning to Seus with a look of mischievous accomplishment, “but if it sinks just once, it is lost forever.” His face changed to one of deep sincerity. “Perhaps it is time to reassess the rules of the game.”

“What are you suggesting?” asked Seus.

“That you write a tome containing the seeds of your Serenity,” replied the Old Man.

Sues was not convinced. “When the Keepers of truth commit their Serenity to scrolls, it becomes dogma and the journey ends,” he declared. “Is that not what the Dhinus have done? And do they not still believe that some people are born above others?”

“What would be your advice to the Dhinus?” asked the Old Man.

“Cast out that which you find to be wrong.”

“Look into the water, what do you see?”

Seus looked down into the water. “I see a mortal man who has many failings, struggling to bring hope and unity to the people of the globe.”

“Must this tome be written as dogma?” asked the Old Man. “Can it not be a mirror that shows how the people of this globe can be led to destruction, or guided towards salvation?” His voice began to fade into the distance. “How people can discover the Duw within themselves, that the Keepers of the Truth might point them toward the doors of eternity.”

“How do I find the Keepers?” asked Seus glancing around, but the Old Man had gone.

When Seus entered the farm courtyard he was greeted by Sedine from the

door of their cottage. “There is bad news,” she said, beckoning him to hurry inside.

Seus immediately secured the cart and rushed to the cottage. Tarun and Nisa were waiting by the fire inside. “Nonnel is dead,” said Tarun bluntly. “Killed by one of his own admirers.”

Seus was shocked. “How could that be?” he asked, taking a seat.

“There is talk that the ICA were behind it,” replied Sedine. “They have been developing ways of controlling people’s minds since the War of the Realms.”

“Well if that is the case, it proves that the movement is effective,” added Tarun, refusing to take a defeatist line. “I say we forge ahead with Shelve the Shell campaign.”

“But we must avoid placing individuals in vulnerable positions in the future,” added Seus cautiously.

“Why not make the campaigns group orientated?” asked Sedine enthusiastically. “Rather than focussing on high profile leaders like the minstrels.”

“But how do we get the message to the people concerned?” asked Tarun.

Sedine’s spirit was lifted by talk of involvement in the campaign and her eyes widened to reveal a sparkle of excitement. “I think it is time that we asked Beldou to pay us a visit.”

~

Beldou knew that Neagar’s rise to power had been part of a carefully orchestrated plot and he worried about the future with such a man at the helm of Marecian policy. Cester also had concerns and had invited himself along to the Presidor’s inaugural briefing, to determine Neagar’s plans with regard to the ICA.

Neagar was known as a man of grand visions, but he lacked the courage that most would expect from someone in his position. As he entered Regenal’s office, his lack of confidence created more the impression of a stumbling fool than a powerful leader. “Sit down,” commanded Regenal,

and Neagar dutifully obeyed.

Cester wasted no time in raising his concerns. “You know that the ICA’s need to conduct clandestine operations is essential to Realmic Security,” he said, directing the glare of his malevolent eye towards Neagar. “I trust you have no qualms with this.”

The Presidor was visibly alarmed. “Oh no,” he replied in an ill-considered abandonment of his convictions. “None whatsoever.”

Regenal felt that it was his place to set the agenda and cast Cester a disapproving look. “Our main preoccupation is to stop the advance of the Collectives,” he said forcefully, turning his attention back to Neagar. “And we need to help some of the weaker realms to accomplish this goal.”

Neagar nodded to show his understanding of the issue, but he did not speak. Regenal continued. “The old Augranican regime is struggling to oust the new Collective Council.” He narrowed his eyes, gripped the edge of his desk and leaned forward with an intimidating scowl. “We want you to persuade Council to give them some help.”

“You mean ask Council to support a dreadist campaign?” asked Neagar with a look of apprehension.

“Cester was amused by the naivety of his new Presidor. “We will give the old regime a nice new name,” he explained in a patronising tone. “And you will portray them as liberty troopers, bravely fighting to protect us all from the Collective advance”

“What will you call these liberty troopers?” asked Neagar.

“The Cantors,” replied Regenal, stepping in to finalise the plan. “Now you do understand the importance of keeping the Collectives at bay I take it?”

Neagar was in agreement with the policy of Collective containment and began to feel a little more comfortable with his new peers. “Yes. I quite agree. And what is the position with regard to Surisa?” he asked, proving that he was not quite as naive as he seemed. “I take it your plan includes them.”

“Yes,” replied Regenal, surprised by Neagar’s grasp of the issue. “We should support the Milsaic Warlords in a bid for control of Saint Gafhan, and that will lead to the downfall of Surisa.”

Neagar failed to see the connection. “How will home rule in Saint Gafhan bring them down?”

“The Warlords will set up schools to promote Milsaic essentialism in Southern Surisa,” explained Cester. “To destabilise their economy and hasten their decline.”

“Teaching dreadists to fight a dirty war is one thing, but fuelling an idealist vision could be dangerous,” observed Neagar. “What happens when Surisa collapses?”

“We get Saint Gafhan of course,” replied Regenal. “And access to the Surisan sap wells.”

“And why would the essentialists view Marecian exploitation as being any more acceptable than Surisan oppression?” asked Neagar, finally making his point. “What is to stop them turning their dreadist tactics on us once Surisa has gone?”

Regenal lost his patience. “I thought you were supposed to be a Realmist,” he fumed. “You’re beginning to sound like Tarrec. Who has been talking to you?”

Neagar seemed flustered by Regenal’s aggressive manner and Cester stepped in to reassure him. “You must remember that we will be in control of the Warlord’s purse,” he said calmly. “And what could a handful of Milsaic rebels with no support do to harm Marecia?”

“Nothing I suppose,” replied Neagar, apparently convinced by Cester’s observation.

Regenal looked relieved by the Presidor’s submission and continued to outline his plan. “Now, in order to ensure maximum value from our investments, I suggest we give the greatest support to the Warlords with a reputation for extreme violence.”

“But these people burn off the faces of women who refuse to wear their shrouds,” protested Neagar with a look of horror. “Give them weapons

and the gutters of Saint Gafhan will run with blood!” he exclaimed.

Cester cast a glance towards Regenal, amused by Neagar’s show of concern for his fellow man. “I can live with that,” he said.

Neagar wasn’t listening any more and stood up to leave. “I don’t think you should be telling me this,” he said, glancing back as he stepped through the door.

“It’s for the greater good,” shouted Regenal, in a hopeless effort to entice Neagar to return. “The future of Marecia and the Free Globe is in your hands.”

“Let him go,” said Cester, nonchalantly cracking the joints of his fingers one at a time. “I’ll get Hubs to organise a solution.”

~

When Beldou arrived at Docmael farm, his concerns about Neagar and the future of the globe had been overshadowed by more pressing events. Sedine had been keeping watch at the window, peering through the fading light of a long day, and ran to the door to greet him. Tarun and Nisa had been invited along, and within moments of his arrival, Beldou had a platter of local fare on his lap and a tankard of Tarun’s finest ale in his hand.

Sedine was eager for gossip, but Beldou was loathed to begin amidst such a joyous atmosphere. “I have bad news,” he announced eventually, casting a solemn look to each of his companions in turn. “Yamler has died from malgrowth.”

A reverent silence swept through the room. Everyone knew that this day would come, but even so, such tidings could only be met with sorrow and shock. “He has done much to raise awareness of the struggle of the people of Mabbizew,” said Sedine, breaking the uneasy silence with a tribute to her lost champion.

“And to bring the word of Assilees to the people of the Globe,” added Seus.

Beldou was keen to move the conversation along. “Speaking of Assilees, I had the opportunity to read a transcript of his address to the Realmic

Union recently,” he said, turning to Seus. “And something in there worried me.”

“What was that?” asked Seus, his curiosity aroused.

“Assilees spoke boldly of global prosperity being a basic freedom for all men,” replied Beldou. “Regardless of their creed or following.”

“He is a wise man,” encouraged Seus.

Beldou continued. “He also said, in the interests of that prosperity, all Realms must agree to surrender to the will of the Union, or face the prospect of annihilation.”

“He has seen that the peoples of the globe must unite in the pursuit of salvation,” responded Seus with an uncharacteristically grim expression. “Or face destruction.”

Beldou seemed perplexed by the explanation and wanted to ask another question, but Tarun cut in. “Surrender in the interests of prosperity indeed,” he declared in a sardonic tongue. “What do such words mean when they are uttered by the men who work the globe?” he asked. “Men who are only interested in their own salvation. The very men who control the Realmic Union.” Tarun was clearly stirred by the issue and had no time to wait for a response. “Surrender or be destroyed,” he said in reply to his own question. “That is what it means to face the prospect of annihilation.”

“The code of the Union would be a good one if all leaders were idealists like Assilees,” observed Nisa, ensuring that no one misconstrued what Tarun was saying.

“But they are not,” persisted Tarun. “Their promises are hollow and their policies are self-serving. It is the age old tale; the man with the loudest voice grows fat on the toil of others.”

“Might we devise a system of governance without greed?” asked Beldou, turning to Seus for a solution to the apparent dilemma. “How did the Iddurs structure their Council?”

“Practitioners of the Sacred, the Council and the Principles all promise us prosperity if we follow their way, yet they each live in separate houses,”

observed Seus. “The Iddurs had an elemental belief that such practitioners should reside together, because they should all seek the same truth.”

“How did people qualify for their Council?” asked Sedine, intrigued by the notion.

“The young Iddur would be educated in matters of the Principles and the Practice, the Head and the Heart and the notions of the Sacred and the Serene,” explained Seus. “Those wishing to enter the House of the Council would have to be accomplished in all these disciplines.”

“So they had to be clever,” noted Beldou.

Seus nodded. “And they had to surrender to the service of the people,” he added. “Not so many were willing to voice their opinions when it meant leading a humble life.”

“It would never work for us,” declared Tarun dismissively. “If we oust those who have the advantage, others will only take their place.”

“The Iddurs would always seek to influence rather than depose. To lead by example rather than force,” said Seus in an effort to enlighten Tarun as to how their society worked. “They had managed their existence alongside the Sovereignties for thousands of years, until the arrival of the Moran Minster.”

“Could they ever return?” asked Sedine hopefully.

“Tolerance promotes tolerance. Respect promotes respect,” replied Seus. “Perhaps they will rise once more.”

“Enough of this pontificating on the lost social archetype,” said Tarun, tiring of the forgotten past. He turned to Beldou. “Tell us of the problems in the real globe.”

Tarun was tall and fit and handsome, not at all like Beldou to look at, but his foolhardy passion to seek justice before harmony reminded Beldou of his own youthful exuberance. “The ICA is attempting to bring down the new Council in Augranica,” said Beldou in reply. “Sabotaging social projects, murdering key citizens and torturing anyone who opposes them.”

“We should bring their plight to the attention of the Autonomist Councillors,” suggested Nisa. “And get them to debate it at the next Council session.”

“That has been done,” replied Beldou nodding courteously. “And the ICA’s murderous endeavours will hopefully soon be exposed.”

“And what of the ‘Shelve the Shell’ campaign?” asked Sedine, eager for news of her old cause. “Have they made any progress?”

“I believe that the Realmic Union may be about to discuss the issue,” replied Beldou. “That is why I mentioned Assilees speech earlier.” He turned to address Seus for a second time. “Do you think that Assilees was referring to the erculan threat when he spoke of annihilation?”

“I suspect so,” replied Seus. “Assilees recognises that such irresponsibility is a catalyst for catastrophe.”

“But later he tells us that Duw will not permit us to destroy ourselves, as we are created in his image,” continued Beldou, obviously greatly troubled by the issue. “Is this not a contradiction?”

“Assilees believes that the word of the Seusian Minster is the word of Duw,” explained Seus. “But if we take a dispassionate view, we see that the men of the Seusian Minster have created their Duw while admiring their own reflection, and their words, however wise, are only a collection of the words of men.”

“But they are derived from your own teachings,” persisted Beldou. “From the very word of the Iddurs.”

“From the word of the Iddurs perhaps, but not from the word of Duw,” said Seus in an attempt to resolve Beldou’s quandary. “The wisdom of the Iddurs is open to question by its teachers and pupils alike. It does not empower its leaders over its followers. Blind faith in such dogma can lead us all to great folly.”

“Could it lead us to destruction?” asked Nisa.

“If we believe in a divine assurance, that the seed of life that has dusted this globe will flourish into perpetuity, we wash our hands of

responsibility.”

