

ELIZABETH RUSSELL

Trinian

*An Epic Fantasy*

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*Dedication:*

*To the girl that I was - this story would not exist without you.  
And to Becca and Anna, and all the young,  
and young at heart, who love epic fantasy.*



*“And certainly, the mistakes that we  
male and female mortals make when  
we have our own way might fairly  
raise some wonder that we are so fond  
of it.”*

~ GEORGE ELIOT, MIDDLEMARCH



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# The Council of the Gods

*“The gods, meanwhile, were gathered with Zeus on the golden council-floor, drinking toasts of nectar from gleaming cups... while they gazed down on Troy.”* Homer, *The Iliad*

Fate, the master of the heavens, watched his round glass watch as it ticked eleven, and with its final, fateful chime, the last age of the mortal world began. He already stood in center of the throne room of the heavenly palace, and now he tucked the watch into his royal robes and took up his seat at the head of the chamber.

At the start of every century, Fate, the oldest of the gods of Minecerva, hosted a centennial convention: a time for the high gods to convene and discuss the mortal land of Minecerva, to discuss its passings and its comings, and now he sat in state for the final convention of all; the time which was coming, which had come, and which was now, at the beginning of the end of the twelve hour rotation.

From the vast corners of Minecerva his brothers and sisters came flying, and the first to arrive was Terror, on his wings of panic, that were spread wide in darkness behind him.

After him was sister Resolve, in her straight-laced dress,

walking with dignified, regal, controlled steps to her seat in the circle.

Peace, the eldest of the sisters, erupted into the chamber with a triumph of color, her gown fluttering freely. She was unrestrained, creative, and joyful; and she was wise and calm.

Knowledge sparkled and she was pure beauty. As she entered the room, all eyes turned to her in wonder, fear, and scorn, for they condemned her as far too pretentious even as they envied her calm self-assurance.

Famine tripped in, hand-in-hand with Plenty, both carefree and careless, both bored with the world and bored with centennial conventions.

The triplets Despair, Destruction, and Death stumbled about, singing a rousing war cry with their arms fiercely round each other's shoulders. The other gods gave them a wide berth, their presence unpleasant, but they three did not care to notice and threw themselves upon a bench, their feet stretched forward, their heads thrown back, to drink during the proceedings with disinterest.

No one noticed Solitude, pale and forgettable, creep into her corner, trembling with eagerness to hear tidings of the end of the world.

Charity and Passion, even now at the end of time, carried on an age-old argument as they entered, their different beauties, the first subtle and the second overwhelming, clashing as they passed witty banter between them, debating the true nature of love.

Hope smiled softly as she crept through a side door; she looked over all and shook her head at brother Fate. He smiled back, and made room for his favorite sister on the

throne beside him.

Joy had arrived already and had laughed and danced and whirled until everyone else was seated, then she dropped breathless and laughing into her own ornate throne.

Power, last to arrive, dominated the room and all within as he took each shaking step, until he sat, not in a chair, but on a high ledge above Fate. From here, he who had, for centuries, scorned the world of the divinities and lived among mortals could make eye-contact with every god except his oldest brother Fate, and he smiled. Let them notice him, he thought. Let them roll their eyes at his vain seat of power here. He had a foothold in the mortal realm itself, and soon, his dominion would be uncontested; soon, he would rise above Fate himself.

When all were seated, Fate lifted his mighty gavel and called the session to order.

“To this day,” he announced gravely, “we, the high gods, have conducted affairs on our own; we have not involved any low gods or mortals, nor have the higher beings interfered with us.” There were nods and murmurs of assent that swelled through the chamber like a mighty river, deep churning and little trickles drawing together into a great roar.

“But we are nearing the end of our time – the end of our reign. The Golden King approaches, and to prepare for his coming, he has at last sent a messenger to me. We must heed the words, for we know that when the clock has turned to the completion of time, it is His rule we will obey, once and for all.”

With a rumble of voices that would have opened a chasm in an ocean bed, groans and whispers behind cupped hands,



boastings and braggings, music and cheering and laughter, filled the hall at the mention of the Golden King, each god reacting in his own way. Some glad, some angry, and some numbingly ambivalent.

Hope held her hands over her ears and smiled to herself, speaking nothing but rejoicing in her heart, doing what she did best. Power also made no sound, but settled himself firmer on the ledge, and sneered. He had waited patiently, plotting a long time for this hour, and anger brewed in his heart.

Fate let them have their reactions until, finally, he pounded his gavel once. "You will each decide how to act when the twelfth hour arrives," he continued. "Until then, we have a little more time, and those who have not had free reign in the lives of all men, will have it now."

"What does that mean?" cried Knowledge. "We have had free reign over Minecerva for eleven hundred years – what do you mean we will have it *now*?"

Death shook with anger. "Not all. There are those of us that have never descended to the very heart of the mortal realm."

"We were supposed to be able to go there," put in Despair with a loud complaint. "But a stupid natural-god prevents it!"

Terror and Destruction laughed loudly at that, and many gods joined in, tickled at the thought that any natural god would be powerful enough to prevent a high god access to anywhere they might want to go.

"You would do better not to laugh," said Death quietly. "For there is one who possesses strength beyond his natural measure."

Famine, too, came forward. "I thought it was only I he refused to allow access," she said, "and I said nothing for the shame of it, but now I know he has defied so many of us! We must overthrow him! Unite against him!"

Despair was shaking with anger. "The city of Drian, the very capitol of Minecerva, stands like a silver beacon, untouchable. It's a low, dirty trick, and it's unfair."

Plenty was incensed. "I have been allowed to go everywhere – I had no idea this was happening! Who is it who decides the actions of high gods? We will destroy him!"

Fate had allowed their discussion, but now he leaned forward to tell them the words of the Golden King. "He will not be destroyed till he has stood before us and given a reckoning of himself, for so says the Messenger."

"What?" cried many of the gods, deeply disconcerted.

"Are we about to host a lesser being in our divine palace?" cried Resolve, voicing the fears of all.

Fate stood. "For the first time, we will convene with a lower power, for he has proven himself a force to be reckoned with, and has earned our ear. Rordan, natural god of the river, I call you to the presence of the high gods!"

There was a breathless silence, and then, amidst a hushed silence, a colossal man entered the throne room of the gods and strode forward until he stood before Fate. Rordan, who would have stood as a giant before men, here seemed diminutive in stature, yet showed no embarrassment in this conclave of divine presences - though this was his first time ever away from the river. There gathered in his shoulders a rippling as of waves, a cresting of sheer force. His hair flowed down his back almost to his knees, clear and alternately green, blue, and silver, depending on how

it caught the light, shimmering like a waterfall. In his hand he held a stick the width of a fifty-year-old tree, gnarled, knotted, and ringed, and twice as tall as himself.

Despair, who was all too familiar with this weapon's reach and solidity, backed up and hid behind Charity.

While all eyes were on the river god, Power, angry and bitter at standing in the presence of a natural god, slipped from the chamber. He knew they were about to speak more of the Golden King, and he could not bear to hear their polite, adoring speech. But though he withdrew, he did not leave the palace. His curiosity was strong and he listened still from the shadows of the outer hall, silent and fuming.

"You have been called here, Rordan," began Fate, "because, as the self-appointed natural god of Drian, you have set yourself as its protector and defended it from misfortune for over a thousand years. You have done well and the Golden King thanks you." Some of the gods scoffed, but the river giant bowed, his flowing hair cascading over his shoulders and brushing the floor. "But the completion of time nears, and even Drian must have its time of trial. You are not allowed to block out Death, Famine, and Despair from the mortals any longer. Those gods have their right place as much as any other, and men and women must learn to deal with these gods, as they have all the rest. You are to step aside and give the gods who have not ruled all of Minecerva free reign. This is the command of the messenger of the Golden King."

The river god tensed and held his breath a moment, as if attempting to reign in an overflowing temper.

"He will never consent," sneered Despair. "Let me at him

to end his paltry life! I will dry up his bed!"

"Patience," said Death, nodding, "you will have your chance."

At last, Rordan nodded curtly. "I will do as the Golden King commands," he rumbled.

Despair grinned from ear to ear and turned in triumph to share his joy of conquest with Famine and Death, but they both sat with their arms folded and their lips pursed. They took no pleasure in making a deal with a lower being.

Fate bowed in thanks, and the river bowed back. He turned to leave, and Despair, who was cavorting gleefully, stilled in place when he caught sight of the giant log, and waited to rejoice until the Giant had stooped through the doorway and his long hair had followed him out.

"At last!" he cried. "We will reap the hearts of men!"

"Their lives will crumble before us," said Famine softly, "and the mortals will once again fear the high gods."

Terror leered a grin of a god who loves chaos. "I have had my turn in Drian, but I think I will revisit it again! We will stir up those tired corporeals."

Fate sighed heavily, his heart stirring for the lives of the many innocents below; but he could only sit in his palace and abide the command of the Golden King.

In the outer chamber of the palace, just before descending to the mortal realm, Rordan stopped still. Power, a thin, murky shadow, was lurking behind a pillar, watching him. The river god clenched his fists when he saw the leer of triumph on the other's half-physical, half-ethereal face, a face distorted by greed and ambition.

With a flex of his strong arms, Rordan planted his gnarled staff upon the stones. "You vile beast, you have

already ruled Drian!” he cried, and Power slithered out from his enclosure, trembling with triumphant rage over Fate’s decree, for he hated the river god from the very depths of his being.

“I will allow the others through,” said Rordan, “but you will never have free reign again. You will rot in your murk and grime until the twelfth hour, when the Golden King casts His light upon your buried crimes.” Power’s face twisted in a grimace and Rordan continued. “Fate may not know or care how you spend your time, but I do. If you attempt to enter Drian, you will know my wrath!” With that, he lifted his staff, and Power cringed and growled, but then abruptly turned and flew to the earth.

Power descended to his corner of the world, desolate as it was, and plotted evil for Rordan and Drian. Meanwhile Famine, Death, and Despair greedily leveled themselves against Drian, spreading their gifts in a massive overdose to make up for lost time. In the process of enjoying themselves, they forgot all about the coming of the Golden King...



# I

## FATE

*“All sorrow, poison, and death are alien, imposed destiny. But every true act, everything that is good and joyful and fruitful on earth, is lived destiny, destiny that has become self.”*

— *Hermann Hesse*





## The City

**A**gainst the brooding gray clouds of the heavens, in the center of Minecerva, far below the palace of the gods, gleamed Drian like a red tear. It stood tall and brave and alone and, built of red brick, glistened like a drop of blood on a gloomy canvas.

Death, Famine, and Despair had taken their toll on this ancient city, which had stood for longer than any of its inhabitants could chart, and now, at the end of the age, as the Golden King came closer and the time of the High Gods neared its end, its ignorant people began to cry and moan in darkness. They did not know it was the end of time, but still they wished for it - desperately! - as an end to their terrible suffering.

Like a specter watching over the graves of the dead, so Lady Adrea, daughter of the steward and heir to the keeping of the throne, surveyed all beneath her with desperation. In multiple layers, the city of Drian expanded outward; the castle Korem looked out over the city, which wrapped about it on three sides, and the city of Drian

looked out in three directions upon a landscape that expanded from it like a fan. Once, everywhere you looked had been green and verdant, trees full of foliage, fields golden with crops, and houses well-kept and proud. But Famine reigned triumphant now, and the trees were stark as winter, the fields empty and brown, the houses emptied with Death. The citizens of Drian had been cut down like blades of grass before the scythe.

Barely nineteen, Adrea stood upon the rim of the tallest tower of the palace. Her loose black hair stirred unkempt in the wind, her skin pulled tight upon her thin frame, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Her restless foot tapped the stone floor, giving off an impromptu beat of agony, and sickened more by the suffering of her people than her own severe want, she shuddered in the wind. She wrapped her white arms around her scanty shoulders, and decided that she was tired: tired of trying to find an answer, tired of attending funerals, and tired of offering soothing words to dying citizens.

For some reason, ever since she awoke that morning, a phrase had been nagging at the back of her mind, a fairytale told to her as a child by her beloved nurse. It droned like a tired song:

“And the Healer said, ‘A great famine shall sweep the land,

and upon its heels plague and death. In this way you shall know

that the coming of the king is at hand – the one to restore the world.”

She chewed over the phrase in her mind. As far as she knew, Fate had taken no interest in their plight for

a hundred years, and they could put no faith in prophecies to save them. But she liked to repeat the phrase, for it was in the voice of Faring – Faring who had held her tenderly upon the death of her mother, Faring who had been an unflagging support throughout her life, Faring who lay dying in the palace below her.

With a heavy sigh, she thought perhaps it would be best for the people of Drian to perish now, perish at what seemed the end of time. Far gone, in this the eleven hundred and ninety-fourth year of Minecerva, were the glory days of kings, majesty, culture, and learning. Long gone was any understanding of the world outside their own red city, and now, ever since the beginning of the eleventh century, Drian's people had dwindled, falling first into Despair, then Famine, and now a plague of Death. Now they would finally perish, not to war or an evil tyrant, but to an invisible, ambivalent enemy. "Upon its heels plague and death... the one to restore the world."

Adrea wondered where Faring had read that from, and suddenly, she wanted to know the context of the words. On an impulse, she descended the long, winding staircase to the main hall of Korem. She crossed the round palace courtyard to the large, low, crumbling building across the way. It was the old castle library which, in her younger years, had served as her classroom. But other than the old caretaker who lived like a hermit, burrowing amid his piles of parchment, the building was abandoned. Adrea entered the darkness and descended to the vaults beneath the palace: to the mazes of parchments, scrolls and words, desperate to find some fragment of comfort.

The library was dusty and dim, and she lit a lamp to

illumine the vast criss-cross of shelves. Here, words had been stashed and forgotten – words of importance that no one understood. Never before had she been interested in these volumes, for her teachers had never encouraged her there. Her father loved politics and modern government, as had his father before him, and so Lord Astren, steward of Drian, did not care to delve into the history of the past, and had discouraged his daughter’s teachers to instruct her in it. Only her nurse had told her stories, legends of once upon a time, and now it was those story fragments of the past that seemed all important. For once, Lady Adrea, daughter of the steward of Drian, had no use for royal protocol or laws. For once, she had only a desperation for comfort.

With dogged desperation, eager to make sense of the crumbling world around her, she sorted through text after text, sneezing and rubbing her eyes, and searching on into the waning hours of evening. At last, it was on a partial piece of parchment, folded away beneath a pile of stacked papyrus, that she found a reference to a Healer. “And the Healer said...” rang Faring’s voice in her head, and her heart leapt. She read the passage in the hope of learning what type of person a Healer was, but this was not the story she was looking for... it was a financial record, and it did not explain the Healer’s profession. “Surely,” she thought, “Healers were a type of physician in the past.”

The lyric played on in her head. “In this way you shall know that the coming of the king is at hand...” And now, believing that Healers were more than a story, she renewed her search with vigor.

Finally, she found a passage that buoyed her spirits. It

was a descriptive document that told of a Healer who had taken on an apprentice, apparently no less than the heir to Drian, to pass on his craft. But the document told that the young prince had died before attaining either either the gift of healing or the throne. It was only a paragraph inserted in a long history, but it was a fact. A Healer. A Healer - though she still did not understand what it was - had lived, and breathed, and healed in Drian.

She reread the passage, drinking it in, hoping for some hint of how the Healers healed. She skimmed ahead, and paused to read carefully when she encountered the words: "He taught the prince the fine art of sealing a wound and the nice skill of eradicating plague. - *Eradicating plague!* - The boy excelled in the art, far exceeding any other pupil his age. There is a legend of how he brought a patient back from the brink of death merely by laying his hands upon him."

Her heart beat rapidly. Healers could save the dying. With all the death around her, hope pounded in her heart. And a little later, she read, "Applying his art, the Healer restored bounty to the impoverished land, bringing about a wealth of grain, fruit, and livestock."

Now it was completely black outside and she wondered how long she had sat entombed among scrolls of the dead. Her feet were asleep and she stamped them upon the cold stone, then gathered the relevant papers into her arms, lifted the fluttering lamp, and ascended to the palace.

In the outer corridors, she passed a servant carrying bandages and medicines.

"Have you seen my father?"

"He is in the center room, my lady, with the council."

And with all haste, she made her way to the throne room, where her father sat surrounded by his six councilors. He looked for all the world like a father pontificating to his children around a dinner table. It was night now and the moonlight speckled about the chamber through the crystal roof above.

He looked up when she came in but did not smile, for he had just been speaking of the hopelessness of finding a cure, the impossibility of saving those already infected, and the likelihood how many more would soon fall victim to its onslaught. He had little to smile about. "Yes, daughter?"

"I think I have found something to help us." She placed the document on the massive table and pointed imperiously to the passage she had found. His voice rough and strong, her father read it aloud to the white- and gray-haired men.

"Applying his art, the Healer restored bounty to the impoverished land, bringing about a wealth of grain, fruit, and livestock."

"I fail to understand," he said when he finished. "What is this?" Her father, Lord Astren, the steward and protector of Drian in the long absence of the king, looked at her with sad eyes. The two silver balls that framed his head on the back of the chair highlighted the silver flecks of his hair.

"There were so many of them, Father. This talks about them as a large group. So many Healers, they cannot possibly be all gone."

"They would surely be dead by now," observed Lord Melcis.

"This Mendican taught his craft to the future king. Surely others must have passed it down. Maybe we can

find them. Maybe they can heal us.”

Her youthful fervor did not catch flame in the dark room. The councilors merely stirred, and shook their wise heads. Lord Ferand raised his thick, gray eyebrows at her and folded his arms over his velvety tunic. “And even if you found one of these Healers’, just exactly how do you think one man can save our city?”

Her steely, earnest eyes stared down the old lord, full of fierce pain. Adrea hated pain. She refused to wallow in it. Now that she had a path to follow, she would direct her energies into action: action to put an end to suffering. “Our people are dying, Lord Ferand. Are you all right with that? Nothing we have tried will stop it, but these Healers can do more than end the plague. According to this text,” she pointed a long, slim finger to the book, “they could bring an end to the famine.”

Her father pushed himself up and walked over to her. Practical, cold, and passionate, she stood taller than her short height. Her sleek, dark hair pushed behind her ears; her narrow, lithe frame clothed with cotton, dark velvet, and a leather belt; and her never-still feet imperceptibly tapping the floor. He knew she was not asking for the men to make a decision; she was waiting to voice her ready-made plan.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked her.

“Send me away from the city in search of one of these Healers. It is better than sitting around here doing nothing, and watching our people die.”

The steward stood as straight and proud as his daughter. He was both a humble, untiring servant of his country, and a proud, noble man. There was a thin, unyielding,

patient strength to their family that carried them through the greatest and most grueling of ages: through the ravages of famine and illness, through the hardship of rule, and through the drain of generations of petty wars. Now that strength held his back stiff and firm. His people might be dying, but he would persevere. He nodded. "I will assign you an escort and you may do as you ask."

Coming up to her, he rested his long, firm fingers on her shoulders and kissed her forehead. "Perhaps, my dearest, you will save our city."



## The Man

**W**hen Adrea entered the courtyard the next day, astride her regal dark horse and dressed with deliberate versatility for her journey: a calf-length skirt, a long apron, three-quarter length sleeves, and a headband to hold back her thick dark hair, she sighed disappointedly to see her father descend the outer steps with a tall, handsome soldier.

She did not recognize the man, but he was of medium build, with big hands and broad shoulders; his skin was fair, hair light, nose aquiline, jaw square, and eyes open, honest, and blue, and the overall effect of his appearance was that he looked very capable.

Adrea detested people who looked capable. This arose from the fact that her father apprized others by their appearance, often honoring handsome men and women because they were handsome, and not on account of skill level or intelligence. A contrarian by nature, Adrea had therefore grown up to dismiss attractive people as quickly as her father dismissed the ugly.

“Is this my escort?” she asked.

The young man saluted her sharply. She could tell he was a soldier by his bearing, he was not arrayed in armor, helmet, or shield. He was dressed simply as a traveler in a leather jerkin, suede billowing cape, and a plain sword. This she could see. But he wore also, close about him, an aura of dedication which Adrea could not see: an air of purpose forged through independence, of a man striving to prove himself, to find himself in the place he desperately believed he belonged. An unproven military man.

“Captain Trinian is the best our army has to offer, and I trust him to keep you safe.”

She nodded respectfully at her father’s words. It was enough of a concession, she knew, for him to dispatch her to the wilderness with only a single companion. Her handmaidens were all ill, as was half the army, and two young people, still hale and full of fighting life, were all the rescue-force he could spare. She would make no complaint.

Side by side, with all those healthy enough to lean out of their windows and doorways to watch, they rode out of the city gates, across the worn-out, overgrown road, and into the wilds of Drian.

“Which direction?” asked Trinian. His voice was strong with a slight cadence, and despite herself, she liked it. She answered him companionably; “I thought we would head southeast toward the old monuments from the time of the kings. There may be some neglected settlements that way.”

He nodded. “I will follow you. I am here to protect you, my lady, wherever you choose to travel.”

She sighed to herself at his answer, deciding that she had

been right to begin with – he was just a strong arm and a pretty face, with no real opinions in his head.

They climbed among dusty mounds, waded through dry prairies, and skirted thickets of brush and thorn, traveling from one ancient ruin to the next. From day to day, Adrea said little to the soldier by her side, and he kept royal protocol by not speaking unless spoken to. Adrea's wounds were often buried deep in her heart, hidden from the world and beneath a careful façade of propriety. But now, comingled with strong despair for her people: for her handmaidens dying in their chambers, for her mother's brother who had died two days before, for Faring who was dying now – they bubbled strong near the surface; and with each fresh disappointment in the wilderlands, they threatened to overflow. So she said nothing, for fear of betraying her fear, and they traveled in silence.

On the first day, they saw the crumbling palace of the Bawrgs with its towers like stalagmites and its eaves like icicles.

But it was desolate.

On the next, they wandered the tunnels of the Nemen Vaults winding like a rabbit warren beneath the surface of the earth.

Empty.

And on the evening of the third, they mounted to the top of the Dirrah Pinnacle, which heaved high above the wilderlands of Drian in a giant swirl.

Barren.

They were all impressive ruins, but Adrea could not appreciate them. Not even occupied by groups of bandits or thieves, they were utterly desolate, despite the fact that

this country was supposed to be ripe with outlaws. But the famine seemed to have driven even these away. The monuments were dead and empty; not a trace of life; and it was life she wanted.

Adrea gazed out from the top of the pinnacle of Dirrah, gripping the sharp sides of the wall beside her. She could see far out over the whole of the land, standing as she did in the very center of Minecerva, and could make out the far mountains of Austro to the east, the hundred mile wall of Kelta to the north, the river Rordan snaking behind the shining, circular city of Drian to the west, and finally, the ancient forests that bordered Drian and South Drian in the south. Slicing through the forest was the one road that led from her home to South Drian – all else was dense, impenetrable wood.

“Why do you think this land is so wild now? Have the gods abandoned it?” she said at last.

Trinian was leaning behind her, against a stone protrusion darkened with ages of wind and rain. He straightened now, and scanned the world laid out like a map at his feet, as if he could uncover its secrets with his eyes.

“I do not know much about natural gods. But I have heard the stories – how they warred with each other here, and trampled humanity in the process.”

“Yes, I know the stories. You would think, though, that the gods would be better than ourselves... at least, I wish that were so. It would be more comforting. I was sort of wondering if the Healers were natural gods.”

“Ah. I had not thought of that. It would make sense, from what you say of them.”

“If only I knew more of Drian’s history. I know we once

prayed to the high gods who dwell above in the heavenly palace, and in the old tales, we could speak to the natural ones who dwelt here on Minerva. But those days are long past, and maybe all the gods, after all, are only fiction. Maybe we are alone here, on this charred pinnacle: no one can see us, no one hear us, no one bring us comfort." She did not lose control when she said it, though her heart rose in her throat. She was a perfect lady, who kept her calm even in the face of utter despair. Now she raised her head in defiance. "If all else fails, we will pray to the high gods before returning to Drian. What do we have to lose now?"

Trinian stiffened in surprise, then nodded silently. Of course he was surprised. No one ever prayed to the gods - not for generations. But Adrea cared nothing for his opinion. Maybe she was mad, she thought, after all the death and disease, but here on the pinnacle of the past, with words of history books pounding in her brain, it did not seem insane to pray to the gods of legend.

She dropped to her knees and slowly, Trinian followed suit.

"Gods of Drian, hear us now," she cried. "We call upon you for aid - save our city! Restore the land and the people to life. Return to us and nurture our lost prosperity. We will build altars, burn incense, and sacrifice our first fruits to your goodness. Only save us from utter destruction."

They were both silent for a long while after that. It was a weak prayer, perhaps, but it was fervent. Finally, Adrea rose from her knees. Trinian sprang up buoyantly, his yellow hair gleaming in the sunlight, and a smile on his face.

"Do you know," he reflected openly, so that Adrea was

taken aback, “I have never prayed before – it is such an odd concept to talk to someone who may or may not exist.”

She frowned, his candor affecting her overfull turmoil of emotions. “Do you think they heard us?” she asked vulnerably.

He frowned and pursed his lips. “Like you said, what do we have to lose?”

“What do we do now?”

They were both surprised by the question, or rather, that she was asking it of him. But finally Trinian answered. “It is up to you, my lady. But if you want my opinion, I suggest we light a fire and go to sleep.”

She nodded, and together they descended to make camp at the foot of the spire.

## The Wizard

**K**nowledge, the third sister of the heavens, was singing a song of praise to the Golden King, hoping he could hear it winging across the vast expanse between the high heavens of Minecerva, and the farthest heavens of His home. As she leaned against the balcony, her airy dress blowing like a bird about her, her eyes shut in bliss, Fate came upon her.

“The Messenger from the Golden King say you are to sing a song to a mortal.”

She turned from her perch and her eyes shone with eagerness. “Is this in preparation for His coming?” she asked eagerly.

He only smiled richly, and she sighed.

“What is the point of knowing everything if you will not tell me?”

“You should *know*, Knowledge,” he answered dryly.

“I already told them everything I knew! I told them all about Truth at the beginning of time. You know what is to come, but you don’t tell.”

“I cannot. But perhaps you could tell the mortals how to make sense of it you’re knowledge.”

She shrugged delicately, “I gave them the resources – it is their choice if they want to make sense of it or not.”

“How very impartial of you.”

Her blue eyes sparkled at him, and she ignored the chastisement of his tone. Moving with an airy grace, she leaned against the palace wall. “You and I are alike that way.”

“I do not interfere with mortals, god, or any creatures – not without the command of the Golden King.”

“Well? Then why should I not be impartial too?”

His face grew solemn, and he studied her gravely. “I do not interfere with mortals because if I moved among them, they would lose their free will, and I cannot do that to them.”

She snorted delicately. “You owe them neither compassion nor sorrow. You have given them a gift, and it is their choice whether to accept it.”

He sighed a mighty sigh that could have shaken the earth. “But they are so confused, you know. More than ourselves.”

“Well, I do not show partiality, either. My knowledge is given them to use as they like – unless of course,” she caught herself, “the Golden King commands something else of me. What does he ask?”

The smile returned to his ageless face, and his whole person lit with an inner beauty. “There is a young soldier traveling with the future stewardess of Drian. You are to give him directions.”

She giggled with the absurdity of the errand. “Directions? I possess the essence of truth, and am merely asked



to give directions? Very well, this must be a very important man. I will keep my eye on him.”

Before leaping from the parapet, she turned back to look at her oldest brother. “But only an eye – I will not interfere.”

He merely looked at her with an enigmatic expression that disconcerted her, and, attempting to shake free of his gaze, she leapt to the earth – her incorporeal form a whisper on the wind, a rainbow flashing delicately in the sky. She drifted above the ruins of Dirrah and breathed a map into the mind of the sleeping soldier on the ground: Trinian, the son of a humble farmer, a man trying to prove himself, the best that Drian had to offer, and now an object of interest to the gods. “Go to the Wizard, young man,” she whispered, infiltrating his dreams like a seed planted by a traveling wind. “Find the Wizard of the Wood.”

\* \* \*

In the morning, Adrea arose early and banked the fire, her heart heavy and unsure. She was pulling out her dried meat and fruit for breakfast when Trinian stirred and sat up suddenly, gazing confusedly in the direction of South Drian. The soldier leapt urgently to his feet, looking about as if expecting to see someone, and abruptly climbed to the Pinnacle of Dirrah to look across the great expanse of land below. When, at last, he returned to the ground, Lady Adrea demanded an explanation and he told her about his strange dream.

“I saw the way so clearly. There is a wizard in the border wood between Drian and South Drian. I think, well, I

think we should try to find him," he explained sheepishly. "I know the way."

Adrea frowned at him. "A dream? You had a dream about where to find a wizard?"

He tilted his head. "So? You said we would find an answer in the morning."

"But we do not want a wizard, we want a Healer." Wizards were strange beings, gifted with uncanny insights. Some could see into the future, others delve into the hearts of men, and still others could communicate with animals... each wizard was different, and the people of Drian feared them, unsure if they were human or immortal. But she had never heard of one with the ability to heal.

"Perhaps this wizard will lead us to a Healer. Maybe he will know something about it." The soldier's hopefulness surprised her into a smile, but she quickly suppressed it and nodded. A dream was a flimsy excuse to go somewhere, but they had not yet explored the border wood. It was as good a place to go as any.

"Very well. We will see."

They set out, traveling southeast toward the ancient woods, and as they went, the summer sun shone blithely upon them, and the birds in the trees sang brightly. The energy lifted their spirits, and both man and woman were filled with fresh hope. Trinian had never considered himself a prophet: he had no reason to think he might dream an answer to Drian's dilemma. Yet the dream was not from himself: it had seemed separate, an entity all its own. As if from someone – something – else, and that gave him hope. His faith, zealous and energetic in its vivacity, was contagious, especially to a young lady

so fully engrossed in the fear that the world lay on her shoulders. It was a balm for her to have someone else, a fellow companion, shoulder that load with her, and her weary heart was glad to borrow strength from Trinian's.

A tall hill rose before them at midmorning and Trinian said he remembered it from his dream. When they reached the top, they saw spread before them a great, dark forest, surrounded on three sides by tall hills, and warily, they urged their horses down the incline. They threaded into the dense trunks and immediately a shadow blocked the sun: all sounds were hushed.

As they progressed, the quiet crept into their souls. Adrea's guarded, lonely heart surged suddenly in fear. She felt like it was gutted wide into a destitute world, and her breath caught in her throat, her arms tingled, and her ears flushed. She was caged, silent but crying out from her depths, trapped in a fear she did not understand. She tried desperately not to let the soldier beside her see her terror, but he was walled up in his own mind.

"There's magic here," said Adrea softly after a moment. Though she had never felt magic before, she recognized its effect.

Trinian nodded. "I think we are close," he whispered, his voice quivering with excitement.

Presently, they came on an open clearing deep within the forest. It was fifty yards wide with only six or seven trees scattered about. In the very center, flanked by two large, low, crimson Sweetgum trees, a thatched stone house seemed to grow from the ground. Behind it nestled a shed or stable of the same make, and right before them, leading up to the wooden door, was a path of deeply embedded

stones.

Then Adrea laughed and Trinian looked at her in surprise, her eyes reflecting the soaring of her heart. "It's wonderful," she cried, released at last from her awful, undirected fear.

Cautiously, curiously, they approached the low door. Dismounting, Trinian went to knock on it for her but, to their astonishment, it swung inward on its own hinges before he touched it. Adrea gasped and they stepped inside.

The room was large and full. The entire wall on the inside was lined with shelves bursting with great, ancient, and beautiful books. On the wall adjoining it there were two closed doors, and between them another set of shelves, filled with jars and boxes of all makes, shapes, and colors. The long wall facing them had a scenic window with a wide seat, and near that a deep, satin upholstered armchair and an old rocking chair. On the same wall was a kitchen with cabinets and drawers, a long counter, and large washing tubs each stacked inside the next. A wooden door with a round window in it led to the back yard. The final wall housed the stove, and beside it, a deep recess, just large enough for one person to enter, which was filled with spices and roots, vegetables and cheeses, salted meats and breads, fruits and berries, and canned goods. The last item in the room was a round table that stood at the center, with four chairs around it.

There was no one inside, but suddenly, the backdoor opened (again of its own accord), and an old man entered. Wrinkled and gnarled and amiable looking, he was carrying a basket of eggs under one arm and clothing draped across the other.

Catching sight of the strangers standing in his house, his eyebrows shot up in surprise, and he spoke to them in a voice that was gravelly and grave. “Well, well, you are most welcome here.”

“Forgive us, father,” said Trinian. “We did not mean to intrude – the door was open.”

Adrea stood stolidly, her head high and proud as ever, her brief moment of gaiety flown in the face of a stranger, but the wizard smiled and when he did, his old eyes shone like stars in a black sky. “Yes, yes. For surely you could not have got in otherwise. Now, now, let me put down these eggs here, and then I can greet you properly.” After he had set down the basket, he turned to them, brought his hands together, and bowed. He seemed to forget about the clothes, and they fluttered in a rainbow of colors from his arm. The robe he wore was bright red, and from the selection on his arm, it was clear he liked bright colors. “Welcome, friends, to the home of Gladier, the wizard of the Sacrawood and keen observer of distant places.”

They in turn bowed back and gave their own names, and Adrea stepped forward. “My father, we come to beg your assistance. The kingdom of Drian is overwhelmed by sickness and plague, and we are seeking out a Healer who can cure the city and bring peace back to us.”

The Wizard looked at her in surprise. “There are no more Healers,” he said. “Don’t you know?”

His words were like a slap in the face, and Adrea cried out so suddenly that Trinian and the hermit started in surprise, but she could no longer rein in her emotions. For too long, she had retained ever-tightening control, and when it seemed as though, finally, they would find an

answer, she had been pulled to the breaking point. Now, disappointed in their discovery, her feelings overflowed in tumultuous disappointment. "Oh, they said so, my father's advisors." Her voice was savage. "But I hoped against hope that they might have only been lost, and maybe we could find them again."

"No," answered Gladier, a depth of sadness in his voice beyond even Adrea's. "No more exist in all this world."

"Then our search is in vain." She dropped into one of the chairs beside the table and there was a long silence.

"Do not despair," said Gladier finally. "All will come right in the end. Listen, children, I have to cook supper. You are weary from your travels. Please sit down," he gestured to Trinian, "while I prepare a meal."

His aged form stepped lightly to the counter, and he began to move briskly, defying his old age, removing food and dishes from the cabinets.

"Our horses, sir?" asked the soldier.

"Already in the stable, I am sure. They are noble beasts and can look out for themselves." The soldier blinked in surprise, but only sat obediently at the table.

"You will, of course, stay the night." It was not a request, as things said in such a way often are. It was a command.

"Please sir," said Adrea watching him, "if you know about the Healers, then surely you can tell us what happened to them?" She stood up restlessly and walked over to him.

"Let us wait till the meal, my child. That is the time to tell stories." He raised one of his old, grizzly eyebrows at her.

"Of course." Her foot tapped the floor.

"You have no skill in cooking," he told her, his back to

them as he briskly sliced potatoes.

“Well, no, I have never learned...but, what does that...?”

“I will teach you now. When your mind will not be still, it is good to find activity for the body. Yet another time, perhaps, I shall teach you to sit quietly in peace.” With a sparkle in his old eye, he set her the task of slicing onions as he pulled down sausages from the nook in the wall.

## The SacraWood

“Do you know,” said Gladier, when they had sat down to their meal, “my doors, the front and back, are strong, very strong, and open only of their own accord. In the span of one hundred years, they have opened to none except myself and one other.” He smiled at them. “That is why I was so startled to find you here. Yet trusting, for they have never admitted my enemies.”

“How curious,” said Trinian after a pause during which Adrea did not respond.

“They would remain locked if someone came to rob or harm me. To get in, my invaders would have to chop down the frame.”

Trinian asked. “Did you construct them yourself?”

“Oh, no! I have some magic, yes, but very little, and nothing as strong as that. That would be a story to tell!” He was about to leave the matter there, but with a glance at Adrea, thought better of it. “A hundred years ago, you see, the natural god of this realm was killed in a feud with



a natural god of Drian. Natural gods will get into such catastrophic disputes now and then, for they get ambitious, and want to own more than they were given; a river rises up to drown the land beside it, or a forest spreads from valley to vale, eager to rule all it finds. Few of the divinities are content to abide where they are and rule their own stretch of land. So it was that the natural god that once ruled the valleys of western Drian killed the god of this forest and tried to burn the trees into dust; but he failed, and was soon killed himself by another god, and the plains of western Drian have been barren, dead, and deserted ever since. But this forest was hardier than the plain, and the trees refused to die or the grasses to wither, and when it remained rooted where it was, full of brave trees and magical creatures, Fate took pity upon it. He came to me, for I was, at the time, a lonely, lost soul, and Fate picked me up and placed me here in the center of the wood. He told me to guard it, though I was not a god. I had little else to do in Minecerva – I had just lost my community and all I cared for in life – and I was happy to live here in isolation. I have found meaning here, for over the years, many odd creatures have joined me and found refuge, away from the drama that was, at the time, unfolding across the wilderness; for the king was recently missing from Drian and the god of Karaka had since turned quite destructive and warlike, so that creatures with magic were being driven from the world. Dragons, garanx birds, unicorns, and stags; Dryads, nyads, mermen and women, and many others – but, you look at me as if you have never heard this before...”

“We know little of the gods,” said Trinian, for whom this

was indeed new and amazing information, and he felt as if ancient myths were becoming real before his eyes, and he was sitting forward to hear more. But Lady Adrea, shaking herself from her silence, startled them both by suddenly demanding, "There are other things I would like to ask you about, father." He raised an old eyebrow at her, and patiently waited. "I want to ask you about the Healers," she said at last, speaking around her anger and burying it in her heart.

"Ah, yes, of course. What do you want to know?"

"What has happened to them? The texts I read told of ancient Healers who mended sickness throughout Minecerva. What happened? Why did they fail to pass on what they knew?"

"Ah, there you strike the point: for the qualities of the Healers were not so much an art, as an inheritance. The Healing Priesthood, as it was called, was passed on, generation to generation, and no age was ever without its Healers. Then, the Blessing of the Healer was gone, and they were no more."

Adrea shook her head. "But why? Why could they not pass on the blessing?"

Gladier looked at her quietly a moment. "You are the daughter of the keeper of Drian, are you not?"

"Yes, I am his only child."

"And yet you know so little of your past," his voice was full of mourning. "Are the people of Drian no longer instructed in their history? Do they not remember the kings of long ago or the prophecies that were foretold?"

"Yes," she answered him slowly, "some. But much of our history was buried and burned in a great fire, four hundred

years ago. Some things have passed down through word of mouth, but we wonder what is truth and what is myth.”

“Then you have no knowledge of your history? Do you not know when and how the line ended?”

“We know this: in the year six hundred, King Ronarge died of old age, leaving no heir. In that same year, enemies of Drian took advantage of the empty throne and attacked the kingdom. They seized Drian and ruled for fifty years. When my ancestors, the first Stewards of Drian, drove them out, they could find no relation to the king in the city. So the Stewards vowed to rein over Drian until the day the king returned.”

Gladier shook his head at her description, saddened over the period of darkness that had driven the long memory of Drian’s precious past into oblivion, and wishing the guardians of the city had kept better care of their history. He leaned forward now to remedy their education.

“Now listen carefully, children, for this concerns you directly.

“In the beginning, over nine hundred years ago, when the world was still quite young, the first king oversaw all the nations. He was King Adalam. On the day of his coronation he swore a covenant, saying that he would never break faith with his people or his god; that he would rule justly and kindly, with no thought to his own gain or selfish desires. That if he, or any of his descendants, ever broke faith with the covenant, they would cease to rule.

“So began the monarchy and it progressed in peace and plenty. All the world was blessed with joy, prosperity, learning, and wisdom. Beauty and culture flourished! It was a blessed age.

“Yet it came to an end on account of King Ronarge. Pleasure and peace, you see, make men weak and lead to indolence. Ronarge was a good man certainly, coming from a long line, almost five hundred years, of righteous men. But he had a flaw; and one flaw is enough to ruin a man. For Ronarge, the flaw was the love of luxury. He desired all that was the best in the kingdom: livestock, food, weavers, tapestries, minstrels, perfumes, furs, jewels: all that was soft, beautiful, and pleasurable, and it may not come as a surprise then, when I say that his wife was the most lovely in the land, for full golden hair and a rose-petal complexion made her the beloved blossom of the kingdom.

“With all this luxury, the king cared little for maintaining Drian and so allowed it to fall into dreadful neglect. The army and the outer walls, no longer the pride of the city, fell into disrepair. The kingdom did not complain, for they were used to peace and reveled with the king, eating and drinking and giving and receiving in marriage, until the day the dragon arrived.

“Yes, for there were dragons aplenty in that time, freely roaming over the world and living in fear of none. Many plundered and stole and carried off women. For what purpose these foul beasts wanted such fair creatures we cannot imagine; but want them they did and more than anything else.

“There was a beast by the name of Lucer, and he was the worst of them. He heard tell of the king’s handsome wife and decided to have her for himself. Setting out to claim her, he flew over the land, and news soon reached the king of his approach. Filled with fear and panic, he ordered

the army out to slay him. But the army was undisciplined, overcome with fear, and all too concerned for their own safety. Without a resourceful leader, the soldiers were led to their deaths and never returned to Drian.

“Then the kingdom was thrown into turmoil. The king hid in his palace, the populace hid in their homes, and the dragon sped ever nearer. He flew to the palace where the king cowered with his wife, tore out the walls, and perched in the crumbled stone. The king’s sword lay on the ground as he shivered in fright.

“Lucer gazed at him with scorn. ‘Take up your sword and fight me, you coward!’

“But the king was still. The dragon turned toward the Queen, and rumbled, ‘Did they tell you I was hideous? Did you really think I was worth all this terror?’

She approached him, as if drawn to him, and he pulled himself up with pride. ‘Well I am. Or rather, I am worth much more. Strip! And let me see you!’ And with that he looked at the king, daring him to reach for his weapon; for truly, the beast was spoiling for a fight.

When Lucer looked back at the queen, he found she had done as he bid. He looked her up and down, but terror had ridden her of her beauty. ‘You are neither of you worth this trouble!’ he cried. ‘I am Lucer, the great beast, come to conquer your city and deprive you of your women. But when I arrive, you hand yourselves over freely. This was your great test! And you failed.’ He smiled. ‘I am glad of it. We are now in merry company together!’ And with this applauding cry, he flew away, far off over the mountains and into the sky. But behind him he had left behind his polluted breath, and all men now breathed it in.

“Shivering in gasps the queen looked at her husband and was revolted when she saw the way he looked upon her nakedness. In trembling haste she pulled her clothes over her quivering body, shamed and weeping. That night she, and the child within her, died. King Ronarge lived many more years but passed childless; and there the line ended.

“Thus the last King of Drian broke faith with his people and so the covenant was broken. And now the people of Drian have forgotten their heritage.”

A long silence hung in the air when Gladier finished his tale.

“But the king will return,” said Trinian after awhile, gazing intently at the wizard. “Will he not? Are not there prophecies about that?”

Gladier looked at him. “Yes. In a time of great need and after much trial, the king will return.”

“And what has this to do with the Healers?” asked Adrea.

Gladier smiled. “Bless me, I had forgotten the point of my story. Yes, yes, the Healers. You see, the blessing was linked to the covenant. The Healers received their gift when King Adalam received his. They were all part of the same promise. When the covenant was broken, the blessings ended. Therefore, until the king returns, the Healers will be lost in legend.”

“But if the covenant is renewed – if the king returns, then surely so shall the blessing? And then the Healers will return?” she asked.

“But how will this help our people now?” demanded Trinian. “They are all dying and we are their hope. It seems that if we are to find a Healer, we must find a king. But the line is dead, and how could we ever find it again?”

Instead of answering, Gladier rose and lifted up his arms. The lamps died in a rush of air and the old man stood gaunt and upright in the silvery light of the bay window. Then solemnly, in a deep voice, he recited: "From the deep ashes of time, after ages shrouded in mist, the sun will rise and bathe the world in his golden light. The king shall return. It shall be after great trial: a famine will sweep through the land, followed by death. In this way you shall know that the coming of the king is imminent: the King who restores the world. Then shall come the Golden Age, a time of wonder: the Dryad will awaken and lie down with the mortal; wild horse shall bear the maiden; tender infant end the war; poison shall save the world. Who can see these things and not wonder? Wonder and madness, death and joy walk hand in hand. Health, also, and all arts shall be renewed, for the Healers shall return. Oh! That that time may come swiftly, for then shall I regain peace, for then can I pass away, bestowing my lost and renewed blessing upon a new minister. All this shall come to pass for the reign of the Golden King." Then Gladier let his arms fall to his sides, and he sank wearily into his chair.

They gazed at him. In awe and amazement, with flushed cheeks and glowing eyes, they stared hard at this old, old man. Wondering, now, how old he truly was. They drew a breath of deep wonder, and then Adrea leapt from her chair, pointing an accusing finger at him.

"It's you! You are the Healer and prophet. It's of you that my nurse spoke, when I was only a little child. Heavens above! You must be nigh on five hundred years old!"

"How have you lived so long?" asked Trinian.

"It is incredible! You cannot be mortal."

“I cannot be a great many things,” answered Gladier soberly, “but I am as mortal as both of you. Did you not listen to what I said? ‘Then shall I regain peace and then shall I pass away.’ My death is but staved off for an indefinite amount of time. Therefore calm yourself, Lady Adrea, for I am neither a deity, nor a king: only an old man in the wilderness who heralds his coming.”

Then he heaved himself upright. “That’s enough conversation for one night. Your heads are full to bursting, and I think you should sleep on it. Good night, my children, and sleep well.”

With practiced grace, he raised his hands in benediction.



## II

# POWER

*“I saw him coming, swift and savage, making  
for me, head high, with ravenous hunger raving  
So that for dread the very air seemed shaking.”*

*- Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy*



## Power and Passion Collude

**A**fter the meeting of the gods, at the beginning of the eleventh century, Power had disappeared into the depths of his corner in the far East of Minecerva, the land of Karaka. There he piled up layer upon layer of mud and muck to conceal a deep labyrinth of caverns dug below the surface. While he was wary of Rordan, he was far too determined to be deterred from his ultimate goal.

He had driven out the natural gods who had once ruled the land, and decided to take on their shape. But it was like smooshing an apple into a banana peel, and the change did not suit him: his power and strength crackled out of the physical shell as if he would burst asunder, but he was perversely pleased with himself all the same, for no other god had ever attempted to take on tactile shape or rule the physical realm. He was less than he had once been, but he thought of himself as more.

In the eleventh hour and ninety-fourth minute, Passion came to visit him. She was tired of the wails of the dying

in the rest of the world, so she came to amuse herself with her brother. Few individuals - mortal, natural god, or high god - could resist her charms, so after they had reveled in debaseness for a little while together, he sat up and offered her some wine. She pushed it away and filled his glass with her own stronger elixir to lower his defenses. She enjoyed secrets and knew he had many.

After drinking himself into an open humor, he began to brag about the monsters and men at his command. "To rule is the greatest joy in life. The lower ones were created to obey us," he gloated.

"Mmm, and don't they just?" She purred. "Just a little nudge here and there, and they are like putty in our hands."

"No, no!" He knelt up and held his glass aloft. "Command! Rule!" He roared, and though he was drunk, he was powerful. "They must know who you are. Know who commands them! Or it is no fun."

"Fun?" She giggled at him. "Since when did you care about fun?"

"It has been long in coming," he nodded and his eyes were fixed on some distant, invisible point, gleaming with eager lust, "but my era is about to begin."

"How do you figure that? The Golden King will come soon, when the clock strikes twelve, and then we will have to answer to him. You don't have time to really rule."

Then he laughed long and loud and Passion, despite herself, shivered, for he was so handsome and black and dynamic in his mirth.

"Yes, but you see, I have consulted the oracles." He flopped down beside her on the soft, black bed to tell his secret, and she thrilled in anticipation to hear it.

“At the very beginning,” he told her, “I flew over the world to practice my art, to implement it, to serve the Golden King and answer to him when he returned. But twelve hundred years is a long time to build something you cannot keep, and looking ahead, I saw myself losing everything. All I had worked so hard to build taken from me by one who abandoned us for so long. Can he justify himself, I wondered. Who was he to rule over what I molded? So, in the nine hundredth year –”

“The eighth hour,” she corrected him, but he paid no heed and kept on with his story. When he taken control of Karaka as a physical being, Power had ceased to measure time in the same increments as the high gods.

“In the nine hundredth year, I descended to Fate’s two daughters, Justice and Mercy, who rule in the mountains of Austro, to find out what they foresaw. Mercy told me what I did not expect:

*‘Beware the rightful heir of Drian’s throne  
His coming brings the end you fear,  
Since rightful mortal heir is the inertia  
For reign of rightful King of Minecerva.’*

“She predicted that a king would return to rule Drian – after all these years, somehow, someone would find an heir to that weak and mortal throne! And his coming would mean that I would lose all, because it heralded the One who would take everything away from me - He would take it, claiming what is *mine* as His own. Mine!” He breathed heavily a moment, seeing only red in his anger, but he mastered himself, remembering what came next.

“But Justice – she told me something I had barely allowed myself to hope for. She told me that just before he is to return, there is another possibility:

*‘Only one to challenge your great might  
there’s only one to end your usurpation.  
To defeat him sustains your lasting nation  
To overthrow maintains your mortal station!’*”

Loudly, Power proclaimed the prophecy; loudly, he continued his explanation. “If I can step into the line of the lost monarchy of Drian, and claim rightful rule over Minecerva, then I do not have to hand it over to the Golden King. It will be mine, mine I tell you, and He can’t have it!” He broke again into wild, unchecked laughter, and Passion joined him, filled with the fun of the idea.

“But how can you do it?”

His eyes were bright, fiery orbs. “I have searched long and hard for the rightful ruler, and I do believe I have found him. Long ago, I traced his lineage and suspected him from a distance, but always he has lived in Drian, protected by Rordan, and I could not touch him. But my moment is now at hand, for tonight, for the first time in his life, he has left Drian, and Rordan cannot protect him.”

## The First Possession

**S**erene and knowledgeable, the shining moon of the heavens gazed down upon Gladier's cottage, shedding her silver radiance in a sheet of sparkly light. She streamed through the great bay window where Trinian slept, casting her silver beams upon him, aware of the mark upon his brow, the birth-right of his destiny.

She was silver, she was a lady, and joyfully, patiently, gently, she reflected the rays of the sun upon a confused world, and kept watch over the confused souls who lived below. She smiled now in the secret knowledge of what was about to come, and she smiled for Minecerva's wondrous, painful, precarious fate that would envelop it for the next five years. She knew, as not even the high gods knew, the reasons for all the pain, loneliness, death, and despair that would descend upon Minecerva in this, the final hour, and she knew it was well worth it.

Suddenly, the stillness was ruptured by a great crash and stamping of bristly feet in the forest glen, and the moon merely glowed the brighter and maintained her

quiet, patient course in the heavens, allowing events to unfold according to their prescription.

Ten hideous creatures, tall and terrifying, with bristly short hair, black hides, horns on their heads, and standing upright upon four legs, trampled through the clearing, making an unholy racket and knocking down tree and bush before them. With a heave of a massive shoulder, the greatest beast threw himself against the cottage door, crashing in the frame – that door which had never opened to any but friendly callers. Their noise was great, yet none of the sleepers awoke, for the mortals slept in a magicked slumber that hung darkly heavy about the house, and under such cover, the beasts seized the soldier who slept in the main room behind the bay window. With a leap and a howl, they sprang back into the woods with him, their prey, and all was silent once more.

Darkness, night, and dank death clung to the air Trinian breathed when he opened his eyes from his deep sleep. Monstrous beings – vile, deformed, and terrible – bore him gagging for breath. Then, his vision clearing, he perceived in the dim light a fortress rising like a dank dream from miry ground. Vanishing and fading in and out of substance, the fortress stood as a darksome extension of the vast plain of mud.

Great gates gaped to receive their band, and Trinian was overcome by the nauseous stench of the cavern, so that he nearly fell insensible again. Twisting, turning tunnels led ever deeper into the darkness so that he could make out nothing except imagined darker blotches where he thought he saw more of the beasts. Eventually, after an interminable period, the darkness grew less oppressive



until he made out an actual light ahead.

They emerged into a cavern too large to be lit completely by the various bonfires that burned throughout. There was a man sitting on a raised dais in the center, at a makeshift desk. If he could be called a man, for he was paler than the paper that surrounded him and his eyes were of the palest blue, so that he looked like a ghost. Indeed, in contrast to the black beasts and red light of the fires, it seemed to Trinian he was carved from pure ice. Though he had lost his humanity, still he had once been a mortal man who had become consumed with the sheer mightiness of Power's divinity, and had willingly enslaved himself to the god, a mere sample of those mortals who are willing to relinquish their humanity, with full and clear knowledge of the weight of their actions, to utter depravity. Though few and far between, they do exist, and we do an injustice to our own fallen nature when we doubt it.

But he had not lost every shred of humanity, for when he spoke, it was with even a human voice, though it was frigid and sharp.

"Welcome. I see you are a splendid figure of a man, a warrior, I think. But that will not help you. We will bring you before your god and you will fall to your knees," he spoke casually, sorting the papers on his desk as he did. "He will crush you to the floor with his eyes. No man cannot tremble. No man cannot sink in terror. You will serve him from this moment on, mindless and blind to all but his awesome power. You are signed in for your appointment. You can go."

Trinian, attempting to rein in his terror, paid no heed to the icy voice. Desperate, he tried to hold himself apart

from the absolute wretchedness surrounding him; blindly, he struggled to regain his calm, soldierly attitude, with which he had once thought he could face anything with equanimity, but which was now failing him.

The beasts, which Trinian knew from legend were called gorgans, opened bronze doors three stories high and shoved him through into the swallowing darkness. Though he could not see, he felt that the chamber was small and enclosed, and he struggled to breathe around stagnant pockets of air. His knees shook and he felt a great load on his heart dragging him to the earth but, stubbornly, he remained upright.

A growing sound filled the chamber, glancing off the cold, muddy walls and reverberating against the bronze doors. It tore his heart in agony and it took him a moment to recognize it for what it was.

Laughter.

“Who are you?” he tried to challenge the laugh, but his voice was barely a quivering whisper.

“Yes, how could I expect you to know that? You know not even who you are.” When he heard the dreadful, beautiful voice, Trinian knew it was a god, and once again, he strove not to fall to his knees.

“You do not fall before me.”

Trinian did not answer, consumed with repeating to himself, over and over, that he would *not* fall.

“I am glad.” The voice was a hiss in his ear and he stumbled aside, hitting his shoulder against the soft wall with a squelch. His heart beat so loud, it filled the chamber with rapid, pulsing percussion.

“I am going to take something from you,” the voice spoke

over the sound of his heart. “Something you do not even know you have. You are going to give it to me.”

Sweat trickling down his face and falling into his eyes, Trinian gasped, “I will give you nothing.”

“You are strong: stronger than any man who has ever been before me, but even you cannot resist a god. You will succumb. It has been foretold, by those who cannot lie: the prophecies are clear.” Then icy fingers, without substance, probed his mind, like a carnivore probing dead flesh for a choice bone. The dead cannot push away the prober. Gradually, the soldier’s defenses fell away. Soon, he would be nothing more than a mindless, pathetic slave.

His mind thrashed against the probing hands, weak and useless, and he wondered how anyone had energy to fight death...but that thought was his salvation. Memory - swift, impulsive, unpredictable – rose with bright image in his mind. Like a summer breeze stirring dying, frozen grasses, blowing open the cobwebs strung between them, a vision rose in Trinian’s memory.

Death, that specter all men face with terror and finality, had taken Trinian’s own father too young, but it was not the final deathbed moment that came to him now. It was a few weeks before, when his father had begun to struggle in his labors, and was leaning heavily on a plow, his heart beating rapidly from a slow, wasting illness. Trinian remembered standing beside his father, his heart wrung with sympathetic, youthful grief, when suddenly Viol, the littlest sister of the family, unaware of her father’s struggles, had run to him across the field. Trinian was about to warn her not to tackle their father, but his tongue fell silent when his father ran toward her and, with superhuman

effort, received her into his arms and lifted her high into the bright summer air, her brown curls whirling in the wind, her gleeful laughter bringing a joyful smile to his dying heart.

With the smallest gleam of hope, the son remembered that moment now, the strength that love brought to a dying man, and he cried out to the dead with desperate breath. "Help me, father! Grant me your strength!"

A surge of power consumed his veins, filling him full with life and light, clarity and determination. With a heave, he hauled up his leaded, weighted feet from the ground and flung himself against the great bronze doors that shut him in.

They parted. He stumbled through and, to the wails of Power behind him, ran back the way the beasts had carried him, groping through the wet and slippery corridors, and fleeing that terrible, wretched wrath. As in a dream, he heard shouts and angry cries behind him, but he ran with all his strength, and they were a confused muddle. He never clearly knew how he lost them. After a long while, he came out into the dark night of the mud-paved land.

Trinian ran on. He ran over the muddy ground, slid and fell, got up again and kept on running. How long this went on, he could never say afterwards. He ran on fear, and when it seemed there was no adrenaline left to fuel his desperation, a giant bird, like a miracle, alighted beside him, scooped him onto its back, and flew him back to Gladier's home.

## Adalam

Cool air wafted through the glen in the border wood, kissing the early sunlight streaming between tall, green branches. Only the door hanging open on its hinges showed any sign of the previous night's invasion. The valley was sparkling and undisturbed.

Inside the hut, however, Gladier stood stern before Trinian. Still wet and muddy from his journey, the soldier shivered in a blanket in the deep armchair.

"What is your family name?" the wizard demanded.

Even Lady Adrea was still shuddering from the shock of the night. It had been horrible for her to wake and find the door ripped off its hinges and her companion gone. Gladier, on rising, had immediately sat down before a bowl of shallow water and found Trinian with his mind. He had seen everything from a distance, as if in a vision, and point by point, he had related the action to her. She had listened in dumbfounded confusion to each event, and now that it was all over, she understood it no better.

It was a garanx bird from Gladier's forest which had come to Trinian's rescue. As soon as the young man broke free from the fortress, Gladier called upon the magical creature to fetch the man at full speed, and the faithful beast brought the waning fugitive promptly back to its master.

Gladier loomed over Trinian and fixed his piercing eyes upon him, as if to ascertain his fate with a penetrating glance. Now he asked again, "What is your family name?"