“And we invite the prospect of annihilation,” added Sedine, acknowledging the dangers of the current path.

Nisa’s concerns had only grown. “Is there any hope?” she asked, as if the weight of impending doom might fall and crush them all at any moment.

Seus smiled his kindly smile. “When we understand that it is the responsibility of us all to nurture the seed of life, then we will realise that our salvation must be of our own making,” he replied in an effort to quell Nisa’s rising anxiety.

Tarun knew well that pursuing the current path was futile and had been quietly considering the question of responsibility. “What would the Iddurs say if they were here now?” he asked.

Seus turned to Tarun and spoke with the voice of conviction. “Respect the globe, seek the truth and together we can find salvation.”

The Collapse of Surisa

The Vengeful Baiaran

The Stone Egg

The Galex

The Thunderbolt

The Gift

The Fear

The Obligation

The cold truth about the hidden power of the Secret had come as shock to Neagar. Within weeks of his appointment, the unworldly Presidor had been subjected to a brutal demonstration of the ICA's capabilities that left him in no doubt as to where his future allegiances should lie.

Neagar's subsequent shift in strategy was viewed by many as suspicious, and Beldou immediately sent word to Seus to outline his concerns over the Presidor's apparent change of heart.

"Beldou is coming to see us again," said Seus, reading directly from a letter that had arrived that morning.

"We could meet him in Port Caderydd and finish the journey together," suggested Sedine excitedly. "You have to go there for supplies anyway."

A familiar rap on the open cottage door caught Seus' attention. "How about a cup of tea for a thirsty worker?" asked Tarun in a cheerful voice.

"Sit down," said Seus, draping a cover over the most comfortable chair in the house. "We have news from Beldou."

"Is it good tidings?" asked Tarun hopefully.

"Neagar is maintaining the autonomy of the ICA," replied Seus, shaking his head disapprovingly.

"Turncoat," declared Tarun.

"And he's persuaded Council to fund a group of dreadists in Augranica called the Cantors," continued Seus.

Tarun was surprisingly accepting of the disclosure. "Nothing unexpected there," he added in an all but nonchalant tone.

"I suppose we should have expected something like this," noted Sedine. "After all, Neagar is a Realmist."

Seus turned back to the letter. "He might be a Realmist, but the Autonomists have successfully raised the issue in Council," he continued with a note of optimism. "And no-one is prepared to condone the ICA's treatment of the Augranican people."

“So Council have listened to us,” said Sedine jubilantly. “And what are they going to do about it?”

“They’ve released the Dolban Scroll,” replied Seus, peering back at the parchment. “It decrees that Marecia must desist from promoting rebel tactics to bring down the Augranican Council.”

“Rebel tactics!” exclaimed Tarun. “That is just a way of making assassination and sabotage sound palatable. Why can’t we hear them call it how it is?”

“Well it looks like we might?” replied Seus. “A copy of an ICA Rebel Guide has been sent to Council.”

The existence of such highly restricted documents had never before gone beyond rumour. Sedine almost dropped the cup she was passing to Tarun and quickly sat down on the edge of a nearby chair. “What does it say?” she asked in astonishment.

“It clearly promotes the use of torture, rape and the beheading of civilians, including children,” said Seus, looking up from Beldou’s letter with a face more pallid than the parchment before him. “Apparently these are acceptable practices for destabilisation of a Collective administration.”

Sedine was speechless. She had no idea just how wicked the men behind the Secret could be, but Tarun was not silenced. “When that gets read out in Council, the ICA and their evil doings will be finished,” he declared emphatically.

~

Release of the Dolban Scroll had prompted Regenal to call a meeting of the Secret, but by the time he began his address, news of Cester’s Rebel Guide had raised the temperature of Marecia’s feverish discontent to an unprecedented degree. “How are we going to regain control of Augranica now?” he barked in an ill-tempered rant and turned an accusing eye towards Cester. “Council have already cut funding to the Cantors and this Rebel Guide fiasco will finish it altogether.”

Cofellreker found it hard to conceal his amusement. “I could call in Augranica’s loans from the Global Vault,” he suggested, capitalising on

Cester's failure to maintain the secrecy of such a damning document. "That will hit their welfare projects and make them unpopular with their people."

Regenal rarely had a good word for Cofellreker, but he was encouraged by the proposal. "Good work," he said in an unusual display of praise. He turned back to Cester with a scowl. "Now what about funding for the Cantors? We must maintain the pressure if we are going to bring down the Augranican Council."

"Why not let the Cantors finance themselves?" suggested Cester, eager to redeem his standing. "Do what we did in Olas. Send in ships of the air full of armaments and bring them back loaded with stupes."

Regenal was not impressed. "You can't use a Weaponry Base in peace time," he declared with more than a measure of truculence. "And who else could manage to keep such an operation beneath the sheets?"

Cofellreker was far less dismissive of the idea and saw an immediate opportunity to make some shekels. "I know just the man," he declared optimistically. "Stateman Tonclin could oversee the operation from Anem."

"Can he be trusted?" asked Regenal.

"Cester can vouch for him," replied Cofellreker boldly. "He once worked for the ICA."

Cester nodded in reluctant agreement, seething with contempt at Cofellreker's appropriation of his idea. "We could always divert funds from the Narian armament shipments," he said, offering yet another source of secret funding for the Cantors. "Use Asirel as the go-between and keep the deal at arms length."

"Who will we send to make the arrangements?" asked Regenal, taken by the idea.

"Hubs has proven himself worthy of such dealings in the past," replied Cester swiftly, before Cofellreker had a chance to step in again.

"I'll leave it all in your capable hands then," declared Regenal decisively. "Because I've had enough of the small fry." He leaned back in his seat,

his faith in Cester clearly restored. “It’s time we turned our attention to the big Collie fish.”

“You mean finish off Surisa and take control of their sap fields?” asked Cofellreker, flashing a look of greedy anticipation.

“That’s exactly what I mean,” replied Regenal and he turned to address Cester. “Now how are you getting on with recruitment of those Milsaic Essentialists?”

“It’s been a little slow,” replied Cester. “But Saint Gafhan’s neighbour Kaspitan have agreed to help, and that should tip the scales.”

“Why would Kaspitan help Marcia?” baulked Cofellreker in disbelief.

“Kaspitan is a Milsaic Realm,” retorted Cester, irritated by Cofellreker’s petty objection. “Promoting essentialism will strengthen their global position.”

Cofellreker was not convinced. “That might be true,” he conceded. “But it still doesn’t explain their willingness to cooperate with us, the decadent demons of the West.”

“They are no different to you,” responded Cester, silencing Cofellreker’s tirade with a menacing glance. “They’ll do anything for shekels.” He turned back to Regenal and calmly continued his address. “If we join forces with Kaspitan, we will have all the dreadist recruits that we need.”

“Good,” declared Regenal, reaching down to a lower drawer. He lifted up a great sheaf of parchments and brought it down on his desk with a resounding thud. “Because this gentlemen is Realmic Security Decree 13.11.”

“And what exactly is Realmic Security Decree 13.11?” asked Cofellreker with a puzzled expression.

“A secret licence to supply the Warlords of Saint Gafhan with more armaments than their mules can carry,” replied Regenal with a grin of delight. “All we have to do is get Neagar to sign it and Surisa will be relegated to the parchments of the past.”

~

“The trouble in Saint Gafhan has escalated,” said Sues, glancing at the headline of the parchment before him with a look of dismay. He and Sedine were waiting for Beldou to meet them in a quiet corner of Port Caderydd Inn.

The inn was filled with porters, traders and sailors, crowding around the bar to participate in a frantic ritual of verbal exchange. “He’s here,” exclaimed Sedine as Beldou appeared at the door and she waved her arms excitedly to attract his attention.

Beldou embraced his sister fondly, but he seemed to find the atmosphere distressing. “Can I get you a drink and something to eat?” asked Seus.

“No thank you,” insisted Beldou. “I would rather just carry on with the journey, if you are ready that is.”

The tranquil sounds of the noontime docks made a stark contrast to the raucous babble of the inn, and once outside Beldou seemed to relax. There were few signs of activity on the quayside. Two diving birds were gaily splashing in the sunshine and a group of gulls were squabbling over the head of a fish. “Did you hear that?” asked Sedine suddenly.

“Hear what?” asked Beldou.

“It sounded like a cat crying,” she replied, pointing to some large chests stacked against the quay wall. “I think it came from in there.”

Seus was touched by Sedine’s concern and ventured between the chests to investigate. When he reached the far wall he turned to his right and saw a black skinned woman slumped against a bollard. Her lips were blistered and bleeding, her eyes were closed and she was lying awkwardly in a pool of stale vomit. Seus kneeled down alongside her and took her hand. “What is your name?” he asked.

“Tria Covi,” she replied in a subdued voice.

“She must be a stowaway,” observed Beldou, passing judgement from behind Seus.

“And how did you come to be in this condition?” continued Seus in a gentle tone.

“I went to Cafira to help the suffering,” she said, struggling to find her voice. “And I became inflicted after the inoculation programme.”

Beldou immediately recoiled. “She has HELPS,” he exclaimed. “Cofellreker’s evil malgrowth weapon. Do not touch her.”

“What is HELPS?” asked Sedine with a startled expression.

“A disease that eclipses the Life Protection System,” replied Beldou. “It was developed on apes in Marecia,” he continued with a note of rising panic. “And released on humans in Cafira by the Global Wellbeing Authority.”

Sedine could hardly believe what she was hearing. “How can you be so sure?” she asked, astonished by Beldou’s claim.

“I have seen a copy of the parchment in Council Hall,” declared Beldou. “Documenting the Weaponry’s request for ten gold shekels to develop a human form of the disease.” He turned to Seus with a look of grave concern. “And it is passed on through contact with bodily fluids.”

“He is right,” whispered Tria, her eyes barely able to see the man that was holding her. “You risk your life if you try to save me.”

Seus was undeterred by Beldou’s warning. “Do not worry,” he said in a kindly voice. “You are my responsibility now.”

“You have no obligation to me,” she uttered, her eyes widening in disbelief.

Seus smiled and he squeezed Tria’s hand gently. “The obligation is to myself,” he said.

“What are you going to do with her?” asked Sedine.

“Tria will be staying in my room until she is well again,” replied Seus resolutely. “Can you take Beldou to fetch the cart?”

Sedine nodded dutifully and took Beldou by the hand.

“And bring some leaves of the sour grape tree,” said Seus calling after

them. “From the Old Apothecary in the docks.” He looked back to Tria and saw a glint of hope restored to her once beautiful face.

“You are my angel,” she said, and then she rested her eyes once more.

By early evening Sedine and Beldou had settled themselves by the fire and Tarun had come to join them. Seus had been busy tending to Tria’s needs and seemed determined not to burden anyone with additional responsibilities. “How is she?” asked Sedine when he finally took his place by the hearth.

“Clean and comfortable,” replied Seus, grateful for the show of concern. “It is remarkable what a pot of herbal tea and a bowl of salt broth can do.”

Beldou had reservations about the decision to look after such a sick person. “I am not sure if Tria is in the right place,” he said making his worries known to Seus. “Her illness will require meticulous attention.”

“I will take great care,” replied Seus in an attempt to allay Beldou’s fears. “Sedine will be perfectly safe.”

“And what about you?” persisted Beldou.

“I am sure Seus knows what he is doing,” interrupted Tarun, rising to Seus’ defence. “Caring comes naturally to him.” Beldou looked as though he might be about to raise another objection but Tarun cut in. “Now what has been happening in the greater globe?” he asked, turning the conversation toward more worldly matters. “Surely you have some news for us.”

Beldou took the bait. “It seems that we have finally entered the era of challenge,” he declared.

“What do you mean?” asked Sedine.

“The scholars of the globe are beginning to rally against the Sacred notions of Creation,” replied Beldou, delighted with the prospect of breaking a tale of intellectual thinking.

“What are they saying?” asked Seus, his attention firmly caught.

“They say that the old stories have been discredited by recent discoveries of the Principles,” continued Beldou excitedly. “That their ideas are just myths devised to strengthen their authority.”

“And how have these criticisms been received?” asked Sedine.

“The Moran Minster was holding its own until the theorist Wardin challenged them with his notion of heredity,” replied Beldou with a touch of glee in his voice. “They’re calling it the ‘Thunderbolt of Wardin’.”

“What is Wardin saying with this thunderbolt?” enquired Seus.

“That all life has developed from the same humble beginnings.”

“That is not a new idea,” observed Sedine.

“Ah, but Wardin explains how,” added Beldou drawing his chair a little closer to the others. “Each generation produces a surplus of offspring with a diversity of characteristics,” he began. “Those that are best suited to their environment will go on to reproduce, and the rest just fall by the wayside.”

“I see,” commented Seus. “So the environment chooses the way that life develops.”

“Yes. As the environment changes, so life forms adapt and evolve in a gradual process,” confirmed Beldou.

“We farmers have known that for a long time,” said Tarun in a dismissive tone.

Beldou was undeterred by Tarun’s objection and continued with his explanation. “It completely contradicts the notion that Duw created Man in his own image. It is the hand of chance versus the hand of destiny,” he concluded. “Obviously Wardin is right.”

Seus cast Tarun an acknowledging glance and then turned back to Beldou to continue the debate. “Perhaps both are right,” he suggested.

“How can that be?” asked Beldou.

“The Iddurs have observed that evolution is not simply a physical process,” replied Seus. “Physical advancement appears to be accompanied by a corresponding development in the power of intellect.”

“How is that relevant?” asked Beldou.

“If you agree with Wardin, we have developed from the most simple of imaginable life forms,” replied Seus.

“Yes,” agreed Beldou cautiously.

“Then perhaps, locked in that life form, somewhere, somehow, like the plan of the great oak locked within the tiny acorn, is a map of the evolutionary path to becoming one with Duw.”

The last thing that Beldou expected was for Seus to side with the Sacred point of view. “I am not convinced,” he declared.

Seus persisted with his explanation. “And regardless of the nature of the physical course that a life form might take to evolve, the goal will always be the same.”

Sedine was quick to catch on to the concept. “So all the plants and animals are on the same journey,” she suggested.

“Yes.”

“Not quite the Minster’s notion of us being created in the image of Duw,” observed Tarun, beginning to understand what Seus was saying.

“It is quite arrogant of us to assume that we have arrived at the pinnacle of evolution,” declared Seus. “That we alone are like Duw and no other life form could possibly be on the same journey.”

“That is an incredible thought,” said Sedine, impressed by Seus’ deliberations. “Did the Iddur’s have any notions of heredity?”

“As I am sure you are aware, the Iddurs were more concerned with approaching questions of the Principles from the perspective of the Serene,” replied Seus. “But they never contradicted the old story of origin.”

“What was the old story?” asked Sedine.

Now it was Seus’ turn to draw his chair into the circle. “One day, before our time, a wise ape gave birth to a thin and feeble infant. The creature looked so strange that the other apes wanted to kill it, but the mother protected it, and, although it was weak, it grew to be the cleverest being that the apes had ever known.”

“You mean that apes suddenly changed into humans?” scoffed Beldou. “According to Wardin, humans evolved gradually.”

Seus was not deterred by Beldou’s dismissive remarks and continued with the story. “Gradually, more and more apes gave birth to these creatures, until eventually there were no more wise apes, only people.”

Now Beldou paused for a moment to think, as if he might be considering the possibility that Seus’ tale could have some merit after all. “Well, the bones of a half ape, half man have never been unearthed,” he mused.

Seus nodded and made his reply with a faint smile. “And maybe they never will be.”

“That is an interesting theory,” noted Sedine. “But unless you were actually there to witness such a change, you could never prove it. There would be no bones.”

“That was exactly what I thought,” responded Seus. “Until one day I heard the story of the stone egg.”

“What is the story of the stone egg?”

“Some years ago now, a theorist from Marecia unearthed the fossilised egg of an ancient animal. A giant creature that roamed the globe long before any that we would recognise today,” began Seus in a hushed tone. “Many such eggs had been found, but this one was very different.”

“How?” asked Tarun, intrigued by the pensive mood of Seus’ tale.

“When the theorist broke it open, he found a creature inside... with feathers.”

“You mean a bird?” asked Sedine.

“Yes. A primitive bird.”

“What did he do with the egg?” asked Tarun.

“The idea that one species could suddenly give birth to another was completely unknown to him,” continued Seus. “He didn’t understand his discovery and put the egg on a shelf to gather dust.”

“But to you this was confirmation that the story of origin had some merit?” said Sedine.

“It certainly suggests that Wardin’s notion of heredity might be incomplete,” concluded Seus.

“So the evidence points to another factor being involved,” observed Beldou thoughtfully.

Seus nodded in agreement. “And if such a deduction is correct, we can assume that destiny might have a hand in evolution after all.”

~

“The hand of chance sows no corn,” said Beldou, looking up from the furrow that he was planting and rubbing his aching back. “Farming is hard work.” He had been keen to try his hand in the fields, but he was greatly relieved when Seus and Sedine finally arrived with a midday feast.

“Honest toil clearly improves the sense of humour,” jested Tarun from the hedgerow at the edge of the field. “Come and lay your spread over here.”

It was a warm day and Sedine was always happy to share her food in the sunshine, but as usual, the conversation quickly turned to more serious matters. “Have you heard what is happening in Saint Gafhan?” asked Tarun.

“Marecia is secretly stoking the conflict,” replied Beldou. “And Cester has employed a man called Badelinn, to encourage activists from all across the Milsaic Globe to enlist in the struggle.”

“Who is this Badelinn?” asked Seus.

“A wealthy and charismatic Baiaran,” replied Beldou. “And they say he has trading links with the Hubs family.”

“No wonder they think he is well placed for the job,” observed Sedine. “They must be paying him well.”

“I doubt it,” said Beldou. “He despises Surisan oppression and needs no encouragement, but they say he has another secret goal...” Beldou paused for a moment to create an air of expectancy. “He hates Marcia even more.”

“Why?” asked Tarun.

“For encouraging Asirel in their hostilities against the Baiaran Globe,” replied Beldou. “He witnessed the resulting carnage in Bennola with his own eyes and has sworn to take revenge.”

Seus was puzzled by Beldou’s revelation. “Does he know that he is working for the ICA?” he asked.

“His supporters think he is working for Kaspitan, but Badelinn knows what he is doing,” replied Beldou “I suspect that he is biding his time. Building up a vast legion of ICA trained troopers, ready for the day when the dog can bite its master.”

“If this is his goal, then the struggle against Marcian oppression has divided,” observed Seus with a disapproving shake of his head.

“What is more, he may well be playing into the hands of the Secret,” added Beldou.

“How can that be?” asked Tarun.

“By providing them with a new enemy when Surisa collapses,” explained Beldou. “And an excuse to continue to interfere in the affairs of the Baiaran Globe.”

“It seems likely that the struggle against Marcian oppression is about to become one against its people,” said Seus.

“Perhaps it already has,” declared Tarun. “While you were in Caderydd the Nariians took seven Marecians hostage in Bennola,” he said. “Apparently they are protesting against Marecian support for Qria in their conflict with Nari.”

It was unusual for Tarun to break news to Beldou, but he was not surprised. “What the Nariians fail to realise is, the victims of the violent struggle for freedom are always the oppressed,” he said.

“Are you suggesting that Marecian citizens are themselves oppressed by their rulers?” asked Sedine, her attention caught by Beldou’s comment.

“Of course,” replied Beldou. “Their freedom is an illusion. They are masochists, beaten by their masters with the sticks of propaganda, oherni culture and sham law. Those who speak out are silenced. What kind of freedom is that?”

Beldou’s outburst reminded Seus of the fates of Deykenn and Nonnel. “It is a false freedom,” he replied with a note of reluctance in his voice.

“Then tell me. What is the true freedom?” asked Beldou.

Seus rolled his head back and cast his attention upward, as if he could scour the recesses of his subconscious mind by studying the fluttering leaves above his head. Obviously the answer to such a deep question was not an easy one to retrieve. Finally he began to speak. “Perhaps the greatest gift of humanity is reason. Reason leads to understanding and understanding is the passage to freedom.”

Beldou had waited patiently for a reply, but his response was not so slow in coming. “Understanding what?” he enquired.

“Understanding our nature. The principles of survival that have been so deeply ingrained in our consciousness that they have become instinctive memories,” continued Seus. “But domination, greed and brutality are no longer the keys to the doors of our future.”

“What are they then?” asked Tarun.

“They are the shackles that bind us to our primitive past.”

“But Wardin has shown us that only the strongest survive” argued

Beldou. “That is why the most callous and greedy people of this globe always rise to the top.”

Sedine was quick to disagree. “Wardin does not say that only the brutal will prosper,” she said sternly, reminding Beldou of his own lecture. “What he has shown us is that evolution is linked to environment.”

“And we can observe that humanity has the ability to alter its environment,” added Seus. “Therefore, through the gift of reason, we can determine that humanity has the ability to shape its own destiny.”

“Is this something that the Iddurs had already realised?” asked Sedine.

Seus nodded and then looked to Tarun. “When farmers keep the fattest pig to breed from, they create an environment where only the fattest pigs survive,” he said, recalling the conversation of the previous day. “Such observations led the Iddurs to consider that the destiny of the mind may also lie in our own hands.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sedine, now fully absorbed by the discussion.

“Think of the tree,” replied Seus looking upwards for inspiration once more. “It does not take life to feed itself. It does not strike back when you cut it down. The Iddurs had a saying. Think like the tree and eventually you will become like the tree.”

“So we should all take root and grow leaves if we are to survive?” responded Beldou with a note of sarcasm in his voice.

Seus looked a little cross. “No,” he replied. “We should consider our destiny in terms of our spiritual environment, as well our physical environment.”

“The prosperity of the people is more important than the wealth of the individual,” said Sedine, offering Beldou a practical interpretation of Sues’ notion.

“And if we begin to think as one, we can go forward in peace together,” added Seus.

Now Beldou understood. “Towards a future where humanity recognises

its gifts and uses them to secure the prosperity of all,” he said, looking to Seus for affirmation.

“Yes,” replied Seus, this time in complete agreement. “This is the only future.”

~

“The future is in aucers,” said Cofellreker, bursting through Regenal’s door unannounced. “And we need to lead the way.” Cester had requested a meeting to discuss funding for the Cantors and Cofellreker was running ahead of schedule.

“You’re too early,” snapped Regenal, irritated by the presumptuous manner of his colleague and he turned his attention to a stack of parchments on his desk.

Cofellreker was undeterred. “Some enterprising traders have started linking their aucers together to create a global information exchange,” he said in a voice laced with expectancy. “They’re calling it the Galex and it’s catching on fast.”

“And what of it?” asked Regenal without looking up.

“Aucers are getting smaller,” replied Cofellreker. “They say everyone in the Decadent Globe will soon have one. Whoever develops the Galex for the masses will control the primary communications system of the future.” He pulled his chair closer to the desk in an effort to regain Regenal’s attention. “And the ultimate spy tool.”

Talk of spy tools seemed to have the desired effect and Regenal looked up from his parchments. “Well your vault aucers have proven to be very useful for prying,” he conceded. “I suppose I should consider the idea.”

“If we don’t develop the Galex, then someone else will,” continued Cofellreker in an effort to secure concurrence. “And the competition has already started.”

Regenal put the parchments into a drawer and leaned back in his chair. “The Weaponry has an Aucer Complex,” he said, rubbing his chin. “We could use it as a model. That would put us ahead of the race.”

“And with Council backing, we could block the competition and guarantee domination of the Galex,” added Cofellreker in excitement.

“And I suppose your Federation members will make a lot of shekels out of it,” said Regenal, forever cynical about Cofellreker’s motivations.

“Who else could you trust with a project like this?” asked Cofellreker. “The IMB have proven more than worthy in the past.”

“All right, we’ll put it to Council,” agreed Regenal and he struck the desk bell with a decisive blow.

“Yes Sir,” asked Lemo, arriving in an instant.

“Is Cester in the building?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Then find him,” commanded Regenal. “We might as well get this meeting started.”

Cester was not long in arriving and raised an eyebrow when he saw Cofellreker gloating in his chair. “He came early with one of his shekel making schemes,” explained Regenal with an air of distaste.

Cofellreker was quick to respond. “The future is a virgin pasture,” he said, proudly defending his position. “And he who ploughs it first...”

Cester was unimpressed by Cofellreker’s philosophical justifications. “Funding for the Cantors is dwindling,” he said, turning directly to the vital issue. “And I need to know why.”