Trinian took a deep breath. "Nian."

"Not anymore. I think it is Adalam."

Adrea glared at him, her heart pinching in teased hope. "You cannot say that unless you have proof. You cannot!"

Gladier looked at her and there was excitement in his old eyes. "I did not hear what went on in that chamber, but I saw. I saw enough to offer that name as a very possible option. In fact, I don't see how it *cannot* be true. No untitled, simple man would be wanted by the gods, and no man less than a king or wizard could have stood like that before a natural god in his full might."

Adrea shook her head and paced quickly in anxiety, hope, and dread. Trinian looked back and forth at them both, trying to process their conversation. Though he was usually quick witted, his mind had just suffered a tremendous ordeal, and he was not able to comprehend their drift.

"Are you saying," he asked in doubt, "that I am descended from Adalam?"

"Yes! You are the heir to the throne of Drian."

Adrea exhaled angrily, and Trinian fell back into his chair. Gladier, unperturbed by their disbelief, went on;

he turned on Adrea and advanced towards her, accenting each word as he advanced, and she backed up beneath his gaze, clenching her fists. Her anger rose from masking the fear she felt at the very likely chance that Gladier was wrong: that he was raising their hopes for nothing. "You know it must be true," said the wizard. "You know we must investigate. This young man is very likely our salvation. *Even the gods fear him.*"

And she looked at Trinian, sitting pale and helpless and confused. And she looked into the Wizard's eyes and the hope there was overwhelming; she began to soften, to hope with him – but then her heart closed resolutely and she stood tall in her short height. She refused to entertain false hope without proof and she told him so.

The old man, to her surprise, nodded his head energetically. "Yes, yes," he cried excitedly. "There is not enough proof. The proof of one natural god, haunting his own land, is hardly enough. There is much to do, much to discover. More prophecies will be fulfilled before we know for certain. We must tell no one until we have irrefutable proof. This is not a matter, my children, to be taken lightly. This is the sort of intelligence that leads to wars."

There was much to think on and the future stewardess and wizard kept at it a long time, so that it was not until a half hour later when Adrea finally wandered out of the hut to speak with Trinian. She found him leaning against a large tree, his straight shoulders drooping, and his eyes glaring into the dark forest. No longer did he stand upon his noble, soldierly grace, but had collapsed: deflated, confused, and frightened, and though his blue eyes and light hair reflected the depth and light of the sky,

his brooding silence mirrored the heavy hush of the wood.

“You have said nothing.”

He shrugged in response. Stridently, she placed herself beside him, her strong command battling his tempestuous silence. “Say what you are thinking,” she ordered.

As a good soldier, he obeyed, though slowly: “Too much and not enough. All my life, I knew what was expected of me. I was supposed to be a farmer – it is what my father wanted, but I always knew it was wrong. When he died I tried to please him for a time, but I was not meant for the fields, and I knew it. My mother knew it, and gave me permission to leave home, to leave the farm in my brother’s hands, and find my place in the world. So she said, but I did not have to find it. I knew! I knew I was meant to be a soldier! I knew it since I first caught sight, as a boy, of their beautiful splendor. To fight for honor, glory, and my city – I was born to protect and build!”

She nodded, and her heart went out to him. She understood, entirely, the drive to protect and build Drian. “So was I. I knew it, my father knew it, and what was better, I was born into it. Fate selected me, of all the world, to rule Drian and preserve her for the coming king, and I would give my life for her. Would you do any less?”

He hung his head, stung by the truth of her words, understanding that if he would die for Drian, he must live for her too.

“What do you live for?” she demanded loudly.

Trinian whirled to face her and declared the age-old mantra of a soldier of Drian. “To fight injustice, unite the kingdom, protect the innocent, and preserve the realm for the coming king!”



“And what if the king has come? What if you are him? Then what would you live for?” she demanded again.

“To end injustice, unite the kingdom, protect the innocent, and serve *my people!*” He answered without a thought. All at once, in a rush of air, the answer had come to him, as if it were programmed into him long ago, before he was born, before he was soldier, before he could question his destiny, and in that instant, the brooding darkness evaporated.

“What if I am the king?”

“And what if you are a soldier? Nothing has changed. Whether I am stewardess or maiden, I will live for my city. And whether you are king or soldier, you will do no less. When we first met I thought – well, it does not matter what I thought...I was wrong. Perhaps you are the answer to our prayers.”

“When we first came to the wood,” he told her suddenly, his voice hushed in awe, “I felt a rush of expectancy, as if something unspeakably wonderful had happened in this place, and would happen, and was happening all around me. My heart quickened with a deep yearning to dive into its happenings, to find my destiny, to pursue the future. I caught the keen scent of spruce and pine, saw every detail of the needled branches, and heard happy sighs of the wind through the trees, and all at once, I was on fire for adventure!” He looked at her with shining eyes. “This is the adventure!”

She was gripped by those eyes, and she suddenly saw how wonderful and magnificent was the man behind them. Any thought that he was a man of shallow thought or superficial purpose fled from her mind, and she became his strongest

advocate in that moment. All at once, she knew, despite the need to find firm proof, that he was the long-awaited king of Drian, and her heart knit to his, as though she had just found a missing part of herself.

She opened to him as she had never done to anyone before, and leaning forward, told of her experience, "I felt something too: a dark presence, a descent over my heart as of pure evil, and it terrified me. If we both felt the future, then Trinian, it is both wonderful and terrible. But if we dare to face it, then perhaps Gladier's golden age will come to pass."

His eyes shone still, but he sobered a little bit, nodding and reflecting, and said, "What a responsibility for one man!"

Adrea planned to return to Drian the next day, and Trinian was eager to plunge back into his normal life. He wanted time to grow accustomed to these new ideas, and yearned for the familiar routine of drills and training and the army. But Gladier advised, to the soldier's dismay, that he remain in the wood and learn more about Drian's history, the gods, and the kings of the past. He told them there was much work to be done, and Trinian must remain to do it. The young man was impatient, but he could not argue with Adrea when she gave her agreement, so he was forced to remain to face the looming, threatening future.

Thus he accompanied her Ladyship until the palace was in sight, for her protection, then turned back toward the Wizard, and she was left to enter the gates alone. As she rode through, she noticed an immediate change: the streets were full of people, the market was active, and the children shrieked, ran, and played in the yards. The people of Drian

had returned to health. Her heart soared in relief as she hurried to the palace to see Faring, and she wondered if this was another prophecy fulfilled. She said nothing to anyone of Trinian's encounter with the god, but told her father all she had learned from Gladier about their country's history. She even said that he may well be a Healer from days gone by, and that, in light of that information, she said, Trinian had remained with the old man, to learn as much as possible.

"You traveled back here alone?" he stressed in disapproval, ignoring her when she assured him that Trinian had accompanied her to the gates. "I do not understand why Trinian did not return with you," he continued. "If this Healer has no more power, then what is the good?"

"Please, father. Trust in me?" Her blue-violet eyes quietly asked for his belief, and he was surprised into looking at her thoughtfully a moment. She was changed, though he knew not how, but it was a good change. She was quieter somehow, calmer, and he nodded his hale head.

For the next several months, Trinian kept close contact with her ladyship, often meeting her couriers at the edge of the forest, sending back letters of his training at Gladier's hand, his history lessons, and the search to discover his heritage. All of this Adrea kept to herself, mulling it over, waiting for the time when proof would arise, Trinian return, and together they would reveal all to her father. She was beginning not only to believe, but to be joyful – Trinian, she treasured the thought in her heart, would be a king to rival all kings.

## The Spirit of the Wood

**T**hree months passed as Trinian took up his abode with Gladier, learned by his side, and grew ever more in wisdom and manhood. And as the weeks turned to months, a change came over him; he was not grown, but he stood taller; he was not so much more handsome as more thoughtful and intelligent, which brought a light of sharp definition to his visage. If Adrea had met him now for the first time, she would not have thought him just a pretty face.

It is easy to wait a month for change to come, for an answer to appear, or for a gamble to pay off. But enter into the second month, and the human heart grows restless, waiting for and demanding impatiently that the fulfillment come to the indefinite deferment. And when the third month has come, though it is in fact the amount of time after which we most often see progress or find an answer, yet it is the most torturous of periods, and the most reviled, and it is in this time that we often fail to find the patience that has borne us through until now. And so it was for

Trinian.

He tossed and turned in the night on the window seat, frustrated that in all this time they had found nothing to prove his identity. While he grew everyday in his knowledge of politics, history, and government, he still had no idea if he was the king. Gladier said a prophethess would arrive soon who would confirm his identity, and that would be the final proof, but how long would he have to wait? And, most torturous of all, what if he was not the king?

Gladier's teachings drummed like a melody in his mind, and the questions the old man taught the young swirled unanswered in a thick, muddy turmoil. He wanted answers, but they were life-lived questions. What does it mean to be a good man, or a good king? Trinian wanted the answer now; and in many ways, he thought he had it. But he only knew the abstract formulas: to be fair, just, patient, and stern. To be heroic and self-sacrificing, loving and objective. But he would not know the true answers until he had lived life, for they were life-lived answers.

The god of Karaka, reasoned Trinian, was evil, and sought to possess the world for himself. He cared not for peace or the good of any but himself. If the god wanted to possess him and claim the kingship, then Trinian, to be a good king, could avoid that fate by being nothing like the god; he must care for others above himself, for the world above his own interests. He must be unflinchingly the god's opposite. Where the god of Karaka was evil, he must be good; where he was tyrannical, he must be merciful; and so, Trinian believed, it would be his righteousness that would hold the evil of Karaka at bay. If only he was the

king!

He tossed hotly about the bed. It was no use theorizing – he was not the king. Not yet, and perhaps never. How long should he wait to learn his fate?

Eventually, unable to sleep, he rolled out and crept into the night. He stalked through the woods, his bow at the ready and quiver slung over his back, his shoulders broad and his legs sturdy and long. His chest was not thrust forward like a soldier's, but flat and lean like a dancer's, and the muscles were firm beneath his light cotton shirt, and he wove through the forest more as a silent companion of it than a predator. The night was alive here in the country; the stars shone bright, not yet dimmed by the approaching dawn. Leaves rustled and twigs cracked, the pine scent was strong upon the air, and hesitantly, the forest prepared to awaken.

A pool of light illumined a small hollow five yards from where Trinian made his quiet way, and as he approached, he saw the black head of a doe. Even as he drew his bow to make the kill and return somewhat fulfilled and master of himself to Gladier's hut, he noticed that there was something unfamiliar about this creature. Squinting his sharp eyes, he saw that it was not a doe at all, and he stopped short in surprise. His prey moved its head, and it was a woman's hair cascading over her back in long, twisted tresses.

"You are no doe," he said gravely, almost to himself, and the woman started up in terror to flee from his voice. "No, stop!" he called. "I am sorry to have frightened you. Please stay."

She stopped, her head turned away from him.

“Who are you?” he asked.

She answered without turning, and her tone was as gentle as a dove’s – it rang like bells, and was as powerful as the purring roar of a lion. “I am the spirit of the wood.”

Her cryptic answer made him smile, taking her words as a mere fancy; but then he frowned, for she did indeed have the air of a spirit about her. And yet she looked mortal. “Why are you here so early?” he asked.

“I could not sleep.”

“Neither could I.” Trinian had come to the wood seeking solitude, but now he found himself wanting conversation. Her voice was alluring and captivating, and he tried to draw her out of her trite responses, and he felt like there was something important about her. “Will you talk to me? I think perhaps our meeting was arranged by Fate.”

Her back stiffened and her voice rang back bitter. “Never think that one such as you was destined to meet one like I.”

“I do not understand you.” Trinian’s eyes were wide at her sudden anger. “Can you not turn and speak to me?”

Instead of answering, she fled, and was gone as quickly and silently as any doe.

\* \* \*

As the morning wore on, Trinian was haunted by the encounter; her short words, her rich voice, her fleeting presence as of a vision, strangely consumed him. So he returned to Gladier’s cottage, hanging his game of rabbits outside the shed and entering by the back door, knowing that Gladier, whose duty it was to know all that passed in

the wood, would be able to tell him who she was.

It was the last thing he expected, however, that on opening the door, he would be confronted with the creature herself. There she stood beside the stove, more earthly now than she had appeared in the shadows of the night, in heated conversation with the wizard. Her back was to him.

"Trinian, you went out early this morning," the old man greeted him.

Trinian gazed at the lady. "I could not sleep."

When he spoke she stiffened. She gave a startled cry of pain. "Oh father, all is lost!" Then she began to weep.

Trinian floundered for a moment, stumbling, trying to find something to say, then tried to back out of the cottage, but Gladier signaled for him to remain. "Go," the old man said gently to the lady. "Wait outside, Adlena. I'll send him to you in a moment."

She fled through the front door, and Gladier waited till it closed behind her, before he turned to Trinian.

"You met in the wood?" he asked him.

"Yes."

Gladier nodded his old head, and his beard moved up and down like the tide going in and out. "You found her. Drove her straight to me. Fate had a hand in this."

Trinian suddenly understood. "Is she...?"

Gladier stopped nodding, and peered intensely at Trinian, as if seeing straight to the depths of the soldier's soul, as he often had a habit of doing. "Are you ready to be king?" he demanded.

Trinian stopped breathing a moment, fixated by that gaze, unsure of himself. "We do not know yet," he said at



last.

“And when we find out, are you ready?”

“Is that not for you to say?”

“I have certainly taught you much, and I could go on teaching you until you die, and you still would not know everything. Are. You. Ready?”

“Gladier, what if I’m not the king? Then what?”

“You’ll be a soldier. A simple soldier of Drian.”

For the first time, that future was not enough for Trinian. He wanted more. He wanted more not only for himself, but for his people, for they had stagnated long enough without a true leader. But he knew he was not ready, and he never would be, for how could one man be ready enough to lead an entire world?

“No, I am not.” And he hung his head.

Gladier nodded. “No. I am glad you see that. But if she is here, and if she confirms it, then that means the world is ready – and you will just have to learn as you go.”

He gestured to the door, and Trinian approached it warily, as if being pulled there against his will, with eagerness and trembling fear. It opened without a creak, and the next instant, he was standing on the doorstep.

Not once since meeting her had he seen her face, and it seemed he never would, for she was gazing fixedly, determinedly, toward the forest.

“It is against my will,” she said after a moment, “but Gladier has stressed that I should meet you. He has told me who you are. Until I see your face, however, I cannot confirm. I know not what Gladier told you,” she went on haltingly. “I am the miserable daughter of a miserable union. My mother’s people were the spirits of the trees,

descendants of the natural god of the forest, and it is the law of her people that no mortal man may look upon them. But she was wild. She fled from her homeland – her desire to see man overpowering the natural reticence of her people.

“She met man and paid dearly for it. He was base and evil, so full of lust that he defiled her, coveting that which was forbidden him to touch. My mother’s people found them and slew him as he claimed her, but they forbade her ever to return to her native home. They doomed her to wander alone through the world. She was desolate until the day I was born, and I became her only companion. We were everything to each other and I never wanted for any other company; though, I believe, she was often lonely. Loneliness I would only comprehend when she was gone. And that happened one day when I had barely become a woman.

“We were passing beside the stream of Codune, where men seldom venture, when an arrow pierced my mother’s heart. In the sight of her child it pierced her. In an agony of grief, overcome with despair, and conquered by fear, I fled from her empty form. I knew that soon a man would appear through the trees, and I remembered her dire warnings against them. Ever since that day, though I have lived alone and lonely, I have spurned and escaped man’s sight, never allowing him to see my face. But now,” she paused, and the extremity of her terror pierced him through the heart, “it seems I am doomed to look upon you – and you must look at me – so I can tell you your fate.”

She was silent a long while. He wanted to tell her not to

turn; that it was not important; she could go back to her solitude. But that was not true, and he knew he needed to know.

And so Trinian, with anticipation racing up his spine, with a breath to prepare, watched her slowly turn and look at him. Her bright, deep, indigo eyes were ages of pain and wisdom; they knew truth and searched his soul. An eternity their eyes held; stars and planets whirled their course unheeded, souls bared, time existed not, messengers bowed and worshipped unknown, and somewhere, in the great existence beyond time, a Father smiled.

So she knew, and as she knew, she wondered, and as she wondered, she bowed. And with a reverent voice of velvet declared, "My Lord and My King."

Thus in that moment he knew, and what was suppressed was released: a kingly grace settled upon his brow; prophecies were fulfilled and the will of the Heavens heeded. King Trinian heaved a sigh of the centuries as all the doubt, fear, and disbelief of generations lifted from his breast. He reached down, took her hand, and raised her up, and in turn, he looked upon her now.

"Thank you. You have revealed me to myself so that I may be revealed to the world."

\* \* \*

That afternoon he returned to Drian. Arriving in the mellow light of evening, Trinian sought out Lady Adrea. She was alone in the gardens, surrounded by ancient texts dug up from the library.

“The last prophecy, according to Gladier,” he told her breathlessly and without greeting, “has been fulfilled.”

She pulled him down onto the bench beside her and demanded everything, and he told his tale briefly, both their eyes shining all the while.

“Then it is time we told my father,” she said.

They went together to his study. And there, in simple state and the hominess of a living room fire, far from any place where matters of state took place, the steward of Drian met the pre-destined King.

“Gladier told me I must perform for you the ceremony I performed for him the day after Adrea – Lady Adrea – left us alone,” said Trinian. “It is an intimate affair, and only one descended of kings is said to be able to accomplish it.”

Astren nodded, disbelieving yet hopeful, for it was the purpose of his life to prepare and keep the throne for the future king; having no false ideas of keeping the throne for himself, so long as the young man was truly the prophesied heir; but he was a skeptic at heart, who did not believe unless shown the proper proofs.

“Yes,” he said gravely. “You must touch the source of the divine, and yet stand. Such is the proof of each king throughout the ages, and such must be your action.”

“He already has,” said Adrea breathlessly, hot impatience rising in her heart, for she did not yet know of this ritual, and thought her father was displaying an unpardonable degree of reticence. “Did we not already tell you that he stood in the presence of the natural god and did not fall to his knees?”

Trinian smiled at her, touched by her show of loyalty, and shook his head gently. “That was only the natural god of

Karaka," he told her. "Gladier told me that perhaps a man of demi-god nature, or of exceptionally strong character, or else descended of the healers, could stand before such a one. But there are the sixteen high gods, he said, and over them all sits Fate."

"Yes," she leaned forward eagerly now. "You told me of these in your messages. What great power of which we have been ignorant!"

"There are some secret relics, passed down for generations, that have once touched the divine essences of some of these gods, and one who touches such a relic and does not fall, does not die, is the one chosen by them to rule over all Minecerva."

Astren nodded. "Yes. It is the sacred duty of each steward to protect the Relic of Drian, which contains the presence of Hope, and still burns bright with the essence she infused into it at the beginning of our world. You would have learned of it, my dear," he told Adrea, "on the day you succeeded me, for it would have been your responsibility to touch it then. You would have fallen to your knees, and then lain abed for a week, ill and helpless. Such a thing you would have done to remind yourself that you are not the ruler of Drian, but its keeper, and that only he who could stand against it could truly and rightfully rule the kingdom."

Adrea's heart was stirring powerfully within her, her eyes shone, and her breath quickened, for here was yet another mystery she had never fathomed, and the talk of the gods moved her strangely. How she yearned to understand them better!

"You say you have already touched such a relic?" Astren

asked of Trinian.

The young man held himself nobly erect. "Glacier possessed a Relic of his Wood, which contains the essence of Plenty. I have touched that, and not been ill. But now I must prove it to you as well, for after all your faithful service, you deserve to be shown."

The steward led Trinian and his daughter to the throne room, where he opened a secret door in the king's throne, and pulled out the Relic. It was a golden globe that shown like a small sun, so that it hurt the eyes to gaze upon it, and Astren held it with a towel, but then placed it naked into Trinian's hands. The young man stood tall, noble, and strong, and the steward, who still vividly remembered its strong, devastating effect upon himself, fell to his knees and said reverently, "Your Majesty, the people have waited long for your coming. When they know you, they will follow you to the ends of the earth." And Adrea, also, knelt beside her father.

Trinian carefully replaced the globe and reverently closed the secret door. "Please do not bow to me," he said gently, "I am not used to it yet, and you have served Drian for too many years to be on the ground." But he was not aware of how kingly and noble he appeared to them; how the light of the globe seemed to shine out of his visage and enfold them in its glow. Trinian continued humbly. "You will have to teach the art of rule to me, steward, for I would suffer greatly without your counsel."

Astren nodded. "It will be my crowning honor as steward, your majesty."

Adrea stood and whirled toward her father, "How soon can we hold the coronation? There is no reason for delay."

But Trinian was frowning, and only vaguely heard her father admonishing her on all the preparation they had to do beforehand. Finally, Trinian asked. "How long do you think you will need to get everything prepared?"

"Two months, I should think," said the older man. "We want to prepare the banquet and your rooms. Prepare the council, of course..."

Trinian interrupted Astren, and the steward frowned, taken aback by the new king's sad lack of etiquette, but Trinian, for once, was too pre-occupied to be the perfect soldier. "Very well, I have something to do in the meantime. A final errand at Gladier's."

"You have already waited too long," cried Adrea. "What more is there to do? You have learned so much from Gladier, and besides, you said he will be coming here to live. With all of us to advise you, there is no reason to wait."

Her father raised a hand to curb her tongue. He heaved a patient sigh. "You tell me you have bided long with Gladier, studying all that you need. There is nothing left now but to learn through experience. And our guidance will be with you. After all, if you follow my advice, not much will change when you take the throne."

"I intend to take any advice you give me, steward, and together, we are sure to rule well. But I must have my way in this; it is a private matter, and I do not intend to be gone long," Trinian explained. "In only two months I will return, and then I will be forever, and irrevocably, the king of Drian."

Astren nodded in resignation. "In that case, my king, I will use this time to put affairs in order, and prepare your

coronation.”



## The Romance of the SacraWood

**T**rinian rode straight from Drian to the Border Wood, to the place where he had met the prophetess, not caring to stop at the cottage. Somehow, he knew he would find her in the same place. He felt like she must be waiting for him.

And so she was. Her black head was bowed as she sat on a fallen tree and her white fingers wove themselves in her lap when he cantered up.

He dismounted. "Do not run," he whispered softly so as not to frighten her, although she must have been hearing the hoofs for some time.

She did not answer, but turned to look at him, and her vivid eyes pierced him so that his knees went weak.

"I knew I would find you here," was all he could think to say.

"Why did you come back?" she looked angry. He saw her hands shaking.

"Be not afraid."

"I am not afraid of you. Not like that." Then he

understood why her hands shook and he smiled. Her heart was in line with his; he knew that the blood pounded in her when she looked at him, as his coursed warmly through his veins at the sight of her. He could love her – for the rest of his life, he could love her; if only she would love him. Confidently, he stepped forward.

He glanced into her eyes with his dancing green ones and she blushed. She was not used to laughter, and it confused her.

“Can you smile?” He sat on the grass before her.

“Yes,” but she was still serious.

“I don’t believe you.”

This time she flushed in surprised anger and pulled up her face to show him, but it was a mirthless grin. Trinian looked at her in astonishment a moment and burst into a laugh.

Then she understood that he was teasing her. Though she was still embarrassed, she gave a genuine smile, her eyes lighting up.

“There you go. Now I believe you. Come back with me.”

He said it all in one breath so she did not realize at first the import of his words. When she did, she gasped and looked at him, expecting to see he was teasing her again. But his eyes were shining, not dancing, and there was a resolve in the set of his jaw. His hope was contagious, but she shrunk from it. “It is not possible,” she quivered.

“That is fear speaking,” said Trinian calmly, refusing to be put off. “It is not true.”

“How can you look at me like that, so confident? It is not possible, I tell you. I am not meant for happiness. Not with another person.”

He frowned as if she had wounded him; when he spoke, he was angry. "And what makes you so different from anyone else? You may be half divine but you are also mortal. Every man or woman is miserable during life; that's the way life is. But we can find some happiness anyway."

He had talked himself out of his anger, and now he looked out into the trees, seeing something that was not there. "When I am too miserable, I call to mind something glorious. Like the day my mother first saw me in uniform; I remember the light of pride and love in her eyes in that moment. Or when I received my first commission... My favorite," he paused and smiled. "I have never told anyone. My favorite memory is from my boyhood. Can I tell you?"

She nodded.

"I was fifteen and my brother twelve; we had gone camping alone for the first time and as we came home, a thunderstorm broke out above us and we had to run for shelter. We stood under a tree and the one right across from us was suddenly struck and charred black. As scared as I was, I was brave for his sake, telling him we would be alright. To my astonishment, he did not cry, but pulled me out from beneath the branches into the midst of the lightning strikes. It was as if we stood in the middle of a glowing, pillared cathedral.

"'Come brother,' he cried. 'We must face the feral force of nature!' With the water driving in sheets against our faces and the wind whipping our clothes against us, he held out his hand to me, and there in the temple of rain with its pillars of lightening and organ of thunder, we declared that we would be forever brave, righteous, and true to one

another. I had ceased to be his older brother. That day, we were equals before the world." Trinian fell silent, scenting pine and spruce again, his heart pounding. "This moment has the same weight. No – more, because my whole future hangs breathless upon it. I want you to come back with me, to share the journey with me. There will be misery and unhappiness, I know that. Wholeheartedly, even happily, I grant it. But it will be transformed; I will suffer with you, for you, because of you, and my heart will soar. Please," he stood and held out his hand to her, "face it with me."

She took his hand, her eyes upon his bright, questioning face. He was at once vulnerable and confident, and her frightened, shrinking heart came out of her breast like a blossom opening to the morning sunshine.

"There will still be misery?"

"I promise."

"But it will be transformed?"

"It already is."

She nodded, trying to understand, to accept the force that was pulling her away from the comfort of her loneliness, but all her defenses were gone: he had destroyed them with his eagerness, and her head spun around. So she merely repeated, "It already is."

### III

## CHARITY

*“For the lover is never isolated from what he loves;  
he belongs to it.”*

*- Hannah Arendt*



## The Nian Family

**T**wo months later, when Trinian rode into the walls of the city with his new wife Adlena sitting on the horse before him, he watched her intently, with the all-consuming gaze of a man in love. She looked all about with round, frightened eyes; yet, for all her fear, they could not help but glisten with wonder at the bustle, rush, and sheer size of the ancient city. She was cowed by what, to her, was a vast number of people, and Trinian chuckled to himself, reflecting that it was best they had not arrived on market day.

He rode through the downtown shops directly to his brother's house, his old family home, which was nestled in the south-eastern corner of the city among the other agricultural manors. Trinian's family was old and well-established and did well for itself, though they were not particularly wealthy, and their home reflected that fact. The house was two and a half stories, with an added wing curving around the back, a vaulted roof over the kitchen and parlor, and a plentitude of front and back stained-

glass windows facing north and south; it had many gables, overhangs, and turrets, and vines that grew up the walls. Behind it stretched the mighty red wall of Drian, with a small blue gate that led out into the pastures beyond the city.

When Trinian pulled up before the front door, Adlena gazed at it in wonder. "This is where you live?"

He smiled. "Don't get used to it. The palace is five times this size." As he lifted her down and led her up the front step, Adlena stared in awe at the intricate wood paneling, crown molding, tiny buttresses, and two carved wooden pillars that stood guard at the entrance. They waited a long moment before someone answered his knock, and when the door opened, they were accosted by a beautiful girl with the most glorious head of elaborate curls. She was dressed richly, and her eyes narrowed when she saw Trinian.

"Well, you know well enough you do not have to knock, brother!" she said at him, her head held high on her neck at an antagonistic angle, as if everything below her were too good for her; her green eyes were pale, icy, and stabbed threateningly at them. "Oh, you have got a woman with you. About time: we were worrying you meant to bachelor it the rest of your life. Cila! Come and see! Trinian's brought a girl home!" And so it was in this abrupt way that Adlena met Lavendier, the oldest sister of Trinian's family, and had her first jolt of fear in her presence.

A petite girl with the same features as her sister, though not so striking, and the bleached blond hair of her brother ran round the corner, drying her hands on a towel. It was immediately apparent that she was gentle and kind, and far



more like her brother than her sister in her warm-hearted nature.

“Trinian!” she cried, leaping joyfully into his arms. “Are you going to make them stand on the stoop all day, Laven? Come in, come in. Jeroe can see to the horse.”

A young servant stepped out of the shadows and slipped past them outside.

“What happened to Kerg?” asked Trinian in surprise.

“The plague,” Cila said shortly.

They all trooped to the kitchen which was in the back of the house, where it was clear from the scent that preceded them that Cila was in the midst of baking bread.

“I did not expect to see you here,” said her brother with happy emotion as they filed through the hallway.

“Just a visit,” Cila told him. “Afias and Astren are in the fields.”

When they all stood in the spacious room, Cila turned expectantly to be introduced to her brother’s companion, but Lavendier was not so polite.

“So who are you, then? My brother’s sweetheart?” She tilted her nose up, and ran her pretty white hands over the large floral pattern on her skirt. “No need to look so frightened. We are not snakes who bite their victims.”

“Cila, Lavendier, allow me to introduce you to Adlena – my wife.”

The pride in Trinian’s voice barely contained itself beneath his boyishly happy smile. Adlena, too, gave a small smile and her head, always so erect on her white neck, lifted a little higher. Lavendier bit her lip and looked over her new sister in astonishment, but Cila, polite enough not to gape in her surprise, immediately stepped forward

and took the woman's hand in her own. "Adlena, it is a joy to meet you and let me be the first to welcome you to our family. I can see how happy you make him," she added confidentially, "he has not smiled like that in years."

"Thank you," whispered her new sister.

"This must be overwhelming for you," Cila guessed, who was also naturally quiet and reserved. "We have plenty of time to get acquainted, but for now, please sit down and rest. I will get you something to drink. I do wish," she looked reproachfully at her brother as she went to the cupboard, "that you had gotten married here."

Trinian grinned. "It could not be helped. We had to travel alone together, so it would not have been proper." Cila did not look convinced, but Trinian said nothing else. He did not explain how uncomfortable Adlena had been with him, and with the idea of entering civilization, and how they needed several weeks in the forest, with Gladier close enough for her to run to, before she thoroughly trusted him to take her to Drian.

"And did you know he was only a common soldier when you married him?" asked Lavendier abruptly.

From her seat by the fire, Adlena met the eyes of the tall, dark-haired sister. With that gaze she saw into the very depths of her husband's sister, to her soul. "He is no common soldier."

"Did not he tell you?" she cried, flushing and growing more bitter to hide her distress at the other woman's penetrating eyes. "He must have played up his role in the family fortunes – oh, wait," she spat at her brother, "there aren't any. Are you rich? Did he marry you for money?"

"Enough, Laven." Trinian broke in sternly. "You will not

“speak so.”

“I will speak however I please. I do not have to answer to you or anyone else. I could leave this house whenever I choose – for there are plenty of men who would take me away! You just wait and see: I will show up with my own husband out of the blue.”

With that she ran from the room, her footsteps pounding down the passageway until they heard the outer door slam. Adlena jumped, and there was an uncomfortable silence.

“Where has she gone?” asked Trinian.

“To find comfort in the arms of another man who will never marry her,” said his sister sadly.

Trinian sighed, but accustomed to the dramatics of his sister, he passed on to a new subject. “You said my brothers were in the fields?”

“The north pasture. Planning their work now that the plague has left us some peace.”

“I think I will ride out to them.”

“Oh, they will like that.” She bent over the oven to pull out several golden loaves. “I’ll send you with one of these.”

“Wrap it up. I will go tell – Jeroe? you said – to saddle Mary.” He kissed Adlena and told her, “I will be back in an hour or two.” She said nothing, but when he left the room and she had sat for a moment without him, she started up and ran down the passage until she fell against his broad, comforting back in the dark shadows.

“Must you leave? I know not what to say or do. Since we were married I have not been without you. Please let me come with.”

He smiled at her. They stood nearly eye to eye, and, as he had many times already in their brief time together, he

found it odd that such a regal, tall, graceful woman, who held her head so erect, could feel awkward or uncomfortable.

“You must get accustomed to being without me,” he told her. “We will not always be together. But I could leave you in no more capable hands than Cila’s. She is gentle, kind, and good, and will love you first for my sake, but I know that it will soon be for your own. Please, do the same for her?”

Adlena watched Trinian disappear around the corner before returning timidly to the kitchen, and standing awkwardly in the doorway.

“So,” said the petite, busy sister, who had transitioned from bread-making to pounding out meat on the table, “you must tell me how you two met. Where was it?”

“In the woods. I was walking and he was hunting in the early morning.”

“I like it! It is very romantic – and unconventional. You know, all these months we had no idea where he was. He told us not to worry and he was only gone away on retreat, but,” she shook her head, “that could have just been a cover for something more dangerous. I was sure the government had sent him somewhere. Never did I imagine that he was pursuing someone.” Cila lifted down a bin of flour to bread the meat.

“Can I help you?” Adlena asked.

“Thank you, but I am sure you are very tired after your journey. You just sit and talk to me.”

Adlena was indeed tired, so she sank back into the wicker chair by the fire. “You have a lovely house,” she ventured.

“I am glad you like it. It is the one I grew up in, although

I do not live here now.”

“Why not?”

“My husband is a ranger. We live near the soldier barracks. We will be close neighbors soon, since that is where I am sure you and Trinian will live.”

Adlena said nothing. Trinian had asked her to keep his secret until he could reveal it in his own way. After reflection, she ventured, “I hope we will be close. Whether we live near each other or not. I have never had a friend or a sister.”

Cila’s reaction to that simple statement was much stronger than her visitor had anticipated. Cila immediately cried out and ran over to take the woman’s hands in her own, much to Adlena’s surprise, who did not realize how sad it is to say she had never had a friend.

“Of course we will be friends! And sisters. Pay no mind to Laven: she is very, very lonely, and since she is the oldest girl, she is bitter that others have married before her. Me first, and now Trinian too. But I know you and I will be wonderful friends. And you will find love in our other siblings, I know. Viol, our little sister, is not here now, for she is staying with our aunt and uncle in the outlying regions to escape the plague. But she will be returning home soon, and you will find her the sweetest, kindest creature you ever met. And Afias, too, is a brother to love, for he is a bulwark for our family and a leader in his own quiet way. With all our mingled love, we will make this a home for others to envy! Just wait and see!”

Adlena smiled and was no longer nervous. In fact, the isolated spirit of the wood was surprised at how comfortable she was. She felt a sensation wholly new to

her: of safety, comfort, and love. For the first time in her life, she belonged to a family.

## A Domestic Dinner

**T**he shadow of the kitchen table stretched far across the wooden floor when Cila, now alone in the kitchen, finished preparing the meal. She set it prettily in bowls on the table, untied the apron strings that had familiarized themselves in the creases of her hips, and peeked at her flushed face in the glass above the washstand. She had shown Adlena to Trinian's old room so her sister-in-law could refresh herself before dinner. Breaking upon her in her moment of dusk and silence came from outside the loud, bantering voices of the men coming in from the fields. Cila, smiling to herself, opened the back door and stepped out onto the porch.

“Ah! There she is! My lovely woman.” Her red-headed husband Asbult dashed lightly up to her and wrapped his arm into the groove where her apron strings had just nestled. “Your brother was telling us about the pretty quarry he caught on retreat. I should go on retreat; have nothing to do but hunt, lounge, and love my woman. Who knew that Trinian – the active, the brave, the rash – could

find time to sit and do nothing?”

“You may find that I have many hidden talents,” said his brother-in-law, laughing at him.

“It must be this new wife of yours,” observed Afias, their brother, carefully taking off his boots and hanging up his shovel. “She has changed you.”

“That is more true than you know.”

“Yes, yes, this mysterious wife. And where is the elusive beauty?” demanded Asbult. “You must produce her before we begin to doubt her existence.”

“She is upstairs,” said Cila. “Dinner is ready; come in, act like gentlemen, and I will call her down.”

Adlena heard the voices of the men from the open window of the upstairs bedroom, and trembled. She ought to go down, she knew, but her hands shook as she paced the room, the sight of Lavendier’s black heart rising in her inner mind, unbidden, unsought, and haunting her. She cursed her inner vision now as she had never done before, for she had only ever seen the pure hearts of Trinian and Gladier, who had only small vices to color their otherwise magnanimous and great souls. When Trinian and she rode through the city, she had made eye contact with no one, and seen into no one’s inner being, but on looking this new girl in the eye, she had seen to the black depths of her soul. And she had never seen one so dark. Cila’s heart was calm and kind, only little darkneses like Gladier and Trinian and herself. There was nothing surprising in her. But Lavendier’s roiled and shouted, and was more black than light, and Adlena, her heart racing in fear, gripped the dresser against the wall, trying to still the world that tipped about her. She never wanted to see such evil again.



How could she love this girl, who was now her sister, if she had such evil in her? The thought that she might be confronted by such a blackness of other individuals overwhelmed the innocent nymph, the spirit of the wood. She clenched her hands into fists, remembering Trinian's words to her in the forest. He had said she was mortal, as well as a daughter of the trees, and she could put aside what set her apart. She had not understood at the time – not realized what he meant – but now, she saw. She saw it was impossible to live among mortals while knowing their faults. It was impossible to find peace in oneself when there was so much turmoil in another. She would wither up, be consumed, or drown – something dreadful would happen if she allowed her inner vision to portray to her all the truths of other's souls. But – if she could put it aside? Yes - she could, and she would. She had given her word to Trinian. Indeed, she loved him now more than she loved herself, and she would find a way to live within his world.

With an effort to still her quaking knees, she straightened, standing tall and gazing toward the door that, once she went through, would take her irrevocably into this new world. With new resolve, she made the firm decision to never use her inner vision again. She went out the door.

Downstairs, the family was gathering around the long kitchen table, waiting for Adlena to join them. They were mainly a happy family, bound together as only children of loving parents can be. For even when those parents were dead, even when the children had their differences, and even when life took them down separate roads, their ties bound them irrevocably to one another. If one sibling was missing, they all felt it. If one returned after a long

absence, they all welcomed them with open, forgiving arms. They were neither perfect nor blind in their love, but only struggling to follow the instilled path their parents had taken such pains to form in them.

The farm, which had been in the family for generations, had come to Trinian and Afias at the death of their father; but it now belonged, in all effect, to Afias. He loved the life, the house, the tenants, and the earth, and could imagine no other existence. Unlike his older brother, who had barely kept from fleeing hearth and home as from a prison, he could not comprehend leaving.

Yes, Trinian had very much wanted to flee, and owed the patience and fullness of his present life to the understanding of his mother, for she had taught her impatient eldest son the value of working with a purpose, waiting for the right moment, and acting when the opportunity was ripe. "You can always leave," she had told him once, when his eyes starved for the world beyond their farm; "but the trick is to know when leaving will bring reward. Prepare yourself, watch, and one day soon, your chance will come."

It had come when Trinian was just eighteen in the shape of a visiting general. The man, Cartnol by name, was a cousin of their neighbors', and he came one day to dinner, where he noticed the intelligence and astuteness of the young man who eagerly fired questions at him, and inquired if he was interested in the army. "More than anything!" was his immediate answer, and the two spoke together well into the early hours of the morning. By the time the sun suffused her early glow on the horizon, Trinian sought out his mother, and she nodded when he

explained that his chance had come at last. "This man will help you," she affirmed; "his good word will carry you far. Treasure it, and do nothing to jeopardize his good faith. Then I will not worry about my oldest son." But for all her brave words, there had been a catch in her throat when she sent him away.

When Trinian left, Afias had seamlessly taken on management of the estate. Although only seventeen, his level-headedness allowed the land and farm to flourish more than it had since even his father governed it. So it was that now, when all the children were grown and their mother passed on to be with her husband, they referred to home as Afias's Farm. To them, he was their stability; the person they most trusted; the father that Viol barely remembered; the conscience that Lavendier abhorred; and the rock of counsel upon which Trinian stood firm.

And so it was that, in the waning light of evening, Afias took his seat at the head of the table, while the rest filed into the benches along the sides. The chair at the other end they left empty, as was always the case when Lavendier was absent. It had been their mother's chair, and when she passed, no one felt right sitting in it. Sometimes, Lavendier asserted her place as the oldest girl, but she was always insecure about it, and took it out on everyone as they ate.

Trinian departed the room to bring Adlena to them, and Cila called after him to fetch the servants as well. But while he was fetching the servants, his wife came down without being summoned and preceded her husband, cautiously watching what looked to her as a large group in the kitchen.

Asbult noticed her first. "I think we are being watched."  
She came into the full light of the kitchen and curtsied.

“I am Adlena.”

Asbult and Afias smiled - Asbult’s was large with his teeth displayed, and Afias’s was gentle, more with his eyes than mouth.

“I am Afias. Welcome to our home and to our family. This is Asbult, Cila’s husband.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my dear,” Asbult came forward with an easy charm and bowed to Adlena. “Please sit down.” And Cila felt a spark of pride in her men.

As Adlena came forward with a regal gesture that she neither feigned nor assumed, she slipped into the seat at the head of the table, which prompted Cila to look uncertainly at Afias, but he accepted it and took his own place opposite, and they all resumed their chairs as Trinian and the servants joined them.

It was a pleasant, lively meal – any dinner with Asbult could not help but be so, and he and Lela, the family’s life-long maid, kept up lively banter at each other. She had lived with the Nian family since before Trinian was born, and she dearly loved to tease and be teased, and Asbult liked to oblige her.

“Had any gentleman callers lately, Lela?”

“Now you impertinent boy, you know I only ever had eyes for one man,” she lectured comfortably.

“Me, you mean?”

“Well I never! The idea—,” for a moment she only sputtered, lost for words. “That tongue is gonna land you in a heap of trouble one day,” she wagged a finger as she ripped through her bread with her toothless gums.

“You mean it’s not true?” her antagonist cried in mortal agony. “You’ve been playing with me, old woman—leading

me on.”

“Don’t say what you don’t mean. Bad for the liver to tell a lie.”

“Yes,” he nodded soberly, “livers should never tell lies.”

“Ach!” she shrieked at him. “Don’t twist my words!”

Through it all, Cila noted with pleasure that although Adlena remained silent and somewhat surprised all the while, she seemed to find some comfort at the lively table.

## After Dinner

Afias was reading from a ledger, and taking down notes on a pad at his elbow, when Trinian came into his study after dinner.

“The farm is running well?” asked the elder brother of the younger.

“That’s an odd question,” said Afias without looking up.

“Odd?”

“From you. I’m sure you do not want to talk about the farm – you never have before.”

Trinian did not answer. He paced through the study, running his hands along the oak shelves and leather-bound books. There was an intricately carved garanx bird on the round sidetable beside the fire-place that glistened in the candlelight. Trinian had always felt drawn to this treasure of his father’s, and that connection was now strengthened after his own encounter with one of the regal creatures. The statue seemed poised to rise up into the air, with its beak pointed toward the sun. In perfectly suspended animation, it now seemed an allegory to his own life.

“Will you stop a moment? I have to talk to you about something.”

The scratching of the pen paused and Afias looked up. “Is something the matter?”

“Not exactly. In a way. I have to tell you...I have to tell you what happened when I traveled with Lady Adrea during the height of the plague.”

“Is this political or personal?”

Trinian sighed, smiled, and sighed again in surrender. “Both: it is greater than that. It is beyond us, and yet it is us. There is so much to tell, and I know not what affects us or how. I thought I knew who I was before I left Drian, and then I was rewritten. After that, I thought I had figured it out, but now I am back here, and I am the same as I ever was. It is as if nothing has changed.”

“Marriage changes you. Mother used to say that.”

“I am not talking about my marriage. But, I suppose, I am. I had not thought about it. Afias,” Trinian came and sat in the chair beside his brother. The younger turned so that they sat knee to knee, and Trinian leaned forward. “I am the lost heir to Drian.”

Afias blinked. He sat a long moment staring at his brother, Trinian watching him excitedly, and finally, the farmer sat back and put his chin in his hand.

“You just said it. No build-up, no preparation, just – said it. What does it mean?”

The restlessness stirring Trinian’s soul forced him to jump up and pace the room again. Now that the terrible truth lay before them in all its glory, he laughed.

“Mean? I know not. But it means something.”

“You are giddy.”

“And you’re not?”

“I am just surprised. You have had time to think about it.”

“Yes,” Trinian nodded. “Almost half a year, and I thought I understood – I thought I knew what it meant. But...”

“But there is no way to know,” his brother supplemented moodily. “You must just live it.”

“And you, and our sisters, and my wife: we will all change. It must be so.”

Afias sighed deeply and stirred. “Tell me everything. Start at the beginning.”

Trinian told all. He related the dream that led him and Lady Adrea to Gladier, the history of Drian’s lost kings, of the nightly capture and dark encounter with the god... and finally, of Gladier’s words when he returned from the muddy land.

“He said that only the descendant of Adalam would be able to stand before the god and not die. And the deity himself said something to that effect. All we could do was wait and study, trying to search out the secrets of the past. But they were too deeply buried...” He did not tell of the Relics, for that was a sacred secret, and Gladier had told him to say nothing except to the stewards, for fear it should be taken in too cavalier a light. “For,” Gladier had told him, “it is a proof only to those who have touched it themselves, and understand its significance. Such knowledge is not for every man to possess.”

“But Gladier told me of a propheticess,” Trinian went on, for this he could tell. “A woman gifted with inner sight, who could affirm or deny who I truly was. He set out to find her, but I found her first.” Then he told everything



about Adlena, all that he knew, and Afias still sat silent, listening carefully.

“I am the lost king, and I have returned to Drian to step into the throne and reign over the world. It is not my choice – but my destiny.”

Afias said nothing, but Trinian saw the war of pain and agony that raged behind his eyes. His brother loved his home, his fields, and his tenants, and he had wrapped everything he was into them. But he loved duty and brother more and so, as was his habit, he did not voice his own turmoil. Slowly, with unuttered pain, Trinian saw him relinquish all his deep attachments. Afias looked up at his brother with emptied eyes.

“If you are the king, then I am a prince, and I will follow you.”

\* \* \*

Adlena noted with concern when Trinian and Afias emerged from the study, and she left the table where she had been sitting with Cila and Asbult.

“You told him?” she asked.

“Yes, and now I must tell everyone else.” His eyes were sad and his color pale, and she realized, with a start, that this was difficult for him. He had always seemed happy before – about being king, about his future – but now she wondered if he was rethinking that happiness. She wanted to ask him if that were the case, but then decided he would speak if he wanted to talk about it. With her limited experience of the world, she had yet to learn that the penetration of a woman often runs deeper even than a

man's penetration of his own feelings.

Afias led the way to the parlor and gathered the family together, sending Jeroe to fetch Lavendier from the nearest tavern. They sat each at their own private activity, Trinian brooding in a chair in the corner, holding Adlena's hand, and a half hour later Lavendier came home grumbling and bitter. But even she could feel the tension in the room, and expecting something either scandalous or calamitous, she sat down with the eager heart of one who loves to gloat over the troubles of others.

Then Trinian told them all.

The variety of reactions would astound even the most studious of character observers: Lavendier, with a frightening light in her eyes, glowed with happiness and clapped her hands; Cila clutched the wood of her chair and her face became gray and cold; Asbult laughed, sobered, and laughed again. Adlena, hardly a student of humanity, was frightened by Asbult's loud, guttural laughs, Lavendier's wild happiness, and Cila's sudden alteration. Filled still with the gratitude of Cila's comfort, she rose and bent over her pale new sister-in-law, trying to repay the debt by laying her hand on her tense arm; at the kind touch, Cila relaxed into her, and melted into tears.

"And what is there to cry about?" demanded Lavendier. "You just received the best news of your entire life: act like it. Afias, when can we sell the farm? Or perhaps we can renovate it, set it up as a summer retreat – a private place to get away once in awhile with a few friends. After all, court life might get dull after a few years." She laughed brightly. "I can just see myself telling my friends that palace life has its charm, to be sure, but the country is really so quaint,

one must visit it every now and again! Trinian, we will live in Korem? When do we go? Tomorrow?"

"What does this mean for the army?" asked Asbult, who was all at once thoughtful, distracted, and excited. "You will be the head, and we have not had one in – well, I suppose, hundreds of years. Not a proper one. Only the Head General. Do we just pick up where they left off then? How do we do that?"

"Why worry about it? We can do whatever we want!"

Afias' deep voice checked his sister sternly. "No, Lavendier, we cannot. This is not a new-found freedom, it's a responsibility."

Trinian nodded. "Astren expects me at the Palace tomorrow. You will all accompany me to meet him."

Cila grew quieter and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered to her new sister, "I do not know if I'm happy or sad, and I do not know why I'm crying. It is such a strange, new idea."

"Trinian," Asbult went over to Afias and the new king, lowering his voice a bit, but they could all still hear. "What of this god of Karaka who kidnapped you? He cannot be content with the end of your meeting. He will return for you."

"Yes, I fear that as well. It is another thing that weighs on me. Why does he want my birth-right? Does he really seek to leave Karaka, and rule here as well?" All grew sober (even Lavendier was quiet, although only because she was planning her new wardrobe), as they silently questioned whether any of them could stand against a god who came to claim their world. The three men looked upon the women in their care, and Adlena felt Trinian's eyes burn into her.

She tightened her hold on Cila.

## Korem Palace

**A**drea stood royally upon the steps of Drian. Trinian had sent her a message from the farm of his return, and her heart beat wildly as she waited to receive him; formally, this time: as her king.

For once, she wore more than her simple, practical clothes; now a long, velvet black gown, with a fearsome, diamond-crusted train, wrapped her in drooping folds; upon her head sat a simple diamond barrette amongst her piles of black, shining hair, as if to highlight, with humility, that she would never wear a crown; and long, white satin gloves and satin slippers encased her hands and feet. She seldom dressed for her station, being possessed of a simplicity-loving personality, but when etiquette demanded the sacrifice of her, she followed proper protocol to the letter. And she, who commanded garrisons of soldiers and retinues of servants in nothing but a frock and an apron, looked just as formidable in this dazzling, cumbersome raiment.

With concealed impatience, she caught sight of Trinian's

group advancing, on foot, up the hill from the direction of the sprawling estates. A man with golden hair led them, and she watched intently until she saw the familiar blue shine in his eyes. Beside him strode a woman of unbelievable beauty, and Adrea was captivated by her, as one might be by the brilliance of the night sky. Her every step seemed like a cloud drifting low across the earth, and she had an other-worldly air about her. Her hair was dark, with tight, ringleted curls half pulled back from her face, and a string of pearls woven through as a headband. Her skin glistened like starlight on a stream, and Adrea had to wrench her eyes away to look at the rest of the group.

There were two other men, and one she knew immediately as Trinian's brother. He was darker and slightly smaller than Trinian, but still with strong arms and a handsome face that bore the same family features as the king. Perhaps even a little more handsome, for it was a softer, more sensitive face.

The other man was very different, with a wiry build and brilliant red hair that fell unkempt about his forehead. He had a pleasant, open face and even from this distance, she saw that he was talking and laughing loudly. She decided that she liked the look of him, so far ignorant of her inner mind as to be unaware that she made this judgment based on the fact that he was not handsome.

Escorted by the red-haired man, with her arm nestled comfortably in his elbow, walked a small woman with light hair and light features, who walked quietly as if she did not wish to be noticed.

But the third woman, the last of the group, most certainly did. She stalked ahead, unescorted, nearly beside Trinian,

but just enough behind to avoid looking like she belonged to him. In a way, she seemed at first glance to be as beautiful as the woman Trinian led, the one reminiscent of a night sky, but Adrea frowned. They were almost close enough for her ladyship to descend to them, and she could see the expression on this young woman's face with utter clarity. She was a raging fire, and reminded one of a beautiful volcano. Her hair was perfect, in brown, chestnut waves that caught the morning light and shone to perfection; her face was perfect also, but falsely so, done up with such an excess of makeup that she looked like a girl you would meet in the streets at midnight. And while they had all clearly dressed for the occasion, her gown was extravagant, and one to rival Adrea's. It plunged in the front, draped in the back, slit along her arms, and pulled in roughly at the waist. Large, fake, fabric flowers cascaded down from one shoulder to the opposite hem like a waterfall. Whoever this girl was, she was hidden behind cleavage and rouge, and Adrea, with her typical quick-judgment, hated her.

They were here, and she descended to them. She approached Trinian and kissed his cheek in greeting. He kissed her as well, and she thrilled at his touch. "Lady Adrea," he said, using the formality they had long ago dropped in deference to the occasion, "allow me to introduce my wife, Adlena."

For an instant, the sky and earth whirled around the Lady of Drian. She knew all at once that this was why he had returned to Gladier's, why he had remained absent for two months, and why he had never said anything to her when she had hoped he might. And before the thoughts

were half-realized, she took Adlena's hand in hers, curtsied deeply, and kissed it.

Then he introduced his family one by one, and she turned intently to the task of listening. She heard each name, and knew it perfectly forever after that, allowing the memorization of their names to replace any thoughts in her head of her inner turmoil. She was a perfect Lady of Drian.

Then she led them through the high arching columns of Korem, and the country residents, though they had been well-off in their own sphere, gazed in awe at the three-story ceilings, the corner gardens with bubbling fountains, the soft curtains instead of doors, and the natural, simple flow of extravagance, which was beyond any richness they had ever known. Though the palace had stood for five hundred years, yet still it maintained its original splendor, and the jewel of the entire structure was the throne room, where she led them at last.

When the two guards on either side of the grand iron doors pushed them open, the group caught its breath. The throne room's long roof was formed of pure crystal and it fractured the streaming light of the sun like a diamond.

Supporting it were double layers of marble pillars, carved into the breathing shapes of men out of Drian's past. In the very center sat the great throne of the king. Above it, a canopy of intricate gold design wove in and out of a crystal dome that, in daytime, focused the sun's light through the crystal roof. While diffusing the heat, it directed its beams in a glow upon the throne, and everywhere else was veiled in shadow.

At the head of the ebony table, in a seat below the throne,



presided her father, the steward of Drian, who rose as they entered, his long gray robes sweeping the floor.

“Your majesties.” He bowed and his daughter followed suit. The Nians stood uncomfortably, unsure if they should bow back. A few of them did. Astren gestured to the long table and the throne. “Come forward, and do not be afraid. For the first time in your lives, you shall sit in your rightful seats.”

Before they could move, Lord Ferand rose, a tall, thin figure in the shadows.

“We are the council of Drian,” said Ferand, “the advisors to the king and steward. But we are only a portion of those who ought to sit at the table. Here,” he indicated empty seats, “is where the royal family sits.”

There was a specific place for each member, kept waiting and empty for centuries, until the king’s return. Adlena sat at the top, just below Astren. Lavendier sat after the third council member on the left, and Afias after the third member on the right. Cila sat below Lavendier, and Asbult was below her. The seat after Afias was empty, reserved for Viol, but she was still in the outer farmlands of Drian. After that, there were still several empty seats to accommodate the royal family and council through later generations, no matter what their size

“We will have the coronation ceremony in four days,” continued Astren. “And tonight, we will present you to the people.” His grave voice went on, laying out plans, ceremonies, feasts, and procedures. Adrea listened attentively even as she oversaw the servants who were giving out refreshments. Lavendier squirmed in her seat, impatient to speak up and ask multitudes of questions, and

had Astren broken his speech for more than a short breath, she surely would have. Afias, meanwhile, sat through it all like a funeral, his mind not on the proceedings, but wandering in paths of dismay along the future, and regretful fondness for the past.

After the meeting, when Astren had prepared them for everything, and assured them that Viol had been sent for, Prince Afias, defying his usual ponderous air, practically bolted from the chamber through the main doors, as if he would stifle if he stayed within a moment longer. Adrea frowned after him, considering marching out and demanding that he return, demanding that he show support to his brother and king; she was on the verge of doing so, when Trinian claimed her attention.

“We have left everything behind, and brought nothing with us,” he told her. “You said rooms, clothing, and everything we might need, were already here?”

“Of course. I will have servants bring you to them immediately. And after you are settled, we will run through the coronation ceremony. The practice is for our benefit as much as yours, since we have never gone through it either.”

His eyes twinkled at her in excitement, but his face was somber. She knew that despite his eagerness, he was concerned about being a good king. But she had no doubts. He was perfect, and his humility and doubt only heightened the perfection.

“Do not worry,” she said. “You will be magnificent.” Then she included Adlena in her gaze, who stood uncertainly, gorgeously, radiantly, to the side. “You both will.”

The servants now entered to lead them to their new

rooms, and Trinian looked over the group. "Where is Afias?"

"I will find him," she said, and the royal family left through the side door toward the royal apartments. Adrea had aired them out in the past couple weeks for the first time in many, many years, and she was very pleased with the results.

As she watched the family disappear, she did her best not to let herself fall into a slump, telling herself that no matter her disappointment, she could always serve Trinian and work closely with him. That, at least, was not denied her, though she had lost the relationship for which she had yearned. With a heavy sigh, she released her built up hair and let it fall around her shoulders, as if to conceal her already hidden heart, and with it closely hugging her disappointed form, she whirled on her heel to find the lost prince.

At the top of the courtyard's turret wall, she found him leaning against the brick, looking out over the kingdom and letting the wind blow his soft, brown locks.

"Your brother was looking for you."

He startled and turned quickly. "My lady," he bowed, trying to collect himself, "I did not hear you come up."

Her dark eyes flashed at him. Perhaps she should have accepted him without question and honored his new title – after all, he was a prince, and she was now only a lady. But Adrea judged men on character, not title. And from what she could see, this man was selfish, lazy, and fearful, and she despised him for it. She dismissed him in a cursory glance, then shrugged and walked to the wall, where she had stood less than a year ago, despairing over the fate of

her people.

“What do *you* think of all this?” she said it as a challenge, surprising herself, for she had not meant to speak.

Afias tried to answer politely, but the meeting in the chamber was still only a muddle in his mind. “It’s confusing. I never understood politics.”

She gave a derisive laugh, and Afias looked at her in astonishment, surprised that someone so highbred could be so rude.

“I suppose you never had much reason to pursue them. After all, you were only a farmer.”

He agreed evenly with a slow nod, angering her further. “And I expected to be a farmer until the day I died.”

“Your brother always had higher ambitions. I admire him for that.”

He turned to her and studied her face. She looked him rigidly in the eye and accepted the glance, but she refused to let him see beyond her outer shell. Finally, he sighed.

“He never expected to be king.”

“Life is not always what we expect,” she shot back.

“He was just a common soldier.”

She whirled upon him and her eyes flashed. “He was never common, and when he learned the truth, he accepted it and rose to the challenge. As should you. This is your life now and you should get used to it. And go to your brother; he is king now, and when he requests your presence, you go to him.” She whirled toward the stairs, her long black hair slapping the stone wall, and started to walk away.

“Wait.”

She paused, and looked back at him as if he were a troublesome child who had pulled her hair to get her

attention.

“About my sister. When will she return to Drian?”

There was a softness in his eye when he said ‘my sister,’ and she suddenly, against her will and with a lurch of her heart, saw his devastation. He had been uprooted, torn from everything he loved, thrown into a world he could not understand, and her heart prodded her to pity him. In that moment, she came closer to doing so than she ever had for anyone... but Adrea hated pity. He should get used to it, she decided. He had no choice over his fate.

“In three days – before the coronation.” Then she disappeared down the parapet.

## The White Witch of Kelta

**T**he outskirts of northern Drian – ancient crumbling ruins and bare prairies with the high winds moaning among the stones and whistling through the grasses – surrounded ten-year-old Viol as she traveled in the company of two Drinian soldiers.

The soldiers had come to her aunt's house, who lived in the southern region of Kelta, to bring her home, but had told her nothing other than that Trinian had sent them. She thought this very wonderful of her brother, to send soldiers to bring her home, but she did not think anything else of it. Of course he would send soldiers to protect her, of course he would want her home, and of course she was eager to go. That he was king, or she a princess, would have been a thought utterly ludicrous, had it entered her head.

Two soldiers, however, were not sufficient protection. To deal with ordinary brigands, they would have been a sufficient deterrent, but in these desolate lands there were ten enemy soldiers, sent by a witch, who lay in ambush

behind a decaying ruin, watching the travelers approach. Bedecked with red face paint, with black paint about the eyes, and dressed in all white, they were emptied of all individuality, and a strange pulse, not their own, beat an enchanted rhythm in their veins.

When the three Drinians, all unsuspecting, drew near enough to the trap, the red and white men leapt out of hiding and fell upon them. Shrieking in terror, Viol watched her guards mount a fierce defense, covering her ears at the clash and roar of battle. She screamed when one of them, Darid, fell to the ground with a hole through his heart. Theon, the other, yelled for her to run, and she tried, but he too was slain and she was seized violently from behind. In her overwhelming fear, she fell into a dead faint.

\* \* \*

The witch had decided to play the merciful queen, and comfort the poor, frightened girl when she arrived. When the soldiers carried the princess inside, they laid her upon the witch's soft, padded couch, where servants dressed the girl in fine white silk and satin, and laid out trays of rich food that scented the chamber.

Viol's eyes fluttered open at last and her captor's lovely face bent over her with motherly compassion, holding a glass of wine to her lips. Her features were strong and delicate, with a small, regal nose, bright eyes, and a high forehead possessed of arching, finely-chiseled brows.

"Drink, my dear. It will refresh you," she said softly, and the sound was of a soft wind whispering through grasses.

Viol blinked confusedly and glanced all around the chamber, disoriented by the brightness of the white walls and cream-colored cushions. She sipped the pale liquid and glanced at the beautiful woman.

“Who are you? Where am I?”

“I am Strana, my darling, and you are in my home. Rest, relax. There will be time for talking.”

Bit by bit, she fed the girl delicacies from her hand until Viol’s mind was clouded and her body comfortable. She no longer remembered the traumatic death of her guardians. When the witch was satisfied with the state of her prisoner, she began to ask her questions, probing into her life and personality, gleaning serviceable information for her magical arts. She learned from the confused girl that Viol had been away from her family for two years, her parents were both dead, and her education poor. Not that she had lacked education, but that the general knowledge of Drian was, as Gladier had discovered, deplorable.

“How old are you, my dear?”

Viol drowsily answered she was ten.

“Are you an only child?”

“I am the youngest of five living children. My mother had three infants after me who all died.”

Strana’s sultry figure slithered beside her, folding the child into the heat of her perfumed air.

“Do you like me, darling?”

“Oh, yes. Very much.”

“You like this place better than your home, I think.”

“It is very nice.”

Her red lips curled delicately. “It is indeed. Would you like to stay here and be *my* little girl? I could make you a



beautiful queen.”

“What about my family?”

“And what about them? They have got along well enough without you all these years. Come, you are much more important to *me*. Say you will stay. Say you will be my daughter. I think you miss having a mother.”

Fed on drugs and seated where she could hardly feel anything firm or real, the princess floated on a buoyant raft of confusion. Strana extended her mind into the princess's, following her train of thought while the girl tried to remember her family. She thought of Afias her brother, whom she loved the most, but his memory slipped from her like water through a sieve. And she was not even sad. She thought of each person she had ever loved – Trinian, her protective older brother; Cila, her sweet sister; Astren, her warm-hearted brother-in-law – and with each rise of affection, there was an equal smear of them from her mind. She forgot them, for the witch's magic worked on the emotions of love. Strana smirked, triumphant in her approaching victory. But just before Viol relinquished the inner battle, just before she forgot everything about who she was and who she loved, she remembered Lavendier. Her selfish, hateful sister who loved no one. Viol felt nothing but pain, loneliness, and annoyance when she thought of this sister – no lovely tingles of affection. And the witch started with surprise – the stupid girl loved her! It was a love removed from emotion, and the witch had no control over it. She felt the girl retain a tiny part of her inner self. It lay so deep that even Viol herself did not sense it, but it was a final, unassailable wall between her heart and the wicked woman's invasive magic. Strana tried

again, desperately, for she needed the girl to come to her willingly, and she could not afford to lose this battle.

“Do you not miss having a mother?” she hissed, bending low over the girl’s face, and for the first time, Viol felt a twinge of foreboding.

## The Son of Kelta

**H**is heart racing in torment, Trinian paced the antechamber of his quarters, in a far different state on this, the evening after his coronation, than he could have predicted. The room, a section of his own private quarters, was a spacious apartment, with curtains instead of walls and luxurious cushions for reclining. It was a place with many rooms, that would allow for he and Adlena to grow their family as the years progressed, and it might have left him feeling airy and free, had it not symbolized his new state of imprisonment.

“You will govern from the throne of the center chamber,” had spoken Steward Astren, the night before. “You will no longer depart the city to find answers, healing, or other kings. Like the rulers who came before you, all the world will travel vast distances to but seek your good favor, and you shall govern the people beneath you with a level, far-seeing eye, as you sit upon the throne as upon a mountain, and survey the world beneath you like a map.” Trinian had nodded acquiescently, for at the time, it had seemed a

fair injunction and the wisest way; but now, only twenty-four hours later, his first trial had come, and the steward's words were like a noose that was slowly squeezing him to death.

The coronation ceremony had taken place in the afternoon, an event of fireworks and feasts, dancing, singing, and cheering from thousands of citizens of Drian, outside his chambers it was still progressing, and he would never again be a private man.

He could not have known how soon this fate would stifle him, how soon it would fill him with fear, and test his resolve to think of the nation over his family.

Heavy, even footsteps approached the corridor from outside, and with impatience, Trinian stood still to receive the large man who entered, filled the room with his large presence, and bowed low upon his knee.

“General Phestite, I thank you for coming.”

The Head General rose and reared tall above the king. He was a giant of a man, stern of demeanor and solidly built. “Yes, your majesty,” he rumbled with a voice the depth of which matched his girth. “I faithfully present my blade to you. Command me, and I and my men will obey.” They were not strangers to each other, for only a few months before, Phesite had been Trinian's superior; but now, a humble soldier commanded the commander of the Royal Army.

Trinian did not dwell on that now, but spoke forth immediately about the weight on his heart. “I am indebted to you for your sword, and already, I have need of it. My youngest sister Viol – Princess Viol,” he corrected himself, “should have returned yesterday before the coronation

ceremony, accompanied by two soldiers. When she did not arrive, I sent a scout to learn of them.”

“Yes, your Majesty. I know of the two soldiers and the scout.”

Trinian nodded, for Phestite had always been a hands-on man with the army, and he remembered that now with gratitude.

“The scout returned to me not a half hour ago to say he found the soldiers, dead, not five leagues distant from the southern tip of Kelta. There was no sign of my sister.”

As he spoke the words, his tormented, half-formed thoughts rose again in his mind and overwhelmed him. *If Viol was in danger, had he not only the right but the duty to forget all else and rush to her rescue? What sort of king...what sort of brother...?* But he stopped himself, and continued with his instructions, clenching his fists to hold himself still. “I cannot be seen to leave the country just as soon as I am crowned. I am entrusting her safety to you, and to all the men you choose to be her champions.”

Phestite stood as firm and solid as a brick wall, and nodded slowly. “I agree that it is wise that you remain here, since it may well be that this is a trap for you.”

Trinian had not thought of that and in the surprise of the moment, his gaze betrayed his vulnerability, and he stepped back. “So soon? But no one could know so soon.”

“Man, no,” agreed the general. “No man could know. But the natural gods know many things about the mortal world, and are often jealous of us.”

Phestite’s face was impassive, for he would not reveal that he saw the king’s weakness. Trinian now recovered himself and looked on the man with respect. Meeting eye

to eye, he saw that the burly, gruff-looking commander understood his internal struggle, and had given his advice as a quiet assurance that Trinian was right to rule from his throne and not from his battle-horse. Trinian accepted the comfort, and inclined his head ever so slightly to acknowledge it.

“There are stories of a wicked natural goddess near Kelta,” Trinian mused. “She is the natural goddess of the land where the men were killed, and I suppose she may already have tidings of my coronation. Do you think this was her doing?”

“I cannot know, my king. But if it was not her, yet still she would know of all that passed in her dominion, and perhaps we could enforce her to disclose her knowledge to us, in exchange for receiving the favor of the new king.”

His heart lightened ever so slightly, and Trinian nodded. “I entrust Princess Viol to you, General. Bring her back to me.”

“On my honor, your Majesty.” Phestite bowed and departed.

\* \* \*

In the winding barracks of Drian’s army, stretching like burrows through the valleys and hills east of the palace, the training arena clamored and echoed like war itself, the clang and slash of blades in combat, the piercing cries and deep bellows of men young and old, the sweat and new-cut leather smells that flooded the chamber with a rousing call to action. In the center of the swirl and tangle of male sinew and steel whirled Garrity, the training master and

captain of the outer guard.

Garrity had come to Drian ten years before, rising from the dunes of no-man's land and offering himself as a soldier for hire. Silent about where he had come from, he proved through many encounters with outlaws and vandals his loyalty to Drian and her people, and he had settled in the capital city, making it his home.

Stories and myths surrounding his person had turned this man into a thing of legend in Drian. And indeed, his might and personal beauty leant themselves to painting him a hero. No one knew where he came from or whom he loved; some said he was a prince, born out of wedlock and prophesied to kill his father if he ever met him, so that he was now running from his tragic fate. Some said he had fallen for a distant princess who had scorned him and he had killed her in a fit of rage, now atoning for his sin through the mighty deeds of his life. Some said he was a natural god who had been driven from his lands and now was only a mere mortal, pining for his lost might. These and other fantastic tales the villagers whispered of him when he passed by the outer gates on his nightly patrols.

Soldiers told even more graphic and frightening stories to new recruits. They would tell them of the time he led a band of three boys into the woods, and the boys were never heard from again. "He burned them in sacrifice," they whispered. "He is a warlock." "He drank their blood," others said. "It is how he keeps his youth." But those recruits did not believe the tales for long. At first, they stood in awe of his god-like figure, sculpted as if from bronze and gleaming like gold in the firelight of the training cavern. They feared his perfect record and bold

strength, and made up their own tales about him – until he came and looked them in the eye.

Then all preconceptions melted away. They forgot, in that moment, to see him as anything other than himself, pure and present. In his mild, large brown eyes, they saw their own souls reflected, and hung their heads in humility. When he spoke, they lifted up again in hope, for he spoke of his belief in them. And when he brought them to the training floor, they performed above and beyond even their own wildest dreams. He was to these men who knew him not a god, nor a hero, nor a criminal, but himself, and they were, for the first time in their lives, themselves.

This was his strongest trait: his belief in each man's potential for greatness, and his ability to drive him toward it. He chose all his new recruits by hand, rejecting those he knew did not seek goodness for its own sake, and it was those shallow, rejected men who wove the fantastical tales about him. They could not understand him, and saw his greatness only as a projection of their weak, selfish selves, and told tales of what they would have done with his power, blaming him for their own depravity.

Today he whirled with his men in the training chamber, preparing them to meet the king and demonstrate their several skills and strengths in a nightly performance. But when he saw General Phestite, through the cluster of swords, stride into the chamber, dwarfing the tall stone doorway with his giant stature, Garrity called his men to a halt, tripping Sergeant Desmond, in the process, to remind him to watch his footing. They lined up before the General a second before any other group noticed his presence.

“Soldiers of Drian,” echoed Phestite’s deep voice through



the cavern, "for the first time in hundreds of years, the king has need of our service."

Every man's heart swelled with excitement.

"His sister, Princess Viol, has disappeared in the southern tip of Kelta. We must find her and bring her back."

The atmosphere, charged with eager excitement, changed immediately to shrinking fear. Phestite glanced around, his eyes stern and demanding as he noticed the change, and with cold resolve, he continued his speech. "I will select a contingent of scouts and warriors to accompany me. Colonel Karth, are your scouts prepared?"

Colonel Karth stepped forward smartly, his arms straight along his sides, his back upright and firm, but his eyes cloudy with reluctance. "Commander General," he addressed him by his most formal title. "Forgive me sir, but no soldiers return alive from that country. You will lead the men in suicide."

There was a swelling murmur of agreement in the room. Garrity heard one soldier mutter the name Strana, and his heart tightened. The soldier's face was red with fury against the insult toward his General, against the cowardice of his fellow soldiers, and against a host of deeper scars in his own heart, which were now reawakened by their frightened words.

He stepped forward.

"General, send my men. We will serve the king proudly, rescue the princess, and return alive. I give you my word." The twelve young men who stood behind him, steady and undaunted by any of the fear swirling in the room, stepped forward behind their leader, bold and ready.

Karth's face flushed in angry shame, but he was silent as

Phestite moved away from him and stood before Garrity. "Captain, your men know nothing of the wilds and have not been in battle. What makes you think they are ready?"

Garrity felt the collective energy behind him; he knew each of their skill and strength, and knew they were ready. He spoke so that no one else in the room could overhear his words except Phestite, and his own men. "You and I both know you were about to declare them fit for active duty in the next tests. Furthermore," he paused here, but forged ahead despite his personal reticence, "I know the lands of southern Kelta like the back of my hand. I was raised there."

Phestite took another moment to gaze hard into his captain's eyes, where he confirmed the man's honest words. Finally, he stepped back to his position in front of the entire room and announced that Captain Garrity's contingent would ride out with him to rescue Princess Viol, and declared, in a voice of mingled pride and scorn, that they were dismissed.

## The Green Dragon of Kelta

**P**hestite led the men from Drian into the wild regions of Southern Kelta where they expected to find the hidden fortress of the witch. Within half a day, they reached the river Ran, flowing in a twisting, tumultuous rivulet from Rordan, and bisecting the wilderlands of Kelta from the farm land and verdant valleys of Drian. Phestite turned to Garrity behind him. "You say you know this land. Lead on."

Garrity nodded, and pushed forward into the wild prairies where the rolling land, that stretched as far as the eye could see, promised sure confusion to the inexperienced traveler. True to his word, he led them confidently onward, and they followed him as a flock of birds follows a sure leader at the head of their wide-spread arrow.

Eventually, when one of the men indicated a short rock wall and claimed to have seen it before, asking hesitantly if they were going in circles, Garrity only examined it closely, and then led on with greater speed, declaring they were

nearing their destination. Eventually they emerged from the prairie into a land of hills, trees, and deep river ravines. "Stay close," he warned his men. "We must keep the element of surprise." No one but Garrity could make out any distinguishing signs in the terrain, the trees appearing more or less the same as they had for the past several hours, but still it was clear their captain knew where he was. "Just beyond that ridge," he pointed forward, "we will see Strana's palace. We are approaching it from the rear where there is a secret entrance behind the hedges of the garden. She uses them for escape. She will not have it heavily guarded, and we can infiltrate our way in there."

Garrity's familiarity with not only the terrain, but with the castle itself, astonished Phestite. Whatever the truth of his friend's mysterious past, he had never thought it would include this place, and he looked at him with deep wonder, refusing to think that he could come from evil, but wondering how he could have retained purity if he had bided in this palace of pure evil. As Garrity ascended to the top of the hill and Phestite followed, laying himself down along the ridge beside the steady warrior, and seeing the burning gaze with which Garrity smote the palace before them, Phestite decided the great man must have been a captive here – for it was not a place he loved. From their position along the ridge, they could see the rear of the palace, gleaming black and shiny in the sunlight, and the guards scattered about the grounds. Towers like spikes speared the sky, and a garden of dark evergreens and white roses surrounded the rear of the black palace walls, where the witch's guards stood unflinching on balconies, before bushes, and along pathways.

There were maybe twenty of them, and Garrity had his men thread their bows and kill eight simultaneously, then eight more, and finally the last four. Each group of killings was out of eyeshot of the other groups, and silent as dropping a sack of flour, each one emitting a thump too dull to attract attention. Then the Drinians crept to the hedges and found, sure enough, a path in the stonework that led into the bowels of the dark palace. Garrity led them through these with that same uncanny knowledge with which he had led them across the indistinguishable wilderness. Phestite followed directly behind, and felt they traveled for a half hour at least before Garrity finally paused and turned back to him.

“We are just outside her favorite room,” he whispered in the dim light that filtered through cracks in the walls. “She would have brought the princess here.”

“Are you certain?”

The soldier’s eyes darkened, and his voice was like the sound of a dire gong stifled in its vibrating, “Yes.”

Phestite gestured directions to the men behind, then nodded for Garrity to lead on. The soldier, beautiful of bearing and mysterious of origin, pushed an invisible panel inward, and the Drinians were blinded as they spilled into a tall chamber of white marble pillars, white soft rugs, and white strips of pearls dangling from the ceiling.

The walls, furniture, and soldier’s clothing were all white, and the only color to relieve the starkness was the princess’s dark brown hair which looked black in contrast, where she sat curled up, defenseless, on a white sofa against the wall. She was shivering with fear, but looking up at her captor with a mesmerized expression, for over her stood

a tall woman with the air of a queen and a circlet of silver on her piled-up, platinum curls.

Garrity darted straight for the child, and Phestite and the other men ran along the walls, ringing the room and readying to face off against the guards – but there was no attack. All was silent and still. Phestite looked at the witch's face to see that her eyes, wide with horror, were riveted on Garrity.

Disturbing the air of quiet and horror as if he were unaware of it, Garrity's strong voice vibrated through the quiet chamber, speaking urgently to the princess as he knelt gently before her. "Pay no heed to her lies, child. Banish her voice from your mind. Come Viol, come back to the world and forget her promises. They are all false." Viol's eyes were glazed and distant, but she slowly blinked and looked at the soldier before her, puzzled, confused, and startled by his gold and red armor which was warm in the frigid white room.

He kept looking at the young girl, ignoring the burning gaze of the tall woman standing above him.

"You are dead," the witch gasped at last, her voice gritting between her teeth.

Still, he looked at the princess, as he said calmly: "Is that what you thought? I wondered why you never came after me."

"Look at me!" she screamed, and for the first time, her soldiers in the room held their weapons at the ready. Garrity stood slowly and turned to face her. He was a tall man but she was a tall woman, and they stood eye to eye.

"You are dead. What, have you come back to haunt me now?"

“I have returned to retrieve one of your victims.”

Her face had been as white as her room, but now it flamed in anger. “You know not of what you speak. I will give her everything.”

“And yet she will gain nothing. I am taking her now; you can relinquish her willingly, or I will kill you.”

She gasped as if he had punched her in the stomach. “You kill me?” There was terror in her eyes, but she held her head higher. “I am immortal – you cannot.”

Still he spoke calmly, but Phestite felt an eager, raging tension quivering beneath his words. “I can and I will. Do not provoke me.”

At first, it seemed that the queen was turning sick from fear or anger, but then she was far too green for that. Her whole face suffused to a scaly, brilliant emerald shade and she grew taller and thinner, filling the room with the body of a giant serpent.

Viol screamed in terror, and the Drinians’ hearts thrilled with fear, as if startled into realizing the serpent was real. This was far from anything human.

With a word of command, Garrity sent the princess fleeing toward Sergeant Desmond, who wrapped an arm around her and held her close, wielding his sword to ward off any threats. Though they were all terrified, the Drinian soldiers were too closely bound to Garrity to lose heart. So long as he understood this demon, they would stand their ground. There were ten of the witch’s white soldiers in the room, but thus far they had stood completely still. Now, as if obeying a silent command, they rushed the Drinians, and Phestite was distracted from Garrity and the giant serpent. All the soldiers were consumed for a long moment in the

frenzy of the conflict, and were unaware of the epic duel between snake and soldier.

Their fight raged on for several minutes, the princess cowering in the corner, the witch bent upon Garrity with a singleness of purpose. She would thrust her fangs and coils toward him, and he would lunge with his sword, each evading the other with nimbleness and deadly resolve. Entirely gone from her mind were her designs upon the royal girl. Utterly consumed was she by the desire to take the soldier's life, and in that resolve she trembled with fear, hatred, and mounting desperation. Both bore wounds from the other, but neither could strike a fatal blow.

Over the din of grunts and steel, the serpent spoke. "You will pay dearly for what you have cost me. I have hated you from the beginning and now you are my bane! Even if you kill me, you will never be free of me!"

Phestite had broken from the fight and lunged forward to help his friend, but the serpent, with one of her coils, offhandedly threw the mighty man against the wall as a child throws a rag doll, and he crumbled to the ground. Then she threw a coil against Garrity, but rather than throwing him aside, he caught it in his bare hands and threw it back at her, then leapt in the air and with his spear, pierced her left eye with a rousing cry. Together they clashed to the ground, shaking the very foundations of the floor with their clamor, and when they landed, she was dead. Garrity stood over her like an avenging angel, her blood and his mingling together.

The few of her soldiers still alive immediately threw down their weapons in surrender, their enchantment ended, and the battle done.



Sergeant Desmond now moved away from Viol to take the weapons of the enemy soldiers, and Phestite went to the princess. But her gaze was riveted on Garrity, looking at him with wonder, awe, and a shining glance of her young eyes. He met her look and approached her gravely.

“Your highness,” he bowed, and she started as if in fear, so that Phestite raised his hand to the soldier.

“She does not yet know,” he said warningly.

Viol was shivering still. “That woman – the serpent woman – she called me a princess. What do I not know?”

“We have come to take you home,” said Phestite, approaching her consolingly, but his deep voice and large, heavy girth were intimidating, and she involuntarily pulled back. “I am not going to hurt you,” he assured her.

“I know,” she said, “but can he take me?” she asked pleadingly, her childish eyes turned with trusting love to Garrity, and her innocent heart honestly telling what she desired. Both men smiled at that, and Garrity stooped down and lifted her up in his strong arms. “Am I a princess?” she asked, feeling like one as she laid her head against his shoulder.

“Your brother is a king,” said her new hero. “He will tell you.”

## The Littlest Princess

**I**n the waning light of day, when the shafts through the diamond roof were red and orange in the chamber, Trinian held Viol tight to his heart. The moment Phestite and Garrity returned, he had dismissed all his attendants, and Garrity had brought her straight to his arms.

After a long moment, Viol let go and looked up at him, her brown eyes large and questioning. “They tell me you are a king. How?”

There was a reverberating clang as the far doors parted, and Afias pounded against the flagstones until he had gathered her to him. His chest heaved against her gratefully, then he pushed her away and scrutinized her face. “Are you alright?”

She smiled and smoothed his wrinkled forehead with her small, cool hand. There were tears in her eyes. “I’m perfectly well, but I am very confused. Am I a princess?”

Afias looked up at the king.

“Yes,” said Trinian.

“So you really are king?”

“Yes.”

“What did the witch want with me?”

“I know not.” Trinian’s brow clouded. “What did she say?”

Afias warned, “Trinian-”

“No, it’s all right,” she said bravely. “I want to talk about it. I want to know the answers.”

“Very well. But we will at least sit down.”

“She said she wanted to be my mother.” Viol sat on Afias’s lap at the long table. “To make us the same nature, somehow, I think.”

Afias shook his head at Trinian. “What does that mean?”

The new king, in his long stay in the dark wood, had learned many things from Gladier about the gods. He had learned that the natural gods were often jealous of mankind’s power, and as the god of Karaka had tried to do in his dark chamber to Trinian, so many natural gods had attempted to do to humans born into positions of prestige. And many had even succeeded in stripping weak men and women of their titles, so that now he shuddered and leaned forward in his tall throne. “She wanted to usurp your birthright. If you had consented, she would have had the right to rule her part of the world unmolested by any other claims, and possibly to rule Drian as well, should the rest of us die. She wanted to unmake you. But these gods are strong,” his eyes clouded, remembering how he had called upon his father in his moment of travail, “how did you resist her?”

Her face fell. “I did not: I nearly gave her what she wanted. If the soldiers had not come...”

“Sh.” Afias put his arms around her and held her close. “It is all over now. You are safe with us and no evil will ever touch you.”

## IV

# RESOLVE

*“He was only too well aware that such resolutions might look very different when the moment came, but he felt an unwonted assurance that somehow or other he would be able to go through with it. It was necessary, and the necessary was always possible.”*

*- C.S. Lewis, Out of the Silent Planet*



## Mestraff

**F**ive years passed away in the shining jewel city of Drian, wherein Trinian found that very little was expected of him: the Nian family had little responsibility, acting more in the role of figureheads than leaders, while Astren and Adrea guided and controlled the city as they had ever done, and Afias wondered why he had been forced to desert his fields.

Within the first year of marriage, Adlena gave birth to a son. Prince Jacian had the bright eyes and high brow of his father, and the dark, curling locks of his mother; the vivacious energy of the king, and the sensitive soul of the queen; and he was the pride and darling of the kingdom.

King Trinian, under the tutelage of Lord Astren, settled into a routine. He spent most of his days in the throne room, satisfying Astren's demands by listening to the needs of the people and learning the details of legal proceedings. Two days of the week, however, much to Astren's disapproval, he spent in company with the army. It was the only matter which Trinian adamantly

insisted upon, and where he put forth his kingly right to demand. He was in his heart, and had always been, a soldier: whether in the throne room or bed at night, his mind was always in the barracks, his hand on the hilt of his sword, and his muscles taut to defend his city. To strengthen himself against Astren's arguments, he kept in mind the fate of King Ronarge, who had allowed the army to grow lax and lazy, and he reminded himself ever of his encounter with the natural god of Karaka, and Viol's enchantment under the natural goddess Strana. No matter what Astren and the council thought or said of his proper roles and responsibilities, Trinian repeated to himself that the security of Drian rested on his shoulders, and he must and would remain ever vigilant.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, Power was full of pride.

He never imagined that a mere man, king or not, could challenge or defeat him. By killing the heir of Adalam – the king meant to return at the end of the ages – he would have effectively destroyed the only remaining prophecy that threatened to keep him from ruling all of Minecerva, and preventing the return of the Golden King. He would kill the man, kill his relatives, and with the army he had forged for over three hundred years, he would conquer Drian unhindered. He would transform it into his own stronghold, and live in glory for eternity.

So when, to his astonishment, he did not kill Trinian, Power panicked. Now he could be defeated, for he knew the prophecy of Mercy. But he would not wait to be



marched upon and driven from his home by mere mortal men. No, he would march over the whole of Minecerva and invade Drian. And though he could not travel there himself, hindered by the hateful Rordan, he could send forth his army. Time was running out, and the Golden King's approach was a distant light growing ever larger, threatening to consume him and shed brightness into the darkest corners of his realm. The other gods did not seem to care about the Golden King's advent, but he did. He, at least, would push against the tide.

And so Power, in the eleventh hour and ninety-fifth minute, gathered together his dark forces, turned his soul to conquering by brute force, and called Kellan to his presence.

Unlike the vastness of the rest of the room, where Power's secretary sat like a white specter at his desk, the back corner where Power received Kellan was dark and hazy, filled with sumptuous, harsh luxuries. The large metal table was hard and flat with sharp corners, embedded in the soft mud floor. There were no chairs – only black lumps bubbling out of the walls that had hardened into benches. A massive black stone fireplace, that forever burned two-stories-high blazed against the back wall, casting a stark, amber glow into the shadows.

But Kellan took note of none of it. He, a gorgan from another land, lived in a reality entirely clouded by rage and pain so that he did not notice any difference between light and dark, supple and sharp, translucent and murky, and his overriding fear of Power was the only restraining influence on his harsh passions.

Kellan hailed from a land far beyond Minecerva. A place

of fire and ice. He had been stolen away by Power when he was just an infant, and brought to this temperate land that was like hell to him. Used to regulating itself by jumping from one extreme to the other, his body did not know how to adjust and he had grown up in agonizing, unending pain. He was a large beast, with hide like supple rock that shifted about as he moved. His four legs – his long ones in front and his longer ones in back – had long, cruel claws. His iron jaws easily disemboweled their prey, and his teeth were sharp as a jackal's. Though he could understand it, he had never learned to speak the language of Minecerva, for his throat only formed the grunts and growls of his own people.

It was long ago that Power had set him at the task of spawning more creatures like himself, rearing them to serve as a fierce and mindless army; and now, from beneath the oozing, stone-bed mud of Karaka, the long-bred army was about to emerge. After three hundred years in the black bowels of the earth, they would rise up to claim its surface.

Kellan listened to his master's instructions now, and with a rage for blood pumping in his molten veins, he put in his own conditions for warfare. When Power told him to attack the western cities and bring them under his domain, Kellan demanded that his offspring be allowed to devour the women and children along the way. Power assented. Though not a blood-thirsty god, in his pursuit for glory and conquest, he was happy to feed his hordes.

Slowly, inexorably, with howls of pain and agony, Kellan's gorgans swept into the eastern wilds of Mestraff, making their way systematically, ravenously, southeast

to the sea ports of Rordan.

\* \* \*

Although the largest landmass in Minecerva, this country of Mestraff was made up of the smallest population, providing few and scanty bits of food to the savage hunters. Small villages scattered about heavily wooded forests were made up of self-sustaining, autonomous communities, where farmers, hunters, and artisans lived in each village.

These people were governed by no overarching government, and only interacted with each other for the purposes of trade, collaborating knowledge, and giving in marriage. It was a serene country with no army, dedicated to community, wisdom, and peace. Lately, that peace had flowered on uninterrupted since they – unlike Drian – had not been victims to Famine, Death, and Despair in the past century. But now their time of trial had come, and it was to this unsuspecting world that the blood-thirsty creatures descended.

Any highways between Drian and Mestraff had long since fallen into disrepair, and communication between countries was often delayed and unreliable, so when the beasts destroyed the scattered villages, defeated the makeshift armies of the local farmers, and devoured the women and children, the news did not reach Drian until the army was half-way across the country.

## Princess Lavendier

Lavendier glided through the elaborate hallways of Korem in her resplendent, purple satin gown tailored to her tall height, round curves, and full bust, well-contented with herself on her mission for companionship. In these large halls, flowering gardens, and hidden servant rooms, there was always someone to uncover and wrangle back to her quarters.

As soon as Lavendier had seen the living chambers fitted out especially for her – a sumptuous three room suite – she had swept inside and reigned over it like a queen. She threw galas in the high-ceilinged first room with its chandeliers and massive fireplace, luncheons in the garden room with walls built of windows, and soirees with numerous men in the dark, lush, sumptuous bedroom. But as much as she gloried in spending time in her own apartment, her heart thrilled to sit in the throne room at the long table and observe matters of state. She always watched eagerly for any young men who entered the chamber, yearning ever to be admired and have them in

her power. Decked out in all her finery, with her shining curls woven luxuriously around her head; her fair, golden neck graceful above her sloping shoulders; her eyes more green than a summer lawn in July, she presented a perfect portrait.

One man had once whispered in her ear – and she firmly believed it – that the gods had appointed Trinian as king in acknowledgment of her beauty.

Now she floated meticulously along the hallways – conscious that she might always encounter an admirer – and arrived two hours into the royal hearing. The two guards pushed open the oak doors for her, and she entered with a rustle that caused everyone to turn their heads. She smiled and nodded, allowing one of the handsome pages to pull her seat out for her.

“Please continue, General,” said Trinian, glancing dismissively away from her intrusive entrance.

“Your Majesty, the reports are only scattered and contradictory. The inhabitants of the Mestraff forests live in great fear, that is certain; but what they fear – of this, we are less sure.”

Lavendier met the eyes of one of the young soldiers, standing behind General Cartnol and gave him her slow, red smile. He flushed and ducked his head, but continued to glance at her throughout the meeting.

“What do you advise?” asked the king.

“Send our own scouts, sire. We cannot rely on the scattered reports of the wild men who live there. They have no cities or government – only a single military fort on the far side of the Rordan, and we will want to know what is happening before the danger gets that far.”

Lavendier had no idea of geography, for she had never cared to learn. She was growing bored with this talk of cities and wildmen, but she kept her perfect poise at the table and ran her eyes languidly over the extent of the room. Through one of the side doors, she caught sight of her sister Viol slipping quietly inside and making her way in the shadows to the table. She was accompanied by a tall figure, and Lavendier watched them, hoping to get a good look at his face. It was Garrity, the daring captain who had saved Viol from the witch five years ago, and on recognizing him, her heart skipped a beat and she pulled herself up even straighter. As he led her sister to the table, Lavendier smiled and sighed and used all her feminine charm to get him to look at her, but his attention was completely centered on Viol. until he stood to the side to listen to the king's conference.

She pouted, but did not show it.

Garrity should have been easy prey, but he had long eluded her. His early, almost immediate, connection to her family had presented her with ample opportunity to invite him to parties, dinners, and soirees, but he consistently refused every overture, although he was still great friends with her little sister. And this was more than usually aggravating because he was by far the most magnificent man she had ever seen. He was positively beautiful, like a god, and she had spent many a sleepless night thinking of his strong, supple frame that was tight and soft in all the right places, his skin which glowed with the perfection of a bronze statue, his face with its serious jaw, sad brown eyes, and tantalizing lips.

She saw nothing of his internal struggles or caring

nature, for she, spawned from the common brood of humanity to which we all belong, judged others by her own standards. So in her blindness, she saw only a lovely man consumed with his own consequence, who thought himself too good for the likes of an aspiring princess, who laughed at her in the secret recesses of his heart.

Lavendier was jealous of her title, and secretly, did not believe in it. She lived in fear that, with the suddenness by which it had come to her, her new privileges and title would depart one day without warning, and she would be only a simple girl again, without power, prestige, or popularity. Unless she received high praise and flattery from all those around her, she assumed that like herself, they considered her an imposter, pretender, and hypocrite, and she hated them for it, and so there was a strange mixture of hate and desire blended in her for this soldier of godlike beauty.

Trinian's voice was growing agitated, and now it broke into her thoughts. "I am particularly concerned that Mestraff is so near Karaka. I think these troubles must be arising from there."

"Your majesty," said Lord Astren, "we have had no trouble from that quarter for thousands of years. Every state leaves the others alone, and it is how we all like it. No doubt this is some animal gone insane, or new monster risen from the ocean..."

Lavendier was suddenly bored with the debate and, rising with as much rustle as she had entered, she regally exited through the main doors, not noticing the look which Garrity finally sent after her, for he was lowering his brows in contempt as she exited the chamber with

her air of puffed-up importance. She swept down the passages, headed for the gardens where she hoped to run into the new apprentice there, who had lively green eyes and a quick smile. But as she rounded a corner, she nearly collided with Queen Adlena, who was strolling through the long corridors with her four year old son.

Lavendier sidestepped and caught her footing as lightly as a dancer, whirling so that her skirts flew like the wings of a swan. Adlena merely blushed and stepped back, casting her eyes to the floor.

"Aunt Laven!" Her nephew engulfed her silk wrapped legs with his chubby arms and held her tight. She submitted to the affection, since it was what she had gone searching for anyhow, though she was not particularly fond of children.

"I'm so sorry," Adlena tried to pull him away, but Lavendier stopped her with a wave of her hand.

"I will allow it. He is so very affectionate." She bent down and nuzzled his little neck with her nose and giggled with him. Lavendier knew her sister-in-law was rather afraid of her, but she did not at all mind. Though neither of them knew it, Lavendier was rather afraid of Adlena.

Lavendier released Jacian and thumbed him on the nose. "So what are you up to, Jacquee?"

"Me and mother going for a walk to see father."

She looked up at the queen. "He seemed very busy," she commented. "It might be a long meeting."

Adlena's fair face, pale with awkward flutterings in her chest, darkened. "Were they discussing anything serious?"

Lavendier shrugged. "It was all very dull. Something about land disputes, I think, but they were making a big



deal out of it. Well, I am off to the gardens to smell the roses. Good luck with your walk, my love.” She patted the prince’s head absently before sweeping away down the corridor.

Adlena watched her go for only a brief moment before grabbing her son’s hand in her own and hurrying him on, her heart trembling within her for, ever since their first encounter, Adlena had lived in fear of her sister-in-law, and avoided her whenever possible.

Evil was not a new concept for Adlena. Alone in the forest, with only the innocent animals for company, she had struggled with her own flawed nature, and her mother had instructed her in virtue thoroughly. She knew she was imperfect, and battled within herself to overcome her vices; sometimes alone, and sometimes with the counsel of her mother and Gladier. But with only this limited experience, she knew nothing but her own sins. She had never imagined that there were other evils lurking in the hearts of men whose bitterness she had yet to taste, and ever since that first meeting, five years ago, in the Nian estate, she had been meeting them in the breasts of her new family. But most terrible of all, she felt these new vices rising in response in her own soul. In terror, she strove to be blind to others’ faults. She wanted only to think of their virtue and goodness, but the more she tried to ignore their sins, the more they blinded her to all else. And Lavendier’s sin was pervasive. Even willing not to use her inner sight had not kept her from seeing the selfishness and caprice in the other girl, and witnessing it in her every look and act. Every conversation between them revealed more evils than Adlena had ever imagined. Vanity took her

wholly by surprise, and envy at another woman's beauty floored her. Gradually, she realized Lavendier was envious of many things: of the love of men, of costly, fine clothing, of other women's boudoirs and wardrobes, of the respect of everyone she met. But what confused the queen to no end was that the princess also seemed full of contempt for these same things: contempt for men and the love they gave, contempt for the quality of anything she bought or owned, contempt for the finery of all fine ladies, and contempt for the opinion of any man or woman. She was never satisfied, never happy, and never stopped smiling, and she was a terrifying conundrum.

## A Royal Dinner

**T**hat evening, the Nian family, dubbed by Astren Nian-Adalam, gathered for dinner in Korem's long, ornate dining hall. Though they all lived once again under the same roof, and gathered once every week for dinner, they were strangers, and their thoughts and purposes were as concealed from each other as if they all lived a thousand miles apart.

"Are you going with Garrity to inspect the army camp at Jourinan tomorrow?" Viol asked Afias.

Her brother glanced at the king. "I do not know. I will go wherever I am needed."

Trinian put a piece of lamb in his mouth. "You can if you like. Did you want to?"

"I want to be where I can be of service."

"Then it is your choice. You will be of service either place. If you stay I will have the benefit of your counsel tomorrow, and if you go, then I will hear your assessment of the camp when you return."

"Then I will stay. My assessment could not improve on

Commander Garrity's, I am sure."

"Can I go?" Asbult spoke up. "I'd like to learn how to assess an army camp."

"So would I!" cried Lavendier, and they all looked at her. "An army camp is a very good thing to inspect."

"Asbult may go, but not Lavendier," was the king's verdict.

"Oh, and why can I not? I am the First Princess, after all, 'Makopola,' these sorts of things are my duty." She liked to cast up her duty, along with her special title as oldest princess, when it was convenient, and it would be very convenient for her to be the only woman, in a fortress full of young, handsome soldiers.

"Indeed," agreed Trinian. "And if I see you dutiful, I will send you."

Lavendier blushed in anger.

"Sire, have you given any thought to my scouting proposal? If you approve, I would like to begin organizing it as soon as possible." Trinian thankfully turned his eyes from his sister to his brother-in-law, Asbult.

"Where would you plan to go first?"

"East, hopefully. Mestraff is so little charted."

On any given day, Trinian had his personal reasons for being wary of Mestraff, since it sat directly beside the land of Karaka; but this day had brought with it newer reasons to be cautious of that land, and he shook his head. "Not Mestraff. The rumors coming out of it are vague at best, and I don't intend to send you into a war zone."

"War? Sire, I know some of the stories have been dire, but that's only a better reason to go. To learn exactly what's happening."

“Now is not the time. I have my reasons. You can travel to Kelta instead. In fact, I want to send a message to King Wrelle. He will be happy to receive you, and you can head straight there from the army camp.”

“Yes, sire. Thank you.” Asbult sighed, attempting not to look as deflated as he felt. Viol shot him a sympathetic glance, and Cila took his hand under the table.

When the family rose to depart, Trinian asked Afias to walk with him a moment, and silently, they went through the tall glass doors into the courtyard and paced the flower paths.

The contrast between the two brothers was especially stark in the moonlight. Afias, with his dark hair and skin and slight figure, practically disappeared into the shadows: it would be easy to overlook him at a glance. But Trinian, with his golden hair, fair complexion, and broad shoulders, seemed to carry the sun with him. Whatever light was around him seemed to magnify three-fold, casting a glow from his very figure. Walking side by side now, a stranger glancing upon the pair would have guessed aright which was the king.

“Afias, what would you think if I said that the entire world will fall into war?”

His brother stopped still in the path, his eyebrows drawn low. “Why do you ask?”

Trinian was silent and kept walking so that, after a moment, Afias had to catch up with his long strides.

“Trinian, wait. Trinian, stop walking and look at me.”

With a deep sigh, his brother looked at him, and there were tears in his fearful eyes. Afias shook his head. “Why do you think there will be a war? No one has come against

you for being king.” He took his brother by the shoulders. “Trinian, answer me. What are you thinking?”

The answer was halting and slow, but firm. “I do not think it. I know. As certain as I am that I am king, that I love my family, that I have a son – I am certain of this. There will be war, a terrible war that will involve the entire world.”

“And who are we fighting in this war?”

“A god — a natural god of karaka. A powerful force that is trying to expand itself...” His brother opened his mouth to speak, but Trinian pressed on. “He hates me. With the passion of fire against water, vacuum against air, he yearns for my complete destruction. For hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, he has lusted after my throne, and now I, who aspired for it in no way, rise to it and escape his grasp. As king I have lived and thrived under the sun, and he will not stomach this much longer. I know. He will destroy me and rule over Minecerva.”

The prince was silent now, and Trinian waited impatient and trembling for his response. After a thoughtful silence, he gave his verdict. “Do not dismiss your fears.”

“You believe me?”

Afias looked at his older brother who, despite his fear, stood tall in the moonlight. “I have never known you to be paranoid. And that gives me pause. No one else was present the day you faced the god, no one else could have judged his anger and resolve. Gods cannot leave their domains, but if you think he has found a way, then you need to be wary. If you feel he is going to come for your life, then you must trust your gut.” He was silent a moment, then added slowly, “I do not see how it could

hurt to prepare against it, anyway.”

“I feared you would say I was crazy. I have been preparing as much as I can, but I have no proof. No justification for preparing for war, and Astren does not believe me. So I must do very little for now.”

“Then I would make a suggestion.” Afias paused, then pressed forward. “Send Asbult to Mestraff. Confide in him, and tell him to determine what this monster is. If it is an organized army, or an animal gone mad, or even the god himself – then you will know how to act.” Relieved, Trinian agreed.

They sought out Asbult and, to no one’s surprise, he was eager and excited to take on the mission, so that Trinian’s mind, for the moment, was at ease, and he felt as though he had done something worthwhile at last.

## A Soldier

**T**he messenger's long, lanky legs flashed fierce across the bristly grasses of the Drian wilds. His breath measured, his arms churning, his chest pushing ever so slightly forward into the wind, he raced from camp Saskatchan beside the River Rordan to Drian.

At the city gates, in the stuffy little apartment built right into the magnificent outer wall itself, a stocky little gatekeeper with a bristly face sat squinting into a half-full mug of coffee.

"Half empty," he mused to himself. "Soon, it'll be all gone, and after that, I'll have to make some more. Then, 'course, I'll drink half of it again. T' that point, I'd will have made a full circle. Like life. Life's like that. My life, 'nparticular. 'Course, probly most folk's lives is more'n like that than not. I wonder if -"

But at that moment a call came from the sentry on the wall. "Courier with urgent message for the king!" It was the first time, since Trinian became king, that such a cry had sounded, and the cry of it made the philosophizing



man's ears ring.

Like a flash of lightning, the gate-keeper's half-filled mug spilled to the floor, and he released the weights and pulleys of Drian's gates; he saw Horans the messenger leapt, without faltering, through the opening and continue straight toward the palace throne room. The messenger was the only person ever admitted to the throne room without ceremony, for it was a gesture of respect to the unflagging speed of the one who ran from city to fortress to city.

King Trinian received the letter from the sweaty man with a bow.

"Message, sir," Horans gasped. "Urgent message for the king."

"Thank you, Horans," said Lord Astren formally. "Your speed and fortitude are as reliable as ever."

The messenger bowed, backed up to the door with only a stolen glance now and again at the king, and then disappeared into the outer daylight.

Trinian broke the seal. "It is from Asbult."

Afias, who was sitting at the table, stood to look over his shoulder. Now that the courier had left, they were the only three in the room.

"Bad news?" asked the steward.

Trinian scanned its contents. "I was right. It's an army. He says here, 'These monsters are terrible, huge and fierce. Like animals they tear through the villages, razing homes, fields, and families.' He describes them in detail; they are like the creatures that captured me at Gladier's."

"That does not mean it is an army," said Astren, closing his over-robe and crossing his arms over it.

“But it does. He continues, “Your fears were as grounded as if you had been here to see it yourself. There is no doubt it’s an organized army, with leaders commanding hundreds of foot soldiers, pushing ever further into the land, wiping out what came before and clearing the way ahead. I have come only as far as the other side of Rordan and sent this letter ahead of me because the enemy approaches the fort of Ringwold and I must stay to help defend it. Trinian, if we do not hold the river, these monsters will be upon Drian within the fortnight. Please advise.”

There was a long silence.

Astren shifted uncomfortably in his seat, for once bereft of ready advice. He was not, and never had been, a man of action; as the steward, his task had always been to preserve with patience, and he had executed that task by ruling with slow, methodical non-committance.

While it had been the responsibility of the kings who came before to protect and enrich all the lands of Mincerva, the stewards had had the resources to care only for those close at home. Since each city in Minecerva had thought and cared only for itself for hundreds of years, without seeking to subjugate or subdue anyone else, Drian had not known anything more than small bands of outlaws in all that time. When necessary, Astren had allowed the generals of the army to deal with small confrontations, not considering it his particular area of expertise, and happy to relinquish that responsibility, so that now, the idea that Drian might face an all out war left him at a loss.

Trinian, however, was a soldier – had been so all his adult life – and a new title did not erase his programming. His

heart burning in his chest, and without speaking another word, he suddenly marched out of the chamber. Astren took up the letter, his old hands shaky and patient, but Afias followed after Trinian, running to catch up.

“Where are you going?”

Trinian said nothing.

“What are you going to do?”

He was still silent. He made his way to the training grounds, and when he entered the cavern, the loud clangs, shouts, and duels slowly died until all soldiers stood erect and attentive before him. He strode down the ranks, wondering if these men, trained in peace and taught only to deal with vagrant bands of outlaws, were enough to grapple with an army of a god.

He came up alongside a boy, barely sixteen, who was quivering in his boots, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

“What is your name, soldier?”

“Kett, sire.”

“And tell me, Kett, why do you fight?”

The young boy’s high voice proclaimed the formula with ringing tones and a proud heart. “To fight injustice, unite the kingdom, protect the innocent, and serve our lord and king, his family, and all he loves.”

The boy was reciting the new formula – Trinian had heard it before and it held no surprise for him.

“Why did you join the army, Kett?”

There was no longer a formula to recite, and the boy’s overfull vigor felt the release. His words poured over each other. “For *you*, sire. Ever since I was eleven and you were crowned king, I’ve wanted nothing else. Just as soon as I was old enough, I came straight here.”

Though Trinian stood solidly in place, the chamber spun and his vision went black. He gazed at Kett, young and hopeful, his thin young chest thrust proudly forward, his hand tight around a sword hilt, his eyes shining with love. This boy had taken the new formula and embraced it as his own. He was not fighting for Drian, as Trinian had done when he signed up, but for a man – for Trinian. He fought for the king, and he did it willingly.

“For me?”

“You are our king, sire. It is an honor to follow you. I would follow you anywhere.”

Trinian’s heart pounded with fear and humility. He could never repay such a debt... But all of a sudden, he understood how to fight the war. He stepped back and called out, so that his voice carried strong to every corner. “Why do you fight?” They declared the new formula. Trinian leapt up onto a wooden box full of chain mail and looked out over the army.

“That is your battle cry, and it is good and strong. You say you fight for me – well I fight for you. I make a vow before you today: I will fight to end injustice, unite the kingdom, protect the innocent, and serve *my* people, their families, and all they love. This I swear to you. Upon the red peaks of the palace Korem, I swear it!”

Oh, that you could have heard the mighty roar that greeted his ears! Even the most cynical and closed chests of men swelled with love at his fervor and opened to his words. The room reverberated with repeated calls of ‘long live the king;’ swelling like a tide, and breaking against the hard, rock walls, echoing and swelling and ebbing like a great ocean of sound. When at last the noise fell, Trinian

addressed them again.

“Listen men! I will need all the strength of your souls, hearts, and limbs, for Mestraff is under attack as we speak. There are monsters overriding her lands, killing, burning, and ravaging their way to our city. Mestraff needs our blades, our city needs our courage, our world needs our resolve. I will lead you forth to face this terror, and we will return triumphant to a city that will rejoice in our prowess! Prepare yourselves! We depart at dawn.”

He stepped off the crate to depart in silence, since his heart, at the end, had flooded with regret and doubt at the last moment, but a voice proclaimed again, “Long live the king!” and the room resounded with the cries until he was far away from the cavern, their voices guiding his steps.

## Blind, Oblivious Old Men

Steward Astren was in no way pleased when he heard of this development. When Trinian returned to the throne room and told his mentor that he meant to lead the army to Mestraff, the Lord cried out against it immediately. He insisted the king should not involve himself directly in the fighting, for he was far too precious a commodity, and he was rushing into this without thinking it through. But Afias interposed.

“Lord Astren, I was there and I saw him rally the men. For the first time since he has been king, I saw my brother again. And I saw *why* he is king. Any man who can inspire such confidence is a true leader, and I would follow him to the ends of the earth. I know he will defeat the invading army.”

“Army!” scoffed Astren, ignoring the new light of pride shining on Trinian’s face. “This is *not* an army. It is a group of monsters, nothing more, and it does not need the Emperor of Minecerva marching off to destroy it.”

Afias went up to his brother to say softly, “Tell him.”

“I have no proof.”

“What do you need? The evil spirit himself pounding on the chamber doors? Tell him.”

Trinian took a deep breath. “Lord Astren, I believe it truly is an army – sent out against us by the natural god of Karaka.”

“Oh? And why do you think that?”

“When he captured me, his envy filled the room so that it was palpable. He does not just want to destroy me – he wants the throne, the power. This is his preemptive strike and we must treat it as such.”

Astren sat in his chair and folded his hands in his lap, like a teacher who has to deal with an errant student. “You are young, my king. I recognize that. Youth likes to find meaning and reasons for things, but you will soon learn that there seldom is any meaning to chaos. Karaka is a wasteland; it could not support an army, even if the evil spirit desired it. He would never be able to *leave*, even if he desired it. Natural gods are confined to their realm. It is far more likely - though you may think otherwise - that these are just monsters. And monsters are monsters simply because they have no reason for doing what they do. And they are easily destroyed.”

Trinian flushed and cast a glance at Afias, and his brother pursed his lips. “Nonetheless,” said Trinian, “I will lead the army. I am sorry you do not agree, but it is my decision. I am the king.”

Astren flushed, for Trinian had never yet overruled him on such a serious matter. “You are too young to know what you are saying,” he warned.

“Perhaps,” said Trinian. “But I will do this all the same.”

“And if you die? Do you not see that it will mean the death of Drian, as well as of yourself? You are no longer an individual!”

“Drian will suffer if I do not protect her. And I will protect her.”

Lord Astren, in the face of such unexpected obstinance, and seeing that he could say nothing to persuade the king, threw his robed hands in the air and turned on his heel, gracefully departing the chamber.

The king heaved a sigh and dropped into his throne. “You see.”

“He is an idiot.”

Although he smiled, Trinian was scandalized. “He is not. He has ruled this kingdom his whole life, and he cannot be completely wrong.”

But unlike Trinian, Afias was not a soldier trained to accept the decree of authority, and he paced the room in anger. “He can, and he is. It is a wonder the entire kingdom is not already crumbling at our feet! It’s a good thing you did not cave to him; how can you defend him when he’s such a blind fool?”

“He was not with me in the god’s chamber. He did not feel the hate.”

“He ought to respect your judgment.”

“But the truth is, I am young. And inexperienced.”

“Fine! You want aged wisdom then go to Gladier, at least he will listen to you. He does not have blinders over his eyes and cotton in his ears.”

“That’s enough, Afias. I will not have you insinuate another word against the steward.”

Afias halted, his hand pressed against a cool pillar, and



took a hold of himself. "Very well, but I stand by what I said about Gladier – I am going to talk to him."

Gladier's Healory, as it was called, adjoined the palace on the eastern side in what had once been some sort of living apartment. It was half-submerged in the earth, with airy windows all around and one large, circular fenestration in the ceiling. An open floor plan, the rooms were barely distinguishable as separate apartments; and while this was good for lighting and air flow, it made for an unusual living space. Gladier's bedchamber was simply a rounded corner of the room, separated by nothing more than a tan curtain, and his apprentices slept in the main space on the same beds that were intended one day for the patients. But despite the close living quarters, it was a pleasant place, and had the comfortable air of Gladier's previous home.

As eager as the wizard had been to see the prophecies fulfilled, to pass on his craft, and eventually, to die in peace, leaving his forest had been a sad affair for Gladier, and he had declared to Adlena, when she met him on his arrival in Drian, that he intended to make his new home as comfortable as the old. He had done it, and this comfort extended not only to his living quarters, but to those with whom he surrounded himself. He had chosen his apprentices with special attention to their compatibility with one another and with himself. He told Afias, to whom he had taken an immediate liking, that it was difficult enough to practice a trade well without discord breeding beneath the surface among its practitioners.

Gladier had always known he would return to Drian when the king was found again. Fate had been clear about that when he appointed him over the Sacrawood, but

leaving the forest meant he left it unprotected, and that saddened him. He freed all his magical creatures, allowing them to be their own masters, and the old man departed their company for that of humanity's.

Prince Afias had become a regular visitor to the Healory, and the young apprentices viewed him as a benevolent patron. But the truth was that he found an escape with Gladier, who seemed to understand his brooding, melancholy nature and sympathize with it. Whenever palace life became intolerable, which it often did, Afias would retreat to his sanctuary, and Gladier's words would shine a light on his confusion. It helped that the wizard was allowed full access to all court knowledge, for from his first and best teacher, the oldest and most venerable of men, Trinian decreed there would be no secrets, and so Afias could unburden his heart without reserve.

The prince found the wizard bent over the distillery, painstakingly extracting geranium into an oil, with focused, extended lenses resting on his nose, and a pot boiling behind him with a mighty will of its own.

"Prince Afias!" exclaimed Mignis, the youngest of the apprentices; too young even to grow a beard, he worshipped the prince. "Have you come to see our new equipment?"

Since Gladier was absorbed in his work, Afias went over to the boy. "What new equipment?"

"Our new instruments and knives."

Mignis launched into a technical description of the apparatus, in far too minute of detail, and Afias tuned him out. He watched Gladier in the corner of his vision, and when the old man finally rose and left his still, he excused

himself. Mignis, cut off in mid-sentence but still pleased to have gotten in a word with the prince, turned back to his work.

Gladier chuckled when Afias told him everything.

“Why do you laugh at me?” he cried.

“Calm down. I’m not laughing at you. I laugh because I understand poor Astren, and I feel sorry and frustrated at him. And I understand you. You are angry because you are young and idealistic; you want old men to be perfect and comprehending, and passionate like yourself, but I’m afraid I know better than that. Astren has been shaped by life and has passed the point where he will be malleable by changing events, so you cannot expect him to accept these new ideas.”

Afias’s temper still flamed and he spat his words like fireballs. “Why not? You do. You are malleable.”

Gladier glanced at him sternly from beneath his sharp gray eyebrows. “Hardly. I am a healer, a counselor, a patient waiter, and that is how I have been shaped. I am stuck in that mold. Much as I might wish, sometimes, that I could become something else, I am afraid I would be very poor at it. If you put me in charge of the army, for instance, I would lead it through counsel, healing, and patient stratagem. It may be effective or it may not, but I am not a military leader: I would only be able to do the best I could with what I had. That is all Astren is doing. He has been shaped by circumstances and I am not sure you can reshape him. However you can, through time, patience, and commitment, show him that you and Trinian are qualified to do what he cannot.”

“Fine. How can I do that?”

“Just do what you have been doing: support your brother, take the initiative against the evil spirit of Karaka, and remember to respect Astren even when you disagree with him, just as you do with Trinian.”

The young man pulled himself to his feet. “Speaking of Trinian, I left him alone, and I think he needs me.” But instead of leaving, he stepped across the room and looked out a round window into the darkening day. The red stone buildings were soaking up and storing the last of the sun’s heat. He stood watching until the sun disappeared behind the eastern wall.

“I had my whole life figured out. My entire life. I knew what I wanted, I was doing it, and I was exceptional at it. Do the gods have a plan? Or do they just like to make blissful mortals miserable? We are a game to them, I tell you. A rotten, unending, stupid little game!

“But I can’t do anything about it. Even if I could give up my title, I could not leave Trinian. You say you can’t change, but that is exactly what I have to do – I am supposed to flip my way of life on its head. I was a man who lived in the fields, worked side by side with his laborers, and managed only a small homestead – now I’m drowning in politics, dinner parties, intrigue, and war. You would think after five years I’d be used to it, but I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I am floundering, but I have to pretend that I understand *everything*.”