“Nari has stopped buying armaments from us,” explained Regenal succinctly. “No sales means no shekels.”

“Illegal armaments pass through too many hands,” added Cofellreker. “And Nachi can supply them directly. All Nari buys from us these days are spare parts.”

“Then perhaps we could use the Bennola situation to our advantage,” said Cester, never one to accept defeat. “Council might agree to supply Nari through an intermediary, in return for the release of the hostages.”

“I’ve tried that using Asirel as a go-between,” said Regenal. “And Council refused.”

Cester was not ready to give up. “Then get Neagar to sanction the deal and keep it secret,” he said, struggling to conceal his desperation. “If the Cantors don’t get more shekels, we will lose Augranica.”

“Council would find out and Neagar would be finished,” scoffed Cofellreker.

“Neagar is expendable,” sneered Cester in response.

“And Hubs would take his place,” added Regenal, remembering their earlier plan with a look of glee.

Cofellreker was far from convinced. “The people will lose faith in the system if we let a Presidor take a fall like that,” he said. “And it would destroy the Realmist’s reputation. Hubs would soon be voted out.”

Cofellreker had a point, but Cester wasn’t about to give up on his idea. “Then we’ll find a dupe,” he said persuasively. “Pawn a prince to save the king and keep Neagar out of it.”

Now it was Regenal’s turn to raise an objection. “Even if you lay the blame on someone else, Neagar’s mark will still be on the documents,” he said, pointing out an obvious flaw in the plan.

“Then we’ll tell everyone he’s gone senile and was tricked into signing things he didn’t understand,” added Cester with a snigger. “He won’t have to act.”

~

Neagar’s growing reputation for unaccountability had the globe looking on in disbelief. “Marecia has awarded compassionate aid to the Cantors,” said Beldou, peering over his morning tea to read the latest headlines.

Tria was sitting by the fire keeping Beldou’s company. “Compassionate aid,” she said in astonishment. “I thought the Cantors were dreadists.”

“They are,” replied Beldou. “But the conflict between Nari and Qria has

just ended and profits from illegal armament sales will be down,” he explained. “Neagar has obviously been forced to find other ways to support his Augranican marauders.”

“It always amazes me how Marecians can be so blind to the evil deeds that are performed in their name,” said Seus, looking greatly disheartened by the news. He handed Tria a bowl of broth and feigned a look of annoyance at her exertions. “But you must not trouble yourself with such matters.”

“Thank you,” replied Tria, rewarding Seus’ concern with a gracious smile, but she clearly felt well enough to ignore his advice. “People only see what they are shown,” she continued. “They even tried to blame my condition on men having sex with apes.”

“Is it not true that apes have been found to carry the germ?” asked Beldou innocently.

“Only because apes were used in its development,” retorted Tria. “And they duped animal protectionists into releasing some of them back into the wild.”

“But why would they do that?” enquired Beldou.

“As part of the experiment, or maybe to provide a cover story,” added Tria. “But that has nothing to do with people becoming infected. People became infected through an inoculation programme.”

“I know about the programme,” said Beldou. “But how do you know about the apes?”

“You just have to be there and observe,” she replied. “But no one ever listens to the lowly or the afflicted.”

“Lemo will be very interested to learn about this,” said Beldou. “I will send him word as soon as I get home.”

“And give him my regards,” said Seus, patting Beldou on the shoulder. “I expect you will be gone by the time I get back from my deliveries.”

Seus had to pass by the Northern Hills to complete his morning’s work and decided to stop off at Einim Crag on his way home. Soon he was

settled in his favourite place and, after sitting in contemplation for some time, he noticed the Old Man quietly perched on a nearby stone. “You seem deep in thought,” said the Old Man.

“It seems that my feelings for Tria are growing by the day,” responded Seus with a perplexed expression.

“And are these feelings reciprocated?” enquired the Old Man.

“Oh yes. She has told me that she loves me.”

The Old Man was mystified. “Then where is the problem?” he asked.

“There is a fear in my heart that I will lose Tria, as I did with Amme,” replied Seus with a sorrowful look. “And that I could not cope with such a loss for a second time.”

“Tria is a remarkable person,” said the Old Man. “She has risked her life to help those who are less fortunate and now she must make her sacrifice.” He looked deep into the sorrowful eyes before him. “Cherish what you have and let Tria’s love and determination provide the inspiration for you to continue with your task.”

Seus was greatly reassured by the Old Man’s wisdom. “You say that I should write a Tome,” he said, turning his mind toward the quest. “But what will this Tome be like?”

The Old Man cast his eyes upwards to consider the question, just as Seus might. “The Tome is like a game board,” he replied after some deliberation. “Yet no armies lie in wait. Instead there are eight stories, and each story is made of eight more.”

“And what are the subjects of these stories?” asked Seus, keen to learn as much of his task as possible.

“Perhaps you could write of greed and sacrifice,” suggested the Old Man.

“Do you mean the Tyranny and the Toil?” asked Seus, clearly inspired. “The greed of those who have yet to begin the journey of truth,” he continued. “And the struggle of others like Beldou, to stay upon the path in the face of oppression.”

The Old Man nodded encouragingly. “And what do you know of the Principle?” he asked.

“The Principle is a vision of the tree of measures,” replied Seus. “It grows through observation and blossoms through procrastination.”

“A good enough answer,” replied the Old Man, nodding again in concurrence.

“But the story of the Principle can not be rolled out like a scroll of time,” noted Seus. “For me the story of the Principle is one of personal discovery.”

“Then you should tell the story of your own vision,” determined the Old Man.

“And what of the Practice?” asked Seus, beginning to see the task unfold before him. “The fruit of the tree of measures?”

“It may be sweet or it may be sour,” replied the Old Man. “So be of good intension when you pick the fruit of this tree.”

Seus stood up. “And then there is the story of the Sacred,” he continued, gazing southward across the lonely moor. “The path that no man can witness, but we know in our hearts to exist.” He turned to the Old Man and smiled enthusiastically. “But we should beware of laying false paths.”

“And what of the path contemplated by the eye that peers within?” asked the Old Man.

“The story of the Serene,” exclaimed Seus excitedly. “Of course. Another tale of discovery.” He returned to his place, sat down and looked the Old Man directly in the eye. “That makes just six stories,” he said, clasping his hands in expectancy. “What of the other two?”

“They would be the stories of the rulers,” replied the Old Man.

Seus seemed a little confused. “What could be said about rulers that could not be mentioned in the Tyranny and the Toil?” he asked with a note of surprise.

“I am not referring to the rulers of realms,” replied the Old Man with a wry smile. “I am referring to the rulers of emotion and reason.”

“The Head is the ruler of reason,” responded Seus quickly. “Understand your deepest instincts and your choices will be wise.”

“Precisely,” confirmed the Old Man, his voice now little more than a whisper. “And the Heart is the ruler of emotion. Through the heart we can learn the love of one and, through the love of one, we can discover the love of all.”

~

As Lemo crossed the threshold of Regenal’s office, he wondered if any of the members of Regenal’s Secret clan had ever known love. “I have a report that may be of importance to the meeting,” he said, cautiously interrupting the atmosphere of malicious machinations.

Regenal snatched the message from Lemo’s hand and quickly scanned the top line. “Badelinn has formed his own legion of Milsaic essentialists,” he said, casting a look of concern towards Cester. “What do you know about this?”

“Ah. You mean Qeadala,” replied Cester, acknowledging his recognition of Saint Gafhan’s latest dreadist group. “A new customer for Marecian armaments and another stone in the hoof for Surisa,” he explained. “Need I say more?”

Regenal turned his attention back to the scroll. “And there is a problem with Qria,” he continued.

“Usshenei has never forgiven us for supplying armaments to both sides,” interrupted Cofellreker. “What does he want now?”

“He is claiming that the Qrian Durks supported Nari during the war,” replied Regenal. “And he’s murdering them in droves for their treachery.”

“So what?” asked Cester, irritated by Lemo’s seemingly inconsequential news.

All eyes turned to Lemo. “Council want to block armament sales to

Qria,” he spluttered in a nervous attempt to justify his intrusion. “As a protest against the carnage.”

“Then we’ll get Neagar to override Council’s objection,” said Cester dismissively. “We can’t afford to lose sales over a bunch of useless no realmers like the Durks.”

Lemo was horrified by the suggestion and dared to raise an objection. “If we supply Ussheni with the means to annihilate the Durks, everyone will know,” he said, bowing his head in reverence to Regenal. “The globe is watching Sir.”

“Then let the Globe do something about it,” snapped Regenal and he dismissed Lemo with a wave.

Cester watched in amusement as Lemo scurried away. “We might as well hang as much as we can on Neagar while we still have the opportunity,” he said, turning back to Regenal. “Because he’ll never win the next polls.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t been thrown out already considering some of the things that we’ve made him do,” observed Cofellreker.

“You just make sure Hubs is next in the saddle,” demanded Cester with a cold stare.

Cofellreker averted his gaze. “Hubs is a big player in the sap trade,” he said, shaking his head in disapproval. “And he’s used his privileges to extend his interests into the stupe and the weaponry support trades,” he continued.

“What is your point,” asked Regenal.

“I think it would be a mistake to install such a powerful and ambitious man in the saddle,” replied Cofellreker.

“You’re just worried that he might take over your Federation,” sneered Cester.

Regenal was quick to side with Cester. “Hubs understands the Secret perfectly,” he professed. “And he’s proven himself worthy as Deputy Paramount.”

“That is true,” conceded Cofellreker. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you if the old dog stops fetching and starts barking.”

“I’m more concerned about the possibility of a surprise win by the Autonomists,” declared Cester. “And we all know of your penchant for Autonomist Presidors.”

A look of conceit spread across Cofellreker’s face. “One of my protégés, Kadikus, is destined for the Autonomist chair,” he confessed. “So if Hubs loses, we’ll still have our way.”

“You just see to it that Hubs wins,” insisted Regenal, suspecting that Cofellreker might be nurturing a different agenda. “And don’t delay,” he continued, pointing to the door. “Time is getting short.”

“All right, all right,” said Cofellreker standing up to leave. “I get the message.”

As Cofellreker opened the door, Lemo tentatively stepped inside and bowed his head. “Well, what is it this time?” bawled Regenal.

“Surisa has pulled out of Saint Gafhan Sir. They are virtually broken.”

Regenal’s eyebrows rose in surprise and his eyes beamed with pure delight. “Congratulations are in order,” he said, tuning to Cester with a look of fulfilment.

“And Augranica is back under Marecian control,” continued Lemo.

Regenal lifted his feet onto the desk. “Glory be,” he said, casting his eyes skyward in mock gratitude. “It seems that that all our prayers have been answered today.”

“Well, not quite Sir,” added Lemo. “Usshenni is preparing for war with his neighbour Wakuti.”

Regenal was unconcerned and continued to wallow in his victory, but Cester wanted to know more. “Why?” he asked.

“Because we persuaded Wakuti to steal Qrian sap and sell it to us at a low price,” explained Beldou.

“Ussheni needs our trade to rebuild his economy,” said Cester in a facetious tone. “He’s just bluffing.”

“I think he is serious Sir,” persisted Lemo in an attempt to regain his superior’s attention. “He has summoned Envoy Speigal to officially warn us of his intentions.”

“Good,” declared Regenal, dropping his feet to the floor. “Then tell Speigal to give him the impression that we will not interfere in his squabble with Wakuti.”

“But we promised to protect Wakuti in return for the cheap sap Sir,” said Lemo, tactfully reminding Regenal of his obligation.

“Lemo, Lemo, Lemo. If Ussheni thinks we’ll protect them, he wont invade,” retorted Regenal in a condescending tone. “And we don’t want to pass up on an excuse to extend our influence in the Baiaran Globe, now do we?”

“No Sir. Of course Sir,” responded Lemo dutifully and he backed towards the door.

“As soon as we hear from Speigal we’ll reconvene,” continued Regenal and he tuned to Cester with a look of jubilant anticipation. “This could be the war that we’ve been waiting for.”

~

Speigal was a stocky, reserved and somewhat dishevelled looking individual, quite unlike any other Marecian Envoy, but she was a woman of the Decadent Globe and Ussheni liked that.

Their meeting had been arranged at his convenience, and as soon as Speigal entered the reception, she spotted him chatting to a group of admiring dignitaries. He turned to watch her approach, his dark eyes devouring her form as if she might be an offering sent for his delight.

Glancing at the palatial surroundings, Speigal deduced that Ussheni wished to portray himself as a Sovereign of the people, but his choice of battle attire for such an occasion only served to reinforce his image as a notorious weaponry dictator. His hair was neat and his face was strangely

handsome, but something about his manner caused Speigal to shudder. “Good day,” he said, extending his hand but a short distance from his body, in order to oblige her to enter the lair of his personal space.

Speigal took his hand from the greatest distance that she could manage. “Good day,” she replied and smiled courteously, but her lowered head and narrowed eyes instantly established her position as his equal. “Shall we get down to work?”

The two rivals retired to a more intimate location and settled themselves opposite each other. Speigal wasted no time in opening the dialogue. “I have a direct instruction from the new Presidor, to seek better relations with Qria.”

Usshenni raised an eyebrow. “But how?” he asked. “We see nothing but your desire to access Baiaran fire sap at prices that promote poverty amongst the Qrian people.”

Speigal was not about to be drawn into a moral debate for which she had no defence, she was there for one purpose only, to encourage Usshenni to seek revenge against Wakuti. “I won’t waste your time,” she replied, donning her most sincere face. “I am here to tell you that Marecia has no interest in your dispute with Wakuti.”

Usshenni was not deceived. “So what does it mean when Marecia promises to protect its friends?” he asked with a sardonic tongue. His voice hardened and he peered toward his opponent with accusing eyes. “It is Marecian encouragement that has led to Wakuti disregarding Qrian rights.”

To concede such a point would almost certainly have lead to failure for Speigal, and failure was not in her brief. “I can only reiterate our position,” she replied stubbornly. “We have no opinions on conflicts amongst the Baiaran realms.”

“The Globe is not littered with fools,” replied Usshenni with a note of rising impatience. “They all know that Marecia uses its muscles to manipulate the flow of our sap for themselves.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice slightly. “And we know that you can harm us, although it is not you that we threaten. But we too can cause harm to you, even if we have to send lone troopers to your door.”

The phrase, ‘*only a mad dog bites the sleeping lion*’ sprang into Speigal’s mind. Her instinct was to reprimand Usshenni for his impertinent threat, but he was clearly considering invading Wakuti, and it was her job to ensure that he did. “Is there any possibility that you might settle your differences with Wakuti?” she asked, intent on discovering what, if anything, might dissuade him.

“I have sent word to Wakuti,” he explained. “If, when we meet, they agree to cease stealing from our borders we will say no more. But if we cannot find a solution, Qria will not lie down, even though wisdom suggests otherwise. Do you understand?”

Speigal could not help but smile. She now knew that war was inevitable, despite the failure of her earlier subterfuge. “Oh yes, make no mistake,” she said. “I understand.”

“Then tell these things to your Presidor Hubs.”

~

“Hubs has dubbed Usshenni *The new Thirel!*” exclaimed Seus, looking up from Beldou’s latest letter with the eyes of surprise. It was a cold evening and Tarun and Nisa had come to join the others before a roaring fire at Docmael cottage.

“Why would he say that?” asked Tarun.

“Because Usshenni has just invaded Wakuti,” replied Seus, leaning over to fill Tarun’s tankard from the hearth jug. “And he has been persecuting the Durks, as Thirel did with the Sewjhi people.”

“But Marecia have been supporting Usshenni’s massacres for some time,” said Nisa in bewilderment. “Why the sudden change of heart?”

“It seems that Hubs requires an excuse for war with Qria,” replied Seus.

“An excuse to get a greater control of Baiaran fire sap more like,” said Tarun with a note of sarcasm.

“There will be strong opposition from the people,” said Sedine, in an effort to maintain a sense of optimism. “Even a Realist Council would find it hard to justify Marecian involvement in such a conflict.”

“According to Beldou, Hubs has the support of the Union,” replied Seus. “And if Council refuse his request, he will use his powers as Presidor and go to war anyway.”

“That means the Union would be dictating to Council!” exclaimed Tarun in disbelief. “Surely that is against the Charter of the Realm.”

Tria had been dosing beneath her blanket by the fire and suddenly opened her eyes. “This is exactly the opportunity that Cofellreker has been waiting for,” she said, clearly stirred by the conversation. “For the Realmic Union to make their mark as a supreme global force.”

“You could be right,” agreed Tarun. “The minor realms have been campaigning against Usshenni’s slaughtering of the Durks. They will see this as an opportunity to do something about it.”

“Only the major realms have any sway with the Union,” said Sedine dismissively. “And Surisa and Nari are in no position to vote for war.”

Seus was not of the same mind. “Surisa is on the verge of economic collapse and Nari are desperate for Marecian trade,” he observed. “Hubs could easily bribe them into compliance.”

“And that would bring the Union one step closer to success,” murmured Tria in agreement. “A One Globe authority with Cofellreker pulling the strings.”

“I am not so sure about Cofellreker being in control,” observed Nisa. “If you ask me, Hubs is pulling his own strings.”

“Well I certainly hope that he fails,” added Seus. “Because Beldou is of the opinion that Marecia will test their new UD shells on the Qrian people if the war goes ahead.”

“What are UD shells?” asked Sedine, alarmed by talk of a new weapon.

“Shells filled with spent elements from the erculan trade,” replied Seus, casting his eyes back to Beldou’s letter. “Used dust they call it. And if the dust gets into the soil, it will cause a malgrowth epidemic that will last for generations.”

“Surely it would affect Marecian troopers as well?” said Nisa with a look of horror.

“Not soon enough to stop them fighting,” responded Tarun with a cynical tone.

Sedine threw herself backwards in dejection. “Surisa has pulled out of Saint Gafhan, Augranica is back under Marecian control and all our efforts to seek justice through the Union have failed,” she declared. “Is there nothing we can do to maintain the struggle against the Secret?”

Seus was concerned by Sedine’s rising mood of dejection. Country living had many rewards, but he knew well that she often felt isolated and powerless. “Perhaps it is time to scatter the seeds of spiritual unity,” he said, in an effort to rekindle her customary fire of determination. “And turn our attentions toward the preservation of the globe for the children of the future.”

“I will drink to that,” said Tarun, raising his tankard towards Sedine. “To the new focus. Spiritual unity and the environment.”

~

“The new focus is to be exploitation,” declared Hubs, addressing his former superiors amidst the grandiose setting of the Presidor’s office. He bared his teeth with an arrogant, slightly lopsided grin. “Surisa is finished.”

“I hope this position hasn’t gone to your head,” snapped Regenal, irritated by Hubs’ lofty attitude. “I haven’t come all this way for you to read me the headlines.”

Hubs had no desire to tarnish his glory with a demeaning squabble and declined to react. “Most of the Surisan territories are to re-form as a Federation of Realms,” he continued, assuming an appropriately serious expression.

“And the Milsaic Warlords have retained control of the southern territorial belt,” added Cester with a look of pride.

Hubs made no acknowledgment of the triumph. Instead he clasped his hands in regal fashion above his desk and turned a wanting eye to Cester.

“But unfortunately, Bersia have declared their independence in the west.”

Regenal interrupted. “What does Bersia matter?” he asked truculently. “We only need control of the central belt to ensure access for our sap duct.”

“We need control of the entire belt,” retorted Hubs, daring to exercise his newfound authority at the very first opportunity. “To ensure control of the stupe routes out of Saint Gafhan.”

Cofellreker saw Regenal’s face begin to redden with anger and quickly cut in to diffuse the situation. “We won’t be the only realm scrabbling for the spoils,” he said in a conciliatory tone. “And control of Bersia will be essential if we are going to dominate the trade routes of the southern belt.”

Regenal was distracted by Cofellreker’s observation and Cester seized the opportunity to steer the debate. “And what do you propose to do with Bersia?” he asked, eager to test Hubs’ competence as a strategist.

Hubs leaned back in his sumptuous seat and cast a greedy smile across the desk. “Your Warlords have done us proud so far,” he said, finally acknowledging Cester’s contribution to the decline of Surisa. “I say we send them west to help their Milsaic brothers take over Bersia.”

“How will a home war in Bersia benefit us?” asked Cofellreker.

Hubs struggled to suppress an indulgent smile. “The Realmic Union will be obliged to keep the peace,” he explained with an unashamed look of fulfilment. “And Marcia’s role will be to build Weaponry bases for the Union forces.”

Cester was most impressed. “Very clever,” he enthused. “The bases will make convenient safe havens for our oherni shipments.”

“And no doubt you and your Weaponry Support Traders will be given the job of building them,” scoffed Regenal. “You and Cofellreker must have been twinned at birth.” He rose to his feet and made for the door. “I think it is time for us to retire.”

“Very well gentlemen,” agreed Hubs, with more than a note of condescension. “That will be all for now.”

Regenal was clearly incensed by Hubs' appropriation of command. "What has Hubs done for us since we put him into the saddle?" he bellowed as his select band of followers re-entered the sanctuary of his office.

Cester closed the door quietly behind Cofellreker and turned to Regenal. "It was Hubs who secured the Union's support for the war in Wakuti," he replied in a calm voice.

"But not the subsequent occupation of Qria," retorted Regenal grudgingly. "And that was the objective."

"All is not lost with Qria," said Cester in appeasement. "There may be a way."

"How?"

"You remember that Ussheni threatened to send lone troopers to our door?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well he and Badelinn are conspiring to attack Marecia," continued Cester. "By planting a shell beneath the Turrets of Korweny."

Regenal sat back, startled by Ussheni's impertinent plot. "How do you know this?" he demanded.

"The Borderless Interrogation Force have infiltrated his dreadist group," replied Cester. "They are planning to secretly swap the fire dust for harmless powder and catch the dreadists in the act."

"And what are you proposing?" asked Regenal.

"We could secretly put the fire dust back," replied Cester with a wily grin. "Then when shell goes off, we march into Qria in response to Ussheni's act of war."

"Another Treasure Bay," declared Regenal.

"And Hubs will be cursed for not dealing with Ussheni when he had the

opportunity,” added Cofellreker.

The prospect of war did nothing to stem Regenal’s loathing of Hub’s duplicitous ambitions. “I hate to admit that you were right,” he confessed, glancing up at Cofellreker. “But it was a mistake to allow a major player to become all-powerful.” He banged the desk with an insistent fist. “Hubs is beyond control. I want him out.”

“And I have just the man to beat him at the next polls,” said Cofellreker, glowing with joy at Regenal’s admission. “Tonclin. He will do exactly as he is told.”

“How can you be sure?” asked Regenal.

“Because we know of his dark side as a trader in Anem,” replied Cofellreker.

“But Hubs is a wily old fox,” noted Cester. “What if he wins the polls?”

“The people will never choose Hubs over a silver tongue like Tonclin.”

Regenal was still not satisfied. “Hubs will be a formidable power by the time he comes up for the polls, Presidor or not.” He looked back to Cester and scowled. “I think we should consider a more permanent solution.”

“Well,” said Cester, cracking his fingers in anticipation. “He has too many friends in the ICA for us to do anything, but I might have just the solution.”

Regenal’s eyes opened wide, like a child being handed a surprise gift. “What solution?” he asked.

“Usshenni blames Hubs for Wakuti,” explained Cester. “Should Hubs ever dare to set foot on Baiaran soil, Usshenni has sworn to kill him.”

Regenal realised the implications of Cester’s observation immediately. “If Tonclin wins, we’ll despatch Hubs on a mission to Wakuti,” he continued with a look of bitter expectancy. “And if Usshenni is as good as his word, Hubs will be history.”

The Turrets of Korweny
The Conquest in the Ashes

The Mildren
The Cure that Kills

The Day of Eights

The Purpose

The Fulfilment
The Accomplishment

“That Hubs is luckier than a sire pig,” complained Regenal as Cester showed the new Presidor into his office. “He’s virtually running the Weaponry and Sap Support trades and he’s got more friends than Cofellreker. How does he do it?”

Cester had a more resilient attitude. “Hubs might have survived the dreadist attack in Wakuti,” he responded, pulling up a chair for Tonclin. “But he couldn’t manage a second turn in the saddle.”

Regenal took no comfort from the remark. Just seeing Tonclin was enough to raise his blood pressure. He reminded him of Deykenn. Calm, confident and annoyingly handsome. Another pretty boy born with a guardian angel, and Regenal hated pretty boys. He looked Tonclin straight in the eye. “Usshenni has shelled the Turrets of Korweny,” he said emphatically. “And that is an act of war.”