Gladier sighed. “I am sorry. If only you were old like me, maybe you would not have to.”

Swallowing his bitterness, Afias went back to the palace.

## The Queen

**W**ith all his obsession for war, for the god of Karaka, and for protecting the city, Trinian was a sadly neglectful husband. Adlena never saw him alone except for late at night when he climbed, exhausted, into bed beside her; and in that moment, even if he was passionate, she was left with deep emptiness.

Since their marriage, he had grown more and more obsessed with being a good king and answering to every commitment, so that he made no time for her or Jacian, and sacrificed none of his commitments to prioritize their marriage. Now, at last, as he prepared to depart the city to do the thing he most loved, she fell into a deep gloom. She could not voice the reasons for her depression, for she did not know if he was right or wrong, so little did she understand of human relationships; but deep down, beneath the realm of conscious thought, she wondered if she would ever again know the patient, kind, thoughtful man of their courtship. She feared there, in the deep darkness, that this was the meaning of marriage:

loneliness, toil, and unremitting support across a vast distance of souls, and she could not rise from this terror, so that it threatened to break her and leave her a lonely, unreachable wreck.

It was in this despondent state, the day before the army departed for Mestraff, that Cila happened upon her sister-in-law in the palace gardens. The queen sat upon one of the low stone partitions, her slender fingers digging deep into the furrowed agony of her face, and violent sobs wracking her frame.

“My dear, what has happened?” Cila ran to her and put her arms tenderly about her. Adlena wiped her eyes, tried to smile, and then laid her head on Cila’s shoulder. Sitting there together, surrounded by pink and yellow roses, clad in their informal gowns, and with hair loose and flowing about their faces, they formed such a lovely picture of two young girls that a stranger, wandering in and glancing upon them, might have taken them for maidens, innocent and virginal. But beneath those fresh, beautiful faces, there lay hid their heavy burdens, which at times could do nothing but rise up, overwhelm, and cast them down. Cila, with heavy heart, waited for her sister to unburden herself.

Finally, Adlena’s voice came forth low, calm, and tragic. “What is marriage supposed to be like? I have never known and now I think I must be doing it wrong, because it lacks any happiness.”

Cila rocked and soothed for a moment, tears springing to her eyes. “It is not going to be happy all the time, my darling,” she said at last.

“When will it stop being miserable?”

“Well, when was the last time you were happy?”

“I know not – it has been so long. I suppose... when Jacquee was born.” The queen broke forth in fresh tears at the realization that that was four years ago.

Cila was shocked, and breathed deeply to wrap her mind around it. Unhappiness in her marriage, at its worst, lasted three days, and she understood now that something was much worse here than she had supposed. “That is *not* right. Tell me more, Adlee,” calling her by her pet name, “we are going to resolve this, you and I together.”

Torn between tears and hope, Adlena shared everything: the agony of loneliness, the rebuffed attempts at conversation with her husband, the rearing of a small boy all by herself. Then she went further, finding to her surprise that there was a deeper root, a more agonizing trouble plaguing her heart: she told of the complete confusion she felt toward life. It was a terrifying, overwhelming bewilderment that left her lost and scared; she felt incompetent entering into relationships or being around people. Her years of loneliness left her inept in social scenes, and she actively avoided appearing before her subjects. How was she supposed to behave when she did not understand how everyone else did?

Cila found here a tangle of heartache, confusion, and desolating alienation, and it tore at her heart. It was inconceivable that the queen, the most idolized, adored, and beautiful creature in the kingdom, held such deep, hidden, encompassing darkness! And yet it was so. And her brother was unaware of it! Adlena’s own husband, who should have been her guide and comfort in this turmoil, only served to deepen the confusion and isolation within

her.

Immediately, Cila assured her sister she was not alone. She assured her that she would always be there, ready to comfort, answer, and explain. “Come to me, please. Always come to me if you are confused, lonely, or sad: I want to help you. And do not fear ignorance. Adlee, we are all ignorant of something or another, and it is our unknowing that paves the road to experience. So do not fear the darkness – it merely serves to show us the light.”

Adlena thanked her with calmer tears, and they held each other close for a long moment.

“As for my brother,” said Cila, sitting up straight as if ready to lecture him then and there, “when he returns, we will see what can be done with him.”



## The Offensive

Lady Adrea watched the soldiers of Drian, with their glittering bayoneted splendor, glistening sharpened swords, and swelling wetted passion, from the imperious height of the Korem tower. It was here she had once despaired for her people and desperately sought a way to save them, and now they were saving themselves, led forth from their vigorous, beautiful city by a man who matched it in strength and grace. How she loved him!

When Trinian had told her, after she found him alone in the throne room, of his plans to travel to Mestraff, she had shown disgust at her father's plans and joy at her king's decisions, for such was her usual way now that Trinian was king. Everything he did, if it was action-driven, stirred her heart, and she supported his desires. How she admired him for spending his days with the army, training them and honing them into a force worthy of the once great majesty of Drian. How she had encouraged him to be respectful yet firm before her father, and had been disappointed

whenever he put off actions at the advice of the Steward. When Trinian told her that he intended to leave Drian at the head of the army, push back the invading monsters in the East, and return victorious, she had not held back her words, but encouraged him to leave with all the persuasion in her power. “Your father does not approve,” he told her, but she only stilled her enflamed pacing and whirled on him with shining eyes, and cried out, “And who is king of Drian? Everyone else is bound to obey the steward – but not you. Oh no, for you have a higher calling, and must even lead *him!* Go forth, Trinian, and conquer!”

Now her heart swelled with pride and her eyes glittered with delight as she admired how he rode back and forth before the ranks, inspiring them with brave, fighting words. Oh, she would give anything to see them in battle! The color rose on her cheeks at the thought, and her white profile, sharp against the gray, windy sky beyond her, quivered softly with pleasure.

It was upon this image of the young, impassioned girl, gazing over the bulwarks at the rippling crowd below, that three high goddesses gazed from the heavenly palace. Passion, Resolve, and Charity were musing on the fate of the mortal army of Drian.

“It is a huge task, and he will never succeed. But he is right to try,” decided the goddess Resolve.

“Who?” asked her sister Passion. “Power, or the little king down there?”

“Oh, that king is just doing what he has to. But Power is pushing the boundaries. You know, the Golden King said we had all the freedom we wanted just so long as we handed it back to him when he returned, but that is not

freedom. Power understands that. True freedom has no consequences, and if he can claim this world for his own, then we can all be truly free.”

They were lounging on one of the many verandahs of Fate’s palace, seated on cushions on the railing-free balcony. As her sisters talked over her head, Charity lay on her stomach, gazing at the beauty of Minecerva: lush greens pastures, streaking blue rivers, purple mountain ranges, and bustling cities. But the blackish, brackish, darkling land of Karaka smudged and blotted one corner, and she scrunched her nose at it musingly.

“Is it worthwhile to have freedom in a boggy, cold, and black world?” she asked her sisters.

Passion giggled. She considered herself much more knowledgeable than her older sister, and often patronized her sentiments. “You do not understand what we are saying, Chary dear. *Not* having freedom is far, far worse. You know that when the Golden King arrives, he will demand an account of our actions. Ugh,” she shuddered daintily, “how unpleasant *that* will be.”

Resolve never giggled, so before speaking, she only looked sharply at the other two, and then down at the world below. “Of course, ‘miss perfection’ has nothing to fear from the Golden King. She has played it safe and tame all these years, and he will probably pat her kindly on her shining yellow head and give her a little section to oversee. Why should she not be against Power when she has been such a faithful servant for *Him*?”

A sharp pain stabbed Charity in the heart and she stood up to relieve the old ache. She knew the lie of Resolve’s words, and she cradled her shoulders as if to ward off a

chilling, unsettling wind.

“Oh, poor Chary,” prattled Passion. “Perfect little princess, doesn’t like to be teased.”

“I am not perfect, you know,” she murmured.

“Not in my book, you are not,” affirmed Resolve. “Perfection is Power, who has dared to rise so high in ambition that he will one day rule the world. That is perfection, and the world he creates will be ours.”

“It will be our playground!” cried Passion.

“Our kingdom,” said Resolve.

“Our fresh start,” said Passion.

“Our road away from that overseeing, demanding, despotic King,” finished Resolve firmly.

“But you said he would never succeed,” broke in Charity.

Resolve straightened her shoulders with a new plan. “Not alone, he will not, that is true. Very well – I will help him. Passion?”

“Oh, I’ve been doing little things already,” she waived her arm dismissively. “I suppose I could get some people riled up and ready to fight for him, but that’s really so boring and involves making up so many lies. I think I’ll wait and see what happens.”

“Well, I will not. If I want it to happen, I must do it myself. Farewell, ladies,” and with a flutter of her gown, Resolve descended swiftly to the world below to instill resolute victory into Power’s monsters.

“What little things have you been doing?” Charity asked Passion.

“Oh! There is the oldest princess, you know, who is ruled by me. She drinks me up like I were a glass of fine wine; she revels with the young men, teasing them and taunting

them, and making them into clay in her hands, and every morning she decks herself out in satins, silks, beads, and rouge, so that I am quite contented. She is a regular diva.”

Charity thought of her own special pets, and the thought of them made her smile sweetly. “Princess Cila and Prince Asbult are very wonderful, you know. And the love the king has for his people is quite contagious.”

“Oh, and of course, Lady Adrea is a work in progress,” said Passion. “Her stores of desire are boundless, it seems, and I can stir them with a tip of my little finger. Watching her respond is sheer delight.”

“What does she respond to?”

“The king, naturally. She’s in love with him, though I’ve never gotten her to say so. War and fighting invigorate her, and – what’s most fun – incompetence boils her blood, and can send her into such delightful fits of rage and fury.”

A regal step within the palace made them turn their heads as Fate stepped out on the balcony. “How goes the battle?”

“Has it started already? We didn’t know.” Passion peered down at Mestraff and saw Trinian’s soldiers crossing the Rordan in boats. A few leagues within the forest on the other side, Terror, Resolve, and Death winged through the air, organizing and fueling Power’s troops with their curses.

“Why does Power not come himself?” Charity asked Fate.

“I have noticed he avoids Rordan,” he answered. “Also, he has abided with the mortals so long that he has trouble flying about. It is wearisome for one of our kind to traverse their world, so heavy, coarse, and rigid as it is.”

“I think he has been blending,” shuddered Charity.

“Yes, like a touchable shadow,” agreed Passion. “It’s exhilarating to touch him, he feels so sensual now.”

The sides were still two leagues distant from one another, but the gods watched as they closed within a day. They settled in to observe the carnage.

## Bottleneck at Ringwold

“**H**ave you heard any more from Asbult?” Trinian asked the captain of Ringwold’s volunteer guard. They had met the captain and his men before reaching the city, for they were a hunting party who had been stranded in the woods, unaware of the danger to their homes until it closed about their town, blocking them out.

“Ringwold has been under siege for forty-two hours. The enemy surrounds it on all sides, and threatens to break through at any moment. We’ve had no word from anyone inside. We have done little damage to the enemy out here, such a small band as we are.”

“Well, captain, you will be invaluable to us,” Trinian assured him. “We intend to surround and demolish the enemy, but first we must rout it, and send them fleeing from the city gates.”

The man’s eyes grew wide with disbelief, and he gaped at the king. “You can’t know then how many there are! Those people in there are as good as dead, I tell you. Those beasts can’t be routed.”

Trinian was unmoved by the warning. "With your help, they most certainly can. There must be a side door in the city somewhere – a gate, or an opening in the wall. We have to get one man inside, no matter how difficult, so he can take a message to Prince Asbult."

"I know of no such opening, sire."

"Well, I guarantee one of your men will. Ask the youths, one of them will come forward."

Sure enough two young men, abashed and glowing with the honor of recognition, said that they knew of a fissure in the brick wall, just large enough to crawl through from a house roof, and then drop into a tree below.

"Can you get *into* the city through it?" Trinian asked them.

"We do it all the time, sire. Just have to climb the tree," they told him.

"Very well; then that is your mission. You are to get into the city without being seen and take this message to Prince Asbult: "At the third hour of the morning, open Ringwold's gates and descend, with all able men behind you, upon the army of beasts. Rout them from the front, as we rout them from the sides, and we will send them fleeing into the trees."

He had them repeat it back three times, before they scampered away into the underbrush to find their secret entrance.

"How did you know a youth would have the answer?" Afias asked him.

Trinian smiled. "The young like to run away, even when they are not held captive by anyone. Do you not remember being young?"



"I suppose. But I always liked staying home: I only ran away when you goaded me."

Trinian grinned at him. "Maybe. But you were stubborn. I could never get you to do anything you did not want to. Admit it: you liked to rebel against convention. And you still do." When Afias did not answer, Trinian laughed at him, then tramped away to prepare his captains for the morning's battle.

\* \* \*

The dawn glanced above the pine trees the next morning. And as it rose, it shed its gray light over the open field of Fort Ringwold, with its full clearing of gruesome monsters that gathered before the southern wall. They had been encamped for two weeks, slowly starving the city, and going mad with unrequited hunger themselves, ever more eager for the juicy morsels promised them inside. Even now, in the early hours after the night, they shifted restlessly like one great, black, quivering mass.

On the western side, the dawn's rays soon discovered Trinian and his men, silent as statues, waiting for the call to fight. Miraculously, as if Fate himself had dictated it, one single ray glanced between two tree tops to reveal King Trinian, as he sat erect on his charger, silent, still, and waiting, in a full glory of a golden beam. Behind him, his men formed a perfect line; they were a stretch of darkness in the shadows of morning, with only a glint here and there when someone shifted his spear. Across the field on the eastern side, shrouded in mist and shadow, silent allies waited; and within the fortress, with its tall brown walls

and frightened citizens, a silent city held its breath.

Every whisper of air, every beat of the heart, every heave of each soldier's breast was sharp, clear, and lasted an eternity in his own ears.

At last it was the third hour, and Trinian nodded to General Phesite, and the large man wound his bugle with a clear roar. As Trinian charged full force ahead of his men, the glinting spears and the black mass dissolved into each other.

Only vaguely afterwards did Trinian remember meeting his first monster: noting its terrible size, strength, and multitudinous legs, for he was afire with the pounding of battle, and no gruesomeness could put him off from the glory and resolve of the fight.

As through a red mist, he saw his sword slice through the fleshy part of the beast's neck, right where it met the collarbone. He saw the bright red, searing blood that spurting onto his arm and gave him blisters. He saw that the beast did not fall, but fought on, its neck pierced and spurting blood. And Trinian saw that it was not until he gutted its stomach that it fell to the ground, completely conquered.

After that, he killed them all the same way, hacking off head after head, catching them with his blade before they could fit their teeth into his skin, then stabbing them in the middle. Phesite commented afterwards on the ferocity and single-mindedness of the king's fight: that it was staggering to see him so unmoved by the beasts' savagery and failure to die, and he should have been eaten or trampled too many times to count.

Undaunted, the king continued to hack his way through

the ranks.

To Trinian, it was no act of heroism; to him, he did his duty, fighting for his people. He had sworn to fight for them, and he would. He was in the fray despite warnings from Steward Asten to remain in Drian, and despite pleas from General Phestite that he stay at camp to coordinate the fight. It was all or nothing now, and he would show no quarter. He was a soldier now, and he would drive the creatures back from the gates of the fortress. He was king, and all others would follow where he led.

He fought into the very center of the horde, and there he came against Afias, who had been fighting to reach him from the other side of the field, and together, side by side and back to back, they drove the monsters into confusion.

Prince Asbult, who had received his brother-in-law's message, led the charge from inside the city, so that the onslaught from all three sides confused and routed the enemy. To regroup, it wheeled round and fled to the south, pursued with triumphant gusto by the Drinians and Ringwoldians, through the opening Trinian had left in his three-sided attack.

The creatures did not run far before they were met and mown down by the Drinian reserves, captained by Garrity, and lying in silent readiness beyond the ridge of the valley. When it was all over, the field was a black mire of dead beasts.

## Domestic Hearts

**M**estraff breathed a sigh of relief when the monsters were dead, Drian rejoiced in the victory of their leader, but Trinian himself was more on edge than ever. Though he returned to Drian in triumph, his people rejoicing in his feats, he worked ceaselessly, day and night, telling Adrea and Afias that he was preparing the city for an attack.

“Those gorgans are making their way to us,” he told them. “And we only slowed them down at Ringwold.”

He posted look-outs at the Rordan fort Saskatchan, maintained constant conversation with the governor of Ringwold, and sent out emissaries to all the countries about Drian, warning them of the encroaching danger and requesting that they come to Drian, where, banded together, they could stave off attack. The men and soldiers of the capital city were few for an army, too few to defend Drian in a siege. The walls of Drian were large and sturdy, but they sprawled across a great distance, and could not be defended by the small population that now inhabited the

city. His best hope lay in South Drian's support, for they had many men, and with their aid, he hoped to prevent the enemy from ever entering the city. To allow them entrance was to lose the battle.

During the day, he trained with the army. In the early morning hours, he and Garrity could be found in the inner courtyard of the family apartments of Korem, pushing themselves to the limit against one another, battling with sword, javelin, mace, bow and arrows, hand-to-hand, and the long knife. When he finished in the morning, the king supped briefly and answered to court affairs, before overseeing the training in the army barracks.

Through it all, Trinian had no idea he was a bad husband, and he remained truly clueless as to Adlena's inner state. He was so entirely concentrated on being an excellent king that he thought everything else in life would easily fall and lock in place. Of course he loved Adlena – he had done so with a fiery passion since the first moment he laid eyes upon her. He would have been the first to dart to her defense had anyone mistreated or neglected her, but it did not occur to him that having those feelings, and demonstrating them on a day to day basis, were two separate activities. And so the discrepancy between his heart and his actions would have gone unnoticed much longer had his sister not sallied into his throne room one evening to instill some new insights into him.

She came in barefooted, aproned, and with her hair piled in a loose bun behind her head, with delicate wisps escaping and framing her face in a floured halo. She was dressed for the kitchen and not the court; a subtle device that delicately suggested home comfort, domestic bliss,

and warm food: things she knew her brother often went without.

“I baked pumpkin bread, and wanted to know if you wanted any, or if Adlee had made some recently?”

His mind was bent on the maps before him, and he only glanced up briefly. “I am not sure – you should ask her.”

A flush of anger warmed her face, but she reminded herself that he was a man who did not know what he needed. She said calmly, “You don’t know if you have eaten pumpkin bread recently at home?”

“I eat my meals here – they bring it to me from the royal kitchens. I assume that is what Adlena eats.”

“Oh!” Cila dropped into one of the chairs, as if exhausted. “You have been eating alone every day? I could not do that. If I cannot talk to Asbult at the end of each day, I get so moody and peeved.”

Now, while Trinian was unaware of his shortcomings as a husband, he was painfully aware of his shortcomings as a king. Lately, he had noticed with disgust that he was short-tempered, moody, and stressed; for this fault, he had berated himself time and again, but since Mestraff, it had only grown worse. And so Cila’s observation struck him deeply, and he looked up at her with interest.

“I can only imagine,” she continued, as if the thought had only just then occurred to her, “how lonely and irritable Adlee must be. Oh, but then,” she corrected herself, “you must have some other way of spending time together. Well, I have to run to finish dinner – Asbult will be home in an hour.” She pecked her brother on the cheek and, leaving behind the wispy scent of nutmeg, disappeared from the cold, hollow, dismal throne room.

With the door shut – the last dull echoes of its closure reverberating from the stone walls – the most important man in Minercerva slumped into his mighty throne, and nervously tapped his fingers against its engraved arm, deep in moody thought. When was the last time he had been alone with Adlee? When was the last time they had a conversation together? And if they had one now, what would they talk about? He sat musing for a whole half hour, and was startled when Asbult came in to make his final report for the day.

“Asbult,” he said, gazing without seeing at one of the pillars, “what do you and Cila talk about?”

Stoic on the outside, Asbult smiled to himself. He wanted very much to say, “You;” but he held his tongue. Cila had filled him in on all the details. She had loaded him with advice on how to help the king, should he ask for it, and made him swear to say nothing about the queen’s broken heart.

So he only said, “We talk about work sometimes. We talk about our day, mostly. Sometimes, if we have extra time together, we talk about our hopes and plans for the future. I suppose, we compare our opinions on life, other people, on food, tastes... Anything that jumps into our heads. We will read a book aloud, on occasion, which will always give us new material to talk about. I guess that’s mostly it.”

Trinian studied his brother-in-law as if he were a puzzle. “You tell each other everything?”

“Anything I am not sworn to secrecy on, and even then, I tell her that I’m sworn and she understands. Although we haven’t had any secrets in years. That’s the nice thing about her being a princess now – she has the same military

clearance that I do.”

“What about political affairs and battles – is she not frightened when you tell her of it?”

It took a strong effort of will for Asbult not to raise his eyebrows at such a remark. He and Cila had often bemoaned the sorry state of married couples who tried to ‘protect’ each other from foul news. It was a mutual endeavor, they had observed, wherein neither sex trusted the other to handle the bitter realities of life, and so kept them at arm’s length, broadening the already natural distance between sexes through mistrust and misunderstanding.

Confronted now with the reality of this common mistake, Asbult tried to respond patiently. “Cila is often frightened, yes. So am I. There are frightening things going on in the world. But it helps both of us to know what they are; if I kept her in the dark, it would be worse when I left home. She wouldn’t know what I was facing, or what my chances were, and she would sit at home feeling helpless. But there is nothing that gives me more strength when I leave home than knowing she is back here waiting and working for me. She is not passive; just as my heart is back with her, so hers is with me, following me everywhere I go, praying and fighting for me in her own quiet way. I’m not sure I can explain it properly, but then, I’m not sure that I should. It’s a precious thing we have – and I am the most fortunate man in the world to have it.”

His words had spilled forth easily, and he was surprised at his own eloquence. He saw he had given Trinian something to think about, so he bowed, left his report on the table, and went home. There, it can be supposed, he told everything to Cila.



Trinian remained a few minutes longer alone; and then acted. For injustice did not often go unredressed by Trinian; and this, he now saw, was a great injustice.

## The Romance of Drian

**A**dlena pulled a sleeveless cloak over her long-sleeve dress, a brilliant, deep blue over dusty yellow, and rifled through a collection of gems in her jewelry box. They were only a small selection of the many royal decorations she was offered when crowned queen, for though she had worn many on formal occasions, she did not keep them for private use – there had never been anything to dress up for in her own apartments, before now.

She glided into the kitchen, feeling the soft fabric as it drifted and floated over her legs, wrapping and releasing her with each step. Nervousness chilled her as she took the hot food from over the stove and carried it to the table, wondering, hoping, if Cila would beguile her husband into coming home early; fearing that all her preparations were in vain.

She loved him desperately, and her desire to be with him battled with her instincts to recede and disappear into the background. While she had indulged her instincts

for four years and found no happiness, still she worried lest Trinian wanted her to step up and assert herself. He married her when she was shy, insecure, and fragile, so perhaps, she reasoned, he would be disappointed if she was as passionate on the outside as she felt within.

But should he instigate everything? her mind cried in a flutter. Lead everything? And should she be patient, and just wait for him to do it? For a moment, she was overwhelmed with the certainty that she was over-extending herself, harassing Trinian, and ruining whatever they had left of their relationship – but she caught herself. It was too late to back down now, and she would put her trust in Cila.

Adlena seated herself at the table, then rose and went to the large bay window, gazing into the night, seeing the vast expanse of the city below her. She shuddered at the responsibilities that awaited her without, and went into the sitting room where she picked up a book and tried to read. An agony of time later, though it was only a half hour, she heard the double chamber doors open into the reception room. Jittery and over-anxious, she put down the book, misjudging the distance to the table and dropping it on the floor, and darted into the kitchen.

Trinian was not a nervous man. He confidently strode into the parlor, glancing around for his wife and preparing to proclaim his love invincibly, vocally, vigorously. But she was not sitting with Jacian on the floor, as he thought they usually did at this hour, playing and reading together, and that threw him off; surprised him out of his confidence and caused him to hesitate.

“Adlee?” he called.

"I am in here." He followed her voice into the kitchen to pause suddenly at finding her radiant, glowing, and pale. She stood next to the table, her fingers lying delicately upon it, and her eyes watching him as if both challenging and waiting. At the sight of her apparent confidence, the words he had prepared died on his lips. He looked at her standing there, alone and vulnerable, beautiful and commanding, and she was a paradox to him; all in one moment he felt her intense strength, the strength she granted him and had granted him since the first moment they met, and he was filled anew with love for her. He wanted to protect and envelop her; to lean on her, for she was his support and foundation, to take her in his arms and suffer for and with her. These emotions, long unstirred, overwhelmed him; his tongue stilled and turned to stone, and he said nothing.

"I made dinner," she whispered at last. She cleared her throat and walked around the table toward the dish. "Although I think it is cold now; I will heat it up."

Her words took him partly out of the spell, and he tried to think of something to say. Any declarations of love seemed suddenly cumbersome and indelicate. "Where is Jacquee?"

"Viol took him. He is going to spend the night in her rooms."

"That is unusual, isn't it?" He went to the table and sat down, watching the way she moved as she rekindled the fire, stoking the ashes.

"They do it sometimes. She likes to keep him."

"That is good," he nodded, and added after a pause, "I never noticed before how nice this room is." It was easier

to comment on the room than on her.

"Yes, it is one of my favorite places."

He liked to hear that. It suddenly occurred to him that he knew little of her preferences. He wanted to hear more. "Why is that?"

She leaned against a stone counter, letting the food heat up behind her, and glanced over the light brown walls, low vaulted ceiling, and mahogany table. "I suppose because it is homelike, despite its elegance. The walls catch the lamplight in a nice way, and I feel cozy here. The rest of the palace, even our other rooms, usually feel too overwhelming, but this room feels smaller than it is."

"Yes. The throne room is so vast, it can make me feel insignificant at times." She looked quietly to him, and he felt her close, even though she was across the room. "You know, *you* make me feel insignificant."

"What?" She started as if he had slapped her, and an ashy pallor suffused her face. "Why would you say that?"

He did not answer for a long time, just continued to look at her, as if he would search out with his gaze the depths of her being. She looked at the floor, embarrassed but pleased, and a rosy color slowly came back to her complexion. Once or twice she glanced up, but could not hold his gaze.

"I say it because it is true," he said finally. "When I go about my day, I am the most important man in the world, but when I am with you, I matter nothing. I feel so insignificant and mortal. I feel not like a king; I feel only like a man."

"I am sorry," she quivered. "I do not mean to do it."

"No, no, you misunderstand. But then, I do not under-

stand.” He stood up, his natural propensity toward action reasserting itself. He paced the strip between the wall and the table, back and forth, and then suddenly rounded the table and brought them face to face. He stood so close he felt her warmth, her vulnerability.

“I grow so overwhelmed with my responsibilities that I forget who I am – I forget I am a man, a husband. But even more than that, I forget the strength of a man in love. And I love you.”

He expected her to melt in his arms. He anticipated the warmth of her body melting into his, the grip of her arms around his neck; he was moments away from wrapping her in his own, when she suddenly twisted around and removed the simmering pot from the stove. She carried it to the table, putting distance between them once again.

Adlena was as surprised by her actions as her husband. All she wanted was to meet him, forget herself in him, and lose the night in his arms. But not like this. Something was wrong – somehow, she knew this was not how Cila and Asbult fell in love each night.

She served the food and sat down without looking back, so Trinian was left to do nothing but sit as well and eat his food in silence. Adlena expected to feel uncomfortable, but to her surprise, her heart rejoiced. She felt released, as if she could not be manipulated, and could only be truly, wholly, and completely loved.

After a little while, she saw Trinian was about to say something, and she spoke before he could. “I hear you are sending emissaries to countries all over Minecerva. Have you had many responses?”

She saw how surprised he was at her question, which

confirmed her suspicion that he only intended to discuss pleasantries and passion. But she wanted more than pleasantries, and less than passion. She understood now that there was a very important level in between that they had somehow missed, and must discover.

“Well,” he answered thoughtfully, “Kelta responded immediately. They have always been loyal allies to Drian, so their response was encouraging.”

“That is good,” she nodded.

“Today, I received South Drian’s answer; they possess a powerful army, and I knew that with their help, we could stand an excellent chance of blockading the east against the invading force. So I was overjoyed to learn that they have pledged half their army, and will be arriving here in three days. It was an enormous relief; I do not know why, but I am plagued by the fear that the enemy will get to our allies first and turn them against us.”

“Do you believe the god is attempting to ally with human countries? I thought he wanted to destroy all of them.”

“I do not know his plans. Only that he plans evil, and I must do all I can to prevent him. The more time progresses, Adlee, the more I feel a dark cloud gathers above our heads, waiting to strike. Astren does not sense it, and his mistrust weighs on me, obscuring all my decisions.” Suddenly, and all at once, he poured out his apprehensions, foreboding, plans, and predictions, admitting, as his words poured over each other, more in his communication with her than he had spoken of to any other person, or even thought in his mind.

When he finally finished, his words and thoughts exhausted, he leaned back in his seat, surprised at his

dissemination – and yet pleased. Her silent, patient listening awakened between them a deep bond he never would have imagined possible, and though he still did not grasp the need for verbal intercourse in the same way as she, he understood that there was something deeper between them now than there had been before. As he sat in the silence surrounding them, in the warm light of the brown room, watching her gaze at the floor with a mild crease in her forehead, a desire increased each moment within him to hear her opinion and glean from her insight. How had he never desired this before? Not realized how much he honored her intellect and perspective? He leaned forward vigilantly when she finally turned to him.

“You carry a heavy load,” she said, reaching over and taking his strong, large hand in her delicate one, fondling it thoughtfully. “One that I fear I have too long allowed you to bear alone. But I will do so no longer. As the country needs allies, so do you. I will be your help and support, as I swore to be before the gods when Gladier married us.

“You must trust yourself – there is no one with a surer instinct than you, and you must trust it unflinchingly. It is as if the gods communicate their very plans to you; unless you listen, you will miss the next step. You have received an ancestral gift – one to which Astren is not privy, and his instincts stem from a previous age, one in which life was slow and sleepy. But I know – I *know* – that this world is not what it once was. It has awakened. And it is powerful. You have heard Gladier’s prophecy? “The Dryad will awaken and lie down with the mortal.””

Trinian, who had stared at the table as he listened intently, glanced up at her, eyes wide with astonishment and



sudden understanding. "The Dryad has indeed awakened," she continued, "and she has joined with the mortal. We, our very beings and our lives, are fulfilling the prophecies of the ages, moving toward a time we cannot, right now, foresee or understand. Fear too, and trepidation, have their place. But whether we are afraid, or whether we rejoice, our place is preserved in the timeline of history, and in each moment, we must prove ourselves worthy of it. I suppose, until I heard your fears tonight, I never truly understood the weight of our rule."

Though she had spoken with surety and strength throughout, she ended at last with innocent humility, and uttered those last words, "our rule," with a simplicity that stabbed Trinian through the heart. Suddenly, he got off his chair and bent to the ground before her on one knee. Still grasping her hand in his, he gazed up at her with a new delight. The old passion blazed within him, burning his breast and smelting his gaze, but it was ennobled now with true love. First and foremost she was his queen, and he had forgotten this simple fact.

"Forgive me," he begged, his bearded chin trembling with unadulterated ardor. "It is your rule, as well as mine, and I have allowed our hearts and purposes to grow apart. I left you at home to raise our son while I stayed away to rule a kingdom. I decided, without deliberation, that one was your duty and the other mine. I allowed you to grow tired and sad, alone and abandoned as you were, while I grew distant and cold, pacing uselessly in my vast, empty chamber." As he proclaimed the truth, sobs rose in Adlena's throat and shook her lovely frame. He reached up his hand and caressed her fine cheek so that her tears spilled over

his fingers. "I never want to be apart from you. We must pursue life together, supporting and uplifting as we are meant to do.

"As king and queen; as husband and wife."

After that, words were no longer necessary. Now, at last, did they melt into one another's arms and spend the night together, sealing each other into their hearts. And it was through this renewed ardor of love that the queen came, once more, to bear fruit in her womb.

## V

### RORDAN

*"I do not know much about gods; but I think that  
the river  
Is a strong brown god – sullen, untamed and  
intractable,  
Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a  
frontier;  
...The problem once solved, the brown god is  
almost forgotten  
By the dwellers in cities – ever, however,  
implacable,  
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder  
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured,  
unpropitiated  
By worshippers of the machine, by waiting,  
watching and waiting."*

- T.S. Eliot; *The Four Quartets*



## The City Besieged

**M**erciec, first Bowman of Drian, stood upon the southern rampart, his sturdy legs mounted like pillars on the stone. He had stood for hours, like a tree on a hill, bent against the wind, defying anyone else to stand against the forces of nature with his endurance and rigidity. Fully iron clad, he wore the traditional curved blade of a hunter, and a rounded bow on the curve of his back. At the moment, his helm was at his feet, and his long, blond hair burned golden in the sun; a beacon of hope, an example of the type of man who followed Trinian, a stalwart warrior against the encroaching forces from the east.

He scanned the southern horizon. He had done so intermittently for the entirety of the morning with no result, but now, at last, his watchful eyes met a mark. A shadow in the distance that could have been anything, and so he thought it was what they had waited for, and his heart lifted in hope. But it was larger than he had expected, and curious, he squinted at it, lifted a spyglass, and then, with a

deep frown that would have alarmed a fellow soldier had there been one to see, leapt to the alarm bell.

“The South! The South!” his voice rang out as he pulled the southern bells. “The enemy approaches from the South!”

Trinian heard the bells from the throne room and gripped the sides of his chair, for a moment stunned into inaction, then leapt up and ran to the southern wall, meeting Afias on the way, and rushing on together. He ran until he hit the raised wall and leaned over it, peering into the far distance.

“The South? Surely not. That must be South Drian advancing to aid us.”

“I thought so too, sire,” said Merciec, handing him the spyglass. “But take a closer look.”

“Fate help us, they are the same monsters as the Mestraff host,” Trinian breathed. “But how? Are they closing in on both sides?”

Afias shook his hand. “We’ve heard nothing from Saskatchewan. We would know if they crossed the Rordan.”

“We should have heard from South Drian. What happened to their army?”

Afias looked out over the vast mass of advancing beasts. It filled the entire Kernan Valley and still more streamed endlessly over the horizon. “I don’t think they are coming, Trinian. We are alone.”

Trinian hurried back to the throne room where Astren waited for him, as stoic as the marble table at which he sat. The steward had heard the cries of alarm but, minister-like, refused to budge, and sat quietly for the tidings to be brought to him. When Trinian relayed, shaking with the

fear of a youth and the anger of a soldier, the sheer size of the invading host, the old man's gnarled face went gray.

"How many?" he breathed.

"Thousands. I cannot say for certain."

With shaking hands, the old man gathered a handful of papers before him into piles. "We have to retreat. This is worse... this is unthinkable... We have no army for this."

"To where would we retreat?" asked Trinian, not believing what he heard.

"Saskachan? Yes, Saskachan. We shall go there."

Trinian struggled to understand his mentor, and he grew more infuriated, trying to find some sense in his words. "My lord, Saskachan is barely large enough to hold our army, let alone the entire city. Drian is the most fortified city in Minecerva – to leave is suicide."

"Yes, it is," proclaimed Gladier, who had entered the room. "You must fight."

Astren drew himself upright, ashamed of showing weakness in the wave of the first shock. He crossed his arms over his robe and resumed his customary stateliness.

"You have to ride out and meet them," said the wizard. "Because you have only two choices: ride out and fight until you surrender, or surrender now. But if you surrender now, you will be teaching your people that fighting is not worthwhile, and it will be much harder to rally them a second time."

"A second time?" asked Astren.

"Yes! When you drive them out from the inside. Through rebellion, through resisting their rule. The people must believe that their king supports them – that he believes in their freedom and welfare above all else. This

will give them courage during the coming occupation.”

Trinian’s face was red as a tomato, his neck muscles bulged and the veins popped – he had never been angry at Gladier before, but now his vision was red. “Occupied!” he roared. “Never! This city will not fall, do you hear? If you repeat that before anyone, I will strike off your head, so help me, I will. My men will fight as they did in Mestraff – they will mow down the enemy and drive them from our walls. Those beasts know not what force they have awoken!” And without another word, he fled from the company of his mentors and descended to the barracks.

That was where Lady Adrea found him shortly after. He was donning his armor with Commander Garrity, and both men were deeply involved in planning their defense.

“My father says we should not fight, and that he told you the same thing,” she yelled at him. Whenever her anger rose – and that was often, for it always boiled just beneath the surface – she yelled at anyone. “He says we should retreat to Saskatchan.”

“Well, clearly I’m not listening,” said Trinian, as a page tightened his shin guards.

“And what do you think? Will we fall?”

He leaned forward, his eyes blazing to meet the fire in hers. “I think we’ll drive them from the city walls and rise victorious.”

With a strong effort of will, his face only inches from hers, she did not kiss him, but instead, nodded with shining eyes. “They will follow you! They believe in you as I do!”

“Yes, on the battlefield – yes! But,” he paused suddenly, his habit of listening to Astren reasserting itself over the first flush of his anger. “Adrea, what of my family?”



What if your father has some wisdom in his words about Saskatchan? Do I plan well if I subject my family to this threat, without trying to protect them in case of invasion?"

She grew sober, suddenly willing to accept the idea of retreating to Saskatchan because Trinian, and not her ever-frightened father, suggested it. "I will *not* leave the city," she said after a moment. "It is always the place of the stewards to remain behind and keep the throne for the king, and Saskatchan would never accommodate the whole population of Drian. We could never get them all there in time, anyway. But if you want to send your family to the fort, just to be certain of their safety, then I see nothing wrong with that. They are the royal family, and I think it shows prudence."

He smiled at her in relief. "What would I do without you?" he asked. "Gather them together, and send them immediately." His trust filled her chest until she felt it would burst, and she, feeling bound to him by bonds stronger than words, nodded her proud head and sailed out of the armory.

After seeing the Nian's safely on their way to Saskatchan, Adrea joined her father on the tallest tower of Korem to watch the impending battle.

"Who are these enemies?" demanded Lord Astren, shivering in the wind of the high tower.

"They are the same monsters that attacked in Mestraff," said his daughter, well aware that he had been told many times already.

"Oh! And I suppose they just decided to circumvent the Rordan and go the long way around for no reason? How do we know they are the same enemy? Where have they

come from?”

“I do not know *why* they came the long way,” Adrea said deliberately, “but I think we can assume with reasonable certainty that they come from Karaka.”

Rapidly the army of Power advanced and filled all the valley before the red city, encamping itself there, a black mass signaling the impending doom of Drian. “Look at the size of that host. Surely we can never hope to defeat them! What shall we do if they invade the city?”

Adrea, whose impatience with her father’s fears and slow ways never showed in his presence, laid her hand upon his shoulder and watched Trinian ride out at the head of their army. “We will face whatever comes with honor, bravery, and steadfastness – as we have ever done.”

## The First Battle for Drian

When he rode forth at the front of the line in the bright light of day, though every able-bodied man of the kingdom assembled on the field, King Trinian led an army of meager hundreds against a horde of uncountable thousands. The gold and blue flag of Drian with its white dove nesting in calm comfort faced itself against the black banner of The Enemy with its white smile and sharp scarlet arrow. Kellan, the beast lord of Karaka, strode at the front of his host to face the bronze-clad king of Drian for a second time, for he had been one of the few survivors after the obliteration at Mestraff.

Queen Adlena and Lady Adrea stood together upon the rampart of the palace, and saw the king's sword catch the light of the sun as it rose high above his head.

All were silent.

The hearts of the citizens of Drian were valiant as they waited in that awful moment. Their faith in him had swelled in an unbounded expanse after the battle of Mestraff, and they believed in their king as if he were

the god of Drian himself. If King Trinian, descended of Destine, emperor of Minecerva, and divinely appointed by Fate, chose to face the ambitious god risen in the east, then they would, with all their strength, back him to the last man. They must fall; how could they not, outnumbered seven to one? But no one believed it. They would not fall so long as Trinian led them with his might.

His sword dropped –

And the armies flew to meet...

And clashed with a clash that shook the heavens.

It was not long before either side was indistinguishable as the blue and gold of Drian's soldiers melded with the black and red of the enemy's horde, obscuring all but Death, whose godlike visage seemed to take on mortal appearance in the clash of the armies of good and evil.

Garrity led his troop on the right flank, his long, dark curls streaming in the wind, a brown banner for his men to follow. The enemy horde expected an ease of victory like what they had known in South Drian, but proving their mettle, the Drinian's held fast their ground. Moving with the precision of a mill, Garrity and his men were one machine, slicing the monsters before them like a knife through butter. The monsters bared their teeth, trying to rip off an arm or bite off a head, and they were terrifying. But each man fought with the strength of ten, spurred on by their faith in Trinian, and their love of Garrity. They fought harder and braver than mortal ability.

On the left, Phestite led the charge, eager to swing his mighty arms like a mill, to blow the monsters away like the wind; to throw his great spear and mow down the horde. He was too wise to know that the Drinians could win, but

he wanted to sink his teeth into the monsters who dared to attack his citadel. To get his bit of flesh before all was ended.

The battle raged for three hours, and not until the sun was beginning to dip in his round did the Drinian soldiers then, with stubborn reluctance, give ground.

Afias swung his sword in a high arc to behead a monster on the left, and then charged his horse forward to trample a beast charging him in the fore. But the monster anticipated him and stuck a spear into the ground. His horse trampled the beast, but was pierced by the spear in the process. Afias threw himself off, landing in a roll, so his steed did not crush him in its fall. Immediately, he was on his feet again, meeting another towering creature as it descended upon him. He stabbed it through the heart and swiped the beast's head from its neck, and then took stock of his surroundings. Most Drinians were on their feet now, unhorsed and fighting hand to hand. He saw Asbult and Trinian through the fray, and gripping his sword tight, fought his way toward them.

Trinian was breathing heavily, realizing with dismay that they now fought with their backs against the very stones of the city. Fresh soldiers untiringly replenished the enemy's lines. Despite the high hope and faith of his army, the enemy was gaining the field. Trinian knew they could not stand ground, and he called to Asbult, who had never left his side.

"In no time now, the enemy will rout us. I am going to call a retreat. The Drinians can go to Saskatchan, and build a defense there."

"No! We must hold the city! We can barricade within."

“Asbult, the city is lost. We do not have enough soldiers to hold it. Before we lose the gates to their horde, before we’re trapped inside like meat in an oven and they decimate our army, we must retreat. Go now!”

“Are you coming?”

With a roar, Trinian lunged past his brother-in-law and slit the throat of a monster. “Go!” he yelled again.

“Are you coming?” Asbult insisted, for the light of despair glinted in the king’s eye as he struggled with himself, loath to let the city fall, and more reluctant still to live after he had failed. He was torn between responsibility and guilt, and Asbult witnessed his desperation. With love and strength, he gripped the king’s arm. “This is *not* a final defeat, you hear me? We will rise from this, and we will need you. You must come.”

Suddenly, a beast reared above their heads. It had broken through the ring of men who fought about them, and as Trinian raised his sword to meet it, too late, the beast fell to the ground, pierced by their third brother’s blade.

Afias approached them, bloody and scratched, and eager to fight to his last breath, and it was his battle fury and determination that finally awoke Trinian. If these two men were willing to fight to the death for him, then he ought not to die for them; and seeing the light of future victory burning in his brothers, Trinian accepted that he should live to fight another day. He met Asbult’s gaze. “I will come. You must lead the army, but I will remain with the rear guard and meet you at the river fort.”

“I’ll make sure he gets there,” said Afias to Asbult, and his brother gripped his arm in gratitude.

“I will see you *both* there,” Asbult said, and with a final

glance at his friends, forced himself with gritted teeth to ride to the head of the army and call them into retreat. Then the army fled west to Saskatchan, abandoning the red city to her fate.

## The City Lost

**S**askatchan was a large field beyond Fort Jourinan, just beside the Rordan River. It was a small fort built of clay walls, hardened over time to an impenetrable concrete, and it barely accommodated Trinian's army. He had a tent erected in the center for himself, and put his family in the most fortified house at the southern end. Astren and Adrea had not made it out of the city, and neither had Gladier. Trinian was alone and without counsel for the first time since he was crowned king.

Soldiers milled about the clearing dotted with tents and over-laden carts. The once-green ground was overturned by so many feet and wheels, and was ridden with so many mud and wagon ruts, that they all resided in squalor. The air resounded with the rough shouting and raucous laughter of men.

Though his heart was steeled in anger, Trinian struggled not to succumb to despair. He was haunted by the image of the cobblestone streets of the Drinian markets, the



glistening palace, the red brick houses, and the bright-paneled shops and barns ravaged by monstrous beasts. He wanted to believe it possible to reclaim Drian, but his fears were overwhelming him, and he wondered how many citizens would still live when he returned.

Most of all, his strange dread of Power, whom he did not know, and believed only to be a natural god, oppressed him. Yet something deep inside warned that there was more to this terror that he did not understand, and it was the fear of the unknown, his lack of counsel, and the personal guilt over losing Drian that finally banded together in his heart, and forced him to make a desperate resolution.

That evening, Trinian called his family to the command tent, and they gathered in the waning light of day. Afias had not left his brother's side since they returned from battle, but Trinian had kept his own counsel, remaining silent and non-communicative, and the prince watched him with a worried eye.

Adlena was sitting in a cloth chair, constructed for her by one of the soldiers, with Jacian cradled drowsily in her lap. Cila and Asbult entered late and sat upon the rug in the center of the tent, and Viol went to where Afias sat on a low stool. She saw the worry in her brother's face, and sympathetically ran her hands through his hair, seeking to comfort him; and he, comforted, leaned his head on her shoulder.

"Are you alright?" he asked under his breath.

"Is anyone?"

He frowned, his eyes still watching Trinian. At that moment, Lavendier, the last to enter, did so in a blaze of orange glory, in a dress resplendent as the sun, in varying

shades of orange, vermillion, and yellow. She was preceded by a page bearing a cushioned stool, who set it upon the ground beside the table. Another page followed, laying out a dainty dinner scavenged from the meager kitchens: a roll, a chicken leg, and some grapes, with a decanter of wine.

"I do not know what Trinian will do with me," Viol confided to Afias after a moment, watching Lavendier. "We are underfoot here."

"Wherever he sends you, or whatever he tells you, you will listen to him, won't you? We have to set the example. Everyone looks up to us."

She smiled at her brother. She was young enough still to be glad when someone told her what to do. "Of course I will. No matter what." She thought a moment. "I think he's doing a good job."

Afias squeezed her hand. "I think so too."

While Lavendier situated herself, like a queen of dawn, upon her makeshift throne, Garrity entered the tent and Trinian drew him aside to speak in private. "I am sending the women of my family up the river to Kelta to stay under King Wrelle's protection – you will lead them."

"Sire?"

"You have kept Viol safe before; now you must protect them all."

Garrity stared at the floor a long moment. "I do not want to leave you or Drian," he said at last, looking frankly at him. "I feel like my place is here."

"Where are you going?" cut in Lavendier's voice from across the room, for she was now quiet and settled, and had dismissed her pages from the tent.

Trinian ignored her and spoke under his breath. "And I feel like mine is with my family. But neither of us has the privilege to choose."

Garrity nodded. "Yes, Sire. Do I have permission to take my squadron?"

"I wish I could say yes. I know their loyalty, and their love for you; but no. Merciec will be the only other Drinian soldier. You will be traveling with the captain who brought the soldiers to us from Kelta; Drinian sailors will accompany you, but the remaining soldiers will be Keltian. They know their land and their king, and we need all the soldiers we can here, for the next battle."

"Then you do plan to retake Drian?" Garrity watched him hopefully.

"I cannot afford to plan anything else. We must!"

Lavendier was growing petulant as she tried to follow their hushed words. "We must what? Why did you call us here Trinian?"

Garrity bowed. His heart ached, and he did not trust himself to say more. "Yes, Sire." He turned to leave, but came to attention again and looked upon his king. "I have your oath, sire, and you have mine: your family will be safe."

He left with a heavy heart, ignoring Lavendier and nodding reassuringly to Princess Viol. But Lavendier was not concerned with him any longer, and she looked demandingly upon Trinian.

"Well," he began, moving to the center of the tent, in front of his throne, and looking about at all of them gathered around him, "I am sending the ladies and Jacian up the river to Kelta to stay with King Wrelle."

Afias started up from his seat, his body stretched taut and tense, "You're what?" Viol tried to calm him, tried to pull him back, but he whirled on his brother. "You can't send them away. There are witches and natural gods, and all manner of dangers that wish to claim them! What are you thinking?"

"I am not leaving!" cried Lavendier.

"Sit down, brother," said Trinian.

"We'll be alright, Afias," soothed Viol. "We have to listen to Trinian."

Like a mad man, the prince's head flew about the tent, taking in all those who were before him, trying to retain them with his gaze, but his heart was filling with grief, and he looked into Viol's eyes. "I don't want you to go," he gasped, gripping her shoulders as if he might keep her through pure might.

"I know," she whispered. "But you have to let me. I'm not a little girl anymore, and I will be alright." She looked frankly at Trinian. "He is sending Garrity to protect me - all of us - aren't you?"

Trinian nodded; defeated, Afias resumed his seat and pulled Viol onto his lap, "You will always be a little girl," as he squeezed her tight, she blushed, and they both felt better.

"Well I will not go! And you cannot make me!"

"Be silent, Laven," Trinian ordered, but she would not. Remaining stolidly in her seat, as if too good to let her emotions move her, she cried out that he was wicked and cruel, and cared nothing for the feelings of others. Trinian, pushed now to the breaking point, turned on her with fire in his eyes and an anger he had never before unleashed

upon one of her sex.

“How dare you!” he said. “How dare you question my authority! You force me to turn upon you and rebuke you in a manner in which I once would have been whipped by my father.”

Lavendier flushed, for the mention of her father filled her with guilt, and stifling that guilt filled her with bitter anger. “Father knew you never loved me!”

“Never loved you,” he said, forcing his words through gritted teeth, and ignoring Jacian’s whimpers, for the little boy had been awakened by the angry shouts. “It is you who has never loved another person in your life! You are selfish, vain, stubborn – everything unvirtuous and unwomanly clings to you like a disease, festering beneath a fair, false façade. Never loved you! I cannot even give a good reason why it is I do love you; I’m sending you away for your own safety. I thought you might like the chance to sleep in a real bed again – that’s all you care about, is it not? General!” he cried, and Phestite entered from outside the tent. The large soldier, so brave and confident on the battlefield, immediately flushed in embarrassment at being brought into the middle of a family debacle. “Escort the princess to her chambers, where she can pack up her neat little boxes of luxuries.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she cried.

“It means,” said he with cutting precision, “precisely what you think it means. It means there is only one person in this entire world you love.”

“And it isn’t you!” she shot back, screaming over Jacian’s loud sobs.

“I pray that you will learn to love while you are gone.”

She rose slowly, cloaked in self-righteousness, and glowered upon him, her eyes ugly as they dripped hatred, and she swore, before the whole family as witness: "I will *always* hate you," and she swept from the chamber.

Trinian fell into his throne, weary in body, mind, and soul. The family looked askance at one another, and except for Jacian, who was now whimpering into his mother's shoulder, all were silent. This confrontation had been building between the two proudest members of their clan for many years, and some were in shock that it had actually happened, and some were only surprised that it had taken so long. Lavendier had always been a thorn in Trinian's side, a pain he did not know how to address, but she had never openly declared hatred against him; he had ignored her, as she ignored him, unless she found it convenient to ask a favor; but in their inevitable encounters he had always tried to treat her kindly. He had not expected her to be grateful when he took care of her best interests, so now he was angry at himself for letting her words strike him; but he was a man who loved approval, and her tongue had pierced him where he was most vulnerable.

Presently, there was a rustle, and Asbult stood up, glancing about the somber chamber. Trinian looked up at his brother-in-law, whose smile seemed to bear the sun, and whose active spirit was a welcome balm to the general gloom.

"We always knew our sister had spirit," he said, and Cila and Viol cracked reluctant smiles.

"I hardly know to whom the defeat belonged," sighed Trinian.

"Well, my practical wife has been whispering with me,

and I think we have got a plan, if you're willing to listen."

Trinian looked at him expectantly, his reticence to hear advice dampened, and Asbult's energy infecting his own.

"I would like to offer my services as personal guard to the queen and princesses. On the journey, there may be some danger from the Mestraff coasts and, as you know, I'm familiar with those woods. Also, I believe everyone, my wife especially," he gave her a warm smile, "would be comfortable knowing that I took responsibility for their safety. You know I can handle Lavendier. I will abide by your decision, of course; but let me go brother – please."

Trinian's face relaxed into a warm smile, and he rose from his throne and embraced his brother-in-law. "I did not consider you for this task because you are neither a captain nor a sailor... and I think, I wanted you for myself. But I see now that you are right; there is no better man to keep our family safe."

Viol smiled, Cila clapped her hands, and Asbult grinned, ignoring his brother's sentiment and concentrating on the honor. He puffed up his chest and strutted to the map spread out on the table, leaning against it and pretending to study it carefully.

"What are you doing?" asked Trinian, grinning despite himself. "You have no reason to look at a map."

"Unless you're trying to find fault with it," laughed Viol.

"Just sticking around to give you more opportunity to admire the man who will save us all."

And so the family meeting ended with laughter, and they all departed the tent to pack for their journey.

## The River

**T**he party that departed the camp at Saskatchan, besides the women and little prince, was nine; three officers and six soldiers. The three officers were Commander Garrity, Prince Asbult, and Captain Merciec, and the others were sailors from Kelta.

On the ramp, before they departed, Trinian embraced his wife. "I love you," he whispered.

"And I you."

"I could not assemble a better guard to protect you. I have provided for you as well as I could."

"And I for you."

He tilted his head in surprise and pleasure. "Yes?"

"You will be well cared for. I've seen to that."

He held her close, tightening his fist around her silky gown as his arms wrapped about her waist. He buried his head in her breast. "I love you."

She laughed, and her peal, which was so rare a thing, stamped itself into his mind and rang there in all the lonely nights afterwards. "Your love is worth all the riches of the



world.”

“You mock me.”

“Never,” she whispered with a smile, and caressed his hair with her delicate hand. “We will be safe with Garrity and Asbult.”

“I wish you could tell me that for certain,” he sighed, wishing she still employed her inner sight, and regretting its loss.

“Trinian, I’ve told you I cannot. Even if I wished to, I have forgotten how. And besides, I would live in terror if I knew the true states of men’s souls.”

“Not mine,” he said, “not Garrity or Asbult’s. They are good men – I just wish you could see it.”

“I believe it. Isn’t that enough?” Anxiety was growing within her, and she did not want to part if he thought less of her.

“Of course it is. I am sorry, my dear. I believe so much in mankind and our fate, and I just want you to see it.”

She wanted to warn him against seeing what was not there, against believing too greatly in the selflessness of mankind, against placing his trust too strongly in weak mortals, but she still undervalued her insight into humanity, so she only kissed him one last time, and they parted on the shore of Rordan, their lives destined for great pain and trial before they might find one another again.

\* \* \*

The captain of the small vessel proudly led the group all over his little ship, from stem to stern, crow’s nest to hull, and despite its small size, the boat itself was magnificent:

sleek and fast in blue and gold, with masts and rigging that intersected every which way. The captain himself was a jovial man with a square face and bulging eyes; his nose was flat and wide, and he had a habit of stretching it out further when he was thinking.

The ladies he put in his own quarters and the men he bunked in the underbelly; it was all rather cramped, but the captain assured them that for a short journey such as theirs, it would not be oppressive.

That evening, when the moon was high in its crescent shape and the clouds were wisps against the star-scattered sky, the young Viol traversed the deck. Only Sailor Armand, as helmsman, was to be met with at this late hour, and the break of waves against one another in their endless give and take was the only sighing sound. The shore, in the darkness, was invisible on either side, and the princess might have imagined that she was alone in the midst of emptiness, floating on a sea of silent, sleeping air.

But soon, Viol heard Lavendier's laughter slash against the quiet as the eldest princess emerged from below on the arm of Dascerice, one of the sailors. They feigned quiet, but in reality their whispers were louder than plain speech.

"What, little sister!" cried Lavendier in a gusty voice, "still up at this hour?"

"As are you."

Lavendier laughed. "On the contrary, our circumstances seem quite out of comparison. Sailor Dascerice, would not you say so? After all, I am not unaccompanied."

Dascerice beamed. "Certainly not."

"No," said Viol, slipping below, no longer caring to remain above, "certainly not."

At the railing, Lavendier sighed and leaned prettily against the wood, her long, chestnut curls bouncing and blowing in the wind as the sea air caught them and the silver moon melted into her deep auburn streaks. Her vixen green eyes sparkled beneath black brows, and her red lips, always seeming puckered as if ready for a kiss, extended into a pout.

“How dare he uproot us like this?” she complained to her companion, her silky voice in discord with the sigh of the river. “My brother has no right to send us away from Drian, on a journey so dull and tiresome. What does he expect us to do in Kelta?” Lavendier liked to portray herself as a helpless victim: she had learned young how ready men were to play the role of hero. They had fawned over her ever since she had discovered her sensuous beauty, and with all that natural charm lending itself to ready flirtation, it had seemed imperative on her that she employ her gifts.

Now Dasceric bought her bait and rose to comfort her. “Your brother only wants what is best for you,” he said, with chivalrous promptitude. “After all, if you had stayed in Drian, you would have been in the midst of another battle. He wants to protect you.”

“Protect me!” she scoffed. “As if this little boat would be any protection if we were attacked.”

“Well I will be, anyway. Nothing will harm you so long as I am here.”

She cried out in aggravation, “Oh, must everyone always be talking about life and death! As if it’s the only important thing!”

“Well, what else then?”

“What about comfort, and a hot meal, and laughter? How

can I enjoy those things if everyone's running around like frightened chickens?"

"Oh, I see! Then I promise you, no matter what happens, I will keep you entertained. How's that? And besides, in no time at all, the fighting will be over, and you'll be home again. I promise."

She fell into his words, and was about to fall into his arms when the deck door banged and Merciec and Armand joined them. Lavendier flirted for a little while, but then said she was exhausted and must retire to bed. The three men watched as she gracefully swayed across the deck to the stairs and disappeared below like a fairy, barely seeming to touch the deck, or notice the roll of the waves.

"Have you ever been to any of her parties?" asked Dascerice, when she was gone.

"I have heard about them. Rowdy, late nights and all manner of crazy activities," said sailor Armand, leaning forward and hoping for more.