Tonclin understood Regenal perfectly. “The people don’t want wars, they want domestic reform,” he responded in a condescending tone. “And if the Autonomists start behaving like the Realmists, faith in the concept of freedom will be destroyed.”

“If the people find out that Usshenni was behind the Turrets, they will demand a reprisal,” snapped Regenal in response. “Never mind your Autonomists and the concept of freedom.”

Tonclin was unruffled. “That may well be,” he conceded. “But Council would never agree without proof, and all the evidence points to Badelinn, not Usshenni.”

Regenal’s frustration was beginning to mount. “Don’t get sanctimonious with me Tonclin, you hypocritical little snake. We have cut out tongues to get you here. You might be Cofellreker’s little pet, but as far as I’m concerned you do as you are told.”

Cester felt that Regenal’s expectation was unrealistic. “As unfortunate as it might be, a botched attempt on the Turrets doesn’t quite constitute a call for war,” he said as diplomatically as he could manage. “Usshenni will keep.”

“And you know what they say,” added Tonclin with a cocky smirk. “Don’t start the feast until the meat is tender.”

“Usshenni must be punished,” insisted Regenal. “No one spits in the face of Marecia and gets away with it.”

“I’m sure we could think of something,” responded Cester in a conciliatory tone. “Like shelling his Closet Facility for example.”

Tonclin dared to voice his opinion yet again. “I will still need to give Council a reason for any offensive,” he protested.

“Then tell them it is in reprisal for the assassination attempt on Hubs,” responded Cester. “We have proof that Usshenni was behind that.”

Regenal seemed to be placated by Cester’s proposal. “All right,” he conceded, turning to Tonclin. “But understand this. The greater the realm the mightier the weaponry and only a war can justify my hefty purse.” He slapped his hand down hard on the table and watched in delight as Tonclin jumped in his chair. “And I won’t wait forever.”

“Well gentlemen. That settles that,” said Cester in an effort to calm the atmosphere. “Maybe now we can turn our attentions to more immediate concerns.”

“Such as?” snapped Regenal, irritated by Cester’s interruption of his moment of pleasure.

“Such as opening up the trade routes in the old Surisan territories,” replied Cester, in a tactful reminder that war was not the only subject on the agenda.

Tonclin was quick to regain his composure. “We would have to see an end to civil unrest in Saint Gafhan first,” he responded, proving that he was no fool when it came to interrealmic matters. “And it looks like your Warlords might take longer to settle their differences than they took to bring down Surisa.”

“Then perhaps we should settle their differences for them,” interjected Regenal. “The Libatan Army are promising to restore order if they win the struggle. We want you to pledge Marecia’s support.”

“They command a great deal of respect amongst the other factions,” added Cester, bolstering Regenal’s argument.

Tonclin did not respond immediately. He seemed to be contemplating the merits of the proposal, but in reality he was questioning the wisdom of raising yet another protestation. “The Libatan Army have a reputation for ruthless intolerance,” he said, finally tempting his peril. “I can’t see Council voting in favour.”

“Council, Council, Council,” fumed Regenal. “It’s always Council with you Autonomists.”

Now even Cester was disturbed by the Presidor’s petulant manner. “Have you forgotten your dark side?” he asked, concentrating his terrible gaze on Tonclin like a knight might aim his deadly lance. “Because we haven’t.”

~

“I had not forgotten,” said Beldou, appearing at the door of Docmael cottage in a fluster. “But the journey was horrendously slow.”

Four solemn faces turned to greet him. “Well you are here now,” responded Sedine with more than a glimmer of relief. “The funeral went well. Come in and join us.”

Tarun and Nisa were standing with Tria’s physician by the fireside, clutching small goblets of wine. “I hope she will forgive me if she is watching,” continued Beldou, looking to the physician for consolation. “Did she suffer at all?”

“Tria passed away peacefully in her sleep,” he replied in a reassuring voice. “And she managed a longer and far more comfortable life than I ever expected.”

“That is all down to Seus,” noted Beldou and he shook the physician’s hand. “Where is Seus by the way?” he asked, casting his sister a look of concern. “He must be devastated.”

“Seus has gone to Einim,” replied Sedine. “To seek his solace.”

The air at Einim was warm and still, and the atmosphere was strangely tranquil. Shadows of scattered stones stretched across the ground like fingers, pointing to the place where the sun had last raised the spirit of the day. Not even the sheep from the village below seemed willing to

break the eerie silence of the mount. When Seus reached the summit he took his rest on a great stone and watched in awe as the pallid blue horizon gradually succumbed to a glorious blaze of colour.

“It is a splendid sight,” observed the Old Man, suddenly emerging from the crimson hue of the moor. “How are you getting along?”

“The sun is setting on another chapter,” replied Seus in a wistful tone.

“And how is The Tome progressing?” enquired the Old Man.

“It is almost finished.”

The Old Man nodded appreciatively. “On the eighth day of the eighth moon of the eighth year of the New Age, you must pass The Tome to the people.”

Seus turned to the Old Man. “And who will herald it? I am much too old to become a preacher.”

“Look amongst those who are close to you,” said the Old Man.

“And will my work be done when the Tome is finished?” asked Seus.

“The Tome will represent the accomplishment of your task,” replied the Old Man. “In order to complete it, you must first consider the fulfilment of the final Quest.”

“To unite the keepers of the Truth,” mused Seus. “How will I find them?” he asked looking around, but the Old Man had gone as swiftly as he had arrived.

“How will you find who?” panted Beldou, his red and breathless face rising from a nearby ridge.

Seus smiled. He was greatly heartened to see Beldou arriving. “I was just considering what to do when The Tome is complete,” he explained. “I am not sure that anyone would choose to publish such a script, particularly as it is to be given away.”

Beldou settled himself on the stone next to Seus and drew a deep breath. “You leave that to me,” he said cheerfully. “Parchments can be freely

exchanged on the Galex.”

As the light of the day began to fade, a distinct chill descended upon the mount and the two friends set off for home. By the time that they arrived at Docmael Farm, the flickering light in the cottage window presented a most welcome sight. “I was beginning to get worried,” said Sedine when the creaking door finally announced their return. “You must be hungry. Come and sit down.”

“Thank you,” replied Seus. “And thank you also for all your help today. I could not have managed without it.”

“That is the least I could do,” replied Sedine, turning to hide her bashful face and making for the stove.

“And how is life in the greater globe?” enquired Tarun as Beldou and Seus took their places by the fire. “Presidor Tonclin seems to have had a certain restraining influence on the Secret.”

“Yes,” replied Beldou in concurrence. “That is something of a surprise considering his immoral past.” Beldou leaned forward and lowered his voice to create an air of intrigue. “And I have heard rumour that he is Cofellreker’s illegitimate son.”

“From what I’ve heard he is in danger of having a few illegitimate sons of his own,” added Nisa with a clear note of disapproval. “If you ask me it will be his philandering that will be his undoing, not his evil past.”

“And he has been of no help to the people of Saint Gafhan,” complained Sedine, arriving with two bowls of steaming broth for the weary latecomers. “His Libatan Army are turning out to be crueller than the Warlords they have replaced.”

“Worse still, Tonclin seems oblivious to the legacy of Marecia’s UD shells,” added Beldou. “And thousands of Qrian children are dying as a result.”

“When will our leaders realise that all people are one?” asked Seus with a look of dismay. “That to destroy the house of your neighbour is to tear down the future for all of humanity.”

“I think we should encourage protests against Marecian support of the

Libatan Army,” said Sedine, finally joining the others by the fireside. “There will be a lot of support amongst the women’s groups in Marecia.”

“And I am sure that the minor realms will raise objections over the suffering of the children in Qria,” added Beldou. “Once it is brought to their attention.”

“Then let us hope that Tonclin truly is a changed man,” said Seus. “And that he will bring an end to Marecia’s persecution of the innocent.”

~

“Tonclin is here to see you Sir,” announced Lemo, shuffling into Regenal’s office like a weary old man. His sprightly gait may have been eroded by the passage of time, but his smooth olive skin seemed almost impervious to change.

Regenal was not so fortunate. “He’ll have to wait,” he snapped, turning his furrowed face towards the door. “Hubs is coming over.”

Cester had arrived earlier and was already comfortably seated. “Perhaps we should let Tonclin sit in on the meeting,” he suggested. “And take the opportunity to ensure his continued cooperation.”

Regenal wanted to disagree but he was unable to muster a viable objection. “All right,” he conceded with reluctance. “Show him in.”

Tonclin was his usual sycophantic self. “Good day gentlemen,” he said, breezing into the office with an ingratiating smile and making straight for Cofellreker’s chair.

“What do you want Tonclin?” demanded Regenal as abruptly as he could manage.

“It seems that your UD shells are causing malgrowth problems in Qria,” he replied, with the shadow of an accusation crossing his lips.

“And what of it?” demanded Regenal impetuously.

Tonclin seemed surprised by Regenal’s dismissive attitude. “Children in Qria are dying in their droves,” he said, in the misguided hope of enlightening his Weaponry Chief. “They say it is the worst crime against

humanity since Thirel tried to eliminate the Sewjhi nation. All the usual protesters are bleating. Even the Union want us to answer to them.”

“Who is our Realmic Union Envoy?” demanded Regenal.

“Blagrith,” replied Cester in an obliging tone.

Regenal turned a cold eye toward Tonclin. “Then get Blagrith to tell them that the deaths of the children are worth it to stop Ussheni.”

“And what about diplomacy,” protested Tonclin. “Showing some signs of remorse might be helpful.”

“Don’t try any of that silver tongue routine on me,” retorted Regenal. “You save that for Council. Understood?” A familiar tapping at the door caught Regenal’s attention. “Come,” he bellowed, glad of an excuse to terminate the discussion with Tonclin.

Hubs entered the office followed by another man. “This is Heycen, Head of Weaponry and Sap Support,” declared Hubs, urging his associate to step forward.

“I know who he is,” retorted Regenal abruptly. “But what is he doing here?”

Heycen was younger than Hubs, but his portly stature and receding grey hair made it hard to tell. “The Libatan Army have refused our deal on the Sap Duct,” he replied in earnest. “Something needs to be done.”

“Perhaps you were too greedy,” responded Regenal with a cynical grin. “We’ve brought Surisa down and given you stability?” he added. “Exploitation is not the problem of the Weaponry.”

“Saint Gafhan is the gateway to the southern territorial belt,” countered Heycen with a look of rising apprehension. “We have invested too much in Saint Gafhan to let the Libatan Army hand over the rewards to the likes of Nachi or the Northern Continent.”

Regenal seemed unperturbed and Hubs stepped in to further the point. “Libatan controlled oherni represents three quarters of global production,” he said. “And Marecian prosperity is highly dependant on the shekels from that business as well.”

“What do I care?” asked Regenal, conveniently neglectful of the Weaponry’s reliance on the Marecian purse.

The oherni trade was also the lifeblood of the ICA and Cester was not prepared to jeopardise his purse. “We put the Libatan Army into power,” he said, shifting the crux of the argument. “Surely we are not going to stand by and let them spit in our face.”

Cester’s instinctive utilisation of his subject’s psyche made him a master in the art of coercion, and Regenal presented a modest challenge. “What do you suggest that we do?” he asked, responding immediately to the new pitch.

“Put the Warlords back in,” replied Hubs, quick to continue his cause. He looked to Tonclin. “Libatan mistreatment of women is making headlines on a daily basis. I don’t think Council will object to their removal.”

Tonclin disagreed. “I’ve had enough trouble persuading Council that Libatan brutality is an acceptable price for civil stability,” he said adamantly. “I can’t ask them to risk a return to the chaos and violence of the Warlords now.”

Hubs was better prepared than Tonclin expected. “You don’t have to,” he said with a look of cunning. “We pick the most capable Warlords, rename them the Highland League and tell the globe that they are promising social reform. That will silence the parchments and appease your Autonomist Council.”

Tonclin was taken aback by the ingenuity of the plan, but Cester could foresee a problem. “The Libatan Army control the oherni trade,” he said in a scornful tone. “They won’t hand it over to the Highland League without a fight.”

“Then we buy it off them,” responded Hubs.

“They’ll never sell,” retorted Cester dismissively.

“They will if Tonclin was to squeeze them with barter blocks,” added Heycen. “And Cofellreker has already agreed to freeze their Marecian assets if he does.”

Cester was greatly impressed by Heycen's planning. "How much is one year's oherni trade worth to them?" he asked.

Heycen had done his research. "Twenty three gold shekels," he replied. "Offer them forty three and I guarantee they will snatch the bait."

"Forty three gold shekels!" exclaimed Regenal. "And who is going to pay for this fanciful tale of yours?"

"Council," replied Heycen.

Tonclin laughed out loud. "Council aren't going to buy the oherni trade off the Libatan Army."

"They will if the Libatan Army offer to destroy their crop," retorted Hubs defiantly. "As a gesture to reduce the flow of stupes into Marecia."

"We just say that they need the shekels to compensate the farmers for their loss," added Heycen. "Council will love that."

"And what is to stop them taking up arms and plunging Saint Gafhan back into chaos?" asked Cester.

A broad smile spread across Hubs' face. "Once they have destroyed the crop, we can destroy them."

Regenal always liked talk of Weaponry action, but Tonclin was appalled by the prospect of being asked to advocate war. "On what pretext?" he balked.

Tonclin had found a hole in the plan that neither Hubs nor Heycen had considered. "There might be a way," began Cester, breaking the ensuing silence. "I believe that Badelinn is plotting to shell our Envoy Quarters in Cafira," he said thoughtfully. "If we allowed the plan to proceed, we could blame the resultant carnage on the Libatan Army."

"The Libatan Army are supposed to be Pro-Marecian," objected Tonclin. "Council won't fall for that. Where's the link?"

"Badelinn's troopers all graduated from the training camps in Saint Gafhan," responded Cester swiftly. "And who controls the camps?"

“The Libatan Army,” replied Tonclin with a puzzled look.

“Exactly,” responded Cester. “When Badelinn shells the Outpost, we can say the Libatan Army are harbouring him and we have our excuse for retaliation.”

“Where will be our proof?” asked Tonclin, clearly unconvinced.

“Proof. Proof,” roared Regenal, tired of Tonclin’s unrelenting gripes. “When did we ever need proof?”

~

Seus opened his eyes and raised a hand before his face, as if he needed proof of a wakeful state of mind. Suddenly, strangely, he found himself standing amidst a cold and swirling haze, surrounded by the lustrous white stones of the Keeper’s Circle.

“These stones have endured many storms,” came a compelling voice, piercing the air from the black beyond. “To symbolise the coming of the Keepers of Truth.”

Seus turned to face the voice. “Who is there?” he asked with a natural sense of disquiet.

“The time approaches when the Cardinals will call upon the Keepers of every Sacred shore,” continued the voice. “To create a new circle. A circle of flesh and spirit.”

“The Circle of Truth,” said Seus, finally recognising the face of the Old Man emerging from the milky mist.

The Old Man patted the largest of the stones, as though it might have been an old friend. “And the Circle will begin with the word of Pejhos.”

“How can that be possible?” asked Seus, quite certain that the Old Man was evoking the ambitions of a bygone era. “The Cardinals of the East and West may live on, but the words of Pejhos and Myar were obliterated long ago.”

“Do you not know?” asked the Old Man in surprise. “The word of Pejhos is still being sung in the land of the Father Spirit.”

Seus opened his eyes wide, almost in disbelief. “And the word of Myar?” he asked, with a note of wild expectancy in his voice.

“The word of Myar has also survived and is being read again,” replied the Old Man. “Your Cardinals are amongst us. Your quest awaits.”

“Myar is here,” whispered Seus in bewilderment.

“Seus. Are you awake?” asked Sedine, placing a log onto the flagging embers in the hearth. “The fire is almost out.”

“Sorry,” he replied with a shiver. “My mind was far away in the Land of Crowllan.”

“Perhaps we are getting old,” said Sedine. “Whenever I think of Crowllan, I find myself pondering the imponderable.”

“Such as?” enquired Seus, his interest aroused.

“Well,” she began, clearing her throat in an uncharacteristically prim fashion. “If the soul is eternal and unyielding, why should we concern ourselves with the prospect of annihilation?”

“Imponderable indeed,” noted Seus with an admiring smile. “But were we to invite annihilation, our lives would have served no purpose,” he replied.

“Then what is the purpose of life?” asked Sedine, determined to test him further.

Seus looked a little dismayed. He had no quick retort for such a difficult question. “If some advanced being were to magically unfold the purpose of life before us, it would be like us rolling out a map of Tribian for the worms to read,” he continued, in an effort to provide a succinct response.

“But we must be able to understand something of it,” persisted Sedine. “Surely the Iddurs have pondered this dilemma.”

Seus sat back in resignation. He had contemplated the matter many times in his youth, but his memory was not as it used to be. “In the beginning, the universe was a barren place,” he began with a considered voice.

“Then came the fertile stage. The seed of life entered the physical measures and the journey of life began.”

“And gradually we evolved.”

Seus nodded. “We can observe that journey as a process of becoming. Sometimes, as with other journeys, we might find ourselves retracing our steps, but essentially the desire is to move forward.”

“I understand,” said Sedine in patient acknowledgment.

“But what would happen if we were faced with the end of the fertile stage tomorrow?” he asked. “If the universe entered its final state and could no longer support any mortal shell?”

“All life would perish,” replied Sedine.

“Then we can determine that the journey must be necessary if life is to endure beyond the fertile stage.”

“So the purpose of life is to evolve,” suggested Sedine.

“Yes. The purpose of the journey is to become, to survive, to seek our salvation,” replied Seus. “To cross the bridge of the fertile stage and discover the path beyond.”

“And what if we fail?” asked Sedine. “What if we fall from the bridge?”

Seus turned and looked into the eyes of his friend. “We will just have to trust that the seed of life will have fallen on some other distant globe and flourished,” he replied in a solemn voice.

Sedine’s mood of wide-eyed enthusiasm was suddenly engulfed by the emergence of a troubled soul. “Oh,” she murmured, lowering her head and sinking into her chair, as if to mull over the catastrophe of human failure. “I wish that I had not mentioned the imponderable now.”

“All the more reason for us to remain positive,” said Seus, concerned that his judgment might have been overly pessimistic.

The familiar click of the door latch broke the ensuing silence to signal the arrival of Tarun. “Hello you two,” he said in a jovial voice. “Have

you heard the news about Tonclin?"

"No. Come in," said Seus enthusiastically, hoping that Tarun's arrival would lift Sedine's troubled heart. "What has Tonclin been up to now?"

"He has been disgraced for his philandering," replied Tarun, indulging in a guilty smile. "But who do you think will be the next Presidor?" he asked. "I'd rather keep Tonclin than see another Realmist get in."

"Cofellreker's new boy, La Rego will win," replied Sedine, her spirits rallying. "He knows how to keep his britches buttoned and at least he is an Autonomist."

"I have heard that Hubs is putting his boy up, Gregeo the Minor," continued Tarun. "With his son in the chair and the whole of Weaponry and Sap Support Traders behind him, Hubs would be virtually running the Globe."

"Would anyone vote for another Hubs?" asked Seus.

"No one will vote for Gregeo," replied Sedine with utter confidence. "Have you heard him speak? Even his mother calls him the buffoon."

~

"How did a half brain midget like Gregeo the Minor manage to win the polls?" barked Regenal as Cofellreker stepped into his office.

"Heycen's bottomless purse bought him the saddle," revealed Cofellreker grudgingly. "We should never underestimate the power of the shekel."

"And I have heard that Hubs rigged the poll counting system," declared Cester, following behind Cofellreker and closing the door. "He is an extremely influential and dangerously ambitious man."

"I told you Hubs was getting too fat for his britches," complained Cofellreker. "He's put all his old cronies back in the ring and thinks he can run the show."

"Perhaps he can," observed Cester. "But he needs our cooperation as much as we need his, and Gregeo won't last forever."

“That demented son of his might dance to his pipes, but it will take more than a bag of wind to get my foot tapping,” roared Regenal defiantly.

“Speaking of bags of wind,” grinned Cofellreker, turning to see Hubs arrive.

“What is so urgent that you needed to call a meeting?” demanded Regenal brusquely, as Hubs was barely through the door.

“The Libatan Army are proving difficult to defeat,” he replied, getting straight to the point. “They had stockpiles of oherni stashed in Kaspitan and are undercutting our operations in the North.”

“There is no need for panic,” interjected Cofellreker with a nonchalant look. “Their stockpiles will soon run out.”

“Their farmers have already replanted,” retorted Hubs, “And I suspect they have enough oherni to keep them going until the next harvest.”

“We’ve been had,” said Cester, realising the significance of the situation. “The Libatan are spitting at us again.”

Regenal was incensed and turned to his map. “We need an excuse to march in and teach those lousy Libatan Army a real lesson,” he said, pushing the stake of a Marecian flag hard into the heart of Saint Gafhan.

“I might just be able to help you there,” declared Hubs, struggling to conceal his amusement at Regenal’s unwitting compliance.

Cofellreker was not so easily enticed. “How?” he asked in a sceptical tone.

“Badelinn has had one attempt to destroy the Turrets of Korweny,” replied Hubs. “Let’s give him another chance and make sure he succeeds this time.”

Regenal’s eyes widened. “If he succeeds, thousands of Marecians will die and we will have the perfect excuse to invade Saint Gafhan,” he enthused. “What’s the plan?”

“When I was Figurehead of the ICA, we asked our best troopers to devise a plan to destroy the Turrets,” replied Hubs, turning to Cester.

“Do you remember?”

“Yes. To test for security breaches.”

“And what was the outcome?” asked Hubs.

“If dreadists were to seize some Marecian ships of the air and fly them into the Turrets, they would tumble like a house of cards,” replied Cester.

Hubs turned back to Regenal. “I could see to it that Badelinn gets to hear of the plan,” he continued with a sinful grin. “And if he succeeds, the whole of the Decadent Globe will be against him and the Libatan Army.”

“We could call upon the allies and stage the biggest show of Weaponry prowess since the War of the Realms,” added Regenal, unashamedly unbridling his lust for power. “And tighten our grip in the Milsaic Globe.”

“It won’t work. The Weaponry defence system would detect the attack immediately,” declared Cester, in an effort to restrain Regenal’s fervent machinations. “Any seized ships would be destroyed long before they could reach the target.”

Regenal knew well that Cester spoke from experience, but Hubs was undeterred. “They would need the Presidor’s permission to destroy a ship full of Marecians,” he said with look of evil expectancy. “And Gregeo could be otherwise disposed.”

“Then someone else would have to make the decision,” admitted Regenal with reluctance. “Possibly even me.”

“And in the confusion, you could delay the decision until it was too late to act,” persisted Hubs.

Regenal seemed positively excited by the daring nature of the plan, but Cester could foresee another problem. “What if the Borderless Interrogation Force got wind of it?” he asked. “They are no fools and would intervene before the plan was off the ground.”

Hubs had seen the craving in Regenal’s eyes and could almost taste success. “With Gregeo in the saddle, I could block any investigations by the Force,” he said with absolute confidence. “Saint Gafhan and the

Milsaic Realms are as good as ours.”

~

“My work in Old Non is as good as done,” declared Beldou, thrusting open the door of Docmael cottage and beaming with delight. “The next time I come down, it will be to stay.”

Sedine could hardly believe what she had heard. “Seus, Beldou is here,” she shouted. “He is coming to live with us.”

Seus was quick to respond. “Rest your legs,” he cried, making his way down the stairs as fast as he could manage. “And tell us all about it.”

“There are plenty of brave young people willing to risk all against the dark rule of the Secret,” explained Beldou, easing himself into a chair by the hearth. “Even the Borderless Interrogation Force has joined the struggle. There is little for an old man like me to do these days.”

“No one knows the sacrifices that you have made better than we do,” said Sedine, clearly very proud of her brother’s unsung and selfless achievements. “And no one has done more to deserve a rest, but what will you do with yourself?” she asked with a look of concern.

“I will be bringing my personal aucer,” replied Beldou contentedly. “And the first thing on my list is to prepare the Tome of Seus.” He turned to Seus and cast him the warmest of smiles. “How is it coming along? Is it finished yet?”

“Almost,” replied Seus. “I had been struggling with the dilemma of how to unite the Cardinals, then Myar spoke to me in the strangest of dreams, and suddenly all became clear.”

“What did she say?” asked Beldou with a look of incredulity.

“Need I find my Cardinals to complete my task?” replied Seus.

“I don’t understand,” said Beldou. “How does that help?”