"That's just the tip of it. I went one night and she was dressed like a goddess and sat on a couch of red linen and purple silk. The whole room was hung with deep colored draperies and scented with spicy perfumes, and the servants themselves were dressed better than most courtiers, but in costumes that only added to the Princess's splendor. It was the most marvelous experience! She served delicacies the likes of which you cannot imagine, and in the center of the chamber sparkled a literal fountain of wine, from which people simply drank, like horses to a trough. Ah, what I wouldn't give to go back to that night!"

"Was there entertainment?" asked Armand.

"Who needs entertainment when you're surrounded

with beautiful girls and wine?”

Dascerice and Armand laughed, but Merciec frowned. “Sounds excessive,” he said quietly and retired to bed, uninterested in the sailor’s bawdy jokes.

## Ashore

When the sun rose the next morning, the river sparkled with little rainbows that tossed the sun beams from one wave to another. Cila was leaning over the railing, watching the buoyant activity, when she suddenly caught sight of a woman, clothed with naught but her hair, with innocent, wondering eyes that glowed an intense, fiery orange, who was staring up at the princess from the water. Her face was suffused with a dismayed expression, and a tail whipped about behind her. Immediately, Cila disappeared, only to return a moment later with her sister Viol. Silently, she pointed to the figure in the water, then stepped back to let them speak. Cila knew through legend and instinct that as a wife, the creature - a daughter of the river - would not communicate with her. It would speak only to her innocent sister.

Viol met the gaze of the sweet creature without a hint of fear, though much wonder. The innocence of the sea girl was not ignorance, but purity; the nakedness not brazenness, but virginity. And she was greatly distressed.

So Viol questioned her gently, urging her against fear.

“Beware,” the maiden declared suddenly, and her voice was like a playful, powerful current. As she continued, her words were the lightness of foam and the power of a raging river. “My father has sent me to you, so you will know your danger. Cease your journey, be on your guard, for evil awaits you in Kelta. The king there was been deposed by a man under him, Captain Farsooth, who is in the pay of the god of Karaka. He lies in wait for you now, and you are journeying to your deaths. Turn aside; do not return to Drian. Do not continue to Kelta.”

“But then, where should we go?”

“My father knows. He will come to you. Wait for him along the eastern bank of the river and he will come.” Then the strange creature dived deep underwater, and as she went, her brilliant tale flashed in the sunlight before following down to her watery home.

The captain was not eager to moor along the bank: they had a schedule to keep, and mermaids of the river were, to him, nothing to heed. “Playful sirens,” he called them, “who tease men away from their journeys.” But he had to listen when Prince Asbult insisted. They moored the ship on the opposite shore, and waited to see if the god of the river would keep his appointment.

They had not long to wait before a gigantic wave blew up from the river in a mighty heave, drenching all on deck. When the spray cleared, they saw a giant pillar of blue/green water was mounted high above their heads, surmounted by a regal, handsome god, with hair that rippled down his bare chest, enfolding his frame as if he was still submerged. In his hand, he held a giant, knotted

tree like a staff. His image was so frightful that all on deck fell to their knees, overawed in his presence. Garrity alone stood upon his own strength, but after a second, he too bent his knee in reverence.

The god spoke, and when he did, it was like the rolling, inexorable tide. "My daughter has warned you of the danger."

Garrity responded. "Yes. She told us not to journey to Kelta."

"That is correct. They are no longer your allies."

"Then where should we go?"

"Mankind is not your ally now," Rordan declared. "Man is corrupted and confused by the growing evil in the east. But we who are of the elements, we know of secret havens which the enemy cannot reach. I will tell you of a land where all is at peace, where all is of its natural order, where you need not fear the extending arm of evil. Travel from here due east across the many miles of the Mestraff wood, until you reach the brown plains of Karaka. Traverse them, and you will encounter the Great Desert. Across the desert, and over the mountain range – the mountain range which you believe conceals naught but ocean – there lies a land of paradise, of untainted beauty. I have heard of it from streams and rivers and rains that have washed the tidings to me, and it is a beautiful refuge. There you will find sanctuary."

With a flourish, the great pillar upon which he sat vanished, leaving him in midair. His tail whipped above him, and he sliced into the water, seeming to disperse as he met it, become it. Or, rather, it became him.

They knelt in stunned silence.



“That’s that then,” said Asbult at last. “Captain, take us ashore.”

The captain rose incredulously. “You can’t be serious, my prince! Taking these girls on a pointless goose chase to a place you, above all people, know cannot exist!”

“I cannot take them to Kelta. And who’s to say it does not exist? I have never been over those mountains. No one has.”

“Yes, and because there’s nothing there. You’ve stood at the top of the yellow mountain in Kelta. *You* know. It’s as clear as the sun in sunlight. Besides, you’d have to walk right past the enemy’s doorstep – this river god could be working for the enemy for all you know. It’s mad. Mad, I tell you!”

“Then I’m mad. Take us ashore.”

The captain, with gritted teeth, glared at him uselessly. He was a kind-hearted man, faithful to Drian and sympathetic to the royal women’s safety; and the thought that he might be playing accomplice to their downfall plagued him bitterly. Personal opinion notwithstanding, however, it was not his decision; he had to obey Asbult. So he gave orders with curt, angry precision, intermittently shooting pleading glances at Garrity. But Garrity kept his own counsel, and followed Asbult.

## Fugitives

**M**oorings the small land boat, laden with Adlena, Merciec, Sailor Armand, and Jacian, along the western bank, Garrity looked over to where Dasceric did the same with the second craft, which held Cila, Asbult, and Viol. “We’ll be on foot from here,” he called over. “You and Armand will return the boats to the ship and journey back to Drian with the captain and the other sailors.”

“Oh, no, not Dasceric!” cried Lavendier. “He has to come with us!”

“Yes, Dasceric,” he answered her shortly, then said to the sailors. “Men?”

“Yes, sir,” they declared, and Dasceric could only cast a sympathetic, parting glance toward the sensuous princess, who watched him go with pouting lips and helpless beauty.

“They will return to Drian to inform King Trinian of our intentions,” he said, as the two boats pushed off, “vague though they may be. The rest of us will continue on to –”

But he was cut off, for Armand, without a cry, suddenly

toppled out of the boat and into the water.

“Get down!” called Asbult as more arrows whizzed through the trees over their heads like a swarm of angry wasps. Dasceric pulled for all he was worth back to the ship.

“Who is it?” asked Merciec, his bow already strung as his piercing eyes looked deep into the trees, searching for the attackers.

“Gorgans. They patrol these shores,” said Asbult, shooting his crossbow and piercing a beast through the forehead. “Guard the women!” Merciec lifted his shield high as the women huddled behind him. Garrity was kneeling beside Asbult, using his shield to protect the archer. “They cannot know who we are,” said the red-haired prince, “but trust me, more are coming. They feed on anything that moves.”

Garrity grunted in reply. “We’re too exposed here,” he said. “We need to get to higher ground.”

Asbult nodded. “Lead their highnesses. We’ll lay down cover fire.” He signaled to Merciec, and Garrity, picking up Jacian, beckoned the women into the trees. Running low to the ground, swift and silent through the forest, Garrity went a long way until he came on a watercourse that led to the river. They followed the rivulet upstream until they were walking along the edge of a cliff that rose high above the water; there they paused, the soldiers breathing quietly, and the ladies panting, listening for the sounds of pursuit.

Lavendier had dragged behind everyone, daintily holding up her skirts with two fingers of each hand, and tripping over it all the same, plagued with the thought that it was very rude of Garrity to insist on maintaining such a rapid pace. Now she crouched beside Viol, whose

skirt only came to her mid calf, and who had not had to hold any of it up. “Why are we running like this?” she demanded gustily.

Viol looked at her with wide eyes. “Because they want to catch us, kill us, and eat us.”

“Hush,” growled Garrity, and although Lavendier glared the full extent of her ire at him, she said nothing after that.

Presently, they heard footsteps, and everyone tensed. Garrity pulled back his arm, preparing to throw his spear, but lowered it when Asbult’s red head appeared.

“More are coming,” he told them. “There are at least thirty now.”

“Come on,” said Garrity. “We have to keep moving.”

“No!” cried Lavendier. “You should stay and fight them! You were hired to protect us.”

As Garrity looked at her, his face white and his nostrils flared as if he would explode, Asbult gripped his arm. “Ignore her. We’re moving.” He took the lead, Adlena docilely following him, then Cila and Viol, gripping Jacian’s hands between them, and Merciec behind them. Lavendier seethed; she wanted Dasceric – everyone else was ignoring her. Garrity did not move – he crouched, watching her, until finally, she followed the others, and he took up the rear.

They moved quickly and quietly, but snarls, growls, and roars followed them, growing louder each moment. Soon they would be upon them, and they were too few to stand an assault.

“We have to mount a defense,” Asbult told Queen Adlena.

“Can we survive that?” she asked with her heart in her throat. She was terrified and tired, and trying to think

straight.

“If we find high ground, we can make a decent stand. Let’s make our way up this bank.”

The bank was on the other side of the stream, and they waded across. It was shallow there, and they got their feet wet. The bank was somewhat steep, but not so much that anyone had to use their hands – except Lavendier, whose gown impeded her every move. At the top of the bank, the women took Jacian and shuffled backward, and the men spread out along the ridge. There was nowhere to go from here. There was an un-scalable cliff behind them and to the right, and on the left, a steep drop toward the river.

But though they readied themselves for the attack, it did not come. They waited, crouching, a long time, wondering at the delay. Finally, campfires flickered and dotted the distance.

Asbult dropped his bow. “They mean to wait out the night. It’s almost dark now.” So he set Merciec to keep watch and pulled Garrity aside.

“We need to fight our way through. We’ll attack first thing in the morning, and then make our way toward the yellow mountains.”

Garrity sighed. “This is a fool’s errand!” he said, releasing his opinion at last. “I said nothing before, but it’s true. Maybe we’ll make it through tomorrow, and I stress maybe, but even if we do survive, we’ll die on this journey. All of us, one by one. So what if Kelta is overrun? So is Mestraff. More so even. There’s nowhere that’s safe.”

Garrity’s sobriety did not faze Asbult. There was still a spark of bright hope in his adventurous blue eyes. “Then why didn’t you overrule me on the ship?”

“Because we could not go to Kelta. Because there was no other option.”

“And there still isn’t. Don’t you agree?”

“It does not matter. We will all die tomorrow anyway.” Staring at the ground, lost in his brooding, he was shocked to feel a quick and heavy clap on his shoulder.

“Take heart!” cried Asbult. “This is no way to face life – or death!” Incredibly, there was a smile on his lips. “Face both with a brave heart, and maybe, fate will surprise you.”

Her footsteps light on the ground, the men were startled to see that the queen had approached them and stood near, calm and tall.

“We will die?”

Asbult shook his head firmly, still unshaken. “Not if we have anything to say about it.”

She sighed, and said, “But that just means you will die first.” She shivered, and Asbult put his arm around her shoulder. “I dreamt on the ship, last night,” she continued, “that we journeyed on foot, and now my dream is coming true. I dreamt that we traveled until we came to a beautiful country, after crossing the wilderness and climbing mountains, just like the river-god said. We climbed high – so high we could touch the heavens. But we were exhausted. We had been through so much rain and desert, fire and snow, hunger and thirst, death and pain.”

Asbult smiled. “Perhaps you have seen our future.”

“In my dream there was a tunnel in the rocks. A tunnel that led to a small settlement, untouched by the enemy. They gave us shelter.”

Asbult looked around, as if expecting to find an outlet.

“There’s no tunnel here,” he said.

She shrugged despondently. “It was a dream.”





## VI

# SOLITUDE

*“Solitude is the path over which destiny endeavors to lead man to himself. Solitude is the path that men most fear. A path fraught with terrors, where snakes and toads lie in wait.”*

*- Hermann Hesse*



## The Second Battle for Drian

**T**he day after Trinian sent his family away, Phestite ducked his tall head into the king's tent and found a young soldier speaking with him. The man was short and slight, with faint traces of stubble on his face, and he walked with an easy, eager grace like a kitten. Phestite remembered how Trinian had singled this boy out before the battle for Mestraff, but aside from that, there was nothing particularly special about him, and he wondered why the king would keep private council with him.

"Footman Kett," explained Trinian, "has come to me with a plan to infiltrate Drian."

"Oh?" asked the General, his deep voice rumbling inside the curtained space.

"You see, sir," explained the young man, trying and failing to reign in his enthusiasm, "my great-grandfather was once the keeper of the sewers beneath the palace, and he took me, when I was only a very young lad, into the vaults below it. He showed me where they used to empty into an outlet

running into Rordan River. General, that opening is not far from here. We could use those channels to infiltrate the palace from within!"

Trinian raised his eyebrows at Phestite, who, after a long moment of solemn brooding, nodded.

"I want you to take us to these tunnels," said the king.

The sewer tunnels were dry and long unused, six feet tall and the breadth of two men standing shoulder to shoulder. The three men followed the twisting, confused passages, which Kett seemed to remember well, all the way into the inner circle of Drian's gardens where the opening, covered over with hedges and trellises, had gone unnoticed for years.

The king, peering through the cracks in the trellis, ached to fight the monsters infesting the capitol, and his blood pumped in anticipation of the encroaching battle. He could see nothing except a destroyed garden on the other side, but he could taste victory.

"What about the gates? Do the tunnels lead there?" he whispered to Kett.

"This way." The short, slight figure, easily standing beneath the low roof while Trinian and Phestite stooped uncomfortably, led them until they finally found themselves behind a grate, spying the gorgan sentries not three paces away.

Trinian smiled with a surge of confidence, and he laid his hand upon the slight shoulder beside him. "With such men in her time of need, Drian is ours already."

Kett puffed with pride.

\* \* \*

When Trinian's squad broke through the concealed tunnels into the light of the Korem Courtyard, a grim spectacle met their eyes. In the center of what, only a few weeks before, had been an abundance of flowers and craftsmanship stood the officials of the enemy conducting their own brand of mock justice. In a tapestry of black slime, shriven tentacles of roots and branches, drooping, shrunk blossoms, and clinging, choking life, on a makeshift gallows erected in the center, Lady Adrea and her father Astren were about to be hanged.

A gorgan was fitting a noose about Adrea's neck and her father was already strung for the drop. Kellan, king of the gorgans, presided over the affair, grinning at his victory.

He had taken Drian, he had pleased his master, and killing the king was an easy step from here.

Full of the revelry of the moment, the villains were completely taken aback by the sudden appearance of the Drinians. They stumbled back before the onslaught of men, tangling their legs in their astonishment. All except Kellan, who recognized Trinian in an instant, and thought his moment of final victory had come. He drew his weapon from where it was stuck in the ground, a spear tipped with a three-pronged spike, and charged for the mortal king.

Trinian rushed forward, leapt to the raised stage of the gallows, stirring a wind that swept warmly against Adrea, and catapulted from the dais, slicing his blade as he descended. It collided with the spear, and the force of the blows together threw the assailants apart. But they were on their feet again in a moment, circling each other, watching for an opening.

Adrea cheered.

Kellan, reminded of her, barked a command, and the gorgan on the stage reached for the lever to drop the steward and his daughter.

Trinian acted. He threw his knife at the gorgan on the platform, hoping to kill him from a distance, then lunged forward and stabbed at Kellan's stomach, but the beast's spear came down to meet his blade. Then he twisted away, feigned at the legs, and then stabbed upward at the goat-like chin.

Ice cold blood spilled over his hand and down his arm. He wrenched the blade free, feeling a burst of battle joy, but Kellan was not killed.

The beast lurched back, then lunged forward, and Trinian's feet skipped away. Gripping his sword with two hands, he dropped beneath the next swipe of Kellan's spear, and stabbed upward at the groin. Black, boiling, searing hot gunk poured out, covering him from head to foot, and the monster, finally, was slain.

The beast on the platform had stumbled back when Trinian's knife hit him in the chest, but it did no more harm to him than if a heavy ball hit a man and winded him. When he caught his breath, he reached forward again to pull the lever and Adrea kicked out with her feet and caused such a nuisance that the monster whirled upon her in a blind rage and bit into her arm.

He had nearly bitten clean through when Trinian leapt upon the stage and sliced off his head from behind – the beast fell back, and Trinian let Kett finish him off on the ground. Then he caught Adrea before she fainted, and gently removed the noose. He lowered her to the ground.

"You returned." Her pale face shone with love and faith.

Her eyes were outlined with the darkness of misery, her face haggard from its brief imprisonment, and about her mouth hung a shadow of the many deaths of her beloved people, but she was steady with resolve.

“The city is ours again,” her king promised.

Most of his men had swept forward into the castle, clearing it of vermin as they went, but Kett had remained with Trinian, and he now freed Astren. The steward shook like a leaf in fear for his daughter, whose arm bled all over the stage.

“You mustn’t touch her,” he cried at Trinian. “That filth will infect her!” Trinian had forgotten about the grime that covered him, and he carefully relinquished Adrea into her father’s arms. “Take her to Gladier’s,” the king said. “I have to call in the cavalry.”

Trinian ran for the bell tower. He climbed the stairs, and at the peak, he saw that his soldiers, led by Phestite, had slain the gorgans at the gate. He rang the bell to summon Afias.

\* \* \*

The cavalry of Drian was lined up behind the Ridge of Berhemir. Afias, mounted upon his charger and clad in brilliant armor of steel plating, sat still as a chiseled statue of marble. Just as a carved figure overlooks a battle scene of a hundred years gone, as if contemplating the course of long events past, so was the visage of Prince Afias. Though tense with expectation, he felt removed from the scene, an observer looking down from heaven perhaps, or a historian recording events.

He knew that at that moment, Trinian was emerging from the tunnels in the grounds of the palace, and Phestite at the gatehouse. If events transpired favorably, it would be a short while before an alarm sounded, and he would lead his men in a charge upon the city.

Five minutes passed, then ten. His horse pawed the ground, expressing his master's tightly controlled anticipation, when at last, the bells clanged over the countryside, sounding the three-beat signal from Trinian.

"Forth Drinians!" Prince Afias cried from the head of the mounted spears, and with an answering roar, the army surged forward behind him, mounted the ridge, and rode down upon the city. The gates lowered to receive them, and they thundered forward with the confidence of victory.

The returning army flooded into the welcoming walls, carrying their blue and gold colors into the mass of black and brown filth. Like a sea of foam, they swept away the gorgan refuse before them.



## The City Reclaimed

Wizard Gladier had gone unnoticed in the gorgan occupation. They had thought nothing, in the three brief days they occupied the city, of the small, round abode that huddled against the large palace as a small child huddles against its mother's cloak. Thus, the old wizard had slipped unnoticed from household to household, ministering to the hurts of the people, caring for them and encouraging them until the morning Trinian infiltrated the palace and his brother Afias swept the gorgans out of the city.

He met Trinian in the throne room, where the king stood shuddering as he surveyed the black, oozing filth that coated the beautiful, ancient walls.

"At last," the wizard proclaimed in his usual cheerful manner. "I knew you would not wait long to save your people." Trinian turned with a smile, and accepted the other's warm embrace. "And where is your dear brother, and my own sweet Adlena? We must celebrate!"

Trinian's face darkened at that, and Gladier frowned.

“Why do you frown? What has happened? Surely all your family is safe?”

“They are safe.”

“Then why do you look so mournful?”

Trinian shook himself. “I should not. They are safe, for I have sent them to Kelta where they will remain – until I have defeated this god once and for all. Not until I sever his head from his phantom body will they set foot here!”

At the king’s adamant declaration, the wizard started, and his eyes brightened in anger. “You’ve done what? Sent them away? But Kelta has turned to the god of Karaka! How could you do this? I had not thought you were such a coward!”

Trinian turned pale. “What? Gladier, what have you seen?”

“That Wrelle is overthrown by an evil man who worships our enemy! The stupidity of your actions! You have pulled out your supports from under you, and sent them up the river. How could you be so governed by your fear?”

“I am not controlled by fear! This god will stop at nothing until he kills me and all my family! If he had taken this city and killed me, they would live on.”

“And now it is the other way around,” said Gladier. “You have condemned them.”

“We don’t know that,” Trinian trembled. “Search for them! Tell me what you see!”

“Stop commanding this of me! You know I cannot. It comes when it comes, and I do not control it.”

Trinian looked deep into his mentor’s eyes. “Can you not try? Can you not search for the ones I love?”

“Trinian, never ask it of me. If I do, I will become like

Strana.”

Trinian was trembling in terror and guilt, and he turned away and strode out of the chamber. The stench of the filth was clouding his mind. Gladier followed, and together, they gazed over the ruined city.

“I will send someone after them, to draw them back. It may not be too late.”

“Nor may my predictions be so dire,” relented the Wizard. “I let my own fear dictate my words. We do not know what fate they face.”

“I am not only driven by fear, you know,” Trinian said. “I have to send Afias to South Drian, and I do not do that from fear.”

“Send another friend away? Shall you send me too? Are you determined to be friendless?”

“Enough,” cried Trinian. “I’ve decided, and it is what I must do. At least I know already that South Drian has fallen to the enemy, and I send a soldier this time – not helpless children. I have no more energy to debate you.”

Gladier patted his shoulder kindly. “Then I will only advise you not to send the prince alone. Do not condemn him to the same fate you have decided for yourself.”

## Spread Thin

**T**he throne room, after several scrubblings, still stank like a molding barrel of apples with the filth of its previous occupants. Trinian kept council there, however, because nowhere was free of the lingering stench and filth.

It was the dawn of the next day, for the fighting had waged through the night, when Trinian called Afias before him.

“When we arrived,” he told him, “Kett discovered a prisoner in the dungeons, who fled here from South Drian. Already weak and dying when we found him, he passed soon after, but not before he told us what happened there. The gorgans swept through their land, killing everyone as they went, and leaving the land empty to attack us. But he begs for our assistance since there are some survivors who are weak and scattered; he begs especially for his brother, who is helping to guard a group of women, children, and wounded, in a valley called Kazeel. Since I cannot leave the city, I am sending you to help them.”

“You want me to go to South Drian? To rebuild it?” Afias asked incredulously. “You are going to send *me* away, too?”

Trinian trembled, but he kept silent about the fate of Kelta. He knew Afias would insist on sailing up the river to save their family, but the prince was even less a sailor than a soldier, and Trinian felt his talents would thus be wasted; he would send help, but not Afias. “I had to send them away,” was all he said, his voice breaking.

Afias stepped forward, feeling chastised for his anger. “I know. And I don’t blame you. But don’t send me too. Your position requires that you be strong, set apart – I understand. But you can’t maintain strength if you have no one to support you.”

Trinian was silent and paced the room. His heart beat desperately for love, but he felt it was a selfish desire. He wanted his brother so he could lean on him; but when the world depended on him, and he had to give it the best that he had. And Afias was the very best of himself. At last, he said, “I need you in South Drian. There’s no better way for you to support me than to go where I ask, and act in my stead. I trust you – more than anyone else.”

“But I don’t understand,” Afias tried another tactic. “Surely there can be no question of it? I’m a farmer; maybe I’m a member of the royal family now, but not a politician or architect or diplomat. I know nothing of how to help these people, and will only lead them awry.”

“First of all, none of that is true. You are a diplomat in your blood and always have been; and any man who can manage his own land can manage a city: it’s just one size larger. I have learned to do it and so can you.”

“You had teachers.”

“And that is why I’m not sending you alone. Lady Adrea will be your companion.”

Afias raised his eyebrows. “Is there no one else?” he asked uncomfortably.

“Lady Adrea is a fine ambassador and a loyal friend.”

Afias sighed. “I’m sure she is. But she and I have never seen the sky as the same color. Besides that, she is unbearably proud. I don’t think she esteems my title as she does yours.”

“Then you will have to earn her esteem, and she yours. Try to respect her please, for my sake.”

Afias bowed. “For you.”

\* \* \*

Trinian lacked the heart to tell Adrea in person that he was sending her to South Drian. He had visited her in Gladier’s Healory the day after the battle, and when he told her he had sent Adlena to Kelta, the disappointment in her eyes stung him so that he nearly broke down.

“Why would you do that?” she had asked.

“To keep her safe,” he had said shortly, cutting off any other questions. But her eyes told her anger all too clearly. In her mind, he was her idol, her perfect king, and she loved him for who she thought he was: faithful, stolid, self-sacrificing, and vulnerable. And she imagined that in his marriage he was godlike and perfect. Adrea’s feelings toward Trinian were paradoxical: because she was in love with him, she was also in love with the idea of his marriage. Adlena must be perfect, for he had married her. And their marriage must be that of two equals, protecting and

working for each other - not sending each other away when life grew difficult. She knew in that moment that if he could send Adlena away, then he could send her away. And her heart broke.

So it only wounded her and did not surprise her when her father told her of Trinian's decision.

"I think he's right," Lord Astren told her. "You are healing well, but you always feel better with a task to do. Prince Afias is capable, and there'll be plenty of soldiers to care for you, I've seen to that. It might even be safer down there than here now."

Adrea smiled bitterly at that. Her father could only imagine danger when he experienced it. He lacked imagination, and thought that what he had experienced in the Drinian prison - poor food, a cold bed, buffets from their gorgan prisoners, and his near death at the gallows - was the worst danger possible, and he wanted to get her as far from it as he could. He did not think of the gorgans that most likely infested the land, or any of the other dangers that might engulf her in South Drian, so entrapped was he in thinking only of the dangers they had faced in Drian.

What he did not know was the danger she carried within. She hugged herself and frowned darkly out the Healer's window before turning impatiently back to her gray, proud father.

"Prince Afias is a stubborn innocent, who sulks after his lost fields and country home. Can he really rule a kingdom?"

"Do you think King Trinian rules the kingdom?" he demanded, and she blinked in surprise to hear him speak so bluntly. "He has done well, for a soldier," he allowed,

“but he does not do it alone. He knows he must listen to the counsel of those who have more experience, and he is attentive to mine. Why do you think he sends you with his brother now? He knows you will be the firm foundation behind the throne. And I, too, have confidence in you.”

Adrea shuffled her foot, uncomfortable with her father’s words, but admitting their truth in her heart. Trinian had always listened to someone – Gladier, Astren, herself – refusing to rely on his own counsel. But the truth that he had lacked strength of resolve and firmness of decision saddened her. *Very well*, she thought, as she straightened her dark head upon her fair neck, *if that was the way to rule a kingdom, she would rule as she was asked.*



## The God of Drian

**L**ady Adrea and Prince Afias set out for South Drian a week after the battle. They departed with two contingents of soldiers and four of Lady Adrea's handmaidens, and Trinian did not watch them go.

He had watched his family depart Saskatchewan, and it had torn his heart with a pain he had thought would heal, but which now only filled him with a death-like agony, and he could bear no further piercing.

He had sent a ship up the Rordan, but it was with a deep hopelessness, for in the deepest chambers of his heart, he believed they must already be lost. It would only be a just sentence for his sending them away, he thought, and he was unprepared when Dasceric arrived for an audience with him.

Feeling as though he were holding his heart together with his two hands, Trinian accepted the conference, and watched the sailor approach with heavy tread across the throne room, an interminable period, and how he wished the throne room were smaller! At last, the man stood

before him, bowed, and began.

“Your majesty, we were a day out from Saskatchan,” he related, “when the natural god of the river stopped us. I’d never seen a god before sir, and it was terrifying. I fell to my knees... I couldn’t stand...” but Trinian knew all about the gods and their powers, and he was impatient to hear what this one had said. “He told us, Sire, that Kelta has been taken by the god of Karaka.” Trinian nodded, his heart in his throat. “He told not to go there. He told us not to return to Drian. The only option, he told Lord Garrity, who stood like a bulwark before his awesome might, was to take the princesses and queen and prince beyond the Great Desert to a hidden haven beside the sea.”

He paused, and Trinian cried, “Well, did he do it?”

“Prince Asbult made the decision, Sire, and yes, they decided for it. They sent me back with tidings for you, and there was nothing we could do or say to prevent it. The captain tried, but their minds were quite made up.”

“And the last you saw – were they alive?”

“They were being set upon by gorgan wardens along the river, and they fled into the forest. I don’t know what became of them after that.”

Trinian fell back into his throne, his head in his hands, his shoulders trembling. He wanted Afias, but Afias was gone. He wanted Adrea, but she too, he had sent away. He was utterly, completely, and desolately alone.

“Go!” he cried to the soldier. “They need fortification at Saskatchan; you are to report there. Wait!” he called out again. “Is there anything else? Anything you haven’t told me?”

“Only this, sire. If we are against a god, and he is anything

like the Rordan, then we are doomed.”

Trinian’s eyes and throat burned, and he wanted to scream at the soldier to rescind his words, to acknowledge that they had won back Drian, that they had held their own so far, and they would hold out until the last man... but when the last man fell, there would be nothing more to say, because they would, indeed, be doomed. The king’s shoulders fell low, his head bowed, and he dismissed the man.

“Too long,” he muttered to himself, running his hands fitfully across the smooth surface of the throne’s arm, “Too long I have wondered what the god is planning. I have fortified, and defended, and fought and feared – but I know nothing!” He rose up and paced the chamber. “Dark, so dark, my vision unclear – my family is safe, but for how long – I must know more. The Karakan god knows more, he knew something, he is coming to kill me! Is he coming? Why hasn’t he come? Oh, but I shall go mad!” He gripped his fair hair in his fair hands and wished for the strength of ten men, and the wisdom of twenty.

“I shall go mad, and I shall fail because I know nothing. But the gods,” he stopped still on a sudden, and looked to the west in the direction of the Rordan River, seeming to see through the walls of the palace and behold its churning might. “The gods know, and I will know what they know.”

He called for Gladier, for his horses, for his cloak, and in ten minutes, without a word of explanation, he and his mentor were riding hard across the paths of Drian to the shore of Rordan River.

\* \* \*

They pulled up at its roaring side, and Trinian leapt from his horse, his boots barely not in the water. "Rordan!" he cried, the wind stirring his hair and heart, his hands upon his sides, and his legs firmly astride the land, full of the elation of taking matters into his own hands.

"Rordan! It is I, Trinian, King of Drian and Emperor of Minecerva, and I call upon you to meet with me. I will have answers!"

For a moment all was still, and Gladier was about to ask what Trinian meant by this madness, when suddenly the river churned and whirled about, and a figure rose above the surface and strode toward them as if on dry land. Tall, taller than any man, with hair that flowed over strong shoulders and a staff of gnarled wood, Rordan was as impressive as the day he first stood in the hall of the gods.

"So, mortal king, you command me as if you were Fate himself. What gives you the right to order and call as if the entire world were at your disposal?"

Trinian swallowed hard, but neither he nor Gladier fell to the ground. Both had already stood before a high god, and though Trinian did not yet know the difference, it was easier not to fall before a natural being in his glory.

"I am the newly appointed king of Drian, chosen by Fate and blessed by the gods at the beginning of time. I carry the blessing of Adalam, and I have command over the natural world. But one of your kind wishes to deprive me of that right, to wrest it from my living hands, then kill me and my family and rule my world. I must know more of this enemy, and you must tell me."

"I need tell you nothing, mortal man. I am not a spirit

you can conjure for your pleasure. I saved your family, of which I am sure you know, and that was a kindness. Not because I owed you anything. If we were to quibble, *you* owe *me*. But that does not matter. I will tell you what you ask not because you demand it but because I am invested in Drian, and I care for its people. Even you, puny man, are under my care. Do not forget it, and do not demand so blithely of your equals.”

All was silent a moment, as if Rordan were waiting for an apology, but Trinian was silent, and the mighty man of water spoke again.

“Had I the ability to depart the river and meet the god on his own land, I would long ago have challenged him in open combat. But it is my part to flow from the northern tip of Kelta, where water from the Northern Ocean cascades into me, and carry the gallons of water down the divide of Minecerva, until I empty into the gulf of Southern Drian.

“Still, this clear delineation of borders does not prevent me from offering aid to those who come to ask it, or even those who do not. I was eager to offer aid to the queen and princesses, and tell them of the far-off land of paradise, of which I have never seen, but have heard rumor from the water that once resided in its lake, that has been carried by clouds in the sky, and dropped down into my own coursing waterway. And I listen eagerly for tales of them from the rivulets that flow into him.”

Trinian stepped forward at that, his own heart beating to hear tidings. “What can you tell me of them?” he cried.

“They are safely past the gorgans for now, and are continuing the journey,” said the god, out of pity, and Trinian visibly relaxed. The god knew that now, at last,

the mortal was ready to hear news of Power.

“Do you think you are merely against a natural god, and do you think you can command him, like you tried to do with me?” he asked quietly. “Oh, little man, you know nothing. You could no more command me than you could the mountains to fall, and to face *him* is to face the afterlife, or the wickedness of a man’s heart, or to command *life* to begin. For he is a high god.”

Gladier visibly started.

“Yes,” continued the god, “your mentor understands. You know he wishes to kill you, but you do not know that he wishes to kill *everything*, and remake it in his own image. He wishes to possess every being, and wield us as puppets upon a muddy stage. The rivers will run with blood in his reign, and he will bury every forest, every prairie, every rock face in the grime that covers Karaka. Karaka was once a jungle land, though you do not understand what I say, since it has been a muddy plateau for hundreds of years. The natural god of the jungle did not care for his land as he ought, and when Power demanded it, he gave it up to him, and slunk far beneath the earth, until he has ceased to be himself. He has died, as you would say, and thus happens to all land when it is abused. The life spirit departs from it, and ceases to be.

“Now Power is breeding his own warriors and sending them to Drian ahead of himself, for he dare not approach me. I am the only god who opposes him.”

“But, why then, do you not stop his armies?” demanded Trinian. His fear was growing upon him like a wave, and he was trying to keep a grip on reality by finding fault with the god.

“I don’t know why I can’t stop the armies,” was the calm, unexpected response. “I am always strong when I go against Power, as if with a strength not of myself. From the Golden King, perhaps. But he has sent his gorgans around me, I do not know where, and I could not stop them from invading Drian.”

Trinian paced a long minute before finally whirling back toward the River. “Power kidnapped me – perhaps you know about that?”

Rordan shook his head. “I did not. The water from Karaka never comes into my courses. I am surprised you survived.”

Trinian was taken aback for a moment, his belief that this being must be all-knowing shattered, and he was uncertain that he might find all the answers here. “Well, he did, and I did. And he spoke of a prophecy that foretold that I would not fall before him, and so he should know that I was the king, and he could kill me, and he could reign over Minecerva. Do you know anything about this? Can Power see into the future?”

Rordan looked uncertain. He folded his flowing arms over his wet, solid chest and considered for a moment. “Power cannot see the future, of that I am certain. For only Fate is this gift reserved, but he would never tell Power anything. I have heard rumors, however, of two goddesses who are called the daughters of Fate, for they can foretell a little of what is to come, and will give prophecies when asked. Perhaps that is where Power got his information. But prophecies are tricky things, and tell little accurately.”

“Where are these daughters? Where can I find them?”

“I’ve only heard rumors, mind you –”

“You seemed to think rumors were enough to send my family on a long, dangerous journey. Tell me!”

Rordan, angry again at being commanded, stared hard at the king before answering. “The mountains of Austro. They are Justice and Mercy. Do not expect them to give you the answers you seek!” With that, he dispersed with a mighty splash into his river, and disappeared.



## The Valley of Death

**T**he Lady of Drian, as she followed the new prince to the country of the south, seethed in her bitterness, remembering her father's last words to her. If Prince Afias would listen to her counsel, all would be well. But if he proved to be as surly and stubborn as he had shown himself thus far in court, then nothing good could come of his command.

Though her arm was in a cast, Gladier had accelerated Adrea's healing, and she felt little pain now. To be sure, she insisted to everyone that there was no pain at all, but Gladier had given Faring, her handmaiden, a bottle of pain-killer and told her to keep an eye on her mistress.

The journey south was difficult but short. This was the most frequented of the roads leading away from Drian, and it was mostly in good condition; but when they reached the path through the Sacred Wood, they began to notice signs of the enemy's destruction as it had passed through. Entire trees had been ripped up by their roots, burnt stumps and blackened branches showed signs of large fires, as if the

army had lit camp fires without caring whether they singed the branches above or spread to neighboring trees. The no-man's land was far more desolate than when Lady Adrea had traversed it five years ago with Trinian.

They met one band of gorgans inside the wood. Four of them sat gorging themselves on venison and failed to look up until the Drian party was right on top of them. Afias led his men, and without loss of life, butchered the creatures. Throwing themselves upon the heavy-toothed creatures, stabbing them through the chest and neck at once, it was the work of a moment, and it was ended.

At the easy victory, the hearts of the Drinians lifted. The men were eager to follow Afias, who had thrown himself upon the largest of the beasts, and who seemed seasoned now as if he has been in many battles. He had led the army bravely in Mestraff, defended boldly when they lost Drian, and led the charge to retake it, but it was this close encounter in the woods that seemed to elevate him in the eyes of his men. Now they loved him and cheered for him, and felt that they could overcome anything so long as he led them.

When they emerged from the boundary forest into the depths of South Drian, they found the land more devastated than they could have imagined. Most villages had been utterly wiped out; a few held only shattered, hollow-eyed inhabitants who had lost everything. The caravan traveled for two days towards the palace, meeting only the odd, struggling farmer here and there. These they picked up, and added to their group.

But on the morn of the third sun, a rider appeared who had apparently been searching for them. His name was

Garla, the brother of the man who died in Drian, and he was young, maybe only fourteen, but he was brave. He came to seek their help, for not all the enemy soldiers had departed South Drian. Some had discovered one of the hideaways and were attacking it as they spoke, and Afias immediately turned the caravan to follow the boy.

The screams could be heard three miles away. They swelled over the hills and like the echo of a bad dream sounded in Adrea's ears. Though Afias led them quickly, still the screams sounded and they were no closer. The village had hidden itself well, and without Garla, their party would have had difficulty discovering it. But somehow, the enemy had found them out.

"Just around this last hill! We're almost to the Kazeel Valley!" Garla told them, and Afias separated the soldiers from the civilians, ordering the latter to remain behind.

Adrea joined the prince where he rode forward at the head of the contingent, and she felt mild displeasure radiate from him as he sighed and shifted restlessly in his saddle. *If he means for me to stay behind with the civilians, he had better do some rethinking.* But he said nothing, and they rode around the hill.

The gorgans must have had warning of them, for when the contingent thundered round the swell into the valley, they were retreating over the hills... but the damage was done. The field stretched before them a sodden mess, muddy and wet, red and black with blood. Bodies sprawled about like laundry scattered by the wind, and they were all the bodies of women.

Adrea dropped from her horse in disbelief and approached one of them, not caring that her gown dragged

through the filth. She overheard one of the men talking to the prince. He was in shock and his voice cracked and broke, "All those who couldn't fight came here to us. We thought we'd be safe. What could we do? They didn't want us. We tried to fight, with our bare hands even, but they threw us into the houses, and barricaded the doors. My wife..." And she heard no more through his weeping. None of the older children or men had been harmed – only the new born infants and the women who had been with child. The beasts cared only for the most tender and new, those who had yet to experience life. Adrea looked down at the dead women at her feet – and vomited.

The Lady of Drain had encountered horror too often to let it overwhelm her long. She was not immune to it, but she had seen too much. It must just be faced and sometimes – when the horror is beyond imagining – forgotten. She looked at the sky, away from the valley, and breathed deeply. Then she looked about for the prince, for he was her responsibility.

She saw him at a distance bent over a woman and blinded by his tears. She took her horse by its bridle and went to him; kneeling gently, she saw that the woman he held had been gutted. Her stomach, once round, was now open.

"Afias," she said to him, "it's time to move on."

"I have to help them," he said, his voice hollow and numb.

Seeing the expression in the prince's eyes, she knew that he could not thus make his appearance before the court. She knew she must get him far away from this horror, this sea of useless death, if he was going to be any help to the people of South Drian. "You will. Come with me and tomorrow, you will help them."

She took his blood-washed hand and led him to the horse. It was a valley of graves, but the graves were not tombs, they were women. Grimly, she led him from the Valley of Kazeel.

## Varlo Palace

**T**he Drinian soldiers did not notice Adrea and Afias leave the valley, occupied as they were in gathering up the bodies for a mass burial. Adrea, leaving the prince sitting in a little dell, his head in his hands, went back to the caravan and told them to go on ahead to the palace as soon as the soldiers returned from the valley. She said that she and the prince would arrive tomorrow.

“I’ll come with you, lady,” said Faring.

Adrea almost dismissed her, but then thought better of it, aware that rumors could circulate quickly, especially in a strange land, and Faring’s presence would ensure against that.

“Very well.”

They found the prince as she had left him, still in a brown mood, brooding so deeply he barely registered their presence. She had to lead him like a child, her scorn for him deepening with each step, and the women set up camp in the wood.

“My lady,” asked Faring, looking strangely at her mistress, “what did you see in that valley?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry: he’ll be himself again soon,” she answered tightly.

“No, my lady. It’s you. I’ve never seen your eyes so haunted.”

Adrea’s heart tightened and she did not answer. The images surged again in her mind, red and black and twisted, but she pushed them away, refusing to recall the blood-stained valley, and turning her attentions solely to the prince. Before going to sleep, she pulled out Faring’s bag. *I am certain Gladier gave her a numbing agent for my arm.* After rooting around for a moment, she found a little bottle, nodded in satisfaction, and measured out three drops into the prince’s glass. He drank it mechanically when she handed it over, then she returned the bottle to the bag, taking none for herself.

After a night of agony in which neither the lady nor the prince of Drian slept, the sun at last dawned pale against the morning mist. Afias was himself again: his eyes clear, his step firm, but his brow still furrowed in sorrow. From then on, there would always be a small part of his face that reflected the horror of the Valley of Kazeel.

Without prologue, as he sat down to accept a dish of eggs from Faring, he asked Adrea, “How does a people recover from something like that?”

“I don’t think they do.” She was short-tempered, and once again, her heart clenched within her. “But eventually, they move on. The world doesn’t stop because of misery.”

“How *can* they move on?” he asked.

She scraped the bottom of her bowl with her good hand,

forcing herself to eat, annoyed that he wanted her to have the answers. But he needed guidance, and that was why she had come. She leaned forward, pushing her anger and contempt aside, and looking him in the eye. “But they will – because you will lead them. You were there; you saw it and you felt it. Your compassion does you credit. You feel, and your feelings will connect you to the South Drinians – it will be your strength; and you will raise them from this terror.”

He met her gaze, and the intensity behind her eyes reassured him despite himself. With perfectly concealed condescension, she had voiced what she knew would encourage him, what would motivate him to act.

“Let us go to the palace, then,” he said, rising. “There is work to be done.”

\* \* \*

When they arrived at Varlo, the palace of South Drian, two lords received them: Dargevalor, an elderly gentleman who had been away in Austro at the time of the attack, and Lord Kalaban, a man in his mid-forties, who had charge of a large fiefdom – a land that, thanks to its proximity to the east, had been mostly untouched by the gorgans. They received Afias and Adrea with a combination of gratitude and trepidation.

“Our royal family was slaughtered in the invasion,” explained Dargevalor. “They were farmers, you know, and we aren’t accustomed to receiving state royalty. We’ve heard so much of the mighty Emperor Trinian, and we want to show only the very best service to his brother.”



A hopeful light came into Afias's eyes and he opened his mouth to explain that any special solemnity for his sake was unnecessary, and he would be very happy to engage with them as farmers, but Adrea cut him off, "Thank you, Lord Dargevalor. It would be my pleasure to answer any questions you might have regarding ceremony or custom. If you would kindly show us to our rooms, we will dress for dinner, and then meet with you to hear about South Drian's situation."

Dargevalor, who had introduced himself without the prefix 'Lord' and looked uncomfortable when the accomplished lady from Drian used it, shuffled his feet. His lined face was wrinkled with worry. "Of course, of course. Your rooms are all ready. But I'm afraid it will be several hours until dinner is ready. We dine late here... I think."

Prince Afias leaned forward, trying to put the man at rest. "That's absolutely fine," he began.

"Of course," agreed Adrea, and the men all gave a sigh of relief. "We can just eat in our rooms. If you would bring us some light appetizers, we'll be perfectly alright."

Afias blushed with embarrassment. It was clear from the blank, lost look on both faces that the lords had no idea of what an appetizer would consist, but Lady Adrea only smiled her official court smile, and followed the servant to her room.

The palace chambers were in good condition since, although the palace showed signs of battle scarring, there was none of the occupation damage that had ravaged Drian. The enemy had been as interested in occupying South Drian as a wild tornado is to rest in a home. And, between the men and women Trinian had sent with them from

Drian, and those who had survived in the castle, Varlo had enough personnel to satisfy Adrea's requirements for ceremony.

Afias and Adrea held council with the two lords that night, but they knew almost as little as the Drinians regarding the state of their kingdom. Afias lost no time in sending out scouts to the various districts, seeking out villagers and townsfolk and calling for them to make their way to the capitol, where Adrea began organizing a restoration of housing and food. Over the next few days, together, they began to create a home for the South Drianians at Varlo.

Within two weeks, two hundred people occupied the capitol, but no more citizens resided in any of the outlying lands. Afias's men had gathered from the houses and fields enough food to last only three months. It was autumn, just past the harvest, when the barns ought to have been stacked full with provisions for the winter, but all the silos and barns lay empty to the frosty air, ransacked by the gorgan army that had swallowed all food like a swarm of invading locusts.

## Rarks

**A**long the bank of the Rordan, on the small hill that nestled neatly within a grove of oak and cypress trees, in a vale surrounded on two sides by water, one side by solid rock, and one side by a horde of gorgans, the morning was bright and cheerful, with no solemn ceremony in the brisk air. To Viol, who awakened early and thought immediately, *today is the day I die*, the brightness of the day seemed incongruous. She rolled up her bedding, combed her hair, and put on the best of her three gowns, as if to dress for death.

Everyone – aside from Asbult who sat watch on the ridge – was sleeping on the ground, and the littlest princess crept away from them. Since the water pot was dry, she made her way to the edge of the cliff, where a rivulet flowed and dropped off suddenly toward the Rordan in a waterfall. The path of the rivulet was closed in by a rock face, which was so overgrown with foliage that the rocky ledge was concealed behind it.

As Viol waded into the water and bent down to scoop

the pot through it, she heard approaching footsteps. Fear gripped her heart, and splashing to the other side of the water, she sank back into the thick overgrowth and almost immediately, met the unyielding surface of the rock face. In a desperate attempt to conceal herself, she moved along the stone until she found an opening, and drew back inside it completely.

The footsteps came up beside the water, and stopped. Viol remembered the water pot. She had left it on the path. Cautiously, peeking out, she saw her brother-in-law standing above it, with a genuinely puzzled expression.

Viol giggled in relief, emerging as if by magic from the foliage, and Asbult laughed at her. "I thought perhaps the pot was an intricate new weapon of the gorgan's, designed to trip me up as I went for water, and dehydrate me to death."

"Hey! I was really scared!"

"So was I. Of the water pot."

"Oh, stop teasing."

"So where were you hiding?" He pulled aside the underbrush, but then he frowned.

"You found a tunnel?"

"Apparently. What's wrong?"

The camp was stirring as Asbult charged into the center. He stopped his mad careen when he found himself face-to-face with Queen Adlena, and stood before her with wide open eyes. And she, puzzled, looked back at him. He gaped as though he saw her for the first time.

"What is it?" she asked.

Without a word, he stumbled back and ran to Garrity and foolishly, clutched his arm.

Garrity grabbed him and shook him a little. "What's the matter?" he asked, frowning at Asbult's dramatic expression. "What is it?"

Viol came up beside the queen, watching in fascination. Her brother-in-law pointed back the way he had come. "There are rocks, Garrity. My Queen, there are rocks and there is a hole in them."

"What?" asked Adlena faintly.

"It's true," said Viol. "I don't know what it means, but there is a tunnel in the rocks."

"Show me," said Garrity.

The hole was just tall and wide enough for Garrity, the tallest of their company, to stand without hitting the roof.

At the prince's command, the group packed their belongings, distributing them in bundles among the company, and then made their way into the tunnel. They could hear the enemy stirring, preparing to ascend to the camp behind them.

Before disappearing into the deep darkness, Asbult looked at Garrity, but the commander only shrugged. It was possible the tunnel went nowhere, and they would be trapped like rabbits in a warren, but the queen's dream had been eerily accurate, and it would be foolish not to try. Garrity waited until everyone had slipped into the cavernous depths, then he too followed through the foliage, disappearing before the gorgans could see where they had gone.

It was dark and long; twisting, with sharp ascents and descents. They lit torches, but it was a dangerous business in the small space, so they had only one at the fore and one at the rear. All along the way, they jumped at any little

sound, afraid that the gorgans would follow them. Afraid they would reach a dead end and have to turn back.

But four claustrophobic hours later, after tramping in single file with the walls brushing against them on all sides, and every little sound or shadow seeming louder and larger than it was, there was light ahead, then clear daylight, and at last, the tunnel led into a large, leafy clearing, and they were deep in Mestraff territory.

The women laughed, the men relaxed, and the little prince danced in freedom. There was no sign of gorgans. Laughing, Asbult picked up Cila and twirled her around.

“I can see the peak of the Yellow Mountain to the northwest!” said Asbult. “Judging by its distance, we should be near the forester dells. Look!” he pointed east, “smoke!”

Sure enough, in the distance, they saw smoke pouring out above the treetops, and they approached cautiously to discover a small hamlet.

Rarks was a lonely dell nestled amongst the wilderlands of Mestraff’s vast forests, wherein dwelt foresters and self-sufficient farmers. Its few huts were all made of stone, with vines growing along the walls and grass sprouting from the roofs. The overall effect was that the village itself seemed to have sprung up from the ground. The only building made of wood was a small inn in the center. This hidden hamlet was friendly and hospitable, and the townsfolk were eager for news from Drian.

The inn-keeper was a tall, skinny man, and when the royal company neared his doors, he stretched out his arms to such capacity that it seemed he would bodily transport the entire group into the tavern himself. He served them

drinks and dinner with a warm gusto, and reassured them of beds for the night.

Neither was he the only one with a lively interest in the travelers. Many of the townsfolk stopped in for a late-night beer to catch a glimpse of the distinguished company from the capitol, and maybe pass a few words with them. It appeared that news of Trinian's salvation of Ringwold had reached even as far as this cloistered dell, and fostered in them a marked gratitude for the new king.

The royals were careful to keep their identities secret, but their homeland they could not, since even their clothing and dialect betrayed them, and they willingly shared information about Drian. When the tavern had at last deposited its final drunken straggler upon the outer road, Asbult lifted his nephew from the bench where he had, for many hours, lain asleep. "We will depart early in the morning, at sunrise."

"And go where?" demanded Lavendier. "This is as good a place as any, now that Kelta is no longer an option."

"We will go where the river god directs. We will travel to the safe haven."

"Must we?" asked Cila, more gently than her sister. "This does seem safe."

"Kelta has already joined Karaka, and Mestraff is overrun with gorgans. Who knows what spies may live among the people here. No, it is safer for us to go on."

"I don't want to go on," said Lavendier.

"Then stay here," said Asbult. "And risk your death, but the rest of us will remain together. No more discussion: good night."

## The Second Possession

**L**avendier sat in the tavern and watched her sister Cila follow Asbult upstairs to bed. The eldest princess bitterly bemoaned her loss of Dasceric, resentful that she did not have the strong arms of a man to hold her close. How she yearned to be comforted and complimented, but neither Garrity nor Merciec seemed willing to act as her personal companion. It was not fair, she mourned to herself, that war, battle, and strife should deprive any one of happiness, and she was particularly disgruntled at Asbult for forbidding her to tell anyone who she was. She had a right to be a princess, after all, and with that internal decision, the tall princess stamped the ground in anger, and stepped back to the bar.

“Brandy.”

The inn-keeper smiled companionably. “For a pretty thing like you? Ah, miss! You must be feeling pretty low. Everyone else is goin’ to bed.”

“I’m frustrated,” she exclaimed injudiciously. “Frustrated and upset, and need something to calm my nerves.”



“Your life can’t be so miserable, now,” he answered, setting the glass before her, and smiling at her melodramatics.

“Danger and death and misery, that’s what my life is. And my idiot brother-in-law wants to prolong it.”

Unnoticed in the corner, as if forgotten by the force that drove everyone home, a man with yellow circles under his eyes rose from the shadows. Oily black locks hung down past his ears, and he moved with an effeminate grace, almost as if he were thick oil moving through water. He sidled up to her sympathetically. “Well now,” he said, “someone ought to get you out of a fix like that.”

\* \* \*

The night was deeply dark, for Mestraff was a dense forest, and not even the light of the moon could penetrate the overspreading foliage. Merciec was on watch for the first half of the night, and he wandered the halls of the inn, listening for any uncommon sounds and peering through the darkness to catch sight of evil, as if evil could be seen. He completed his circuit of the inn in the main room, and moved to sit by the fire: eager to smoke his pipe and recite poetry under his breath; but as he approached the fireplace, he overheard an oily voice snaking its way toward him around the corner from the bar. “Behind the inn,” said the voice, “there is an alcove beneath an elm, a birch, and a spite. I will meet you there at eleven.”

The voice sent a shiver down his spine. He stepped round the corner and saw the back of a man depart through the front door – a man with black, oily locks and a feline grace. The bartender was cleaning up and

Princess Lavendier was heading upstairs. There was no one else in the room.

“Going to bed, princess?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll see you in the morning,” she said coldly, and disappeared.

Merciec went up to the man behind the counter. “Who’s that who just left?” he asked.

The other shrugged. “You know, no one knows. He’s been here a couple days, but don’t talk much with anyone. Surly, he is, and dirty too. Wish he’d wash his hair. No one likes him much, and we all wish he’d move on. He’s not so friendly and well-spoken as your party. Well, I’m going to bed. Help yourself to this coffee if you want anything before morning.”

He put out a jug, then disappeared through a door behind the bar.

Merciec mistrusted the slithery voice he had heard, which was as black as the man’s clinging locks, and he decided to go to the aforementioned alcove. The dark night swallowed him as he exited the inn, and the coven was hard to find, but he stumbled into it after a time, when the wind kindly stirred some branches and the moon illuminated a trio of trees, huddled together liked humped witches, whispering secrets. He settled behind the elm and waited patiently for eleven o’clock.

After an hour, a tall, womanly figure entered the clearing; he could not see her face in the darkness, but he guessed who it was, and presently, another person joined her and they spoke in hushed voices.

“You’re ready?” asked the thick, liquidy, oily voice.

“Yes. What are you going to do?” The princess was over-

eager, and spoke quickly.

“You only have to trust me.”

“Well? You said you can give me my brother’s throne. Tell me!”

“Ah, my lady, I am the god of Karaka’s most trusted advocate. I have come here from Kelta to search you out, on purpose to give you your brother’s throne, and you question me? You must trust me.”

“I will when you tell me,” said Lavendier. “What should I do?”

“Take this,” he handed over something and the princess snatched it greedily. “Hold it up to the moon, and repeat aloud: ‘I swear to you, I swear to you ...’” The princess repeated it after him. “I swear to you my allegiance. Oh god of Power, envelop me in your might, that I may conquer with you. Conquer and rule, and hold power over all of Drian. Come to me, oh god, and take this beautiful vessel – fill me with your might!”

The princess was repeating each word, but before she could say “fill me with your might,” Merciec leapt from his hiding place, drawing his sword in a smooth motion, and falling upon the princess.

“Say nothing,” he cried. “Or I will slit your throat.”

Lavendier became instantly still; the man with the oily locks cursed in the darkness, but he did not run away.

“You need her for something,” said Merciec, “and you do not desire her death. If you wish to avoid it, tell me who you are, whom you serve, and what you are doing here.”

“You shall not kill your prinss-esss.” His voice was no longer thick and syrupy, but sharp and slithery, full of hissing.

“She is a traitor to her nation and family, and I would have no qualms ending her life here. Whom do you serve?”

“You will not kill her –” But a scream from Lavendier, as Merciec’s sword pressed into her neck, convinced him otherwise. He answered then, but the words came from him as if pulled slowly from a clothes press, each yank painful and jerking. “Farsooth. Lord of Kelta. He has defeated King Wrelle and serves the most powerful of all the gods! Farsooth will rule, with his blessing, over all of humanity! The new age of man has begun - the old world is passing away. The old order is no more. The new world has come. The new world is *now*. Man, once and for all, will rule the earth!”

“What do you want with the princess?”

“She will rule,” he cried exultantly. “Farsooth to rule Kelta. Lavendier to rule Drian. The god has granted mankind to rule without the gods! He will overthrow them. No more gods to rule their regions. No more Fate to govern man’s actions. She was to be consumed like Farsooth, to overthrow her brother! To love the god of power!”

Merciec could not see, but he was the first Bowman in Drian, and did not need sight to guide his aim. Only instinct and sound; and so, as the servant of Power grew more and more exultant, and declared his propaganda with more and more strength, Merciec drew his dagger and threw it with true aim. There was a soft thump on the ground, and the voice was silent.

“Lady Lavendier, you would sell your soul for comfort? Betray your brother for power?” She did not speak. “Treason is a capital crime,” he told her.

She trembled beneath his blade, but she lifted her head high. "My brother will have your life! You cannot kill me."

"I would gladly die for killing you, if it meant I saved my king and country. I have every right to kill you: this is war."

She still held the round stone and had only a few words left to the prayer. She could call them out before he slit her throat, and if she did, no doubt she would hold great power over him. He ought to kill her, stop her from voicing the words, and save the throne of Drian forever... but he hesitated, for Lavendier was trembling more and more. She was a selfish woman with a small heart, and her scrap of bravery now fell to pieces beneath his blade. In fear for her life, she dropped the stone. "I only want to go home. No one was going to be hurt. I would have let my brother live!"

Without sympathy, Merciec removed the knife she wore at her waist, withdrew his blade, and stooped down to pick up the stone. It pulsed and throbbed and burnt his hand, and he threw it away into the dark.

"I ought to kill you. You are a danger to your family and a vile traitor. But something holds me back." Though he could not see her face, he imagined the glint of vanity in her eyes, and he shuddered. "Don't flatter yourself that it's because of your beauty or rank. There's something else, something that could have been – that you could have been." He studied her vague form as she trembled in fear, and he thought of Dasceric's description of her splendor – it was a splendor perverted, a power misused, but still... she could have been magnificent.