“The salvation of the people has always rested in their own hands,” replied Seus. “It is the people who must seek their Cardinals, not me.”

“I see,” said Beldou, nodding thoughtfully. “The Tome will act like a signal, for them to begin their own quest.”

“And gradually more Keepers will step into the circle,” added Seus. “Until the day will dawn when the circle is complete.”

“The Keepers of the Sacred beliefs are not known for their tolerance,” observed Sedine. “They are better known for settling differences by conflict than through negotiation. Why will it be different this time?”

“It is time for those who believe in one truth, one Duw, to combine their wisdoms and cast out their dogmas,” replied Seus with a knowing look. “They must be brave and consider not what has been written as truth in the past, but ask themselves, each time they meet, what is truth now?”

“So the Circle of Truth is a circle of unity,” observed Sedine.

“And unity is the path to salvation,” added Seus. “This is our lesson and perhaps our only hope.”

“And if we succeed in our task and survive this difficult time, what will the future hold for us?” asked Beldou in a voice laden with expectancy.

Seus smiled. He was greatly encouraged by Beldou’s positive outlook. “We may be able to see into the future by looking into the past,” he replied.

“Then look into the past now and tell me what you see,” continued Beldou, eager to discover what the future might have in store.

Seus sat back in his chair and cast his eyes upwards in contemplation. “I see the next generation of our kind,” he replied. “Just as we came from apes, so will they come from us.”

Sedine’s imagination was instantly caught by the notion. “Do they have a name?” she asked excitedly. “Can you describe them?”

“The Iddurs called them the Mildren,” replied Seus. “And postulated that they will be mild of manner, with a greater capacity for understanding the universe than you or I could possibly imagine.”

“That is remarkable,” said Beldou. “It has never occurred to me that

humans might one day be replaced.”

“Nothing that is mortal is eternal,” replied Seus.

“When will they come, these Mildren?” asked Sedine.

This was a question that Seus had not considered. “Already we see people being born with tremendous ability to draw, to invent or to perform calculations that for most of us would be quite incomprehensible,” he ventured. “Perhaps the Mildren will possess all of these gifts.”

“Of course,” noted Sedine. “We are constantly evolving.” She looked to Seus with a puzzled expression. “Do we need to prepare for the Mildren?”

“As it is the duty of parents to prepare a fitting home for their children, so it is the obligation of men and women to prepare the globe for the children of humanity,” replied Seus.

“And if we don’t?” enquired Beldou.

“If we fail in this duty, we will be cast into the cauldron of the cosmos and all signs of our existence will be obliterated by the hands of time.”

~

“I’d like to obliterate that Hubs,” said Regenal, brushing a fly from the rim of his glass with an unnecessary degree of gusto. “When he put Gregeo up for the polls, it marked the end of an era for us.”

It was a warm evening, and for the first time in their long and eventful history, Regenal and Cester were meeting outside of their workplace. Cester had never asked where Regenal lived, and Regenal had never previously invited him to find out. “We have achieved a lot,” responded Cester. “We’ve mastered the erculan force, destroyed the Surisan Empire and driven the Secret towards the pinnacle of power.”

“Yes,” responded Regenal in acknowledgement. “But things will never be the same with key players taking to the saddle. They can be seen for what they are. And where is the Secret in that?”

“Where indeed?” conceded Cester. “The illusion is completely destroyed.”

“Mark my words, Hubs’ notion of the Secret will spell the end,” continued Regenal. “At least we had an ideology. What we did was for the greater good. Prosperity through a one Council Globe.”

Cester was not in agreement. “You can appease your conscience all you like, but what we did was certainly not for the greater good,” he retorted. “We are selfish, brutal and greedy, like everybody else. The only difference is that we are better at it.”

“And now we’re washed up,” continued Regenal in resignation. “Now the Hubs family are the linchpins, and Gregeon the Minor, nothing but an imbecilic little worm.”

“Hubs might be the new linchpin, but he is nothing compared to other leaders that we have known,” said Cester, raising his glass to a distant tumbleweed. “Thirel, Imed, Alphvia. Powerful brutal men. Men you would think could never die. All gone.”

“We are still here,” observed Regenal. “And Toscar is still alive.”

“Yes,” agreed Cester. “And still in power.”

“Who would have guessed that someone like Toscar could cross swords with us and live to be an old man?” added Regenal with a rare show of respect.

“And when he goes, I’m going to blame everything on him,” joked Cester. “But I think that you will miss him.”

“No one will miss me. Not here,” said Regenal, lowering his voice and casting a wary eye over his shoulder. “I’ve never been interested in the artillery traders, or piling my shekels into a vault. That’s Cofellreker’s dream.” He raised his head in pride and cast his eyes far out across the land before him. “I am the father of the Weaponry,” he continued. “The legions are my children, and my dream has been to see my family grow and prosper across the globe.”

“But you wouldn’t send your own flesh and blood into battle to die for shekels or power, would you?” asked Cester with a note of cynicism.

“The outcome of the battle means nothing to the mother of a dead trooper, but victory is the greatest trophy of the Legion,” retorted Regenal, surprising Cester with his uncharacteristically philosophical stance. “And global supremacy is the trophy of my Weaponry. That is my legacy. That is how I will achieve my immortality.”

“And what of your children?” asked Cester. “How do you view your real family?”

“There lies the irony,” replied Regenal. “I’ve always provided for them, but I don’t feel as though I know them anymore. I think that they are waiting for me to die, to get their hands on my stocks.” He shook his head again. “Not nice people.”

“Nice people,” said Cester, raising an eyebrow. “Do we know any nice people?”

“I’ve always thought I could protect them,” continued Regenal. “Move them somewhere safe should anything go wrong. It’s not until you come face to face with retirement that you realise you can’t protect them forever. I don’t think I thought I was ever going to leave the Weaponry.”

“This place is safe enough,” noted Cester.

“Nowhere on this Globe is safe now,” responded Regenal. “And you and I Cester, we have done more than any other to bring that about.” He turned to his cohort with an unfamiliar sense of doubt in his heart. “Perhaps the Seusians are right and peace is our only salvation. What about you Cester? What about your children?”

Regenal had known Cester for a very long time, but their relationship had never extended beyond discussion of their business before. Cester showed little expression. His face looked furrowed but he didn’t look old. The dazzling blue of his eyes had greyed, yet, as he turned his head, they still flashed the strange and steely glare of his youth. “I don’t have any children,” he replied. “When I die, the globe can go to hell.”

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“The globe has become a much smaller place since the advent of the Galex,” said Beldou, looking up from the preparation of his aufer on

Sedine's table. "I sometimes wonder how I ever managed my work before I had it."

"What was the last mission that you used it for?" asked Seus, intrigued by the mysterious practicalities of Beldou's activities.

"Did you ever hear of the Goose Germ?" asked Beldou.

"Yes," replied Seus. "The Mallard Malady that crossed over to humans and killed millions of people."

"That was a long time ago," noted Sedine. "Before the War of the Realms."

"Well it could be back," declared Beldou. "Marecian theorists are digging up the bodies of victims that have lain frozen in the earth, in an effort to recreate the germ."

"Why would they want to do that?" asked Sedine, almost in disbelief.

"So that they can prevent it happening again, or at least that is what the theorists have been told," replied Beldou with a note of sarcasm in his voice. "But I believe that the Weaponry are behind the development."

"They want it for a weapon!" exclaimed Seus with a look of horror.

"Oh yes, because such weapons can be utilised in times of peace," explained Beldou. "Even against supposed allies. It is very clever."

"But if the Weaponry was to use the germ against another realm, surely Marecians would eventually become stricken," observed Sedine.

"As they did with HELPS you mean," responded Beldou with a shake of his head. "They won't make that mistake again."

"Then what is the point in recreating it?" asked Seus, quite unable to fathom the logic behind Beldou's account.

"So that they can develop a cure?"

Seus sat back with a puzzled expression on his face and began to consider Beldou's story. "I see," he said after a few moments of

contemplation. “They can not use their weapon until they know that they are safe.”

“That is the irony,” responded Beldou. “It is not the recreation of the germ that will kill us, it is the discovery of a cure.”

“Do you think that they will actually use it?” asked Sedine.

“One of my colleagues believes that a pre-human strain will be released as soon as the cure is found,” continued Beldou. “To determine if it will cross over species again.”

“But surely people will realise what has happened if there is another epidemic,” said Sedine. “This germ has been extinct for nigh on a century.”

“Any suggestion of a connection with the experiments would be explained as coincidental,” replied Beldou. “They could even use the reappearance of the sickness to justify their experiments.”

“This reminds me of the guiding words that a wise old man once gave me,” said Seus.

“What did he say?” enquired Sedine.

“He told me that we should be of good intension when we pick the fruit of the Tree of Measures,” replied Seus, “And it seems that his advice may be increasingly relevant in the years to come.”

“There we are,” announced Beldou, opening the lid of his auцер and casting the others a look of accomplishment. “We are now part of the Global Auцер Link Exchange.”

“And what does that mean exactly?” asked Sedine, a little overwhelmed by Beldou’s strange terminology.

Beldou looked back to his auцер and began to tap it furiously. “You can use it to send messages to people,” he replied enthusiastically. “You can even receive moving images. Look, I will show you.”

Seus and Sedine drew closer and watched in amazement as an image of two tall buildings appeared inside the lid of the auцер. One of the

buildings seemed to be ablaze. “What is this?” asked Sedine.

“It looks like the Turrets of Korweny,” replied Beldou, leaning forward to touch the face of the aucer.

A voice rang out across the table, a Marecian voice, filled with shock and laced with terror. “It may not be a dreadist attack,” said the voice in trembling speculation. “It might just be a dreadful accident.”

Beldou felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise and a sickening pain ripped its way through his stomach. “My Duw, my Duw. The Turrets have been attacked,” he whispered.

Sedine was frightened and confused. “Is this real?” she asked with a mounting sense of foreboding, her eyes firmly fixed upon the blazing turret.

Beldou did not answer. Instead he watched in helpless silence as a ship of the air crept into the image, crossing the clear blue sky, slowly, majestically, then striking the second turret and erupting in a violent plume of flames. “Thousands will perish,” he said in a whisper.

Sedine was weeping. “What do I see that keeps falling from the building?” she sobbed, peering through the flood of tears with eyes still set on the scene of horror.

“Those are people,” replied Seus.

“I do not understand,” said Sedine. “What is happening?”

“Marecians are being forced to taste the pain that their leaders so casually inflict upon the people of other realms,” replied Beldou.

Seus tried to offer Sedine some words of comfort. “For every one who rejoices in this terrible revenge, there will be a thousand more who remember their own agonies and weep for Marecia.”

Sedine closed her eyes and clung to Seus, but still she saw the victims of the horror, leaping to escape the raging inferno and plunging to their deaths.

Suddenly a turret began to quake. Beldou watched the crumbling spire of

flesh and stone crash down into a cloud of ash and could take no more. “This is not the first attempt to destroy the Turrets,” he said, closing the lid of his aucer and crossing the room to the window. He looked up to see the same blue sky, but void of flame and ash and death. “I suspect that this attack was allowed to proceed,” he ventured in a cold, accusing tone.

“What do you mean?” asked Seus.

“It is the hunger for power of old men that summons the fire of youth to battle,” replied Beldou. “But first they must make an enemy if they are to have their war.”

“Are you suggesting that the leaders of Marecia had a hand in this?”

Beldou looked to Seus with a solemn face, his olive skin now a sick and pallid grey. “Yes,” he said and bowed his head again.

“Humans are doomed,” said Sedine dejectedly. “We will never beat the likes of Hubs.”

“Our conquest lies in the ashes,” declared Seus gallantly. “The body may perish but the soul is indestructible.” He started towards the door and then turned back to face his friends. “One day this tragedy will be remembered as a lesson for unity, and forgotten as tale of revenge.”

“So these lives are not lost in vain?” enquired Sedine, distraught and desperate for some kind of comfort.

“Many will be required to make their sacrifice,” replied Seus. “Not for Duw, but for their fellow humans.”

Sedine looked to Seus. His body had grown thin and weak and his eyes were dark and sunken, but he carried the look of hope upon his face. “Where are you going?”

“To find Myar,” he replied softly.

“Will we see you again?” asked Beldou anxiously.

Seus smiled his kindly smile. “When The Circle is complete and people everywhere join their hearts and souls to step inside, I will be waiting.”