She had fallen to the ground, and the sight of her

stretched in abjection made his stomach twist. "I sense the power behind your every speech, look, thought. You have been gifted with the potential for greatness, but you fall so low. You will make a great tear against the canvas of the world or you will single-handedly rebuild its frame. I have it now within my power to prevent your evil," he advanced upon her, still with his blade drawn, "while your power to build holds me back. I will not kill you; but understand that your life is a privilege – you are on probation. Anything you do, wherever you go, you will consult me. If I discover a hint of betrayal in your heart, your life is mine."

Lavendier, shaking and glaring at the ground, hated this man who had caught her in her crime, and yet her mind was too weak to fight against him. She was plagued neither by thoughts of revenge nor flight – she had no thoughts at all. Only feeling. She was a creature entirely governed by feeling, and for the moment, it was fear. In fear, led by her stern arbiter, she returned to the inn.

## The Council of Karaka

Power screamed in anger and threw over anything that was not rooted to the ground. The Secretary did not cease his steady work at his desk, but waited for the fit to pass. It always did.

Finally, Power roared for Kellan.

“Kellan is dead. His son Ferran is who you want,” Secretary reminded him.

“Ferran!”

A gorgan, who looked exactly like his father, just as large and ugly and fierce, ran in and bent to one knee. “The Secretary tells me that we lost the Princess Lavendier,” said Power scornfully. “She was easy prey, but my idiot human slaves have failed me! Kelta has failed me! Farsooth sends his little ants to conquer the world, and he can do nothing but fail!

“Kellan failed me in taking Drian, but you – his mightiest son, my special offspring, my unique one – you will not fail. I will make certain of it.

“Go, you gorgan of thoughtlessness and instinct and

decrepitude! Gather thirty of your strongest, mightiest soldiers, and bring them to me. I have a special plan for you. You will not fail me!" He roared so loud at the last that papers blew off the Secretary's desk and settled into the muddy floor. The Secretary merely leaned over to see which they were, then set about rewriting new ones. The ones on the ground would mold and dissolve and become a part of it.

Ferran stood up and growled in obedience. He bared his teeth, stuck out his frozen chest and clenched the muscles of his boiling legs. Unlike his father, he remembered no time when he was not in constant agony, and the pain did not enrage him like it had the one who spawned him. He saluted, and left to select his men.

"The gorgans cannot be trusted, you know," said the Secretary. "They are on a short leash, to be sure, but they are idiots, and will bungle the job. Your god friends would be better allies."

Power breathed deeply, collecting himself. "Once the gods know my plans, they could act against me. I want this girl for myself. She will serve me or die a terrible death. Do you hear?"

The roar did not ruffle the Secretary. "Always, my master. I hear and record everything. But what of your next goal?" He handed across a paper which the god took scornfully. He had no use for the things, and never read them. The Secretary continued to write while he spoke. "I think this time you should try a different avenue. The gods will learn your ultimate goal soon, and some, like Passion and Resolve, may not oppose you."

Power threw the paper back at him. "So? What is your



point?”

“I think,” he said placidly, “you should speak to Terror. He is always keen for chaos. And Destruction, Death, and Despair hate the other gods. You can use that hatred for your own purposes, and turn them against Fate.”

Power seethed to himself, mulling over the bitter idea. The thought of sharing his winnings galled him, and his heart tightened. Resolve had already strengthened his battle hosts, but he had asked for nothing from her, and owed her nothing because of it. He refused to be in debt to anyone. But the Secretary was always right, and Power knew he could ill afford to fend off all the gods, if they decided to oppose him. Approaching some of the more ambitious ones, convincing them to help him, might turn the tide... and he could always turn against them in the end.

\* \* \*

The hall of Power was filled with the brilliance and beauty of a gathering of the high gods, a mud hole embedded with precious stones. Resolve and Passion sparkled like red and amethyst jewels as they reclined on the bubbly, muddy benches and sipped their sparkling wine. Their young brothers Death, Destruction, and Despair were like deep, whirling, creamy ebony, never standing still and singing raucous war songs, and their eyes held darkness of the blackest night. Finally, Terror was a skinny thing - jittery, active, and glowing orange - wavering in the center of the hall.

No one moved when Power entered triumphantly, his

gray shadow flickering in the firelight, a cloak of heavy darkness encasing his half-mortal substance. “You have come to me, brothers and sisters,” he rumbled, and their hearts thrilled, for Power had always been the most beautiful, most dynamic of them all, and his very presence drew them to him; “you have come to me because you know what I offer – soon, I will control everything in this realm, and when I do, it is you who will enjoy the spoils. This is enough to tempt even the most selfless god: and none of us can claim that title.”

Passion laughed aloud. “Who wants it? Unless it’s my self-righteous other half.” Then, carried away by the sound of her own beautiful voice, she went on. “I was like Charity once – I too wanted to make mortals happy with their pleasures, to relieve the stress of life with innocent revels. But the self-control it requires! The self-mastery. It’s a tedious journey, and I grew bored with it.” She sipped her wine reflectively. “So many mortals never found mastery, and yet they still made use of my gifts, and I found pleasure in granting it. I didn’t want to wait for them to ‘find themselves,’ to ‘become good.’ We only have so much time, and they have far less. Yes, I think controlling them might be fun! Tell us, Power, what do you plan?”

“Is it our place to take command of their existence?” interrupted Despair sorrowfully. This god had once been Sadness, had once found satisfaction in guiding mortals through the trials of life, but he had since turned away from that path, had drowned himself in the futility of life. But a small spark of conscience still pricked him. “After all, we did not bring them into existence – what right have we to end it?”

“Didn’t we?” cried Power. “What did we do then? Did we not heave the mountains from the plains, delve the valleys, fill the rivers, bequeath the natural gods their domains, and nurture the life that was just beginning here? So what if it was all at the command of The Golden King? What has He ever done to benefit us? Or the mortals? I have taken on their shape! I can rule them from both above and below, and I can teach you all to do the same.”

“We can deal out *death*,” said Death greedily.

“We can turn them to our will,” whispered Resolve.

“We can destroy and tear down!”

“We can control them,” said Power, and they all nodded.

Passion stood, her low-cut gown swaying across the ground. “What do you need from us?”

“I need to possess a member of the royal family, and I need a vessel to get near the king. I tried the eldest princess, but she has eluded me. I need another vessel.”

His sultry sister nodded. “Do not give up on her yet – I will see what I can do. But for now,” she glanced at Resolve, “I think we may have another victim for you.”

## Etchta

In the council room of Varlo in South Drian, before they were joined by the other two lords for their morning meeting, Afias and Adrea sat together at the long dining table. They had been in Varlo for one week, and Adrea was adding figures together on paper, planning the distribution of their limited amount of grain, seeking to extend the meager amount as far as possible, and Afias was gazing intently at nothing.

His abstraction rubbed against her and she seethed, reflecting that he never helped, he always moped, and she was forever tasked with all the labor and planning. At last, her mouth spoke almost before she realized she was speaking.

“What are you thinking about?” she cried.

He stirred, as if surprised, and said he was reflecting on a strange encounter he had had that morning.

“Well? What was it?”

He looked at her quietly a moment, and then related a story in tedious detail, and she sat tapping her pen

throughout.

He had been wandering the halls of Varlo in the early hours before the sun rose, unable to rest as he stewed over the problems of the country, and eventually, he found himself in the lower levels of the palace. There he came upon a large grated door and went through it: he was in the kitchens. It was all very clean and neat there, since it was the only place in the lower levels that was used for anything. But he knew the servants would be stirring soon, and loath to meet anyone, he continued down the halls. Here was another door: wooden and old, with mighty iron hinges that creaked when pushed. A rusty bolt latched it tight shut, but he knocked it away and, pushing the creaky hinges open, found a flight of steeply descending stairs.

The going was rough, thickly carpeted with dust and dirt and the steps crumbling away, cobwebs hanging from every nook, and little alcoves where mice and old candlesticks frolicked together. At the very bottom he expected darkness, but a red glow emanated faintly in the distance. He tapered the wick of his candle and followed it.

Soon, he heard a voice. Indistinct and croaking, it seemed to croon to itself. There was a passage at the bottom of the stairs and a door at the far end, from which emanated the light. Afias blew out his lamp.

*“Crickets and toads,  
Light and dark,  
Morning comes soon  
And night is stark.*

*Come gently, my dear,  
And behold your doom  
Come lightly, my love,  
I carve your tomb."*

The singer of the dire chant was invisible from Afias' vantage point, and he stepped forward into the chamber. There was an old woman bent over an ancient fireplace, dressed in black rags, with scraggly white hair. She turned with a bowl in her hands, and this she dropped clattering to the floor, sending its liquid contents all over the cold-hewn stones.

She cried at him, "Now look what you made me do!" and bent over to clean up the spill with her skirt, as if his presence there were not an utter surprise. But her eyes watched him with a peculiar brightness. "What are you doing up at this hour?" she inquired. "When night is stark and morning heralded by nightly terrors? Besides, you're too soon. All is not prepared. No, not prepared at all. No breakfast, no dinner, no nightly sleeping: not like the mortals. Oh no! Not like them at all. We've nothing here for you."

"Who are you?" asked the prince.

"Who are we? We are the woman who moans in the night. We are the ever alert spirit of the palace. Yes, its lucky spirit. But you don't believe me. My rags; yes, my rags. My rags betray me. Nothing fit for a witch or a warlock or a peasant girl. Oh no: only for spirits, perhaps? Good enough for the demented goddess of love – for she's a spirit. But you do not believe me, my rags betray me." She was hobbling around the room, refilling her bowl from a

cauldron in the corner, and taking it back to the fire.

“But what is your name?”

“Names mean nothing. But names are everything. My name is not your name.”

“Old woman, I am the Prince of Drian, and I am asking for your name.”

“Aahhh!” She hobbled quickly over to him, and gazed up hard into his eyes. “But we knew that. Oh yes, not much that old Etchta doesn’t know, down here in her cavern. Down here, in her prison. In her sanctuary. Communing with spirits. Come to bring her back to the light, eh? White Knight of Drian. Too late,” she shook her head sadly. “Too late for that.”

“You seem to have been here a long time. How do you stay alive? The stairs were untraveled, and there are no other doors down here that I can see.”

“There are ways. Ways...ways...ways to light and ways to death...ways to breathe....and ways of breath. I have my ways.”

“Come upstairs with me. I’ll get you some food, and better clothes.”

“I come White Knight, with grateful old heart, and hobbling old steps. But do not separate me from my old cavern. Please, it is my sanctuary.”

“I will not meddle with your ways, Etchta. You are old and can do no harm. You are free to come and go as you please.”

He concluded the story to Adrea by saying, “I gave her a room up here, but I’m not sure if she’ll use it.”

The lady of Drian had forgotten her impatience, in the weirdness of the story. “This woman sounds incredible,”

she said, “to live so many years alone in such a dismal place; and then to avoid death when the gorgans came. I will visit her later and see if I can offer some comfort.”

Afias nodded. “That’s good of you. But I must warn you that I don’t trust her. She is old and hobbling, but perhaps has been kept prisoner down there for a very good reason. I believe she can do no harm, but just because she seems harmless doesn’t mean she is. There must be a reason she survived all those years on nothing. I think she may have a heart of stone, and we should be cautious.”

Adrea raised her eyebrows at him, frustrated that he would think badly of someone he had just met. But she bit her tongue, as she often did when he said something that annoyed her, and turned back to the papers spread out before her. Expecting the South Drinian lords, she put aside her figures and pulled out maps of Minecerva in preparation for their meeting.

Afias, for the last several days, had been advocating a plan to send ships to Cronice, to request resources from its fertile, sheltered, western coast, but Adrea was strongly against that. Diplomatic relations with Cronice on Drian’s part had always been shaky in her time, and she did not trust that the Mayor of Cronice would receive the sailors kindly. She felt that Kelta, though further, was a safer option, and adamantly advised that they send their ships there, up the Rordan River.

Now, when Lords Dargevalor and Kalaban joined them, the Prince and Lady of Drian rehashed their by-now, tired-out arguments.

“Cronice would have more to offer,” said Afias, “and Lord Kalaban has assured us that diplomatic relations



between Cronice and South Drian have not been unstable like that of Drian. We are not requesting aid for Drian, but for South Drian, and we need make no mention of our connection to the capitol.”

“Any country that scorns its motherland is disloyal on principle,” said Adrea, “and cannot be trusted to look out for others in sacrifice of its own well-fare. If we request aid from Cronice, we are asking them to give up their own supplies and resources: resources that can help protect them against Karaka. They will recognize that, and they will not send aid. They will be more likely to give the same welcome Drian’s envoys have received at their hands – death or imprisonment. Then we would have fewer men, and no ships. Kelta is the safer option, since she has always been an ally of Drian and South Drian.”

“That journey is too long to risk with the approaching cold,” returned the prince. “The river will be precarious enough for the journey there, but treacherous on the return. And Kelta isn’t a fertile land; they will have less to offer, even if they do give all they can spare. What they give will likely not be enough to see us through the winter.”

The debate went on, with the South Drian lords putting in a word or two now and again, but mostly silent. The strong opinions and personalities of the Prince and Lady of Drian overwhelmed them.

At last, Afias called in one of the captains of South Drian’s three ships, and asked his opinion. His name was Wilhem, and he was unequivocally in favor of Afias’ proposal, knowing as he did the dangers of a river journey in winter, and trusting in the good graces South Drian shared with Cronice.

But Adrea, stubborn to the end, refused to let his council sway her opinion. She was the only statesman who understood or had experience with foreign relations, and knew the extent of self-interest that pervaded governments. She could not trust Cronice, and preferred to request no help at all than to send a quarter of South Drian's scarce male population to a hostile country.

Overwhelmed and over-tried, Afias jumped up from the table and stood in the light of the window. The glass of the windows were miserable: streaked forever, no matter how many times they were wiped. The garden outside resembled a bleak winter day, with gray stalks that shivered in the faint breeze. Just another reminder of the land's death and decay. Winter was coming. At most, it was two months away, and they could afford no more debate. He turned back to the table.

"I will not sign off on Kelta. It's too far and it would be irresponsible of me to agree to it. Lady Adrea," he looked at her sternly. So far, he had not defied her. He knew to do so would only increase tension between them, but now he spoke in a tone that brooked no argument. "While I appreciate your counsel, I will not take it. Captain Wilhem will take his ship to Cronice." Her eyes blazed at him, but he did not waver. "That is my decision."

## The Third Possession Laid

**I**n a fury, Adrea swept back to her chambers and heaved the door to with a resounding clang. She dropped onto the floor before it and wept, her heart tightening in pain and rage. The image of Kazeel, her last glance that had taken in the entire valley, rose again in her mind, as it had done every day since they arrived, haunting her, heralding the fate that awaited them all. She thought of Trinian – if he were here, everything would be alright. Why had he sent her away? If her father were here, he would listen to her. But this prince was useless. He was a stubborn, weak idiot, and refused to heed anything she said. They had to save the kingdom, prevent more death, but he was sending these soldiers like pigs to a slaughter house.

“I won’t let him get to me,” she told herself. “But what can I do? He will drag this country into ruin!”

“You despair,” said a voice from the other end of her room. Adrea startled to her feet, but it was only an old woman.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, although it was her own chamber, "I didn't know there was anyone here."

"Just Etchta, my dear. Just her."

So this was Etchta. The lady of Drian rolled her eyes when she remembered Afias' words of warning. This was just an old woman. But she did wonder why the old woman was in her private quarters.

"When people despair," the old voice crooned, "they lose hope. And when there is no hope, they come to me and I help them." She stretched out her hand invitingly. The nod of her head gently beckoned Adrea to follow her. The lady of Drian hesitated, gazing at the dry, wrinkled hand with its long yellow nails.

"I think I had better not. Prince Afias wanted me to oversee the food distribution."

"Is that what a lady of Drian, a daughter of the steward, must do with her time? Is that why she was sent far from home?"

Afias's commands, orders, and stubborn decisions whirled in her mind – every single one of his words that had galled her heart sounded perfectly in her memory. Oh, how she hated this upstart prince of Drian!

"I can help you," whispered Etchta, and Adrea followed the strange woman.

The room in the basement was dark and cold; at the bottom of a laborious descent of a spiral staircase, it was easily the deepest section of the castle. It was a plain room with stone walls, wooden chairs, a table, and an iron pot boiling over a makeshift stove.

"Do you want my help?" the woman asked Adrea, gazing fiercely into her eyes. "You must be sure that you want my

help – no matter what – or I can do nothing for you.”

*I think she may have a heart of stone, and we should be cautious.* Afias’s words resounded in her head, but Adrea dismissed his warning; it was Afias who had the heart of stone.

“Afias has done nothing to help this city and he refuses to take my advice. But I have the experience that could save this land. I have no wish to undermine his authority, but something must change. If there’s anything you can do to help, then please – do it.”

Etchta lifted her wrinkles into a pleased smile. “Come over here,” she pointed to a circle carved in the floor. Adrea stood in the center of it.

“What are you going to do?”

Etchta did not answer, but took from some shelves a variety of liquids and powders. She stirred up the fire and the cauldron began to glow red hot. Then the pot sizzled and cracked from the heat and the fire glowed so white that Etchta’s stooped and wizened figure threw a spectral shadow against the stone wall. Upon her face was cast an eerie glow with shadowy craters running through where the wrinkles of her old age should have been. Then she chanted in a foreign tongue and threw powders into the pot until it boiled over. Like a giant mirror, the liquid that gathered at the base of the cauldron began to show strange things. Adrea beheld gorgans infesting the city of Drian, feasting in Korem’s red halls, gorging themselves on meat, vegetables, and slaughter. And for their entertainment, they competed over who could chop off the greatest number of human heads. Presiding over all this, smiling down the long rows of monsters, was the

wise prince, Afias of Drian.

Adrea cried out in surprise and horror.

“Yes,” said Etchta, “this is the future you see, and it is what will happen if you do not step in to stop it.”

“He would betray Drian?” Her heart beat in her ears, a rush of wind filling her mind. Despite her hatred, she had never imagined this.

“Perhaps not willingly – he is a good young man, you know – but through lack of proper judgment, he may well become a servant to the dark lord. Possessed by him!”

Yes, Trinian said this was what the god of Karaka tried to do to him, what Strana tried to do to Princess Viol. The god would try to take the prince, and the prince would be too weak to fight it. He was such a weak prince. “What can I do to stop this?”

“Put yourself in my hands, and I will give you the power to save these people.”

“Do what you will,” Adrea extended her hands in an open gesture. “I am in your power.”

The witch called out strange words and stirred her pot. Fire and darkness, cackle and silence in the close space; whirling, twisting, twining, smoke evaporating and returning. Adrea’s body was entered, by someone, something, and she was not herself; but then she was again, and she awoke, calm and collected, in her own bed.

Her hatred against Afias burned stronger than ever, and she was now resolved to do whatever was necessary to unseat him from power.

\* \* \*

Adrea was supervising grain storage as the men packed it into the silos, when she received a summons from Prince Afias. He was in the throne room, interviewing farmers, but he dismissed them when she entered.

“How is the grain storage progressing?” he asked her.

Adrea ascended the dais, and placed herself to the right of the throne, directly behind it. She was glad to stand at her post, for she did not have to look at him from here. “Poorly,” she answered him, “We have only two silos full, and the harvest is almost complete.”

“I am leaving Varlo for a week.”

She lost her composure and whirled on him. “What? Why?” She was suddenly gripped with panic, feeling that he was slipping out of her fingers.

“The island of Lupit is only a two day journey south by ship. There’s a chance the enemy did not go that way – they may have resources to spare or man-power to help us. I will be back in seven days at the most.” He stared her down quietly, and she returned to her advisor post behind his throne. “You will rule in my stead until I return,” he told her.

“Yes, my lord.” Her tone told nothing of her inner rage; but in her heart, she was deciding she was right to undermine a prince who would leave the very people he was sent to protect.

## The Palace of Death

**W**ith Afias gone, Adrea enjoyed the freedom to do as she pleased, and soon, the palace was running more smoothly than it had since they first arrived. Adrea basked in her new power and flattered herself that all her decisions and pronouncements were far superior to those of the prince, but like a cloud in the recesses of her mind, she knew that he would return, and that filled her with a deep, calm dread of what she knew would then come to pass.

She knew what would be done through her upon his return, but she did not admit the full truth to herself. He would be defeated, overthrown, and supplanted. A frightful power of the gods coursed in her veins and would overwhelm him when the time came. This she knew, but she did not question the source of the power, or whether she would be in control of it. It was a good thing, she insisted in her heart... but never in her mind. If she had probed with her mind, she would have had to face it, for the truth was just out of reach, brushing against



her consciousness, and if she had asked, she would have grasped the awful truth. As time passed, she went about her duties in Varlo jumpy, disgruntled, and short-tempered.

On the day of Afias' return, Adrea stood at the balcony on the verandah, watching Afias while he was still a long way off, riding placidly toward the palace. Her blood boiled with ire at the sight of him, and it was in this state that Etchta found her.

"Prince Afias could no more run a pig-sty than he could this kingdom!" A few loose strands of her long black hair whipped across her face, a stark contrast against the white of her skin. "And it should not be my responsibility to clean up after a man I cannot control – whose perversity and carelessness have led us to such a pass."

Etchta laid her gnarled hand on the lady's soft arm. "You do the best you can, my dear. Always that."

Adrea struggled to breathe. A hand like a vice gripped her chest and her body froze - she felt as if she had returned to the Valley of Kazeel, and the cries wailed, begged, shouted in her ears to be heard. But she was not herself in this vision. She was one of the beasts, standing over its prey. She covered her ears and fell to her knees, but still the cries were relentless. She needed to silence the screaming – to bring order and justice back to a people plagued by death.

"Help me, Etchta! Help me to help them."

The old woman stood above, silent, grim, and watching.

Adrea wrapped her hands around herself, but it was no protection. Something frightening lived in her soul, and it struggled to come out – to possess her – to overthrow her. Scratching, clutching, pulling at her pinned up hair, the jet

black locks came loose and like a curtain they swept across the floor. She jumped back, frightened, and drew away. The black against the white marble evoked a contrast between good and evil, herself and what she had become. Adrea knew – in the deepest parts of herself, she knew – that she had come to the climax of her soul; she had arrived at the tip of a mountain, and must decide which way to descend. Tipping, tipping, the whole world was spinning, she did not want this, but there was no other way...to go...

“My Lady?”

Adrea started and jumped to her feet. Lord Dargevalor had entered the balcony, and stood uncertainly, watching the two women: the young in agony upon the ground, and the old standing above her, triumphant. Adrea looked at him and for a moment, he experienced the very fires of torment radiating from her eyes. Then the windows of her soul closed and he saw only her ladyship.

“Yes, my lord?” her cool voice held an extra edge as she clutched her hands to keep from shaking. Etchta lifted her gently from the ground, and Lord Dargevalor bowed, uncertain and uncomfortable.

“Lord Afias has just returned,” he told her, and after looking at her uneasily a moment, bowed and quickly left.

Adrea met the prince in the main hall. She was calm and collected, and went straight to take his cloak herself. “How did it go?” she asked, and was surprised at how easy it was to pretend that she cared.

“Worse than could be imagined,” he said, and the dark circles and haggard look of his eyes testified to his statement. He looked as if he had aged twenty years. “It was Kazeel all over again. There is no one – nothing – left.”

She was compassionate, as inwardly she rejoiced at his failure, for it confirmed her in her decision. "You look terrible. You must lie down."

He shook his head, even though his knees could barely hold him. "I need to meet with you immediately."

"Very well," she turned to one of the servants standing near. "Prince Afias and I will meet in the Rowning Room. Bring him a warm dinner."

In the long meeting hall, Afias dropped into a chair and let his head fall into his hands. "They're dying, Adrea. They're dying and I don't know what to do."

"You must not blame yourself," she sat down next to him. "You've done all you could."

"I will not relinquish my help for them but there's nothing to be done. There is no food, and we cannot grow anything until the spring. They will all die before then."

The food came. Adrea watched as he wearily sipped the hot soup; with his hair disheveled, his beard untrimmed, his boots and pants still muddy from the ride – and she rejoiced. She remembered the room in the dungeon and the bargain she had made there; she knew it was about to come true; and she was glad.

"Adrea," said Afias quietly, "I want to apologize for the way I've behaved to you since we left Drian. I have been stubborn and disrespectful and – well, very emotional. And through it all, you have been nothing but a pillar of counsel and comfort, and I fear I took advantage of that. I think, possibly, I've dismissed you, taken you for granted – but I don't know what I would have done without you. I depend on you more than you know."

This was not what she wanted to hear. "Not at all," she

said dismissively.

“My worst fault is that I am unforgiving, and I have resented you for going against me so adamantly. But there is no one I rely on more, and I want to thank you for all you have done.” The prince spoke with deep sincerity, leaning forward and giving her his complete attention.

Adrea refused to look him in the eye. She felt the wall around her heart shake at its foundations. She felt also the storm that was rising in the room – her bargain was about to be met.

“I want this,” she told herself, only she said it out loud.

Afias leaned closer, confused. “What is it you want?”

She looked at him, and saw his honest, trusting eyes. The wall in her heart trembled, shook, cracked, and a little sliver of light shone through. The coming storm was like a brooding, menacing cloud over their heads. “Afias, I must warn you...”

He looked at her, but the storm had come. She was suddenly thrown back across the room and her body hit into the far wall. She was lost inside herself, and someone else controlled her body. She felt the dark power rising up and taking her over. Using her as a vessel, it entered the room, filling it. Then, with a rush of force that threw her violently to the ground, it stood by itself in a corner.

## The Third Possession

**A** mighty wind whirled through the tall windows, knocking over chairs and dishes. All the lights blew out and the chamber grew dark as if an eclipse were over the sun, but outside it was as bright as day.

Afias leapt to his feet and knelt beside the lady of Drian, for he had not yet seen the shadow in the corner. Slowly, she raised her vision to the far wall, and froze. She stretched out her hand, pointed with deliberate purpose, and then screamed. The scream was one of absolute, overpowering terror and despair. She knew now that she did not want this, but it was too late. Through her, evil had come to them. All the color in her face was gone, and her eyes were glazed; her breath ceased. She could not look at the divinity, but she was powerless in its grip and it was taking her breath – it was killing her.

Afias looked where she pointed but saw nothing. Then he saw her face, and in terror for her life, took her head between his hands and forced her to look at him. She did,

and instantly her chest lifted in breath. She fell against him and he held her face to his mortal, sweaty, human aroma, which she breathed with increasing strength. Afias looked back to the far wall, and now, at last, he saw her demon. It was unseeable, darkness darker than black, swallowing all light like a vacuum.

“Who are you, and what do you want with us?” the prince demanded.

“You.” Echoing through the vast chamber, the sound was heinous and diabolic, and yet there was no sound at all. Afias felt Adrea shiver against him. She shook without remitting and filled Afias with fear.

“Why?”

Silence.

“How did you find your way here?”

Silence again.

“Go away. Go away I tell you. I will not allow you here.” His heart was in his throat. It beat loudly in Adrea’s ears.

“You think you have power over me?” the shade asked. The voice was hollow, amused, and somehow not there at all.

Afias gave a short nod. “I know I have power over you, and I command you to go; now.”

“She has asked it of me, and you cannot stand between us.”

A great dread settled over him. “Asked what?”

Distinct glee emanated from the shade. “Asked for you.”

Adrea wept against him in helplessness, and Afias began to understand. “I have power here. I have command over my own soul.”

The demon laughed. Long, loud – a powerful chortle.

“My brother faced you, and he survived,” said Afias again, his desperation mounting. “So shall I. You are nothing but a phantom.”

Where eyes might have been, two circles of fire suddenly blazed up and then disappeared again, sucked back into the void. “I am the most powerful being in the world! Of all the gods, I am Might! I am Rule! I am Power!” His voice consumed the chamber, nearly sucking Afias’ breath away. He shook with Adrea.

“Petty mortals, so sure of themselves. All alone in the vast world. No one to help you.”

A fog over his mind, slowly bearing him down and wiping him empty, Afias felt as if his soul were being sucked from his body. With desperation, he remembered Trinian’s story and how he had called upon their father. Surely, there must be a god in the heavens willing to help him now!

He lifted his voice to defy the god, and recited the goddesses that he remembered from the myths of his youth. “Gods of goodness! Gods of right! Knowledge, I call upon your name. Peace, come to my aid. Hope, lift me from death; Joy, restore my soul; Knowledge, teach me to resist!” With each new name, his voice grew louder. With each call, his strength grew greater. “Gods of the heavens who despise not the souls of passing mortals, hear my plea and come to my assistance!” Then, suddenly, there were four new lights in the chamber, glowing stronger each moment with a pale white radiance. “Do not forsake us here to our dire fate. Save us! We are helpless alone.”

The wind in the chamber whipped so fiercely that the prince fell to the ground, Adrea still clutched in his arms.

She curled in a ball, whimpering, but he rose to his knees and watched in astonishment as the four points of light converged on the void and filled it with a white shock so bright that the chamber shone like the clearest day. With a flash, it blinded him, and then it was gone.

All was ended, and the room was empty but for the man and woman upon the ground.

Afias drew Adrea up and held her at arm's length; the paleness of her countenance and the wideness of her eyes frightened him, so that he pulled out a chair and placed her in it. She refused to look him in the eye.

His voice was neither stern nor gentle when he spoke at last; only hollow. "How did the enemy come here?"

"A woman," she quivered. "She did this. She called upon the help of the gods, and they possessed me."

"What woman?"

"Etchta," was spoken so quiet it was hard to hear; but when he did understand, he left.

\* \* \*

The darkness of her soul was gone, leaving only emptiness. She wept, long and hard. She felt Etchta's death when it came and the last vestige of connection with the dark arts departed, with a painful wrench, from her heart. When Afias returned she saw through her tears and tangled hair that his sword was clean, but she knew all the same that he had exacted justice.

He went to the window and stood with his back to her. She said, "I'm sorry," but it came out as a breath. She cleared her throat and sobbed. "I nearly destroyed Drian. I was



wrong. I'm sorry."

He turned slowly to look at her. "Why did you do it?" he asked simply.

"I thought – no...I don't know what I thought."

"You thought you could rule better than I. You thought you would get me out of the way."

She hung her head in shame. "Yes."

He sat down in front of her. "I'm not perfect, Adrea. I know that. But I did not think you hated me so much."

"I was wrong," she quivered. "I was wrong."

"I don't think you're capable of murder," he went on. "Not really. It was the enemy preying upon your weakness, and he used you. But you let him." He was silent then for a long time. She deserved to be locked up, even killed, and she knew it.

Finally, he said, "It will take awhile for me to trust you again, I think. But I think I will. Some of this was my fault; but if we both do better, I think we can get there. I know I can. Can *you* forgive me, and move on?" She was shocked, trying to understand: he was offering her mercy. *He* was offering *her* an apology.

He waited. Patient and steady and strong, he waited.

At last, she nodded. "I can move on." She looked at him, and though she knew it was he who should say it to her, she needed to voice it, so she took a deep breath.

"I forgive you."

He said it at the same time.

## A Divine Picnic

**H**ope was neither an active nor a social force, but she was a contagious one. Because of this, many of her sisters often gathered about her for tea and talking, and she liked this very much. Today was such a day, and a flutter of skirts, blouses, wide-legged silk pants, scarves, and ribbons played in the jasmine-scented breezes of the palace gardens.

Her sisters Joy, Peace, Knowledge, Famine, Plenty, and Charity were gathered on a picnic blanket on the grass, and even Solitude sat outside the circle, gazing contentedly upon them all. The only ones absent were Resolve and Passion, and so naturally, as is common among all women, whether mortal or goddess, they soon became the topic of conversation.

“They are obsessed with this new whim of Power’s,” said Plenty, picking up a bare grape stalk and watching plump fruit re-grow in her hand. “Does he really think he can defy the Golden King?”

Knowledge shrugged. “Apparently, he thinks it worth

a try. But I'm at a loss how he sees that it will help in the long run."

"He has always been a misunderstood god among the mortals. He never exactly had an advantage like the rest of us," said Joy, who was a beloved goddess and thrived on the love mortals sent her. "Besides, he was created to wield power, and then had to watch the mortals use it instead – what kind of divinity is that?"

"A misused one," said Solitude quietly, and they all turned to look at her. She was picking daisies and weaving the stems through her fingers. "We are not all beloved. It is not our job to wield our gifts over the mortals, but to teach them to understand them. I know, because loneliness is a terrible reality – but inevitable. And without it, there is no growth. I am not meant to bring it whenever I wish; but when I must, I do it as gently as I can. They do not often love me."

Knowledge laughed, nodding at the insight of her sister. "I am a very inconvenient goddess as well, and I know it. There are many mortals who hate me."

"And I do not think anyone loves me. That is hardly how I know when I am successful," put in Famine.

Joy pouted and slumped her shoulders, suddenly curious. "If not on mortals' love for us, then how are we to be judged?"

"On merit, I suppose; on duty," answered Knowledge dismissively. She never doubted that the Golden King would reward her when he returned, for she had never squandered her gifts by interfering with the mortals – not like some of her brothers and sisters.

"On love," whispered a new voice, and all the sisters

turned to look at Charity who, to their astonishment, was weeping quiet tears. "I have known it for so long, but I was afraid of rejection, so I kept it to myself. Now I will not be rewarded. But more than that – I shall have to face the Golden King's disappointment. His good, beautiful eyes will be so full of displeasure, and I shall wither away into nothing."

Peace, who as the eldest usually kept her own counsel, took Charity in her arms and soothed her gloriously beautiful black hair from her troubled brow. Everyone fell into an uncomfortable silence.

Knowledge leaned toward Plenty, and said quietly to her. "Have we not loved? We never caused harm."

Plenty was not used to discord, and shifted on the blanket uncomfortably. "I am sure I do not know," she said, her voice tinged with tension. "I gave to the mortals whenever I *had* to – is that not enough?"

"I thought so, but Charity does not seem to."

"What do I care what Charity thinks? She has always been sensitive, and she is hardly all-knowing."

Famine leaned over and caught the end of their intercourse. "But she does know the most about love. Maybe Solitude is right; maybe we owed the mortals more."

"We never owed the mortals anything," snapped Plenty. "They had everything they needed for life, and it was their duty to make the most of it!"

Knowledge grew uncomfortable and her heart squirmed inside her. In her distress, she spoke loud enough for everyone to hear. "But what if... they needed guidance? What if we failed to give it to them when they needed it?" She was accustomed to having all the answers, and this

uncertainty tore her apart.

“The Golden King never gave us any guidance, nor did any of his court, so how would he expect us to give it to those beneath us?” demanded Joy. Famine and Plenty visibly relaxed, settling themselves into the grass and nodding their heads in agreement.

But Charity was still weeping quietly, and Knowledge and Solitude frowned, unconvinced. Hope watched them all, silent and uncritical. She did not know what she thought – unlike the others, she never, in the past twelve hundred years, believed she had the answers. So not having them did not plunge her into despair.

“Peace,” said Knowledge suddenly, “what do you think?”

Peace smiled her beautiful, sad smile. She was always regal, with her hair piled in silken silver folds, keeping in her mind always how fleeting was each beautiful, sacred moment. She was aged and wise, thoughtful and caring. And she never answered questions. So she said instead, in her deep-timbered voice, “Knowledge, my dear, and Hope and Joy, why did you fly to Prince Afias’s aid when he called upon us? Many mortals call upon us every moment of everyday, but I have never seen anything like I did when I saw you, with your beautiful lights, fly to save him. What makes him so special?”

Joy said decisively: “He did not deserve to be possessed by a god.”

“I see a wonderful future for him,” said Hope dreamily, “so long as he remains free.”

Knowledge was the last to speak, and took her time about it. At last she said, “I see. I understand now.”

Solitude leaned forward. “What do you see?”

“I will explain... when I know more.” She smiled at her quiet sister. “I promise.”

## VII

### DESPAIR

*“Love is a trick played on us by the forces of evolution. Pleasure is the bait laid down by the same. There is only power. Power is of the individual mind but the mind’s power is not enough. Power of the body decides everything in the end and only might is right.”*

*- T.H. White, The Once and Future King*





## The Forest of Mestraff

**W**hile leaving Rarks, following Asbult in the darkness as their group silently departed the forest haven, Merciec was vigilant for any more enemies from Kelta, but it seemed the dark-haired man was the only one. Saying nothing to Garrity or Asbult, but keeping the wild, desperately volatile princess at his side, he remained on his guard.

The verdant green wood of Mestraff was overwhelming in its thickness. The many trees pushed against each other like people in a crowd, shoving against those around them to see something on the other side. So thickly clustered, they formed a multi-layered wall impenetrable by sight. The branches above intertwined as a yellow/green barrier between the earth and the sun, with only occasional shafts of golden beams streaking through. Underfoot, and creeping up all around, grew thick moss and trails of lichen that muffled footsteps. Little waterfalls and streams ran courses through the wood, trickling and flowing over the rocks and stones, catching the scattered light and throwing

it back in sparkling patterns, or else stagnating into little pools that added to the overwhelming green with their algae film.

It was impossible to travel in a straight line. For three days, Asbult led the group across the forest, wading through ankle-deep moss and pushing through crisscrossing branches, wandering away from their destination, and then trudging round about again back to it.

Asbult had assigned Merciec to the rear as guard, and Lavendier traveled with him. If anyone thought this a strange development, they kept it to themselves: Lavendier had never been so quiet in her life.

Asbult naturally took advantage of making any and all jokes about the terrain that he might, but he was deceptively carefree. He knew that gorgans patrolled the land, and he was forever on guard for raiding parties.

“We’re going to set up camp here!” called Garrity on the third day. They had trudged long, and the wood was falling into emerald dusk.

“We need dry wood and kindling,” said Asbult, about to assign the task to one of the other men.

“Princess Lavendier can do that. Can’t you?” said Merciec.

Her heart soured, but she stood up from where she had dropped against a giant fir. “Yes,” she said quietly with a set face, and set off into the trees. She grumbled aloud as she picked up sticks and fallen logs, her curly hair frizzed around her temples and forehead, and puffed out of a pony-tail at the nape of her neck. Cursing her long dress train, she picked it up and tucked it into her belt. She had not changed clothes in three days, and her shoes were

cold, wet, and clumped with mud. Despite the lack of a mirror, she was convinced she looked worse than the gorgans themselves, and she justified neglecting her toilet by deciding that neat hair or a freshly washed dress would look grotesque when paired with her dirty fingernails and haggard, plain, unmade face. For the past three days she had slouched and tramped and grimaced, refusing to glide, smile, or stand with dignity since she looked like a hovel witch.

As she was gathering the sticks into her arms and cursing the way they snagged against her sleeves and hair, she suddenly dropped them and glanced toward the forest. There was a loud rustle approaching. Something was coming near. Frozen in place, staring in wide-eyed terror, the bushes parted before her – and a stag bounded into the clearing. She screamed and raced back to camp.

“Captain!” she cried at Merciec, who was quietly rubbing lard up and down his bow.

“Yes, my lady. Is there something you want?”

“I can’t defend myself!”

He coolly looked over her tall figure. She expected him to scowl, as she would have done, but she was constantly surprised by his mild, pleasant manner. His looks often made her feel like she was far more powerful than she thought, and now he only frowned grimly. “Fire is always contagious,” was his enigmatic response.

“Fire cannot light itself,” she whined, her quick wit coming out before she could stop it. She hated to appear smart before men.

“And a good thing, too. No, my lady, I don’t grant your request. I don’t yet trust the fire to spread where it ought

to go.”

She huffed, and he raised his eyebrows. “Did you get the firewood?”

“No!”

He was silent.

She scowled at him. “Fine.”

When the fire had been kindled and Asbult was preparing to heat water for dinner, Jacian grew quarrelsome and restless. Adlena attempted to quiet him, but he only grew more belligerent and irritable, until finally, he sent up a wailing howl. It did not echo or carry far, dampened as was all sound by the close forest, but it was loud nevertheless.

“Silence him,” cried Asbult to Cila, who swiftly covered his tiny mouth with her hand. The little prince continued to whine and struggle until Garrity bent down to his level, looked him in the eye, and sternly commanded him to be quiet. The prince was awed by the big, silent man’s gaze, and fell still.

Asbult was craning his neck, listening. “They’re coming. Get ready.”

“What do we do?” asked Adlena, clutching her son as fear swept through her, chilling her blood.

“It will be alright,” Merciec assured her, while the men formed a circle around the women. “Stay still and we’ll protect you.”

“That’s what you think,” muttered Lavendier, but he ignored her. Hardly even realizing what she did, the eldest princess remained close to the skilled archer, following, almost unconsciously, his every movement.

Then the attack came. There were seven gorgans, their man-like shapes, untamed eyes, and fearsome brawn

making them seem like something out of a nightmare. On facing them so near, Lavendier's heart leapt as if fleeing her body, and she stumbled backward. The hem of her long gown caught at her feet, and she fell to the ground. If they came for her, she could not run away.

More and more gorgans poured through the trees, congesting the clearing and pushing the defenders closer together. Merciec told the ladies to climb the trees nearby, and they clambered up and took refuge in the branches. Merciec handed Jacian up to the queen, and he, Garrity, and Asbult fought with unyielding energy.

Lavendier saw one of the villains make for Asbult, who was locked in a body-hold with another gorgan. In a bright flash of indignation, she fished in her pouch and found an apple she was saving. With quick aim, she threw it, and it hit the creature squarely on the forehead. Like a mad dog, it turned from her brother-in-law and shot its gaze toward her with blazing eyes. It leapt upon the tree and tried to clamber up but failed. So instead, keeping in the same place, it leapt upward toward the limb, and at each leap it gained height, its open jaw snapping ever closer at her legs. Viol screamed in terror from where she sat on the next branch.

Lavendier, incensed but feeling helpless, grabbed hold of a limb above her head and swung when it next leapt, kicking at it. It grabbed her, but with her free foot she hit it squarely in the jaw so that its tongue tore and blood splattered over her. With an angry cry, it slid down her leg, ripping it with its nails.

Merciec noticed them then and flew an arrow at their attacker, killing the gorgan, and Lavendier clambered back

up into the tree. The battle, to her relief, was over, and gorgan bodies were strewn about the ground.

Jacian was once again screaming, but this time from fear. When Garrity ceased swinging his sword and leaned upon it to catch his breath, the prince dropped from his tree and grabbed hold of the warrior's tall, firm legs. Taken by surprise, Garrity caught his breath, but then broke out into a deep, full laugh. Everyone looked at him, for all, except Viol, were hearing him laugh for the first time. The warrior reached down and lifted the boy into his arms.

"We're safe now," he told him. "We're going to be alright;" and the prince wrapped his arms around the large man and buried his head in his neck.

But Lavendier shivered.

\* \* \*

When Merciec sought out Lavendier so he could wash and bandage her leg, she was gazing out, numb, into the forest, seated under a tree away from the company.

"I couldn't start the fire," she said, without looking at him. "I could not defend us."

He nodded, pouring water onto a bandage. "I will teach you. I will teach you to fight."

She sighed in relief, and tears threatened to flow, but for the first time in a long while, she resisted them until he was gone. For the first time, she did not want to look weak.

## Fragile Balance

**I**ronically, as she grew more experienced with the short-sword, Lavendier began to fear more and more for her life. Every night before they retired to sleep, Merciec took her away from the others and trained her, and as they dealt blows, blocked, and evaded, she began to realize the full extent of the mortality of her existence. That it is a frail and fickle thing, fractious at best, and even when perfectly kept, it whines, complains, and grows weary. In the next couple days, she completed her transformation from merely despising the discomforts of the journey, to genuinely fearing for her life.

A week after the attack, as they trekked through the trees, the weary, struggling princess summoned the courage to ask her warden about her efforts.

“Have I improved at all?” she asked timidly. She had never been timid in her life.

“Yes. Your skills with the sword are impressive.” He nodded. “Yes. You have improved.”

Her heart swelled, and she smiled broadly in pleasure.

“However,” he continued, and her smile vanished, “I still do not trust you. I have given you means to defend yourself, but you are still very selfish, and liable to act on your own self-interest.” He caught the spark of fiery anger in her eyes, and smiling inwardly, he went on. “In that way, you have not improved at all. You act from a fear of punishment, and that is not virtue, and I had hoped to see virtue in you.”

She seethed with passion, her hands shaking at his words, for those who have newly begun to practice virtue often believe they are overflowing with it and think themselves worthy of the credit not even due a conscientious man.

“Yes,” he said, facing her flushed face, “I say that. You must learn to be virtuous and brave for their own sake’s, and not your own.”

She tossed her head haughtily and walked ahead, and Merciec smiled to himself, nodding in satisfaction that this had aired out hidden vanities she thought she had eradicated.

That evening, Asbult was leaning against a tree just outside camp, watching Merciec and Lavendier as the soldier taught her to string a bow and shoot a target dead-center. He had been watching their relationship for a long time, wondering what value his sharp-sighted friend found in pursuing the lovely princess. But after only a few days out from Rarks, he realized their relationship was not based on attraction, and his curiosity increased. He worried at first that Lavendier had become the plaything of the archer, but Merciec was too good a man for that. And the princess, who had before posed a serious security threat, with her loud whining and indiscretion, was now not only quiet, but helpful. The change, whatever its cause,



was for the better.

“But I want to perfect my fencing!” He overheard her and began to listen to their conversation. “I don’t think I’m good enough yet to not die.”

Merciec laughed hard at this and Lavendier pouted at him.

“You are already my equal!” the archer exclaimed finally, and she stood straighter in surprise. “And if you can master this as well, you may never need to meet an enemy in close quarters.”

“Really?”

“Really. Now shoot once more and then go eat your dinner.”

She shot, hit the target in the center, and headed back to camp with her eyes shining. She swept her hair over her shoulder when she passed her brother-in-law, and he raised his eyebrows. Her old spirit, the spirit he remembered from their childhood, was beginning to light again within her.

“She sure knows how to handle a bow,” he said to Merciec.

The archer’s boyish eyes danced at his friend. “Yes,” he agreed, “she has a natural talent.”

“What is your intention with all of this?” the prince asked abruptly.

Merciec looked at him openly. “I’m surprised you haven’t asked me before.”

“I trusted your judgment. Besides, I did not note any harm in your relationship.”

“But you do now?”

Asbult smiled, and shook his head. “Let’s just say that

my curiosity has finally gotten the better of me.”

Merciec laughed. “Yes. Well.” He mused a moment. “The Princess Lavendier has not the same trust from me as her sisters. For the safety of the rest of the group, I took it upon myself to be her watch guard. But I will say – she has greatly improved recently.”

“I’ve noticed; she’s almost a different person. But be careful. You could be playing a dangerous game – she seems very attached to you.”

Merciec dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. “She doesn’t think of me that way.”

“Romantically, no,” agreed Asbult. “Although she might, if you’re not careful. But you have to understand something. Laven has not had a real relationship with a man, one that was not romantic, since she was sixteen. That has to leave a gaping hole in her heart – a hole she may very well expect you to fill. Be careful how completely you allow her to become attached.”

“But that can’t be true. She has her brothers and they are great men.”

“When Lavendier was sixteen,” said Asbult, “her father died. Then two years later, Trinian left home. She was abandoned twice – or at least, that’s the way she chose to see it. After that, she ran from relationships, and clung to men whose nature it was to abandon her. The closer she gets to you, the more she will expect you to abandon her. And the more tightly she will cling. Don’t get me wrong – you are helping her. I just want you to understand what you’re in for.”

Merciec nodded soberly. Thus far, he had thought of the princess as a tigress, extremely beautiful and extremely

dangerous. He had not thought of her as vulnerable.

## A Friend Revisited

**A**fter a harrowing day locked deep in the bowels of Korem's throne room, dealing with an angry steward and disgruntled advisers, after two weeks of fielding advice from Astren and Gladier about how to deal with the god of Karaka, after an interminable time of missing his family, denying his guilt for sending them away, and struggling to find support for his own solutions, Trinian surreptitiously slipped from the castle and escaped to the outer rim estates of Drian. Clad still in his royal clothing and cloak, he took only his bridled horse and rode five miles to the outer wall of the city, where the properties nestled snugly against the outer wall, spaced amply apart, with plenty of land sprawling between them. Here was the place of his roots – the land of his beginnings.

Standing at the brow of a hill and gazing upon the home he had chaffed in for so many years, the memories of his childhood suddenly washed over him in a flood. He remembered how he had first visited the center of the city when he was eleven, when his father took him to the

market to sell their harvest. It was then, when he was still only a small boy, that he caught sight of the glistening silver armor of Drinian soldiers, and since that day, his heart was in the city. He had abandoned, in that moment, the home of his ancestors, and latched upon the aspiration of fighting for glory, honor, and pride. How he had wanted to be a soldier! To be part of something great, to belong to a noble calling; to devote himself to honor, justice, and duty.

Now he had an empty pit in his stomach. He gazed dismally at the Nian house standing desolate. When he left for the army all those years ago, he never felt like he was abandoning his heritage, for his family remained behind to carry on the ancient traditions. Now, learning of his very distant heritage had somehow torn his family from the life and love and heritage of their near ancestors.

He had never wanted that heritage! He had not wanted the comfort and predictability that came with inheriting a legacy. Ever since he was a boy, he was attracted by the order and hierarchy of the army; it was based on merit; it was a system wherein a man could rise based only on the courage and uprightness of his actions. Trinian had day-dreamed of ascending to each stage, of proving himself every step of the way, and rising up by accomplishing great feats!

He turned his gaze across the landscape to the home of his friend Trigent, which was the next house to the north of the Nian family home. Green walls overgrown with ivy, a tower at each corner, and a large white gate at the front adorned his friend's comfortable family home, and Trinian ached to live near his friends once again - to live

with his family, to start again the life that had failed. For it had failed. The things he yearned for had been taken from him. He had not risen in ranks according to his own merit. Fate had blind-sided him. He had been cheated of those accomplishments and skipped straight to the top of the ladder, expected to know everything, decide everything, understand everything. He had earned nothing.

He was so deep in his brooding that he did not notice Trigent, until he rode up alongside him.

“I thought that was you. I spotted you from the fields, brooding here on your mighty steed. I suppose I should say, ‘Hail, your Highness, what brings you to our humble abode?’”

Trinian shook his head, and smiled wryly. “Never say that.”

“Trinian, I have not seen you for five years, but I assume that the line down the center of your brow still indicates when you are deeply troubled?”

Trinian looked at his friend, with his kind, concerned, smiling face, who was dusty from working in the fields, and whose blouse, tan and comfortable, fluttered in the breeze where it did not cling to the sweat of his back. No weighty matters of state on Trigent’s shoulders, no missing family to mourn, no heavy scepter in his hand, no tight, precise clothing of the court for him, and Trinian returned the smile. “Do you have an extra shirt?”

\* \* \*

Trigent and Trinian sat in the large, circular living room, with wooden rafters rising from the ground, meeting in

the center of the roof around a small, round skylight to embrace the union of inside and out. A comfortable fire roared on the hearth. Books lined the walls, ancient and new, tomes of family histories and farming records. It was a comfortable place, made doubly so by Trinian's familiarity with it. In his youth, he had lived in this room almost as often as his own home. Though he had not been here in six years, his heart, for the first time in weeks, was at peace. He was not king here. Only a man, lonely and confused.

"The damage is not so bad here," said Trinian, in reference to the gorgan occupation.

"No," agreed his friend, handing him a mug of ale. "They didn't have time to ravage the farmlands. Only the inner city." Trigent poured himself a mug, and then settled into an armchair. "So," he said, "tell me."

"Where to begin?"

"Start with what broke the camel's back, and then go further and begin at the beginning."

So Trinian told of the River Rordan. How he had learned that his family was traveling through enemy land, that a high god wanted his throne, and that he had neither the man power nor the divine strength to ward him off. And on top of all that, how he felt trapped by meaningless customs and blind ignorance, and how there was no one at court to support him. "I'm stifled. All I want is to protect the kingdom, but I'm foiled at every turn. Astren seems to doubt every proof I have found of our danger; and when he does believe me, he wants to bury his head in the sand, or run far away. But there is nowhere to run!"

Trigent asked no questions, but listened silently, and

when Trinian finished, he sat with his hands before his face, his fingers pressed together in a thoughtful posture. “What does Gladier, the wizard you told me of, say about the high god?” he asked.

Trinian let out a burst of breathe, “That’s the worst of it. He says nothing – whenever I ask for his counsel, he just shakes his head, and walks away.”

Trigent rose and stood beside the hearth, leaning on the mantel. “What’s going to happen when the enemy’s army returns? He occupied the city once, he can do it again.”

“Of this I am well aware,” Trinian gritted through his teeth, and his friend saw that he was hitting a sore spot. But he smiled, and dug deeper.

“So, what do you believe is the best idea?”

It was the right question, and Trinian answered deliberately, all in one breath, like he had been holding it in for a long time: “I want to visit Justice and Mercy and find out what they know; and as I go, I want to gather an army to defend Drian.”

Trigent nodded. “Good. What does Astren say about our army? Surely he knows it is too small to defend the city, were the enemy to return?”

Though he still felt tension beneath the surface, Trinian was more relaxed now, and his analytical mind began to roam over the facts. “Astren does not think much of our army. But when he does, he hopes that the enemy has been depleted. Since there is no news from Mestraff, he assumes there are not enough gorgans to carry on the raids, and the council agrees with him. But this is a fool’s hope. As king, I must prepare for the worst, not the best, scenario.”

“So why don’t you gather an army? Why not visit the



goddesses?”

“I would. If Gladier would only give me counsel.”

“And are my words,” said a new voice, “to guide you for the rest of your life?” Both men whirled, to see Gladier standing in the doorway, laden with a stack of notebooks.

“What?” Trinian was utterly astonished. “How did you know where I was? I didn’t tell anyone I was coming here. I didn’t know myself.”

Gladier dismissed that with a wave of his hand, as he set down the volumes on a table. “Oh, I can always find you if I want to. But about my research. I’ve been very busy ever since that River god incident, thinking and looking into things.... But we don’t hardly know everything yet. We do know that he’s a high god; he has the power to utterly devastate a large piece of land; and he commands fearsome creatures that can be killed.

“But what we don’t know is whether he himself can be killed.”



## VIII

# KNOWLEDGE

*“It seems to me we can never give up longing and wishing while we are still alive. There are certain things we feel to be beautiful and good, and we must hunger for them.”*

*- George Eliot*



## Knowledge of High Gods, Natural Gods, and Mortals

**T**he wizard's pronouncement fell like a gong into the round room, reverberating the worst fear of the king. Rordan had hinted that Power could not be killed, and Trinian had tried not to dwell on it. Now he went to the window and leaned against it, his chest constricting and his breath coming in short gasps. Frustration built tight inside the king, and eventually he cried out, "But there's nothing to do then. We would have to surrender!"

"No!" cried Trigent. "Never. We would die ourselves first."

Gladier was scanning through his notebooks, pulling out evidence he had found and building it into a pile. "Your friend is very dire, your Majesty."

Introducing his two friends seemed the easiest response in the moment. "Trigent, this is Gladier, my advisor, and the Healer of the city. Gladier, this is Trigent. My childhood friend."

“Yes, I know. But we don’t have to give up hope – even if Power is invulnerable. Look here, come.” Trinian left the window and all three men gathered around the documents. “There are many gods and goddesses, you know. Those of the natural order, who reign over their individuals places. These have no control except over their allotted places on the earth.” He opened a heavy volume filled with rich paintings. “In the heavens there are the high gods. Thirteen, that we know of.” Gladier listed them, “Fate, the oldest; Power and Peace; Terror, Resolve and Joy; Despair, Truth, Destruction, Famine, Plenty;” he was pointing to the illustrations of each on the pages before him, “Death, Solitude, Charity, Passion, and Hope.” Each illustration looked unique: some of the figures had multiple limbs, some resided in the clouds and others floated over the earth, while others were surrounded by the tools of their trade; for example, Death sat on a throne of skulls, and held a mace in his hand, and Charity wielded her Blade of Love. “They are indifferent gods,” explained Gladier, “always have been in the long history of Minecerva – they do not hold mortal life sacred.”

He paused, letting that sink in. Then he got to his point. “But if one of these gods has decided not to be so removed, if he is not satisfied with ruling the heavens, then perhaps it is true for the other gods as well.”

There was a brief beat, and then Trinian demanded, “You think other gods will rise against us?”

“Or *for* us. Who’s to say?”

“But if they are for us, then what have they been doing?” demanded Trigent, in sudden anger. “Do they not have a responsibility to stop Power?”

“Good, good, you are asking the right questions,” exclaimed Gladier. “That’s the whole point. Not all the gods can hate mankind, you know. If they did, we would be dead already. So this is what I think. I think Fate is allowing this to happen to test us. Power, in order to enter the mortal realm, must have to abide by its rules, and that means—”

“He can be killed,” finished Trinian.

“I do not say that. But we may be able to cut off his ability to affect us here below.”

Trinian was overwhelmed, and paced to one side of the room, and then back again. “That’s a far leap, and we know nothing of its truth. How can we be certain? And how could it be done?”

“We will know,” said Gladier confidently, gathering up his notebooks. “We will know.”

“How?” demanded the king. He was utterly sick of cryptic and partial responses. “Will *you* discover the secret?”

“I? Perhaps. And then again, perhaps not. It’s time I finally take action.” Then he left through the door, and was gone as suddenly as he had arrived.

Neither man moved for a long moment.

“Well, I see what you mean about putting you off with unsatisfactory answers,” said Trigent, at last. “Brandy? I think I need something stronger after all that.”

“He thinks we can kill a high god?”

“Or something like it, I suppose.” Trigent handed Trinian a glass of amber brandy, then sat down and screwed up his face, reflecting. “I think you are right. You *must* build an army.”

“It is the goddesses,” said Trinian breathlessly. “A mortal

army will only go so far – I must learn if I can kill Power.”

“You?”

“Why not? I am the king of the prophecies, I am the one the god fears, surely it is I who will kill him?”

“I thought Gladier was saying you would need the help of the other gods.”

“Who knows what Gladier is saying? I can only do what I can do, and I must learn if that means killing the god of Karaka. I must return to Korem.”

Trigent nodded, and wished his friend well. They shook hands warmly and clapped each other on the shoulders. “You know, I have to admit, I’ve been rather worried, in a selfish way, ever since you arrived,” said Trigent. “I thought you might order me to join you at court.”

Trinian smiled. He looked about the room, and out the window at the rolling green and golden fields. “This is where you belong. I need a link to my old life, and I am glad I have you here. Besides, if you are here, then I cannot send you away.” He grinned wryly.

They went to the horses, and Trinian mounted for his return journey.

Just before he rode off, Trigent said, “I would have come, you know.”

Trinian nodded. “I know.”



## Knowledge of Action

**W**hat the Lord Steward hated most of all was swift decision and hasty action.

“Ah, my king,” said the venerable patriarch, when Trinian entered the throne room like a purposeful hurricane. “We wondered where you were this morning. We have been discussing where to house the poultry on the lower decks of the market. We hear tell that their cages were burned in the siege.”

The entire council was gathered around the long oak table, their graying beards combed regally over their chins, and their hands folded formally in their laps.

“Where have the farmers been keeping them until now?” Trinian asked as a reflex, as he walked to his throne, though he could not have cared less about geese and chickens.

Astren dismissed this question as irrelevant with a wave of his hand. “We do not know. We think the best place is probably beside the bath houses here,” he pointed to the map, “but we have not decided if it is not simply better to rebuild the original cages.”

“Gentlemen,” Trinian spoke sharply. “I have come to a decision.”

The gentlemen looked up apprehensively.

“To protect ourselves from a second siege,” he told them, and the old men shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, “we must build up our army. We are not enough to face a second attack. I am taking a retinue of soldiers into the east to find allies among the kingdoms there. Before you say anything,” their heads had all gone higher upon their necks, as they prepared to answer him, “I am not asking for your opinions. I am going.”

He walked down the dais and strode from the room without looking at any of them, but he stopped before he reached the doors and snapped back around. “And by the way, the farmers at the market have probably already solved this problem, over which you spend hours deliberating, and if you send out a decree about it, you’ll only get in their way.”

With that, he left them to themselves.

\* \* \*

Gladier was glad when Trinian stormed into his Healory and told him of his plans.

“Yes, good, you must take action.”

“Then why did you not tell me so before?”

“Because I do not have all the answers. Neither am I your nursemaid, king; I do not wish to rule, unseen, behind your throne. Although if you do want my advice, take Phestite with you. He’s a good man and will protect you well.”

“No, Phestite needs to stay here to defend the kingdom.”

Gladier glanced at him sharply. "All right, then who will go with you?"

"I can command a retinue myself."

"Yes, I know. But you'll need advice more than manpower. You need someone you can speak with, who can advise you. I can't go."

"I'll be fine."

"Why do you insist on going out by yourself?"

Trinian whirled on him, pricked to the bone that Gladier should give him his opinion now, when he had forced Trinian to make up his own mind. "You think I shouldn't go? You think I should dig my head into the sand here, and decide where to put the farmer's chickens?"

"Answer my question without losing your temper, sire."

Trinian's face was still flushed, and he spoke with the same vehemence, but in a calmer tone. "I *have* to go. Can you not see that? Do you not see they rely on me? I am this city's one defense, and I am not enough. I have to find more men to guard her." He shook with the effort to enunciate himself. "I am a new king, and the other city states might not respect or believe in my authority if they meet only a messenger or envoy. I have to go myself to build the relations. I *have* to, don't you see?"

Gladier nodded, folding his hands into his sleeves, and studied Trinian's earnest eyes. "Yes. I see that, and I am pleased you do as well. But even with your presence," he added quietly, "they may not listen."

"Oh, they will listen." With a wave of his hand that was uncomfortably reminiscent of Astren, Trinian dismissed that idea. He was calmer now, and growing more and more sure of himself. "When they meet me, and are confronted

with all the history and power I represent, they will follow me. I know it.”

Trinian went to the window, gazing into the herb garden courtyard, and Gladier studied him from behind. The king’s hair was rich and golden, and his body strong, but there was a weight upon him that made him older than twenty-five. The wizard shook his head sadly, knowing the weight would only grow heavier with time, and wishing there was something he could do to teach the young man to bear it.

Gladier only sighed. “Take Phestite,” he repeated at last. “Listen to him – he will guide you well. Now, what about the kingdom?” he asked. “The council will rule in your absence?”

Trinian nodded, turning back. “The council will do what it can. The people will feel protected, and that is the best we can do for now. I only worry about how long I will be absent, and what will happen in the meantime.” He glanced up at his aged friend. “Will I find the goddesses?”

Gladier laid a gnarled, wrinkled hand on the king’s shoulder. “You know I can’t tell you that.” He went to his work table and placed a jar of frog livers in its place on the shelves, and took down some powders which he blended in a tumbler of water. “But have hope, your majesty. I do.”

“Hope in what? Myself or my kingship?”

“Yes to both. There is always comfort in whether or not your position in life was ordained.” He handed the king a glass of the blended powders swirling in water. “I have always found it so. But you, Trinian, are only a man – even if you are a great one, meant for great things. Remember that there are powers above you.” The book of the gods

lay open on the table, the image of Hope spread across the page, pulsating in gold, blue, and vibrant green. Gladier stroked the picture, following the line of her golden hair, which coiled around a brilliant, abstract image of the future, blinding it with light. "You are not alone."

Trinian drowned the drink, and much of the tension eased out of his shoulders. He thanked his friend, and made his way to the barracks.

\* \* \*

Phestite was overseeing Garrity's squadron when Trinian entered the round training room. The squad was divided into two groups, and were shooting arrows at a mark in successive order, competing to see which team finished first. They stood quickly to attention even before Phestite noticed the king. The general looked round in his slow, large way, and came to attention, his heavy frame overfilling the space. Unnoticed in a dark corner of the barracks, the soldier Kett approached, to watch his beloved king with adoring eyes.

"My king, to what honor do we owe this visit?"

"Phestite, I'm sorry to interrupt your drills. Which side was winning?"

A young man with light scruff on his chin stepped forward and bowed. "My side, your majesty."

Trinian recognized him. "You're Garrity's head man, are you not?"

"Yes, Sire, my name is Gorj."

What desolation had filled Garrity when he was separated from his squadron had been true also for them.

Without their leader, his men had thought of him and fought for him constantly, pushing themselves further in his absence than he would have allowed them had he been there, so full of love were they for him.

“Garrity is a fine warrior,” said Trinian. “And he spoke well to me of all of you.” He looked them over one last time, then said, “You are dismissed; I have a word to say to the General.” The men gathered their arrows and, with final bows, departed, and Trinian turned to Phestite. “I am journeying east to find allies to defend Drian.”

Phestite’s stoic, broad face did not show any emotion. He merely bowed and waited for Trinian to go on.

“We need to be prepared to defend this city from another attack. You agree that it must be our first priority?”

“I do,” he responded in his deep, thoughtful voice. “But I am afraid it is unlikely that anyone will band with you. Countries in Minecerva have grown accustomed to ruling themselves: I doubt they would take kindly to the return of the empire.”

“Surely,” said the king, “when they understand the might of the power in the East, they will change their minds. They will see reason.”

The General did not argue. “Who do you plan to take with you?”

“You. And I think Garrity’s squadron. They are good men.”

“They are. The best and most loyal men that you will find. And I will be honored to accompany you. General Cartnol will oversee the army in my absence.”

“Good, I will need someone who can advise me. Tell the men we will leave at first light tomorrow.” And with that,

he departed toward the door of the chamber.

Kett had all this time been standing in the shadows of the room and had overheard the conversation. Now, with the ardor of youth, he ran to the king and bowed.

“Sire, please,” he said. “I wonder if you would take me with you. Please say you will, sire; I cannot bear to be left behind. Don’t send me away from your side.”

Trinian’s first response was anger: the boy should not have been listening to his conversation with the general, and he ought to be harshly punished. But the anger did not burn further than a brief, passing burst. In his innermost heart, he was a desolate king, and the young man’s honest love was like a balm to a festering wound.

“You should not have listened, Footman,” he lectured. Kett’s face fell and he looked down at the ground, before remembering his training and snapping his face back up again.

“Yes, sire,” he gasped.

“But your loyalty is commendable, and you have proven yourself a faithful soldier in the past.” The boy’s eyes brightened. “I will take you with – but not as a soldier. Kett, I want you to accompany me as my personal servant.”

The boy’s face was blank for a moment, unsure how to interpret this. But whether it was a demotion or promotion, he was allowed to travel with his beloved king, closely and intimately – and it was what he wanted. So his face burst into a radiant smile.

“Thank you sire.”

“Be ready to leave at first light tomorrow.”

“I will. Thank you sire.”

Trinian rode out from Drian at dawn the next morning. He gave a brief speech to the people, telling them he left them in good hands with the Lord Steward Astren, and that he would return soon with allies to protect the city. As he rode out, to cheers and well-wishers and pressing crowds, he caught sight of Trigent at the outer gate, and pulled up beside him.

“I know I complained before, but truly, is there anything you want from me?” asked his friend.

Trinian looked back at Astren, standing in splendor before the entrance to Korem. “Yes. Keep an eye on matters of state. Whenever you are in town, have words with the steward. Tell him I want you to advise him on farming affairs, but really, try to spur him to action. These old men are slow.” He removed a ring from his finger. “I am bequeathing you secret power to over-rule him, which should only be used in case of great need.”

Trigent bowed and Trinian departed.



## Knowledge of Despair

**T**hough Afias had forgiven her and they both did their best to move on, Adrea was not the same after their encounter with Power. She pushed herself through her daily duties, convinced that to return to normality was the best way to put the matter safely in the past, but she underestimated the after-effects of her trauma. The devastation to Adrea's soul was very real, and every day the misery burrowed deeper and the guilt nestled more firmly inside her.

"Are you feeling alright?"

Afias had kept Adrea in the council room after lords Dargevalor and Kalaban had departed. She had been silent throughout the meeting, and there were dark circles under her eyes. She started when he spoke, recovered, and nodded vigorously.

"Perfect. Yes. I'll get right on that."

"On what?"

She looked at him in surprise, as if only just registering that he had spoken. "What?"

"I said, are you feeling alright? You look like you're not sleeping well."

She sighed and rubbed her face. "I'm not. I'm sorry. I'll try to get better at that."

"No. Adrea, wait," he paused suddenly, worried that perhaps she would not take kindly to his words, but he put the thought aside, and began again. "My lady, I'm worried about you, I'm not giving you orders. I ask because I am concerned."

Maybe she was too tired to be guarded, maybe she was too overwhelmed by her own weakness, or maybe she was, at last, finally beginning to trust him, but she did not close off or seal up like a vault. She merely looked at him and shrugged, her shoulders lifting and falling in a slow, weary cadence. "I've been having nightmares, and now I cannot close my eyes. So I have not slept for two nights."

"I'm sorry. But you have to sleep," he added gently, "or at least lie down. You are not functional."

She nodded. "Alright. You're right." She stood up. "I guess I will go now." She got as far as the double doors out of the room, then just stopped and stood still.

"Adrea?"

She was trembling and hoped he did not notice. "I can't do it. I can't be alone."

He went over and guided her to a couch in the room. "Here. Just lay down. I'll be here."

As docile as a little child, she lay down and closed her eyes. Afias pulled the curtains shut to block out the sunlight, but she asked him sleepily to leave them open; so he did, and went back to his writing table. Every morning after their meetings, Afias spent a half hour recording the

events of the previous day, for he was keeping a ledger to give to Trinian when he returned to Drian. All was quiet for awhile. Only Afias' pen scratched sound into the room, and once in awhile, he rustled the papers; Adrea's breathing was deep and regular, signaling that she was sound asleep. But, as it had been for the past few days, it was a false, exterior peace.

After twenty minutes, she began to moan aloud, and Afias looked up. She suddenly began crying out in her sleep and thrashing her limbs as if to ward off an enemy, and in the process, she fell off the bench; but she did not wake up.

"Adrea," he said to wake her, but she did not hear. Jumping up, alarmed at the intensity of her fear and helplessness, he bent over her to shake her awake, but at his touch, she screamed in fright and, with a terrifying force, suddenly wrapped her arms around his neck, strangling him for dear life. He fell to his knees. He was the stronger of the two and could have broken free, but not without injuring her. So he struggled in vain for a moment, then reached behind and slapped her in the face, which at last awoke her. Coming out of the haze, she found herself standing above the prince, his face turning purple, and she pulled back with a cry of alarm.

"Oh, son of gods, what have I done?"

Afias coughed, trying to laugh ruefully, and only succeeding in giving a weird grimace as he rubbed his neck. "You were choking me."

"I was choking the god. I saw it. And then I became the god, and I was choking myself, and then I woke up and I was me, choking you. Oh, gods of love and gods of hate,

what has become of me?"

"Well, you've begun swearing quite a bit."

"Don't laugh." She fell back onto the bench. "Don't you hate me?"

He answered her soberly. "Of course not. That was not you, just your dream."

"But I did nearly kill you. I did. Why do you not hate me?"

He stood up, supporting himself on the couch. "Adrea, I'm fine. Everything is alright."

"But it's not! It isn't. It'll never be again. Don't you see? I tried to kill you, I betrayed my country...I gave myself to an evil spirit! Why don't you hate me?"

He sighed. "Do you hate you?"

She hung her head, and said nothing.

"I have forgiven you," he said at last. "You must forgive yourself."

"No!" she startled him with her adamancy. "I must not, because that's not enough! It won't make it go away. Don't you see? I can't wipe out my offenses.... And neither can you!" Her eyes wild and her voice risen to a despairing pitch, she ran from the room and Afias let her go, unsure how to help her.

\* \* \*

She did not run to her room. The last time she had run there when she was upset, terrible things had happened. She did not run to the gardens around the palace: they were full of workers and people she did not want to see, people she had betrayed. She ran instead across the

courtyard, out of the palace, and as fast and as far as she could go, into the desolate wilds of South Drian.

## Knowledge of Death

She did not stop running until she was miles from the palace and she tripped over something and sprawled face first in the dust. She pulled herself up and looked back – it was a dead body. Decaying over the past three months, it lay in the middle of the dirt road just as it had fallen. There had been no one left to bury it.

She stood up and saw a barn and house – this had been a farm, and she had tripped over the farmer. Three more bodies were near the home – the mother and two small children. The stench of rot was overpowering and she gagged, but then she breathed it in hard, telling herself that this is what she could have brought on her world – this fate for all the rest of Minecerva. She gritted her teeth and stomped over to the barn, and returning thence with a shovel, she spent the next three hours digging and burying the unknown, forsaken family. With each plunge of the trowel, she stabbed the god of Karaka, and with each throw of dirt, she buried him deep and helpless in the earth. Then she prayed to Death to escort the family's souls peacefully

from Minecerva to the Fields of Rest. She cried over their souls, anger and vengeance rising in her breast against the god, against his monstrous minions, and most of all, against herself.

\* \* \*

Adrea buried many bodies after that, wandering the wasteland that was once South Drian. Her hands bled, her knees were red and cracked, and her lips blistered in the dry sun, but with the shovel clenched tight in her arms, she wandered from road to town to farm, digging, burying, and praying over the lost. She wept until her eyes were red and dry; weeping over the numbers of the dead, marveling that so many could fall. But evil, it seems, is relentless. One evil man could murder ten innocents, and his prey would die because they did not know how to fight back. One army of a hundred could murder a thousand because none of those thousands had the weapons and blood-thirst of those few hundred.

After burying the entire population of one town in a deep hole, covering them by pushing hard against a boulder at the top of a hill and blanketing them in a rockslide, she tried to push on, but her legs at last gave out in the center of the town, and she fainted.

\* \* \*

She awoke as the sun was just kissing the earth, shedding an eerie red glow over the brick buildings and cobblestone streets. She pulled herself up, her nostrils newly assaulted

by the smell of death. It had not ceased to haunt her, clinging still to every building, every road, every body, a reminder of the lives no longer lived.

Beside the well sat a forgotten jar of wine. Unlike the water, it was sealed and protected from the slow decay of death all around, so she popped the stopper and drank it down, finding strength in its rich red flavor; then she pushed on back into the wilderness, fleeing the souls of those left behind, praying to Death to lead them all to paradise.

But suddenly, stranded in the middle of the road, fleeing death, sin, and darkness, and plunging anew into its never-ending wake, she stopped still, her legs wide, her hair wild, and her head thrown back to the sky. Her words ceased to pray to Death and began, instead, to upbraid him.

“How could you? Are we nothing to you? How could you?” Her voice, cracked and dry, shrieked like a witch from her throat, soaring like a harpy to the vast, empty blue above. “Are we nothing to you? Why do you take and take, and leave us nothing? Do you see? Do you hear us? With all your powers and graces, are you impotent?” She collapsed to her hands and knees, and as her bloodied hands hit the ground, she cried out in pain, and wept. “We are less than you, but we *are*. When a horse cries out in pain, I relieve it – can I be less than a horse to you?” She was not only speaking to Death, but to all the heavenly host. She shuddered and wept at their neglect, and dug her fists into the earth.

“Just tell me there’s a plan! Tell me it has to be, but tell me there’s a purpose. If only there’s a purpose, I can go on. If only there’s a reason... but you sit on your heavenly



thrones and move us like pawns, and when one – when one steps up to rule us...” her voice broke. She could say nothing more as the pain of her demonic possession crashed over her in a wave of torment, and she screamed. She screamed her pain, guilt, agony, and grief into the desert, leaning forward on her hands and knees, letting the cries reverberate from stone to stone, begging primal earth to rise up and swallow her into her bosom: into blissful oblivion, into peaceful embryo, into trustful innocence. She pushed hard against the dirt, and felt that it was a futile action. She could not fight the dust. She could not fight the death.

Then with racking breast, she stretched out, weeping quietly, and fell asleep.

## The Garden of Knowledge

**A**drea awoke on a bed of soft grass, pillowed comfortably on a cushion of ground which seemed much softer than that upon which she had fallen asleep. Golden sunlight so suffused the morning that it pierced even through her closed eyelids, and she opened them to see an older woman sitting comfortably on a rock before her. The woman was clad in a simple blue work dress, with her hair pulled back in a yellow bandanna and her work-hardened hands clasped in her lap, and she smiled, in a motherly way, upon the young woman, asleep on the grass.

“Rested, are you?” Her voice, though young, was as soft and motherly as her appearance.

Adrea blinked and sat up. She looked all around and saw a small cottage nestled in the trees in the distance.

“Are you hungry?”

Adrea looked back at the woman. “Yes, I am.”

The woman rose and started toward the house. “Come along then. Let’s get you some breakfast.”

The interior of the cottage was as bright and comfortable as the woman herself, and smelled fresh, like clipped grass and dandelions. Breakfast was berries and milk with sweetbread, which was comfortable food and made her stomach, hot and empty as it was from all her weeping and digging, feel satisfied and full.

When they finished eating, they went out into the garden where the lady of the house fell to pulling up weeds in her garden. Adrea knelt beside her, but the woman would not let her help, sitting her instead upon a bench against the outer wall. "You've clearly had a hard time of it, and you are not to strain yourself on *my* doorstep. Look at those lovely hands, full of raw blisters. Why have you done this to yourself? Here is some honey – spread it all over and then hold them still. It will help the healing and take away the sting."

Adrea sat silent; she had said very little since waking, and watched her new friend industriously dig up the nefarious plants that threatened the well-being of her many flowers and herbs. The activity of digging was too similar to her own recent actions, and after a little while, the lady of Drian found herself weeping again. The gardener came over and took her tenderly in her arms.

"There, there now, just cry it out. That's right, darling. It's a terrible business, it is, and there's nothing to do but cry. Nothing at all else. Is there?"

"But I did!" she sobbed. "I tried. I buried them... but there's always more to bury. It is a sea of blood, and I am drowning in it!"

The woman nodded, soothing Adrea's tussled, messy black hair. "Yes. You can always bury more dead. That

you can. But what to do about the living?"

Adrea's sobs grew quieter, calmer. "The living?"

"There are the living, darling. There's still them....And you are one of them, though you might like to forget it."

"I should!...I do! I ought to be dead. I have no right amongst the living."

"Why?"

"I forfeited it. You wouldn't understand, I can't tell you – it's too awful. But I can't go back. I must pay for it.... And don't tell me I mustn't, because I know it's so, even though I can never make it up."

The gardener went on holding her quietly for some time, rocking gently, patting her head and rubbing her back. "Sh, sh, my darling," she said over and again, and presently, Adrea's tears were all spent.

"That's right, my dear. Now we'll talk."

"What more is there to say?"

"Well, clearly you plan to keep making your way across the country, burying the dead, until you have earthed the last one, or else joined them yourself."

Adrea was silent, and hung her head.

"And what else, you ask yourself, is there to do? You cannot return to the palace with this stain upon your soul, and yet nothing will ever wash it clean; so you figure, you are as good as dead, and must only keep like company." She smiled at the poor, tormented girl. "And I tell you, you are right."

Adrea looked up in surprise.

"Yes. The sin was grave and the consequences severe. And you know, they could have been far worse. You are the one who ought to pay for them, but... you can't. Not

in full." She held Adrea's round face in her work-hardened hands. "And that's all right. My child, no person can atone for their own sin, it is an ability only of the gods. And even they," she added, as if to herself, "cannot atone for their own offenses. After all, the crime is not against them." She looked back at the poor, beautiful girl. "It is not your place to punish yourself, my darling."

"But then, whose place is it? Don't I deserve punishment?"

"I'm afraid I can't explain it all. I don't know all the answers myself. But suffice it to say that if you kill yourself in this pursuit, then nothing good will ever come of it. Live for the living, live a good life, and then, at least, when you die at last, you will have left a light behind you. That is the best way to atone."

Adrea leaned forward. "Then should I not bury the dead? Isn't that the commandment of civilization? We must respect the dead."

"Yes, you should. But you did not kill them, and it is not only *your* responsibility to care for them. Man is a social creature, meant to help bear one another's burdens. Let others help you."

Adrea sighed. She wanted to believe the words, but her hard heart struggled to accept it. "That's not easy for me," she said at last.

Her new friend laughed. "Then that should make you happy. After all, don't you want a difficult task? Go home, my darling; there you have a friend eager and willing to help you. Live. For others – and for the sake of your own soul."

Adrea nodded and smiled at her own stubbornness –

perhaps, accepting help would be the biggest sacrifice she could make. Determining that she would begin her life anew, she looked up to speak, and blinked in astonishment.

She found that the beautiful, fresh-smelling cottage, the small, colorful blossoms of the garden, the stoop upon which she sat, and the motherly woman who had taken her whole-heartedly into her arms and home, had vanished clean into the air. She sat only upon a moss-covered log in a thicket of trees.

## The Intimacy of Knowledge

**A**fias flew down the main staircase to intercept Adrea as she crossed the flagstones of the main hall. Her servant Faring had already met her at the gate and was ushering her ladyship to her chambers.

“Where have you been?” he cried. “Were you kidnapped? You look terrible. Half the soldiers of the kingdom have been out searching for you.”

And she did look terrible. Her hair was a tangled, blowsy mess, her dress only a muddy rag, her face sun-burned and blistered, and her hands raw and bleeding.

“Oh, I didn’t think about that,” she moaned, practically fainting against Faring. “I made you deplete resources.” She was in no state to talk, and without another word, Afias picked her up and tenderly carried her up the stairs, through the corridors, and to her bedroom.

She submitted without a fight, and as she leaned into his powerful frame, it occurred to her that he was strong, wise, and caring. “I must think better of him from now on,” she told herself. “I must think of his goodness instead

of my weakness.”

Faring trotted behind, ordering as she ran that hot water be brought immediately to her ladyship’s chambers. Afias surrendered her ladyship to the care of her handmaid, but could not tear himself far away, and found himself pacing the hallways around her chambers.

He was a man wrecked with guilt. Adrea was his charge, Trinian and Astren had entrusted her to him, and he blamed himself for her current state. He felt he should have helped her more with her nightmares, been more amicable with her when they first arrived, become friends with her while still in Drian. He traced every step of their relationship and found himself cool, removed, and stubborn along the way. A man of deep feeling, he did not remember the times when he sought to build bridges, and she had remained aloof. He blamed himself entirely for Power’s near victory.

The memory of that moment tormented him, almost as much as it did Adrea. Remembering it now, seeing it play out in his mind, feeling the cold darkness that had descended into the meeting room, he pulled at his dark hair and leaned, gasping and hot, against the cold walls of the hall. He could not forget when the god tried to suck Adrea’s breathe from her body, and he wanted to keel over in horror. He wanted to rescue her from it. To take the blame upon himself and shoulder the burden. Surely, his own efforts could heal her, and together, they could restore South Drian. He clung to that hope with stubborn persistence.

But he, poor prince, would never truly understand the depths of shame in her heart. He saw only the



repentance and struggle, and he felt there must be some way, some path, to heal her – but he was inadequate, and in the deepest parts of himself, he knew it. They needed something greater, stronger, better than they. He pushed away from the wall and paced again.

At last, Faring came and said Adrea was asking for him.

She looked far better, wrapped in a sheep blanket and reclining on the couch in her room. Her hair was wet, brushed and braided to the side, her hands were wrapped in bandages, and her face wiped of the signs of her misery. Now, only the darkness beneath her eyes spoke of her weariness. But there was a new light in them too. A new hope, and she smiled when he entered.

“You can leave us Faring,” Adrea told her. “I’ll ring if I need you.”

The faithful servant looked at her ladyship doubtfully as she moved toward the wooden door that led to her own side chamber. “It’s alright,” the prince reassured the faithful servant. “I’ll take care of her.” Faring did not look pleased, but she left them alone.

Afias pulled up an ottoman beside the couch and sat before her. “Are you well enough to tell me?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“You don’t have to. I can come back if you need to sleep first.”

His look of concern was so strong that she put out her hand to cover his reassuringly, but she paused when she saw the bandages on her own hands. “No, please. I want to tell you. I’m very broken, you know,” she said with a small smile, looking over his shoulder at a point in the air beside his head.

"I'm sorry."

"I am not." She looked back at him, and fumbling for the right words, tried to explain herself. "I have always been very proud. Very proper, too. And now look where we are because of it. I could not trust anyone but myself, could not accept that I might be wrong. I lacked empathy and... love. I was so afraid to show weakness, that I bottled all my emotion and tried to act with impartiality. I was wrong, and it took this – this awful, terrible thing – to make me see it. And I am so very sorry." Her voice shook with a sob, but she did not cry. She had wept so much on her journey that her tears were all spent.

"You know I don't hold any of it against you."

"But you should! I don't know why you don't. I am responsible."

"Yes, for some of it, you were. But so was I."

"Don't say that! Of course you weren't. I don't know how you could say that. You were stubborn and willful and moody," she laughed suddenly; it felt so nice to tell him his faults aloud, and when she did, they were suddenly so small that she had to laugh. "You're thick-skulled, and slow, and bumbling sometimes;" he laughed with her, glad that she felt comfortable enough now to speak openly to him. "Yes," she continued, "I admit those are your faults. But nothing worse. It was my pride – a fault you entirely lack – that caused me to push so hard against you; to fear for the future; and to despair of the present. The god needed to possess me to get to you...because I was worse than you."

Afias had tears in his eyes. At long last, he accepted that it was not his fault. He accepted that she had sinned against him, entirely and willfully. He could not excuse her actions

as blind or provoked or misguided, and that was very hard to his generous, idealistic heart. But since he had already forgiven her, he continued to do so, and he looked at her honestly.

“We cannot live in the past. I want to move forward.”

She smiled with a sob of relief. “Ok, yes. That’s what I want too.”

He smiled. “Good.”

“But Afias! We need to make up for the past. We have to make amends as we move forward.”

She was calm and direct, and he could tell she had something specific in mind. Warmth spread through his chest and arms: he was a man of intimacy, and the sharing of ideas fueled excitement and purpose within him. Despite all their shared misery, he was happy in this moment. “By doing what?” he asked.

“We have to bury the bodies. The dead, all across South Drian. We can’t leave them there, and they deserve to be buried. We can’t ignore the dead anymore than we can ignore the living. Please, can we?”

“I think it a wonderful plan. Yes, it’s a good idea. While we wait for Captain Wilhelm to return, we have little else to do anyway.”

She leaned back, her burden at last released, and her eyelids drooped in fatigue.

He stood up. “Am I not to hear about what happened to you while you were gone?” He asked lightly, for he could tell she was too exhausted to speak anymore.

She smiled appreciatively at his smiling face, so solid, strong, and steady. So forgiving and understanding. And she was grateful to have him for a friend. “Later, I promise.

When I wake up, I'll tell you everything.”

“I look forward to it. I will tell Faring you are asleep.”

With a backward glance at her as he left the room, he saw that her sleeping face was composed and still, more peaceful than he had ever seen it.

## The Questions of Knowledge

When Knowledge departed the thicket of trees in South Drian, for it was she who had been visiting in the wilds with Lady Adrea, she returned to the palace of the gods and sought out Fate. She discovered him on the balcony where he had first approached her about bringing directions to a mere mortal; he was there now with Resolve, who paced back and forth before him, self-important and full of consequence.

“These are the stipulations Power demands, brother,” said the tight-lipped lady. “They are not too much, considering the way everything is bound to fall out.”

Fate did not seem perturbed that demands were being made upon his future misfortune, but stood tall and noble, his arms closed stolidly over his chest, his face resting in an amused expression. “I am not in the habit, tempting as it may be, to bet upon the future, sister.”

“Oh? When you already know the way everything falls out? Surely, you would make out the best, by far. You

could have any advantage you desire in our new world.”

“What you do not seem to understand, Resolve, is that it is not my advantage I seek.”

“Don’t be naïve. You really think He will return, glance across the wasteland that was once Minecerva, and say to you, well done, my good and faithful servant? You really think this was what He wanted to happen? Even if He does return, He’ll take everything away from you, everything you ever worked for, and cast you out into the wild with the rest of us. Your best bet is to ally with us, and stop His return before it comes.”

Fate smiled. Her windy words ruffled no feathers. “Ah, Knowledge, my sister,” he said, instead of answering Resolve. “Do not stand in the shadows there – join us.”

Resolve wrinkled her nose at the beautiful goddess and shrugged her shoulders at her. “I have nothing to say to you. You are useless, never up to anything in this world but singing and looking fetching. Your beauty won’t save you!” With that, she jumped from the parapet and flew back to Karaka.

“What were her stipulations?” asked Knowledge, leaning, as her sister had described, fetchingly, against the balcony.

“Oh, they want me to exercise my powers of restraint, to keep back any gods who choose to side with the mortals.”

Knowledge laughed, her face puckered in scorn. “Ha! They ask something against your nature. Power is becoming too arrogant for his own good.”

He smiled at her. “I saw you descend to the mortal realm yourself just now. Have you chosen to choose sides?”

“I told you... it’s up to them if they wish to listen to me.”

“Ah, but you give them a nudge now and again, is that

your plan now?”

To his pleasant surprise, she grew serious and frowned. “I’ve begun to wonder – you know.... Well, I’ve begun to wonder whether we shouldn’t have been more involved with humanity all this time. Have we not brought about this conflict from our neglect? Mankind is no match, on its own, against Power’s might.”

“It is a question worth asking, I grant you that.”

“I never did give any nudges before. Resolve was right. I counted on the beauty of my truth to be enough... but perhaps it’s not.”

Fate did not answer her. It was not his way, even if he had the answer, to give it directly, so he only said to her, “It’s your search for new answers, sister, that does you credit.” Then he strolled inside and left Knowledge to reflect with herself, looking out over the realm of man. Then she turned to seek out Solitude and tell her all she had learned.





# IX

## PASSION

*“These violent delights have violent ends  
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder  
Which, as they kiss, consume”*

— *William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet*



## To Build Up

**T**he terrain in Mestraff had grown the most treacherous yet. The trees were constantly thinning, only scattered in groups here and there, and over the ground and rising up all around was a smooth rock face, rocky cliffs, and outcroppings forming caves and overhangs that almost blocked out the sun. It was dark overhead, and as Lavendier gazed at the cracks of gray sky, she yearned for the wide, blue expanse of Drian's heavens, and the unending, undulating prairie plains. This stony face was far too barren.

Jacian's voice piped up from where Viol walked ahead with him, reverberating in a high echo back and forth across the cliffs. "I remember a time when we weren't always walking."

"Do you?" Viol asked him. "What else do you remember?"

"I remember the nurse who got me up in the morning. I mean, well, I don't really remember her, but I remember that she brought me toasted bread with jam. I miss jam."

“What about your father? Do you remember him?”

He was quiet a moment. “Yes. He was big, and he used to pick me up. But he’s not as strong as Garrity.”

“Why would you say that?” she asked in surprise.

“Because if he was, he’d have come himself, instead of sending Garrity.”

Viol rushed to gainsay this. “My dear, your father is very strong. One of the best and strongest of men. But he must protect the kingdom, and so he found the best men he could to protect us, and he found two: Asbult and Garrity. And Merciec, of course,” she added, with a smile at the tall man walking behind her. “Your father loves you very much, and if he could, he would have come himself.”

Suddenly, a roar reverberated through the stony ravine: above their heads, behind their backs, before and around them. They all jumped in terror, looking about in vain to ascertain the origin of the unholy echo. Then they saw him, and he was terrifying. Out of a hole in the rock wall there stretched forth tentacles of massive size and towering strength, which in a blink of an eye, had ripped up two trees in the ground, and broken them like frail sticks, as if to show off. These tentacles of unholy strength stretched out toward them.

“Back! Back!” screamed Garrity, and pushed everyone around the corner. They pulled into a small outcropping, and huddled in fear.

Garrity turned to Asbult, and Asbult looked back at him, passing a gaze of desperation between them.

“He will return any moment,” Asbult said. “We must kill him quickly. Those tentacles are miles in length. If we try to flee, they’ll certainly overtake us.”

Garrity nodded once. "We will face him then."

Asbult said to Merciec, "Distract him with your arrows, and we will get in close with our spears." Then, as he turned to leave, he was face to face with Cila. He kissed her deeply a moment, and then pulled away and went to the corner. Merciec gripped his arrows, and readied himself for Asbult's signal, but a hand clutched at his back.

It was Lavendier, her face pale with terror, and in her eyes, the vulnerability of a child. "Don't go. You'll die."

Merciec looked at her, and for once his boyish eyes were serious. "Do you remember what I told you, that night outside Rarks?"

"You said my life was on probation," she said faintly.

He smiled a little. "Yes, I did. But I also said that you are a builder. I saw, and I still see, something in you that you can't. You do not care about my life for my sake, but because I have now become a part of you. Learn to look beyond yourself, to care for others, and you will be great. Build up, Laven, and do not tear apart. Do it for me."

She reached for him again but he was gone; in a daze she heard the roar of the beast. She saw the gaping jaws and the slashing steel, and she heard the cries of agony. Numb in body, mind, and soul, she only knew that he was gone.

\* \* \*

When at last the fierce sounds of battle fell silent, she was the first to creep from hiding. With faltering steps she peered around the corner and beheld the carnage. First the monster: mighty and terrifying, even in death, with monstrous tentacles and teeth and claws strewn about,

one lying like a hill in front of her, and she had to climb it to see beyond. There, in the midst of the wreckage, lay Garrity and Merciec.

Asbult was ahead of her, climbing over another tentacle. He was bloody, but more than that, he was covered in slimy, yellow gunk that oozed across the ground. Viol pushed past her and dropped down beside Garrity's prostrate form: the soldier had a nasty gash across his chest.

Asbult went to Merciec, but after a moment came over to Viol.

"Is he...?" the young girl asked, and Asbult nodded grimly.

Lavendier shook like a leaf in autumn, a roaring filling her ears. She saw Asbult kneel beside Garrity, but she did not care about him. The one she cared about was dead.

## And Not Tear Apart

**G**arrity was neither dead nor incapacitated, for his wounds were not deep. Adlena wrapped up his chest with strips of Merciec's cloak, for he would no longer need it, and Garrity insisted he was well enough to travel. They could not bury Merciec – the ground was far too hard and rocky, and yet with no stones that could be collected for a cairn. Cila and Viol laid him out as best they could, spread his blanket over him, and laid his weapons at his feet. All except for his short-sword, which Asbult took up and handed to Lavendier without a word. Then they sadly set out, climbing over the giant, fleshy tentacles of the beast, heading for what they hoped were greener places ahead.

While coveted when withheld, freedom when gained is a weighty responsibility. While living, Lavendier feared Merciec as her arbiter, at the same time as she leaned upon him as her security. Now that he was gone, she felt lost and frightened. He had spoken the truth when he said she still cared more for herself than for him: he had become

a part of her and now a part of her had died. Without him, her moral compass was gone, and she was left with a choice: either to develop that compass within her, or else to succumb to its deprivation. But while she longed to honor his memory, Lavendier had never practiced self-discipline or self-motivation; for this reason, and it alone, she failed to assume responsibility for herself.

\* \* \*

Passion had been eagerly watching for just such an opportunity with the eldest princess, knowing that the weak girl would surely return to her old ways when removed from her guardian's good influence. Now the goddess, eager to play a part in Power's schemes, began to air out old thoughts from the princess's mind, reviving familiar thought patterns, and reawakening memories of luxury and pleasure.

*Wouldn't it be nice to have a comfortable bed once again? To be beautiful and admired? No one admires me now, in these bedraggled rags. No one wants to see me. I could disappear in the undergrowth and no one would notice.*

Her eyes found Garrity, where he tramped in the center of the group, and her desire found him as pleasing as she had in the palace. Ah, the pleasure of being held by a man like that; of being safe, secure, and wanted; of being admired, comforted, and complimented.

She pressed ahead until she walked beside him, then stumbled and nearly fell against his strong arm, but he only side-stepped her, protecting the wound at his side and letting her fumble about clumsily.



She glared at him, but he made no eye contact and pressed on with the others. Everyone was tired, everyone was unsure of their footing, and no one stopped to ask if she was alright.

*Did they ask if I can go on? Do they care for my safety? I was sent away from Drian like a pesky child, and I am ignored here like I am less than a gnat! I'll show them. I'll show them all. I can be useful. I can have value.*

She spent the next several hours sweeping her eyes about as they traveled, keen to spy any small animals that she could fell with an arrow, and so prove her usefulness to the group. At last, as evening was almost upon them, she saw her chance and knocking an arrow to the bow, lifted her weapon and shot at a small thing on a shallow cliff. It flicked around just as she would have hit it, and the arrow only caught in its tail. The little thing shrieked in anger and pain and fled from them, calling and screaming as it went.

“Lavendier!” cried Asbult, “have you lost your senses? Do you want to alert every gorgan in Mestraff to our presence? Just shoot yourself next time, and save us the effort of protecting you.”

She said nothing, only glared off into the distance, and he passed his hand over his brow, weary from travel and short-tempered from their loss. “Never mind,” he said. “We’ll make camp here.”

Lavendier grabbed her share of dinner from the packs – dried fruit, crackers, and hard cheese – and cast herself down apart from the rest of them. They wanted nothing with her, she reasoned, and she wanted nothing with them.

The soft pad of light feet told her Viol had followed her.

Her sister had been casting sympathetic glances at her all day, which she had chosen to ignore, and now she did not look over as Viol leaned against the boulder beside her.

“Asbult didn’t mean what he said,” the young princess said quietly. “He was only upset.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” snapped her sister. “I’ve been ill-treated again, as usual.”

“I think you’ve been helpful lately. And selfless. It’s just very hard to be good when you’re so tired,” she sighed, stretching her aching legs, but Lavendier heard only accusation in Viol’s voice.

“I’m not any more tired than I have a right to be! After all, I’ve been cast from my homeland, forced to wander the wilderness with only indifferent men and helpless women, and my life is forfeit at every turn. It’s grueling, and how can I be expected to go on?”

Beneath her words, what she did not voice aloud, was her desire to be good – as Merciec had wanted. He had called on her to rise above her desires and passions. But he had expected too much of her. She was only a selfish, spoiled girl, and she wept with frustration at her utter uselessness, plunging each moment deeper and deeper into dark despair.

If only she had known that half her evil thoughts came from another source, and not her own breast. If only she had known that she was not nearly so far-gone as she thought herself. But she had no way to discern, no way to search her heart, and so she believed herself to be truly and utterly wicked, and she hated herself for it.

## A Passion for Death

**P**assion felt the time was ripe. She could do now what Power had failed to accomplish: she could ensnare the princess of Drian.

The natural god of the rocky plains of Mestraff was a large, ugly brute who feasted on human flesh and resided deep in a cave; he, the goddess felt, would be the perfect vessel to carry the possession to Lavendier, and so she visited him in his lair.

“There are some humans coming through your lands, and I would like you to approach one of them and send the spirit of a god into her. I’ll make it worth your while.”

But she found him more disgusting than she had thought. He grinned at her with large, black lips and empty eyes, and she realized he was too far gone – too much a senseless creature of the earth now – to do the bidding of the gods, and she departed from his lair to think on a new plan.

However, the goddess had succeeded in one thing: she had alerted the hungry beast to the presence of tasty humans in his lands.

Lavendier was dragging behind the caravan as a wingless goose flags behind an arrow-shaped gaggle. It was the seventh day since they left Merciec, and with each passing day, Asbult's frustration with his sister-in-law mounted. Gritting his teeth, he tried to urge Lavendier on, but she only drooped more and more, like an parched tiger-lily, refusing to speak, eat, or pick up her pace. Thinking that he appreciated Merciec on a whole new level, Asbult finally bit his tongue, and hoped she would get over her mourning before she did permanent harm to the rest of them.

Garrity plowed the way in front, his chest wound healing a little bit each day, but refusing to let it slack their pace across the roadless land. The Nian ladies followed him in single file, spread apart, defenseless, and all took turns carrying or urging Jacian along. With only two men remaining to defend them, they were like a brood of chicks walking blindfold through a den of foxes.

So preoccupied were they in looking for gorgans that they were wholly unprepared when a monster, standing taller than the tallest spire of Korem, suddenly reared its head above the rock hill beside them. With a clatter of boulders and a quake that shook the earth, with hunger in his empty eyes and a large, stupid grin on his lips, he reached down his arm to gather the humans for his lunch.

The princesses fled in all directions and the monster, pleased with the sport, watched them run with a snarl of stupid glee. He wanted them to run. It was so long since mortals had entered his realm, and he was eager for sport before supper.

Asbult and Garrity held their ground and lifted bow and spear to fell the mountainous beast knowing, even as they did, that their weapons would do no more harm to its hide than the sting of a mosquito. But before they quite lost all hope, Lavendier took them all by surprise.

She ran when she saw the beast – but not for cover.

She ran toward him.

“You want a victim?” she screamed, staring up into its empty, animal eyes. “Then take me. Take me back to whatever hellhole you call your home and feast. Feast! Here I am – take me! Send me to death, to hell, to misery, I don’t care!” She laughed hysterically. “What good is my life? What good is anyone’s life?” Her shouting stilled the beast, and he gazed at her in bewilderment. He was accustomed to a chase, but she was not running. He tilted his head, contemplated her for a brief second...

And reached down, took her up, and walked away.

“No!” cried Viol, trying to run after them, but Asbult grabbed her.

“Let them go,” he told her. “He’s left us alone.”

“He has my sister.”

“Yes. But not the prince, not the queen, not all of us. That in itself is a miracle.”

Garrity sheathed his spear to his back.

“Garrity, he has Laven!” cried Viol, throwing herself upon him. The young princess’s eyes were filling with tears, and the warrior laid his hand on her shoulder. He could not have cared less for the lost, selfish, self-destructive princess, but he cared much for this one. “I will deal with him, and bring her back.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Asbult, but Garrity told him to stay

with the others, who were now coming out from under the cover of the cliff where they had huddled in fright.

“He will kill you if you go alone. And you are still wounded.”

“If I succeed at all, it will be alone. There is none else to lead them if I do not return.”

Asbult reluctantly let him go, shaking his head at losing his best and last warrior over a princess who had thrown herself into the arms of death. Let her go, if that was what she wanted. No, he stilled the thought. He still loved her – his stubborn, willful sister – and that was why he was so angry.

May the gods protect them both.

\* \* \*

Lavendier found herself still uneaten in the cave of the beast. He sat towering above her head, watching her with infuriating calm, and she railed against him. She screamed and ran away, but he did not follow; she wept and threw herself upon the ground in abject fear, but he sat watching her; she clawed at her hair and clothing in hysterics, but he merely waited to see what she would do next.

His giant horns were green and curved, spiraling outward, but he did not spear her on them; his long glistening purple claws and teeth, though sharp, sat idle; and his one giant arm, in the center of his chest, dotted with yellow spots and matted fur, lay useless by his loins, where the black fur, that everywhere else covered his body in patches, was absent, and his hideous white skin glowed pale; even his giant, curving tail, that spewed black and red gunk, did

not wrap around her and smother her with its stench.

After lying still upon the ground, she finally got up in anger and cried up the many leagues to his head. "Why don't you eat me? Why don't you snap my little body in two? Trample me beneath your giant feet! Breathe upon me your poisonous breath! I come to you a willing victim, and what do you do? You sit! Idle!"

He only curled his swollen black lips in a hideous grin – this was more sport than a fleeing village. He garbled at her, but she did not know his simple grunting language. Then he stood and ambled to a corner, where he kept a few snacks between meals. He pulled out a body, purple from internal bleeding, dead from broken bones, and bit off its head. Then, finally, Lavendier felt like fainting. She swayed a bit and turned pale.

"I am glad to see you still possess some sort of human emotion."

She whirled to see Garrity leaning on his spear in the shadows of the cave's entrance. "I heard your rant," he observed. "Apparently you don't want to be rescued." He spoke without shouting, and since the beast's head was so far above them, it did not hear.

"You should not have come," she told him. "He will kill you." She did not care if this soldier died. They all died it seemed, sooner or later – all except her. But she thought she should warn him, in case he did not want his life to end.

"He will kill *you*," he returned, "when he's had his fun." He narrowed his eyes at her. "Why do you want that?"

Her dark, luscious eyes, deceitfully perfect, widened in agony, and she clutched at her hair. "Because my life is

*empty.*” Her chest heaved as she tried to find the right words. “I may be a princess in a beast’s cave, but this is nothing to the cage into which I have stuffed my soul. I put it there a long time ago because I couldn’t master it. I tried and failed, and I can’t face it now. Now that I know what it is to have one, I can’t go back. Without a soul, I’m empty, gutted, I’m raw. All I want is my life to end. And death refuses to take me!” She screamed this last part up to the monster, and now it turned its attention back to her....

And decided she was no longer interesting. It reached down with its one giant claw to end her.

Garrity sighed, for this was a natural god and could only be killed by one of its own kind. Knowing this, and knowing the risk he took in revealing himself to the princess, Garrity nonetheless lifted his spear and hurled it at the beast. The heavy weapon pierced the hairy hand and the monster let forth a bellow of pain and outrage, snarling about the cave to find where it had sailed from. This, though it made her angry, did not astonish Lavendier – but what Garrity did next left her utterly speechless.

Garrity threw off his cloak, charged to meet the monster, and when he was only ten paces from being trampled flat like a beetle under a shoe, he leapt high into the air. He flew straight to the roof of the cave, a quarter of a mile above the ground, and latched hold there like a bat. Then, bracing his feet on the wall of the cave, with his bare hands, he pulled down the ceiling, burying the beast beneath a crushing load of rubble. Garrity leapt clear of the falling rocks, landing lightly like a lyrebird, and dusting his hands.

He did not even breathe heavily.

Lavendier trembled and shook for the both of them. The



rubble had barely missed her, and she was kneeling among it, but her gaze was fixated in terror on her savior. "What are you? Are you a god?"

He reclined himself. "I am a man."

"No!" she cried wildly, fear, desperation, and exhaustion blending horribly within her. "I know what I just saw and it wasn't human. Don't lie to me."

He looked at her with calm and mild scorn, as he always did. "I never lie." He walked to where the beast's hand stuck out from beneath the stones and pulled his spear free. "Never suggest that again."

Weak-kneed, she collapsed against the cavern wall. "Then what did I see?"

For the first time since meeting the spoiled princess, Garrity felt a semblance of pity for her. She looked miserable, subdued, and humbled – an attitude only Merciec had seen in her before. But this time, it was less from fear and more from respect, which heightened the humanity of it.

He cleaned and sheathed his sword, and sat down heavily across from her. He winced, now, at the pain in his chest. "I have tried to forget."

"Then you aren't human?"

"Partly. My mother was a witch, a powerful enchantress, the natural goddess of the hills of southern Kelta. I carry her blood in my veins, and when I choose, I can call upon it. Sometimes for strength, sometimes to cast a spell. I have done it little in my life."

Lavendier's eyes did not waver from his face. He looked at her, wanting to stop, but she gave him no excuse, for there was nothing of her old pride looking back at him;

only respect and subdued inquiry. "I fear power, and I respect it," he continued quickly. "But she did neither. She taught me, by lesson and example, to wield my strength for evil. My father was a coward, and died when I was still a child. I grew up knowing nothing of goodness or morality. I had to teach it to myself." He glared at her. He was angry that she had gotten him to talk about himself, but she only looked back at him with the round brown eyes of an eager child.

She was hungry for him to continue, and pressed him. "Why? Why teach yourself that?"

"Because I hated evil. Somehow, I could see the ugliness in it, and I fled as far away as possible."

"Then you are more than human."

He was annoyed. "I am half human, half god. The blood that flows in my veins is half mortal, half immortal. I am a perilous danger to myself! I could easily wield terrible power over others."

She was silent a moment, reflecting on all she knew about the soldier before her, remembering every moment, battle, and speech. "Yet you do not use it," she said. "You could never be a danger to anyone. You do not even engage in small sins." She leaned forward, trying to meet the real man for once. "You are the best man I know," and she surprised herself with her earnestness. Embarrassed, she pulled back and observed softly, "You saved me when I would not save myself. Such power is not to be feared. You are brave and good, and self-sacrificing."

He sighed again, weary with the conversation and with her compliments. "You no longer wish to die?"

"If you can overcome," she said stumblingly, "on your

own – such evil within you – such a terrible past – then I can try harder. I think – I can try also to be good.”

“We all need help, you know,” he said kindly. “I did not learn to be good on my own. I had help.”

She nodded, pursing her lips.

Then he stood, lifted her from the ground, and they returned to the others.

## History of a Demi-God

To Asbult's astonishment, the rocky land had ended in another forest. He had expected it to empty straight into the enemy's domain, but it seemed that even this close to his deadly realm, there struggled up some life in the soil. So now they traveled in shade and slept on soft ground, which was a welcome respite from the rocks. All the while, as they wove in and out among the trees, Lavendier pondered Garrity's broad back, as he forged ahead at the front of the caravan. He seemed to be a new person, and whenever she thought about the mighty leap, the flight to the roof of the cavern, and the toppling of the solid rock, she trembled with excitement. He had an outer calm that belied the intensity of passion and power within. She wanted to understand him, and like everything else in her life, when she wanted something, she tenaciously pursued it.

On the evening of the second day, since her attempted suicide, the demi-god was standing apart from their group beneath an elm, where Cila's voice drifted through the

darkness from the light of the fire, singing Jacquee to sleep,  
and filling his ears with peace:

*“Come my little one  
Come  
And feel the light of dawn*

*A sprinkle of rain  
A trickle to stain  
Dark the little hand  
That stretches for water.*

*But dawn will come again.*

*Come my little one  
Come  
And feel the light of dawn.”*

A loud crackling of twigs disrupted the peace of the song, and Garrity whirled around, nearly taking off Lavendier’s head with his blade.

“It’s only me,” she cried.

“Did you need something?” he asked testily, turning back around with a sigh, and wishing she would leave him alone.

“No,” she said, “Nothing.” Then, to his astonishment, she sat on the ground beside him, her shoulder so close, he could practically feel its warmth on his leg. He tried to make himself comfortable again, but her presence disconcerted him.

“Not much a one for talking, are you?” she asked after a

little while.

“No.”

“Why not?”

He kept his voice even, wishing she would take the hint and go away. “There is very seldom anything worth saying.”

She laughed, and he frowned at her. What he had said was not funny.

“If we waited for that, the human race would soon forget the faculty of speech!” she said.

He thought about that, and did not agree, so he merely said, “Hmm.”

“Of course!” continued the princess, taking his silence as encouragement. “Besides, language itself is ridiculous, so why bother making the content worthwhile? We talk because we want to feel close to others, not because we really have anything to say.”

“When people have a true connection, they can communicate without words.”

“Well, I can’t!” she exclaimed in surprise. “How can I know what someone is thinking unless they tell me?”

“But is that really what we convey when we speak – what we are thinking? I often find it’s the opposite. I think actions convey thoughts more effectively.”

“Huh,” she wrinkled her white brow. “Why do you have to make everything so complicated?”

“Do I?”

“Yes! I’m just trying to get to know you.”

He smiled at that, and then laughed so suddenly that she jumped, her shoulder hitting his knee. “I’m not very good at that,” he told her.

“Talking?”

“Getting to know people. I don’t have very many friends, nor do I wish to. I have difficulty trusting others.”

“Me, you mean?” her voice was small and insecure. “Because of how I’ve acted up till now?”

“No, anyone. It is the way I am.”

“You don’t have to trust me, you know. I mean, not tonight. But maybe we could get to know each other, and then you decide?”

He was taken aback that for the second time he was seeing this girl apart from her selfish, self-centered, arrogant ways. She was vulnerable, curious, and conducting her tenacity in a positive direction, and he unexpectedly wanted to give her a chance. “I think I like that plan,” he said.

\* \* \*

Lavendier walked beside her new friend at the head of the group, and frequently, Viol ran ahead of the others and walked on the other side of Garrity. Her smaller legs fell into step with his long strides, and she swung her arms in an indifferent effortlessness.

It struck Lavendier, as she watched her little sister over the course of the next few days, that when she herself walked or moved, she was forever conscientious about how she presented herself: where she laid her arms when they were at rest, how her head was held upon her neck, what expression she used to mask her face. She thought, with surprise, that these were probably not the manners of an unselfish person. Filled with the eager, new-found

resolve for goodness, she decided, then and there, to be selfless about her appearance, and not to care so much about her poise and movement.

“Who helped you to be good?” she asked Garrity suddenly, as the three of them were walking together.

“What?”

“In the cave, you said someone helped you learn to be good. Who was it?”

Garrity glanced uncomfortably at Viol, wishing Lavendier were more discreet, and shrugged his shoulders. “Just this man who took me in after I left home.”

“After you ran away?”

“Yes,” he said tightly.

“How did he help you?”

“He taught me to mind my tongue,” he said, and to his relief, Lavendier fell silent.

Lavendier, embarrassed, dropped back from them to adjust the pack on her shoulders. The long grasses in the shade were still wet with morning dew and clung to her damp skirt, but she was used to it now. Life lived in comfort, on feather beds with warm fires, a roof over one’s head, and a cushiony chair reached far back in her memory, only offering a pale once-upon-a-time in contrast to the drudgery of life now, and she no longer dwelt on those images in bitterness. Sore back, aching legs, and sunburned neck were the norm, and she did not complain.

Resolved to show Garrity that she could learn from him, she forged on again, and Viol fell back until she walked alongside her. Lavendier felt a warm glow in her heart for, obsessed as she was with gaining Garrity’s good opinion,



she wanted this best friend of Garrity's, her own strange little sister, to be her friend too.

Many new thoughts had been tormenting Lavendier for some time, not the least of these being about love, and now she decided to broach the subject with her sister, in a selfless attempt to show that she was growing in virtue.

"I do not think that loving others means you love yourself any less," she said. "I think we learn to love ourselves more, the more we love others."

"I don't think so," said Viol, surprised. "I think loving others means that you forget about yourself."

Lavendier furrowed her brow. "That's not true. You have to love yourself before you can think about loving others. Otherwise, why would you love? We do it selfishly at first, thinking only of ourselves, and it's only after the person becomes a part of us that we care about their well-being."

"Maybe. I know not. I never thought about it before."

Lavendier frowned in dissatisfaction that the conversation had ebbed, and she suddenly burst out, "Why is it so hard to talk to people?"

Viol laughed in surprise. "Since when have you had trouble talking to people?"

"Since I actually cared what we were talking about. I cannot seem to get Garrity to talk to me about anything interesting."

"Laven, I do not know if I should say this, but..."

"What?"

"Well, you've been by his side a lot the past few days. Maybe he finds it smothering."

"Really? Oh. Do you think I am smothering?"

"N-no. I don't."

Lavendier pouted. "That was enthusiastic."

"I find you needy," she explained guiltily.

"Oh."

"I shouldn't have said that. It's just, well, you have been trying so hard to help everyone and do everything the past few days, and it is kind of tiring."

Lavendier flushed. "I am just trying to be a better person," she exclaimed.

"That's good. Really, it is. I'm glad."

"Don't you notice?"

"I guess so. I guess I was looking at it the wrong way."

The older girl wanted to explain everything to make Viol understand, to make her see how hard being good was, but then she bit her tongue. She could not help thinking of Merciec, who had said she was not as good as she thought she was. Looking for approval, she decided, was probably not the right way to be good. Instead, she picked up her pace until she was alongside Garrity again.

"I've been thinking."

He raised his eyebrow, wondering if she ever stopped. She seemed a tireless whirl of energy: of thinking, talking, moving – the girl was a boundless, burning ball of movement. "What about?" he asked.

"About you, you know. Ever since the cave," She spoke under her breath now, to make sure no one else could hear them. "I have been wondering... I mean, you said your mother was a goddess, and that she wanted to kill you, and that she was evil. I am trying to understand what you said. Why did she want you; who was your father; why did she want to kill you?"

He sighed loudly.

“I only ask,” she pursued, “because I want to understand. If you are going to help me be good, then should I not know what motivates you, and who you are? I will tell you anything you want to know about *me*.”

“If I answer your questions, will you tell anyone else?”

“Of course not! It will be in strictest confidence.”

He glanced over his shoulder, scrunched his eyebrows low together, and then took the plunge. “Very well, but only to stop your questions. My mother, Strana, was a natural goddess who ruled the southern tip of Kelta. She was a mistress of seduction, and exercised power over mortal men’s minds, molding them into fawning slaves, so that always, she had everything she wanted. But at the beginning of the eleven hundredth year of Drian, as my old nurse told it to me, she grew anxious and restless. I think she knew that the god of Karaka was planning something, and she was jealous of retaining her power. The more she dwelt on it, the more her contentment clouded, and she began muttering to herself; my nurse heard her words: ‘He will take my lands. He will take my men. I will be left with nothing at the end!’

“So my mother searched desperately for a deterrent against him, and eventually, she discovered a poor lord of Southern Kelta, who had nothing left to him but a bit of something called poison gold which, being mortal, he could not use.

“What is poison gold?”

“Be silent, and I will tell you. She wooed him and he married her. My poor, weak, selfish, lustful father. She took a bad man, and gave him worse than even he deserved. She, of course, knew the magic of the gold, though he

did not. Be still, I will explain: the rules were that she must bear a child by him and, when both father and child perished, the poison's unlimited power would pass to her. Power that would increase her own, and give her the ability to seduce even a high god. So she bore a son – to bear me, she marred her perpetual, vain, seductive virginity, and then she murdered the sad man, my father, who was her husband. But she could not kill me forthwith. She was forced to wait until I grew to maturity, for I must be able to wield the power before I could be its rightful successor. She raised me with all riches and pomp, ignoring my existence as often as possible and bestowing no love upon me.

“And so, in that time, my nurse discovered all she could of her mistress's plan. You see, Strana had complete control over the hearts of men, but not always of women. Women can resist her, with great effort, and my nurse loved me enough to resist my mother's charms. When the time came for the witch to kill me, my nurse intercepted her plot, and sent me out into the wild. She gave me into the care of a distant friend, faked my death, and then perished herself for her defiance, for my mother was greatly angered. Until I rescued Viol, my mother thought I was lost forever, and her plan foiled. Desperate to retain her magic, she must have kidnapped the young princess in another attempt to defy the god of Karaka.

“There,” he finished with a gust of finality in his tone, “does that satisfy your questions?”

The truth was so much worse than Lavendier had imagined that, for once, Garrity had silenced her. She only gave a small yes, then relapsed into quiet. Garrity had been

walking with his fists clenched and his heart beating hard; but after telling her everything, and leaving her speechless and calm, his chest relaxed, and he suddenly felt lighter. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled, remembering the patience of the old man who had taken him in: an angry, scared, restless young man without direction. His beloved nurse, his surrogate mother, had just been lost and he had never been more alone in his life, but the old man had given him direction and guidance, and he would do the same for Lavendier – if he could.

## The Forest of Death

**T**he next day Lavendier was carrying Jacian at the back of the caravan. They had many weeks ago constructed an upright sling out of scraps of fabric, which carried the prince on the bearer's chest and distributed his weight across the back and shoulders. But he was no longer an infant, and whoever carried him had to be pack free and use their arms to hold him in front, where he sat straddle-legged, with his legs wrapped around their hips. Although carrying him slowed their progress, it let them keep on all day instead of making frequent stops, for his little legs did not have the endurance of their own.

Carrying him had been the job of the soldiers, but now that there were only two men, and all the other women were small and slight of build, Lavendier insisted on helping to bear the burden. Now, as she pushed forward, her shoulders sore and her legs crying out in protest, and developing a headache from his childish prattle, she suddenly saw Garrity tense at the head of their party. He motioned a stop, and they all froze, watching and listening

intently.

There was no sound, but there was tension in the air.

Suddenly, with a roar like thunder, gorgans leapt from the trees. Asbult whipped out his bow and shot for all he was worth, and Garrity was like a whirlwind, slashing his sword and hurling his spear, retrieving it from one dead body, only to lunge it into another. Throw, slash, retrieve, again. But there were many, many gorgans.

Lavendier pulled Jacian from his sling and threw him to Cila, who set him on the ground and stood over him with a long knife, and Lavendier drew her sword. She thrust out at a gorgan as it lunged toward Viol. She slashed its chest and then its throat. She assumed it fell dead, but after that moment, she lost track of cause and effect. She only remembered to stab, duck, whirl, and look every way she could, the movements trained into her by Merciec playing out like a battle song in her mind, and his voice chanted in her memory. Stab, slash, whirl, duck, step, stab. She did not know it, but she fought with the skill of a hardened warrior. Meeting her blade, the beasts fell about her like stalks of grain at harvest.

At last they were dead, but it was not until she had whirled about three times, anxious and primed and fearful, looking for more and expecting death at every turn, that she realized she had survived the conflict. There was nothing left to fight, and she was alive. She stood back, gasping, her sword point limp in the dust. Shivering and shaking, dreading what she might see, she looked for the others in her group. Behind her, Viol was wielding a bloody knife, and Cila as well. Only Adlena, who stooped over her little son with ashen face, had not fought in the

fray.

“Why did you fight?” she cried in horror at her younger sisters.

“To save my life,” gasped Cila, who was on the verge of tears.

“Because you did,” said Viol at the same moment, gazing at Lavendier as if awestruck. “Where did you learn to fight like that? You moved like Merciec.”

Lavendier did not answer her. Her mind was full of the screams of battle, which she had not heard at the time. It felt like there had been a delay, like the action happened first, and the sound later. Screams, cries, Garrity yelling for her to look out, Asbult’s arrows whizzing over her head.

She felt like she was going to pass out. She wished she were the fainting type – before, she would have just pretended, but now... she simply stood still, dazed and numb.

Garrity came up to her and put his hand gently on her elbow.

“Come, princess.” He tried to nudge her to move, but she stayed rooted, her eyes glassy and confused.

He leaned in, trying to catch her glance. “Laven, we have to get away from here. We have to keep going.”

“I don’t want to,” she gasped.

“But we have to. We cannot remain here.”

“I don’t want to.” She was breathing quickly, losing control, her eyes wide and wild. “I don’t want to ever again!”

He paused, familiar with battle shock. He gestured to the others to move on, then turned to her. “Don’t want to



what?"

"Kill," she said in a faint whisper.

He sighed heavily. "I know. I know, but, for now, come. You just need to walk."

At last, she let herself be led.

\* \* \*

The stars shimmered overhead, a little different than they would look from Drian at this time of the year, but still familiar. Lavendier sat against a tree, cradling her knees, trying to wipe the cries of battle from her mind. No other battle had ever lingered with her like this. It was haunting her. It had taken a part of herself with it, and she was less than she had been before.

Garrity brought her dinner. He handed her a bowl of oats and sat down on a large root pushing out of the ground.

"I can't," she insisted again, before he could say anything. "I won't kill again."

He nodded twice, slowly, biting his lip. "If you don't," he told her after a moment, "you will probably die. And fear for your life is a powerful motivator."

"But it wasn't!" she yelled suddenly, and then was startled by her own voice, and spoke in a hush. "It wasn't, remember? I was willing to die before. Maybe I'll just really die this time. You won't always be there to save me. You wouldn't have saved me today."

"You're talking about the cave?"

She nodded miserably.

"The cave was different," he said, with a firm shake of

his head. "It's different to decide you want to lose your life than to have someone try to take it from you. For the first, you act on choice. But the second is instinct. And besides, what if someone tried to kill Viol or Jacian? Would you let them?"

His arguments were too many. Her mind swam and she could not keep up, but she understood enough of what he was trying to say. If they were attacked again, she would fight again, or else she would have to actively choose to die.

"Why do I care?" she pleaded suddenly. "They are gorgans – beasts. I do not even know if they possess intelligence."

Garrity was weary in mind and soul, and this intense conversation exercised his mind in an unfamiliar way. He stretched out on the ground, staring above at where the dark shape of the tree was silhouetted against the starry expanse. "The first time I ever killed," he told her, "it was a boar. I went hunting with my mother's men in autumn, and the boar was our prey. He charged me with tusks bared, his hide shaggy and stiff, and his eyes wells of pure instinct. Nothing of a person in him, and I could see that. But later, after I had faced him down and had driven my spear through his heart, when I looked at those eyes again, they had lost something. Maybe it was not a soul, like yours or mine, but something was still gone. And it was my fault."

She nodded shakily. "Yes, that is what I feel."

"It is a good thing to feel," he assured her. "It is right to feel that."

## The Clay of Demons

**B**orn into the world of humanity, on occasion, comes a man so diabolical that he seems crafted from the clay of demons. Yet what are demons but fallen gods? Is there anything created that was not once pure, holy, and right, that was not once full of potential; that had not the chance to rise to greatness? And yet, those created with the most ability to rise are they who fall farthest, and such was the fall of Farsooth, right-hand advisor to King Wrelle of Kelta.

Farsooth was jubilant with joy as he departed northern Kelta, with an army at his back and a god on his side, he made his way southwest, across the woods of Mestraff, to Power's palace. He rejoiced because a god had noticed him. A god had seen his potential for leadership and had promised to support him if he overthrew Wrelle. And so, without hesitation, he had overthrown him.

Farsooth had met a small squadron of gorgans sent up secretly from Karaka, and used them in the dark of night to assassinate the king and all of his supporters. Then he

called the population of Kelta together and made promises to them in the same words that Power had used with him.

“We will rise to the head of all mankind!” he told them. “We will rule and conquer and control, and we will be more fortunate than anyone else! We will be blessed by the gods, for they have chosen to smile on us – we are the chosen, the beautiful, the perfect of humanity, and our power will sweep across the world and rule from the seat of the Emperor himself. Who is this puny king who has risen in Drian? What loyalty do we owe him? We owe ourselves! We are special, we are powerful, we are gods!”

He killed anyone who refused to sign up for the army, but most men did not refuse, for they were full of the darts of Resolve, the laughter of Terror, and the blood-thirst of Destruction. They wanted to be gods themselves.

Now Farsooth was going to meet with Power in person, and his heart trembled in his chest. When he reached the miry palace, he admired the way it lunged and bubbled up from the mud. He loved the way his mortal boots squelched in the ground. He smiled as the moisture of the air soaked deep into his bones, and he pushed onward. Discomfort was a small price to pay for ultimate dominance. With steely resolve, as his army waited outside, he followed the gorgans at the gate into the bowels of the palace.

The moment he entered the throne room, his knees collapsed beneath him, and he fell before Power, and Power laughed at him.

Anger surged in Farsooth’s heart, battling with his fear. He had not ridden so far to be made a laughing stock: this was meant to be a meeting of equals!

Power laughed and laughed and said nothing, despising the human who groveled before him, and laughing to keep from killing him. But at last, the god sobered, diminished himself, and strode forward, as Farsooth struggled to his feet.

“Stand up, mortal, and let us make our plans. Come discover what I intend for your people.”

\* \* \*

The next week was a living nightmare; but Farsooth told himself it was a dream. He told himself - until he believed it - that receiving Power into his body, losing control of his own faculties, was true bliss. He told himself he would one day overthrow the hateful Power – and he did hate him with every fiber of his being – because Power was merely a means to an end. He told himself he was fortunate to be in Power’s confidence, and he was powerful himself for being able to stand in the god’s presence – on occasion. He saw Power plan his next moves, plot the downfall of Drian, and train the captains of Kelta, and he reveled in the honor of being involved.

“Why not possess all my men with the strength you have given me?” he asked Power one day, and trembled when the god reared above him in anger at being questioned.

“You have been given a rare gift, and you want to squander it? Few mortals have been possessed by me, and fewer have lived to tell the tale. Remember that – I can end your little existence at any moment, no matter where you are, with just a flick of my fingers!”

Farsooth was on his knees and incapable of lifting his

head. "Yes," he trembled, "Yes, oh god of Power, and I am eternally grateful for the favor you have shown to me. Thank you, you are powerful, thank you, you are powerful..." He repeated it over and over again.

Power smirked and drank in the praise, reminding himself that one day, he would kill Farsooth, who was only a means to an end, and how satisfying that day would be.

Though the soldiers of Kelta were many, Power's gorgans were depleted, and the god knew he needed an advantage against the mortals, so when Resolve offered to fill the larger gorgans with super-human strength, and Death volunteered to make their parting from the world more difficult, Power grasped the idea with glee. The two gods combined their gifts and, to ensure victory over Drian, filled a hundred of the largest gorgans with endurance, intelligence, and the ability to outlive a dual blow to their neck and stomach.

Power rejoiced in his new soldiers like they were new toys, and gave them to Farsooth to train. "Teach them the intelligence of men," he said. But a few of them he kept for himself, and sent them out to search for the princesses, queen, and prince in Mestraff.

Passion was eager to claim the selfish Lavendier once again, and as she waited to hear word of her location, she poisoned her blade with the blood of gorgans, and prepared a pretty temptation, to lead the princess back into her thrall.

## Conviction

**I**t was the morning after the gorgan attack and Garrity was sitting with Jacian, who was counting sticks. “What’s after fourteen?” the boy asked.

“Fifteen.”

“No. Fourteen.”

“Fifteen.”

The prince puffed out a harsh breath. “You don’t understand.”

“I understand that fifteen goes after fourteen.” Garrity was polishing his blade.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Rub it with that stuff.”

“Why do you think?”

“Make it shiny?”

“Yes.”

“Where’d mommy go?”

“With your aunts to gather the nuts and berries we found.”

“Why?”

“Do you ever stop asking questions?”

“Can I eat the nuts and berries?”

“Some of them.”

“Does the enemy eat nuts and berries? Probably berries. If I was in charge of everything, I would eat only berries, and nothing else.”

Garrity smiled. “Count your sticks.”

Viol ran up and dropped a basket at Garrity’s feet. “Have anything else we can use for carrying? We found some eggs.”

“There’s room in my knapsack, I think. Just wrap them carefully.”

She grinned and skipped away. “Eggs, eggs, a basket of eggs,” she sang, “and another for the chickadees.”

Jacian was silent for a long while, busy with some sort of make-believe. After a time, Lavendier, Adlena, and Viol emerged from the wood and put down their bundles of gathered treats. Lavendier came over to him.

“Where is Cila?” asked Garrity, and Lavendier pointed back into the woods. “Alone?” he asked.

“No,” said Lavendier with a smile, and he smiled back.

“Oh.”

Jacian ran off to his mother and Viol, and Lavendier seated herself where he had been. She laid out the sticks and counted them.

“How many are there?” asked Garrity.

“Fifteen.”

“That’s after fourteen.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”



Lavendier gathered the sticks into her hand. She had been taking much better care of herself the past few weeks. Her hair, while not always shining, was carefully braided and pulled back from her face, with only little wisps curling around her ears. Her face was clean, and she changed between her two gowns every morning, washing them whenever she got the chance. Her long skirts had long ago vanished to be used as bandages and fabric scraps, and all the frills had fallen to the wayside, leaving only the practical, travel-able fabric underneath. Altogether, she looked quite a different person from the spoiled, made-up princess who left Fort Jourinan, and different again from the frazzled, despairing wraith of their travels.

When next she spoke, her voice was musing and distant. "How far are we, do you think? What's waiting for us?"

"I only know what I have heard from Asbult. That beyond these woods, he thinks, there is a brief strip of Karaka, and then the Great Desert. Beyond that is a range of the Yellow Mountains and beyond them is the sea."

"You don't really think that? I mean, you wouldn't be fighting so hard to take us to this place unless you really thought there was somewhere to go."

"Conviction is not something I possess in any measure, Laven. In fact, I do not believe anything very strongly."

She looked at him in astonishment. "How can you be so good all the time unless you *believe* in goodness?"

"I suppose I believe. But I don't really feel conviction. I just act like I do." He was silent a moment, then asked her suddenly. "Is that hypocrisy, do you think?" He was surprised that he was interested in her answer.

"Yes. I think it is. But I'm not sure it is necessarily bad.

So you really think we're not going anywhere?"

"What I think and what I choose to do are two different things."

Her heart sank in frustration. "What? That makes no sense! That *is* bad hypocrisy."

"I will do what needs to be done, and what I think is best, regardless of what I *know*."

"How can you think it is best if you think it is not there?"

"I don't know if it is there," he answered in his quiet, slow way, her sharp tone making no more dint in his calm than a fly in a waterfall. "I want it to be but there is no proof, one way or the other. But there never has been in my life, and I have learned to carry on. But this time it is worse," he said as if to himself, "because now I am responsible for others." He spoke to her again. "If I am a hypocrite, I'm sorry."

Lavendier was frustrated and went to find Viol. She helped her roast the nuts, but her face kept contorting into such awful grimaces of thought, that Viol finally cried out, "What is bothering you? You keep scrunching up her nose and looking at the sky."

"Really?" she looked pleased at the image. "I didn't know I did that."

"So what were you thinking about?"

The smile fell away, replaced by a frustrated crinkle in her forehead. "Garrity is confusing me. He's always confusing!"

"I never find him so."

"He said he doesn't believe in our journey. He does not think there's a haven at the end."

"I am sure he never said that, for I have spoken with him

about it. He just thinks there is no proof, but that it is still our best option. Laven, he believes. Otherwise he would not take us.”

Lavendier sighed in frustration. “Do you want me to crack those walnuts?”

“Just be careful,” warned her sister, “they have only just come out of the fire. What do you think it will be like when we go back to Drian? Do you ever think about that?”

“Yes,” said Lavendier sadly. “I dream about it almost every night. In between all my dreams of death and dying.”

“Both of those?” said Viol dryly, “death and dying?”

Then they giggled.

“How can we laugh about something like that?” gasped Lavendier.

Viol laughed and shrugged. “If we didn’t, the reality would be unbearable.”

“Isn’t it though? Isn’t it already?” Lavendier sobered a little as she mused. “There’s one thing I’m glad of though – ow!” she stuck her finger in her mouth, burned on one of the nuts.

“I told you they were hot!”

“I was going to say that I’m glad I am not one of the men, and I do not have to kill as often as they do. I think it would make the horror that much more awful.”

“You get used to it,” said Garrity’s voice from behind them. He had come over when Lavendier cried out and heard the last thing she said.

“I know. But it’s still awful,” she said. “To get used to killing – how terrible is that?” There was a long silence in response. She looked up and frowned to see that he was upset by her question.

“I did not mean offense,” she said hesitantly. “I was thoughtless.”

“Garrity,” said Viol, but he held up his hand. He looked up and smiled reassuringly at the two girls.

“No matter. But you are right – it is a terrible thing to grow used to killing...” Although his mouth smiled, his eyes were frowning, and he walked away.

Lavendier cracked nuts in silence. Jacian came and asked for some, and brought her out of her brooding, but when she had satisfied his hunger, she went right back into it with a vigor of cracking and snapping.

“Laven! Hey!” Viol called her name as if she had already called it, unnoticed, several times.

“Did you want something?”

“Yes. I want your attention,” she smiled. “You’ve been reflecting his mood, you know. And it’s annoying, because I like it best when you’re happy; but he is seldom happy and so your usual cheerful self is absent more than I care for.”

“I always used to be cheerful, but I was never happy. Now, oddly, I’m far less cheerful; but I’m happier... I think.”

“I did not care for your old sort of cheerfulness. But it is good now: meant for others, not just for yourself.”

Lavendier blushed and smiled, and her thoughts jumped back to all that had led to her transformation. “How long have we been traveling? How many weeks?”

“I know not. Maybe two months?”

“That is such a long time! If I had known, when we departed, how long we would be gone... No, I would not have acted any differently.” Viol could hear pain in her sister’s voice and it only increased when she spoke again.

“Viol, I...I want to tell you something. Something terrible that I did.”

“Don’t.”

Lavendier looked up in surprise, and Viol met her sister’s bright green eyes with her own gentle ones. “Do not tell me about it. I do not want to know.”

“Why not?” asked Lavendier shakily. She was ready to confess, to take responsibility for her crimes and have her sister know her for who she truly was. A part of her wanted that, and a part of her shrank from it. “Don’t you deserve to know?”

Viol leaned over and touched her sister’s pale cheek. “You are not that person anymore. I am meeting you now for who you are, not then. I think that I never really knew you before. You had too many defensive walls around your soul.”

“No,” Lavendier shook her head; “I had too few. You could not know me because I did not know myself, and I gave myself away without knowing what I gave.”

The sun had long since disappeared and the full moon now beamed down upon them her silver light. Shadows embraced the sisters where they sat and the stars glistened their companionable presence. Viol squeezed her sister’s hand and the two of them sat, comfortable and silent in the night.

## Stepping into the Noose

Garrity had found Asbult as the prince returned with Cila to the group, and pulled him away to a near ridge, looking out in all directions as far as they could see. In spite of the night, the moon cast a bright sheen, so they would see if any gorgans came; and then, in the deep night, they would have only their ears to rely on.

With his arms folded across his chest, his auburn brown hair long and brushing past his shoulders, Garrity stood a formidable figure of a man. But his heart stirred uneasily within him, and he glanced about like one uncertain of his own mind. Asbult, sensing his friend's discomfort, reached inside his shirt and drew out a pipe.

Garrity raised his eyebrows with sudden interest. "You still have that – after all this time? I was certain that it must have been broken in battle, or lost along the way."

"A man guards two things in this life," said Asbult, tamping it down, "his woman and his pipe. Only when one has a woman does he truly enjoy his pipe, and only when he has a pipe does he have patience for his woman."

Garrity laughed. “Marital problems?” he asked.

Asbult took a long pull, then handed it over to Garrity. Once his friend had enjoyed and then returned it, he smoked contemplatively.

“It is not the easiest thing in the world: marriage. Beware its superficial charms.”

“Come now, my friend. I know little of marriage, but I have never seen a happier couple than Cila and yourself.”

Asbult chuckled. “The happiest couple in the world will have its tiffs.”

“What is the problem?”

“I laugh too much. And now you laugh at me...but it is the truth. Sometimes, I don’t know when I should not laugh, so I do, and I upset her. But then she does not talk about it. No. I could handle it if she would speak right out and tell me what was wrong, but I have to guess, and that is worse than anything. It will blow over – it always does,” he took an extra long pull. “But in the meantime, I need patience. And unless I’m misreading your budding relationship with another of the princesses,” he handed over the pipe, “you might need some of that patience yourself.”

Garrity sighed and accepted the instrument, pulling a large cloud into his mouth, letting its smoky pouf play in his mouth and over his tongue, and then exhaling slowly. “I’m not sure what’s going on with her. She has latched onto me like a cocoon to a branch, and I cannot seem to detach her without doing permanent harm.”

Asbult chuckled, accepting his pipe back. “That’s Lavendier for you. She did the same to Merciec.”

“She confuses me. She has so much life, like it’s going to

burst out of her and do something fantastic. But she kept it bottled up so long that it rotted away into meanness, and it is only just now venturing back into the light. What was she like as a child?" he inquired suddenly.

"She was magnificent." Asbult suddenly laughed, remembering. "You couldn't help but be happy in her presence. No matter how happy you already were, if she came into the room, you were ten times happier. It was like she took you over and you had no control of your emotions. If she was happy, you wanted to laugh and dance and kiss everyone. And if she was angry, it was the same thing. You wanted to rescue her, defend her from whatever had clouded the vitality and sweetness with which she was forever clothed."

"You sound like you loved her."

Asbult shrugged. "Everyone did. You couldn't help it. And I still do... I suppose. The Nians have always been family to me."

"So what happened to her?"

The prince sighed. "One day, she was not happy anymore. She had come to think of herself so much that there was no more innocence or sweetness, and she had become a force of depravity. We grew up together you know, Trinian, Afias, Lavendier, Cila and I. We were a unit, until Trinian left for the army. And then Laven became a stranger to us, and we had to choose whether we wanted to be sucked into her self-destructive vortex, or break free of her. It would have been so easy to follow her... But we did not want to be used, and so in a way, I suppose, we cast her off. And she has hated us all for it. And, I think, been very lonely ever since."



Garrity sighed. "Do you think this change for the better will last?"

Asbult did not answer right away. He knocked out his pipe and scooped it clean, then returned it to his shirt. "If she does anything, she does it with her whole heart. I would warn you to be cautious, except that it's your only mode of being, so it is hardly necessary. But be open too. Who knows, you may need this connection as much as she."

Garrity nodded, but did not move. His glance continued to scan the horizon, and at last, he said what he had come to say. "I think we should go back."

"Why?" asked Asbult quietly, without surprise.

"What if there is something ahead, a paradise, and what if there is not? It matters not, and you know that, because we would have to pass through Karaka first. As many gorgans as we have met here, the numbers in Karaka must be uncountable. Too many for a soldier and scout to defeat, even with Lavendier's help. Why do you insist on going on?"

"There is a pattern," said Asbult. "I can only feel it, but I know it to be there. There are beats between each attack, consistencies. They are scanning Mestraff for us, and they are piling up behind us. We have stayed ahead so far, but they're piling, and I can feel it. The only thing that has given us an advantage is that they are stupid. Or rather," he laughed, "we are. We're going the one direction they don't expect, so they're scanning everywhere else first. I guarantee you it's an organized search."

"But you said it's a feeling. You could be wrong."

"I will tell you what I have seen. There were two days

between attacks at the beginning, and then the long break. Why? Because they didn't think we'd go through the no-man's land. No one does. Now that we're on the other side and they've found us, the attacks will grow more frequent again. They're throwing out a noose to catch us with, and I only pray we don't step into it. But we've got some time, I think, because most of their forces are to the south, looking for us in the middle of Mestraff, not the north. And hopefully, we'll be in Karaka before they quite figure out where we're going."

So, the enemy was trying to bottle-neck them. And Asbult had led them through the danger of the no-man's land intentionally. "You knew we'd face those monsters?" he asked. "Merciec was crumpled by that beast, Lavendier was nearly killed..."

Asbult was grim. "I had heard rumors about the beasts. It is a terrible burden to know I led a brave man to his death, and of course that path was not my first choice. But after yesterday's attack, I am confirmed that it was the right one. The gorgan party we met on the bank, and the next one after, did not know who we were, and were not intentional about their attack, but every other foray has been coordinated. They know who we are and they are hunting us. We would never get back through Mestraff alive."

Garrity said nothing more. He was far from convinced, but he looked upon his companion with fearful awe. Asbult's exterior was forever cheerful, belying the horrific decisions he had made and born in silence. They had all sacrificed, and to turn back now would be a terrible blow, but still the demi-god wavered. As terrible as the journey

had been thus far, surely, Karaka would be far worse.

\* \* \*

Asbult lay a distance from the camp – he could barely see the glow of the fire through the thicket – with Cila tucked in his arms. Garrity was on first watch, so it was with no qualms that the husband and wife remained apart from the others the first half of the night. They were wrapped in conversation, sometimes with words, but mostly without.

Or rather, Cila did not use words – it was impossible - when Asbult gazed into his wife’s eyes - for him to say nothing, even if it was simply commenting once again on her beauty, or mentioning the coldness of the night and the warmth of her in his arms. Asbult could be a buffoon, but he was a sentimental one.

Cila was laughing at one of his jokes and stroking his beard when he commented, “It’s fortunate I married one of the king’s sisters, you know.”

“Oh?” she asked.

“Otherwise I would undoubtedly have been appointed court jester. No one would ever have taken me seriously, if not for my marriage.”

Cila’s gentle eyes shone like the stars. “Your only talent is for marrying?”

“Well, naturally; for I am highly attractive. I can’t help that – I was born with it.”

“Jesters have to be *funny*, not attractive. And you, my dear love, are not.”

“A low blow! And I thought you had forgiven me for laughing at you. Well, I’m a little funny. Depend upon it,

my dear, I would have been a jester for the ladies: to be both admired and ridiculed. You saved me from a gruesome fate.”

“Ah! To be ridiculed and admired by only one woman – that is preferable?”

He laughed his lusty laugh, lowering his voice as she put a warning hand on his wide-parted lips. “I take your point. Yes, it is preferable.”

They went on in such a manner as the night fell away and dawn was brightening the sky. Asbult’s shift for the watch arrived and he rose from the ground with a parting kiss. She grabbed his hand as he went, however, and pulled him back down for another. Then Garrity appeared at a crouching run, hastening towards them across the hilly ground.

“We’re surrounded,” he whispered. “I woke Laven and Viol—” but he was cut off by a speeding arrow that lodged above his head in a tree. Then, all of a sudden, the woods were full of cries and pounding footsteps and they were engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

## The Noose Tightens

Lavendier gripped her blade tightly, listening to the boom, boom, boom of the hoofs of approaching beasts. The gorgans had indeed, as Asbult had predicted, been closing in on their band, methodically and carefully, and they had at last managed to entrap their victims. With a roar and a stamping, they approached the women and child, and Lavendier did not hesitate as she defended Viol, Adlena and Jacian from the onslaught. She whirled, slashed, stabbed, and kicked with great ferocity, her tattered dress allowing her legs free movement, and the weeks of living outdoors hardening the strength and dexterity of her limbs. But she was only one, and the gorgans were many, and as they pushed her backward, step by step, she finally had to turn and flee.

Viol had already led Adlena and Jacian away, and now they were trying to find a tree to climb, but all were cone shaped, with bristly needles and thin branches, and they could not ascend. They were trapped like birds fallen from a nest, without the refuge of the high spaces. Lavendier

did not know how many encircled them, but it was many, and it felt like whatever number she felled, three rose to replace one, and she was wearying. She fought with a single-minded purpose – now one, now the next, now the next. When two came at her, she whirled and stabbed and whirled and stabbed, and both fell.

Viol blew a horn, hoping to summon Asbult and Garrity to their aid, but there was no answering cry, no head of red or brown ascending the crest of a hill to save them. They were alone, and the gorgans would not die.

\* \* \*

Cila rose up and tried to run toward the rest of the group at the campfire, but found herself pushed down a steep embankment. She fell and rolled. A gorgan followed her, and she whipped out her knife, scrambling to her feet. As he descended upon her, teeth sharp and glistening, she threw herself forward and plunged the blade into his heart, then whipped it out and stabbed his neck. He fell over, dead. She made her way to the camp but it was deserted. There was still the sound of combat from where she had been lying, and she made her way back there with all speed.

Asbult was in the distance, a pile of dead gorgans heaped about him, in a deadlock with a mighty gorgan that wielded a three-pronged mace; it was twice the size of most and Asbult had already pierced it through the neck and groin. This large one, somehow, seemed more fierce, intelligent, and dangerous – and more difficult to kill.

Garrity was nowhere to be seen. The princess drew back her knife and waited for a propitious shot to rescue

her husband, but the engagement was fierce and their bodies would not separate. She watched warily, and there was a brief moment where she knew that Asbult had seen her. He took his chance and butted the beast away as at the same moment, Cila hurled her knife and pierced the monster's breast. The giant gorgan fell to his knees with shock, almost dead.

But then, in a last act, he lashed out his mighty mace and gouged Asbult deep in his stomach. Then he roared a loud laugh and Cila, with a scream of agony, ran forward and stabbed him through the brain, and, at last, the monster fell dead to the ground.

Cila hurled herself beside her husband, and in one soundless moment, cried, "Oh god, the blood!"

He should have been dead already. The hole ripped through him was larger than her own hand. She wondered wildly if there was anything nearby large enough to cover it up, to staunch the bleeding. Asbult looked at her and his eyes were lucid. He seemed, he who had always had such life in him, to be more alive than ever. "Don't leave, my dear. There is nothing to be done now, except to be together."

Early dawn cast its rays upon them, where her green gown on one side blended with the grass, and on the other was soaking up the color of his life's blood. "Tell me what to do for you."

He smiled at her. That smile was astonishing and there was something wonderful about it. She could not look away from his beautiful blue eyes. "I always thought," he marveled, "that when this moment came, I would be miserable. But I am so calm. So at peace. Is that selfish?"

But it was not a real question; his eyes were laughing at her.

“Very selfish.” She shed silent tears. “What do you want of me?”

“You gave me your heart,” he said, “and it was always enough. *You* know. Since we were children, I’ve never wanted anything else. Look at you – your eyes swollen from weeping and your nose red,” he reached up and touched her, “and still, as I look at you, my heart swells. I was your buffoon and I made you laugh – how could any man ask more from life?”

She smiled a little. “I love you. I have always loved you. And I always will.”

For a long moment they simply took rest in one another’s eyes. He was fading fast and she knew it, but now her expression was not so tragic as at first. They were both waiting: he with tranquil expectation, she with a tragic weight slowly smothering her heart.

Asbult broke the silence. “Where is Garrity?”

Cila looked up but there was no one near. From the distance sounded the dull clanking of steel against steel, and then the call of a horn. “I don’t know,” she said.

“Tell him,” said Asbult, “tell him that I am not worried. I would have thought I would be, but now that the moment is upon me, nothing is as I once thought. Everything will be alright. I know.”

“I don’t,” she wailed, lost in a sea of misery. She knew nothing would ever be right again.

He was shaking now. The numbness had worn off, replaced with pain. “You’ll tell him that you will find safe haven? That everything will be alright?”



“Yes.” But she didn’t care about that. Only him. His eyes were not looking at her, but beyond and to the sky, when he breathed his last breath. They were as blue as the deepest blueness – but the clarity had gone.

Garrity charged through the trees, running fast with great gulping breaths, sweat and blood falling down his face co-mingled, a gaping wound in his forehead. His sword at the ready...

Too late.

He came up beside her, where she wilted in her green and scarlet, and saw in a moment how the matter stood. He reached down a hand and took her red one in his, but she was passive and gave no response.

Garrity spoke through gasps, attempting to regain his breath. “We –have to – go. Cila – we will be overrun – in a moment.” A strangled breath escaped him that sounded strange and harsh, but was in fact a sob. “You have to leave him.”

“Leave him?” she said quietly. “That is impossible.”

Garrity looked over his shoulder. The sound of pursuit that he dreaded grew into a thunder. “Come!” he pulled her limply to her feet, slung her over his shoulder and took off running. He made for dense overgrowth and there lay down to conceal them both.

At the same moment, gorgans burst through the trees, and with rapacity gruesome to see, surrounded Asbult’s body, swarming about it like hornets in a nest. Garrity, every fiber screaming for action, but instead gripping his sword with ashy knuckles, looked at Cila. Her glazed eyes were fixed on the spectacle, tears streaming steadily down her stark white face. The gorgans moved on, leaving their

hiding place undisturbed and taking the body with them.

\* \* \*

With terrifying speed, a beast circumvented Lavendier and made for Jacian. The little boy screamed and threw a small knife at him and the monster batted it away. It reached out a mighty arm, but the Queen, her long knife already drawn, launched at it and severed it. The beast screamed, she grabbed Jacian, and they stumbled back two paces before Adlena tripped and fell heavily to the ground.

“Run, Jacian!” the mother cried, but there were too many all about; Lavendier was locked in combat, the boy would be taken, and another was making its way to Viol.

Then, at last, Lavendier saw Garrity fly towards her and with a single blow, fell two of the three beasts she held at bay. He threw a knife and slew the one reaching for Viol, then leapt through the air, and with a single slash of his sword, cut off the head of the one looming above the queen.

Lavendier killed her last assailant, then turned in relief to her companions – and gasped with sudden wonder. She gazed at Garrity in awe, and her sword point fell unheeded to the ground.

For Garrity stood before them mightily, his hair shining in a shaft of light that flooded through the branches above, his beauty and grace more majestic than she had ever seen before; his stature grand and imposing and bronze, all the gorgans dead at his feet, and her heart beat loud in her chest. Looking upon him filled her with radiance, and stronger and more beautiful than she had ever felt before,

she adored him and yearned for him to worship her. To have a being of such might in her grasp, to prod and cajole and manipulate, was an intoxicating desire that made her dizzy like strong wine. She wanted him to protect and save her, to be her bodyguard and live only for her pleasure and protection. To hold her close and whisper words of love...

But strictly, as she had lately learned to do, she pushed those thoughts aside; though this time, with more effort than usual. She chided herself that it was not right to think of such things, and she turned her mind to the others.

"Where are Asbult and Cila?" she asked.

"They are safe," he stepped towards her, his magnificence a palpable scent. "I need to speak to you alone."

Lavendier could hardly breathe, he stood so close. She looked toward Viol. "Will you be alright?" she asked.

"Yes," said her sister. "We will find the others."

Garrity took the princess's hand and led her behind a grove of dark green firs, and she followed trustingly. "What is it?" she asked, but as soon as they were out of sight, he whirled suddenly and kissed her deeply.

She melted into him, surprised and elated, and did not pull back; but after a moment, the kiss grew deeper and more insistent, and she grew uncomfortable. She jerked away, and his hand caught her arm. "Don't you want this?" he breathed, his breath warming her face.

"We should go back," she whispered. She felt strong desires stirring in her breast and her blood was racing, but she was angry with him too. She did want this – she had hoped for it many times – but it was wrong. She felt that to indulge now would be wrong: because she was frightened and vulnerable and selfish. Yes, there was something

selfish between them, she sensed, in this moment. “They need us.”

“I need you,” he murmured, and leaned down.

“No!” she cried. She had never said no before. “Stop. I don’t want this!” But his hands were too mighty for her, and she was helpless in his grip. “Garrity, stop!”

“You resist me?” His voice was harsh and his hands tightened so that she thought her wrists would snap, and she gave a sharp cry of pain. “After all your fantasies and indulgences and schemes? Is this not what you want – to be safe and loved and protected?”

“No, no, this isn’t love,” she cried out in alarm. “This isn’t love, and you know it!”

At last, he let her go and she stumbled backward and fell to the ground. Then, with an evil glare in his eyes, he raised his sword high, a blade still covered with the boiling and freezing blood of the gorgans, smiled with wicked pleasure, and slashed her across the ribs.

It was not a mortal blow, but it bled, and Lavendier screamed an unending scream of confusion and terror.

“Laven!” When her vision cleared, Viol was kneeling beside her and trying to staunch the wound. “Laven, what’s happened? Who was that woman?”

“Wh-what woman?”

“A woman. She ran away from here – and where is Garrity?”

Lavendier’s eyes widened in sudden understanding. “It was not Garrity,” she gasped. “It was not him.”

## The Noose Hangs

**W**ith a gash in his spirit greater than that on his head, Garrity led Cila away. And if his heart was torn so to pieces, Cila's surely was gone. She had to be led like a lifeless thing.

He was worried about the others. He knew Lavendier would have done her best to protect them, but their fate could have been the same as Asbult's. Keeping a sharp eye out, unable to call to them for fear of calling the gorgans back, he led Cila quietly and cautiously among the fir trees. The sun was just rising in full over the rim of the earth when they suddenly heard a familiar voice, and Viol emerged from behind a thicket.

"At last," said Garrity. "I was beginning to wonder if we would find you."

She looked at Garrity for a long moment, as if in fear, but then shook her head. "The others are nearby. This way."

They followed, but apparently not fast enough, for she begged over her shoulder, "Hurry please! They need you."

“What is wrong?” he asked, a new dread filling his heart.

But she only urged him again to hurry, and suited word to action by sprinting ahead.

Garrity’s chest constricted as he followed; death seemed to devour them like a ravenous dog, feasting unsatisfied until they were all within his jaws.

The girls had found a rock outcropping that formed practically a cave within the rock face, with overgrowth screening the exposed side. It was not perfect protection, but it was better than he could have hoped. Jacian was in one corner, curled up against the wall, weeping. But it was a frightened cry – he was not hurt. Adlena was on the other end, bent over Lavendier who, to his horror, was lying senseless on the ground. Garrity knelt beside her.

“What happened?”

The princess was bleeding from her ribs and her face was deadly pale.

“It is a sword wound. I’ve cleaned it, but...I’m not sure.” Before Adlee finished speaking, Garrity had fully assessed the danger. It was shallower than it might have been, but it was dirty, and that made it treacherous. Adlena had been unable to do more because the medicine bag was in Garrity’s pack, so he pulled it out and deftly washed and wrapped the wound, silent all the while. Then he looked at Adlena, who was gazing across the cave to her pale sister-in-law, crumpled in a helpless heap.

The queen’s eyes were soft and glistening as she turned back to him. “Are you alright?” she asked.

“I’m fine.”

“But you’re not,” she reached up toward the wound on his forehead, but did not touch him. “Your poor head. Clean

it; go on, I'll stay with her. There is a little trickle on the outer rock face."

He found the water stream and wearily, he washed his bloodied, sweaty visage. Then he laid his arm on the wall and his head on his arm. He stood there a long time. When he finally looked up, Viol was watching him.

The small girl's sun-browned face was unusually ashen, and her blue eyes looked strangely large in the pale morning light.

"Was it terrible?" Her lips trembled. They all knew what had happened without asking.

"I wouldn't know. I wasn't there. Fighting elsewhere."

Viol was silent a moment, then – "Is," she stopped and caught her breath; then began again. "Is Laven going to be alright?"

"I don't–" It was so hard to speak. Pain, like a tidal wave, was coursing through his heart, swelling his throat and halting his speech. He could not look at Viol. At her burnished hair tangled and unwashed, her slender throat tanned through the long, hard months, her young, wistful lips parted in unending hope. He could not meet her trusting gaze, and so he stared, choking, at the thickly tangled trees and the overwhelming, consuming forest.

A soft touch, a firm pressure on his wrist, and Viol's arms were around his neck, holding him tight. Her hair was no longer unwashed, for his tears fell upon it with a healing sorrow, and for an unending moment, they held each other close.

Adlena emerged from the shelter into the gray daylight.

"She is at rest," she said, "and Cila watches beside her."

"How is *she*?" asked Viol.

Adlena pursed her lips to keep back the tears. "She wanted something to do."

Garrity nodded. "I'll prepare breakfast." Drawing from his pack the carefully wrapped eggs, which were surprisingly unbroken, he fried them.

All that day, Garrity sat awake beside his new friend, and woke no one to ask that they take his place. He knew that sleep was as far from his eyes as it was for the slim blonde widow who sat beside the fire, alone beneath the cloudless sky.

As day passed to night, and the hours deepened, Lavendier's breath grew more and more ragged. He felt her forehead and it was hot. Fear gripped him, but he only collected water in a bowl and clean rags, and spent the night placing cool cloths on her forehead, and putting coals near her feet. He had seen other soldiers react badly to a wound, and he had seen them recover, and he repeated that over and over in his mind.

At midnight, the fever broke at last, and sweat bedewed her forehead. Her breathing relaxed, and with a moan, she fell into a deep slumber. His throat choked still with tears, he sighed, changed all the bandages, and leaned against the cave wall. She, at least, was going to be alright.



X

MERCY

*“Tis mightiest in the mightiest. It becomes  
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.*

*- Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice*



## Bandits in the Wild

**T**he barren wilderlands stretched before Trinian, a flat plateau of rocky, scraggly prairie land with juts of rocks and old, crumbling buildings, with small pockets of thickets sprouting here and there across the expanse. These provided plenty of cover for bandit groups, waiting for anyone foolish enough to travel from one city to another, particularly in the land stretching northwest from Drian.

Though Trinian had traveled through some of the wilderness on his wanderings with Adrea, he had not gone northwest toward the larger cities. They had had no reason to search for Healers there, since they would have known if they existed by virtue of report. But now it was his intention to secure good relations with these cities. Not just friendly, as they had been for years, but actually renewing the old relationships, that had once bound the empire together as a strong whole.

Traveling with twelve men, Trinian had no fear from bandits, and thus was surprised when they were set upon

on their second day, before even reaching Leghorn. The bandits, silent and unobserved, had been invisible inside a grove on one side of the road, and behind a crumbling wall on the other, and when Trinian's band marched directly between them, they leapt out, bows drawn and ready to kill. Trinian halted.

"Unseat yourselves, and deliver up your goods!" said the only man without a weapon, clearly the leader.

"We have no goods," Trinian spoke, before Phestite could. "We are on a diplomatic journey to Leghorn."

The man openly sneered. "Death take me, a diplomatic mission? And are you also women and beggars? Come, you have purses – unload them."

Phestite spoke quickly when Trinian flushed and would have retorted.

"May I, sire?"

Trinian nodded.

"What funds we have would service you nothing," Phestite spoke firmly. "We are fugitives, fleeing the wrath of the new king of Drian, Lord Trinian. He is a fierce master, who drives out any who oppose him, and he is now turning his gaze toward the wilderlands. Soon, he will drive you all out, if you are not careful."

The lead bandit studied him through slitted eyes. "You don't look like fugitives."

"No. We had warning of our impending capture and managed to flee before he threw us, one and all, to the hangman's noose."

"And what, may I ask, did noble soldiers such as yourselves do, to bring down the king's wrath, eh?" He laughed roughly, and his men with him.

“We are gatesmen, and we failed to stop the gorgans from flooding the city of Drian.”

The bandits swallowed hard and shifted uncomfortably at that. Rumors of gorgans, especially of the damage done in South Drian, had reached even their secluded homes. They certainly did not want to deal with anything like that, and seemed uncomfortable around people who had dealt with them.

“And these gorgans – did the king drive them out?”

“He did. But now he wants to tame the surrounding lands, to keep the gorgans from overrunning everything, and killing all men and woman who live in Minercerva. And he thinks we would just let them run wild over us.” There was an uncomfortable shuffling about, and mild grunts from the men. “But we would see them to the grave in no time, you can be sure of that,” finished Phestite.

They nodded understandingly. They lacked the insight to realize the unlikeliness of Phestite’s story. That he would speak with such deep respect of the king, who disgracefully rode him out of town did not occur to them. But the chance of being overtaken by gorgans certainly did.

“Well,” said their leader at last. “Normally we’d take your weapons and all, but under the circumstances, we can’t afford to have gorgans getting strong off your flesh. If you can kill a few, that’s a better thing for all of us. So we’ll just take your money and let you get on.”

Trinian kept his mouth shut, curious how Phestite would maneuver out of this as well. The general, usually so stoic and unreadable, looked nervous, and as though he would argue, but then he shrugged and nodded reluctantly. “Very

well. That's only fair. Boy," he gestured to Kett, "give them the purse."

Kett rode forward and pulled out his own personal money bag, which was small and insignificant compared to the ones Phestite, Trinian, and even Gorj were concealing under their belts.

He held it out and the bandit approached him, but then the boy got nervous and tossed it. It landed in the dust, and the bandit snarled at him, snatched it up, and waved his hand angrily.

"Get on with you all before I change my mind!" and in a last effort to assert his authority, he cried out, "And tell anyone you see it was Hedger that stole of ya!"

And putting their horses to a gallop, they left Hedger and his robbers far behind, both groups laughing at the other's expense when they were far from earshot.

## The Squire of Leghorn

**T**rinian was now deep in the wilderness, far from home, far from his family, and far from Gladier. Behind, he had left his kingdom in the hands of a man ill-equipped to defend it, and before him, he moved forward to form alliances with countries he did not know.

He kept silence as he rode and ran over a script in his mind to deliver to the steward of Leghorn. He planned to stress the historical importance of an alliance between Leghorn and Drian, to emphasize the connectivity the lands once shared with each another: the protection from enemies, good roads, and easy trade and travel that could once again be theirs. Emperor of a world over which he had no jurisdiction, Trinian attempted to form the perfect words to convince Minecerva to defend itself, and he memorized every word of an argument he was certain was unassailable.

When Trinian led his men through Leghorn, entering the town as possessive hens enter a henhouse, loudly clomping through the streets and drawing all eyes to their

strangeness, he loudly called out to speak with the steward, only to be met with odd looks and puzzled glances. He saw they did not understand him and amended his request, asking instead for the Governor, Lord, or Squire. Squire brought recognition, and he and his men were given directions to the estate of Squire Hagar on the other side of town.

Trinian had known, of course, that various towns and cities had leaders with specific titles. Asbult himself had an official title of Governor of the Western Arm of Drian, but that title bowed before the marked respect of ‘steward’, and Trinian was disconcerted that these people did not follow that custom. They did not even seem to know who, or what, a steward was.

Steward Hagar was a large man with a broad, red face and a full belly. It jiggled when he walked, which he did confidently with his stomach thrust forward, his shoulders back, and his thumbs nestled in the grooves of his suspenders. But aside from his walk, there was nothing to set him apart from other men, for he wore comfortable farmer’s clothes and thick, muddy boots.

“How can I help you, sir?” he asked, with a curious glance at their ostentatious blue and silver armor.

“Steward Hagar,” began Trinian, and the man interrupted him with a startled wave of his hand.

“No steward here, sir, for time out of mind. We’re our own little hamlet, let that be enough for us, and we’re quite comfortable about it. Call me Squire; everyone else does, and it’s a comfortable name. No waiting for empty prophecies – that was my father’s way of thinking, and his father’s before him. We’re simple folk, caring for ourselves



and our descendants, and the rest of the world's got little to do with us. No stewards stewarding for a lost king here."

Trinian tried again. "Squire, have you heard that the prophecies of the king have come true in Drian?"

"Aye, have they now? We heard something about that, but it's little to do with us. He's king of Drian, let that be enough for him."

Trinian sat straighter in his saddle. Neither he nor his men had yet dismounted, but sat astride their horses in Squire Hagar's courtyard, and Trinian was irritated that the man had not invited them in, but even more so that he refused to hear his carefully planned speech. So, dropping his prepared words, he exclaimed abruptly, "The king has returned to Drian, and I am he!"

The squire gaped at him a moment, and his stomach sagged a little. Then, all at once, he was asking them in and calling for his wife to feed them, his stable-boys to unhorse them, and his servants to bring them water for washing.

A flurry of people and activity swept Trinian and his men along like a hurricane, until the king found himself seated in an inner room with the Squire, his wife, Phestite, and Kett.

"So, you say you're the king of Drian, do you? Well, I'm surprised with myself but I believe it. Don't you believe it, Lenora?"

The Squire's wife, gray streaks in her brown hair and just plump enough to look spry and healthy, studied Trinian with the careful gaze of a mother doe and nodded. "He does at that. Has a natural, regal bearing about him."

"That's it. I suppose I could have turned you away for a

liar, but I'm curious to hear you out, and inclined to believe you."

So Trinian, trusting to their good nature and honest faces, leaned forward and delivered with precision and elegance his prepared speech. Unity, safety, and prosperity he emphasized with all the emphasis he could bequeath them, seeking to draw out their long-forgotten feelings of loyalty to the capital as a farmer draws out cream from milk. When at last he finished, he leaned back in his seat, satisfied that these good, hard-working people must understand the importance of his words and intentions. He trusted that they would pledge allegiance to the capitol and join him in his fight against the east. He drank his beer calmly in the weighted silence, not noticing the tenor of the significant glances between husband and wife.

"It's like this," Lenora told him slowly, "we are hard-working people, who never interfered with others, and don't let others interfere with us."

There was a patient silence.

"We's honest," the Squire said. "And never asked anything from anyone we couldn't do ourselves. We've protected our own for five-hundred years, and who's to say we couldn't do so now? In all this time without a king we haven't missed him, and we've puttered along just fine. Our people are happy and prosperous, and we mean to leave them so when we pass on and another generation takes our place. It's the way of the world."

In all these words, they were trying to tell him something he could not imagine, and so he did not hear it. Finally, Hagar leaned forward and said earnestly. "We don't need a king, see. Maybe he needs us, but we're happy as we are and

I see no reason to change it. We don't owe anyone anything, least of all the king of Drian, begging your pardon. He's never done anything for us."

Trinian went pale and the man saw it and said kindly, "We're sorry for your troubles. Really, we are. And a spirit trying to kill your family is a bad fix – one I pray to Leghorn's god never overtakes us. And I hope you win against it. You must pray to your natural gods. But your gods are not our gods, and ours are not yours. We share nothing in common, you must see that. Not gods, not land, not family. It'd be wrong for me to send my young men away from their homes, to a far-off place, to fight for a battle that is not theirs."

Trinian's mind was reeling faster than a galloping horse. All his arguments had turned to dust in the squire's mouth, and he did not know how to respond. The young king felt that the old man was wrong, but his words seemed right. Beneath the sense of the Squire's words, Trinian knew a deeper truth – a truth he had learned from direct experience with evil – but he did not know how to articulate it. He knew that all men were accountable to each other, especially when one asked aid of another. In his bones, he felt that all men must band together against great evil lest that evil infect all men. But he did not know how to articulate the feeling. He was swimming, lost in a sea of words, his mind blank, his heart overflowing with fear that he felt would burst forth.

Hagar rose from the table. "We'll give ya lodging and food tonight, but tomorrow I must ask that you get on your way. It's important that you not stay and try to recruit my men. You might not try to, but some of the young one's

are impressionable, and if they heard your story... well, they might leave home against my word."

Trinian wanted to cry out in anger and desperation, but his throat was dry and no words came. He gaped like a schoolboy, and in the end, he and his men left town the next morning. The unassailable arguments in his head, he now found, were assailable, and even he did not know how to argue against them. How could he recruit men to defend the east if they cared for no one but themselves? That even good men could turn him away scared him most of all, and he wondered how he would convince the corrupt. But the greatest fear that weighed him down was whether Hagar was correct. Did Trinian have a right to ask for aid from those who were not yet in danger?

## Tarfan's Bandits

**T**he next day they visited the next town, and here they had no more luck than the last. And although the arguments against joining with Drian were the same, they were harder to hear, for the governor of this place was sleazy, small-minded, and suspicious, and practically glared Trinian and his men out of town. In the wake of a second defeat, Trinian's fears tripled, and he grew ever more desperate to sort out his own arguments.

That night, he lay beneath the open sky, unwilling to take rooms in the inn of another unfriendly town. He lay on his back gazing up at the stars and wrestling with his doubts, turning them over like dogs wrestling in the streets, first one on top, and then the other.

He listened to Kett's quiet breathing at his feet, and smiled despite himself. It amazed him how quickly the boy could fall asleep. Yet he knew from experience that if he stirred even a bit, his servant would sit up immediately, attentive to his master's every need. Trinian had a fierce affection for him. He was not sure why he had made Kett

his personal servant instead of simply assigning him to the squadron, but he felt that it was important, somehow, for him to have someone who was just his. Someone he could trust unquestioningly, and who had access to all that he thought and knew. He was beginning to accept, at last, that he needed friendship and counsel.

Suddenly, Kett moaned and sat up, gasping heavily into the darkness, awakened from a nightmare; after a moment, the youth gained his bearings, let out a heavy sigh, and fell back against his blanket. Trinian was sensitive to the boys' privacy and said nothing, so he was surprised when, after a minute, Kett spoke to him, seeming to know with an inner sight that his master was wide awake.

"Do you ever have bad dreams, sire?"

Trinian sighed. "Yes," he admitted ruefully. "Every night."

"Seems impossible not to," pursued the boy, "seeing as, even when we wake, the world is still a nightmare. Sire, is that why you don't sleep?" he asked.

Ah, so he had deduced Trinian was awake because he was always awake. Well, that was true – he had gotten very little sleep since leaving the capitol. "My dreams are not about gorgans or demons, Kett. They are about losing my family and failing my kingdom. I fear failure, and that torments my mind so that I cannot close my eyes."

"You put a lot on yourself, sire."

"Because everything is already all on me."

"Don't say so, sire. I'd do anything to help you, and so would any man in Drian."

Trinian smiled grimly in the darkness, realizing that the boy had misunderstood him. "Yes," he agreed. "But I alone must face the dark lord, for it is my birthright that

he desires. And I alone must find an answer to defeat him, for he said so himself. I must find the answers, but the answers are so very difficult to find.”

Kett shifted about in the darkness, dissatisfied and silent, and Trinian returned to his own restless thoughts. He tried to run over what to say at the next city, but the words jumbled about in his head and to clear it, he fretted fitfully on his blanket: roots dug into him every which way, bugs buzzed in his ears, and every little sound made him more awake. He was weary of being tired and not sleeping.

“Kett,” he whispered after a moment, but the boy did not respond; so much for waking up at the king’s slightest movement. Trinian sighed and kicked his cloak off. Then the night air bit into him, and grumbling, he grabbed it and pulled it back on again.

It was then, suddenly and without a warning, that he felt cold steel against his throat. He started, and a voice spoke quietly. “Tell your men to wake up and leave their weapons on the ground. You’re surrounded, and I’ll slit your throat if I must. Tell them to stand in a line before the fire.”

Slowly and carefully, Trinian did as the voice commanded, and presently, his men were all strung out like washing behind the fire. Trinian was now standing, held apart from the rest by his invisible attacker. He scanned his men – their faces lit by the flames – and frowned when he realized Kett was missing.

“Now that you’re all awake,” said the invisible man, who spoke with a smooth, commanding voice, “I’m going to talk quiet with your leader; but if any of you try anything, my men will stick you like skewered meat. Kart, show em.”

Kart, a gnarled old man with an arced bow at the ready, materialized out of the shadows where before, nothing and no one had been visible.

“I’ve got twenty such all around,” announced the leader, and once again, the archer disappeared into the shadows. “You try anything, I kill your leader. And if I don’t come back, my men kill you. Tell ‘em,” he prodded Trinian.

“Try nothing,” Trinian commanded Phestite. “I will be fine.”

Phestite nodded, and the man pulled Trinian away from the fire toward a collection of ancient stones, crumbling and cracking, and sat him on one of the steppes, out of earshot of the others.

“Now – I’ve got to get an ear full from you, and you’re gonna give it. I’ve been hearing words from folks I don’t like to hear, and rumors misting like ghosts, and scaring my men just as much.”

“What have you heard?” asked Trinian evenly.

“About gorgans and kings and what not.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Don’t dance around a bush. Tell me what you know – and I’ll know if you’re lying.”

Trinian doubted that very much, but he had nothing to gain by falsehood. He paused to plan his speech, but thinking better of it, he simply launched in. He spoke the truth to this vagabond – without fancy speech, large words, or practiced emphasis, he spoke the entirety of it. From becoming king, to meeting Power, to fighting for Drian, to learning that the god was of the high heavens and not the earth, his words poured over each other in a natural, honest cadence, and the other man listened, spell-bound.



When at last the tale came to an end, Trinian took a deep breath and waited. The men near the fire were entirely quiet and only the sounds of the night whispered around them – crickets and toads and cicadas. The bandit too was silent.

“Now that’s a different tale than ye told Hedger,” he said at last, “but it holds with a ring of truth that his did no’. If you’re lying about even one fact of all this, you’re never going home alive.”

“It’s not a lie,” said Trinian evenly. “It’s the grim, awful truth.”

The other nodded slowly. “I do believe it is, though I wish it weren’t.” Then, to Trinian’s surprise, he gasped softly, letting out a hiss through his teeth. “I warned ya,” he snarled quietly.

Trinian peered into the darkness. His eyes had grown accustomed to the night, and in the pale half-moon glow, he made out a figure standing behind the bandit: of slight build, whose hair was shaggy and light.

“Kett?” he whispered.

“Your majesty, what should I do with this cur?”

The bandit hissed again, and Trinian realized the boy had a knife to the villain’s back. The king sighed, unsure if the boy had done right. The outlaw seemed inclined to believe the danger of the gorgans, and possibly willing to do something about it, but threatening him was not the way to win his help. At this point, Trinian was not picky about his allies. He told Kett to release him.

“Your majesty?” asked the boy hesitantly, and even in the darkness, Trinian could feel both pairs of surprised eyes upon him.

“Yes,” said Trinian firmly. “Release him, Kett.”

Slowly, expecting the outlaw to turn and stab him at every moment, Kett withdrew his blade and stepped across to the king, as if thinking that if he could not hold the villain at bay, perhaps he could intercept a blow to his master.

The bandit stood tall, sizing up Trinian. “I do fully believe,” he said at last, “you must be the bravest man I ever met. You surprise me, king of Drian. Ya journey across the forsaken world, when your own home is nigh to fall to the enemy. You have me in your grasp, and ya let me go. I could kill you, your home could be destroyed by the god, but you choose the risky, dangerous path – I don’t understand you, but I do think I like ye.”

“If I don’t get your help,” said Trinian honestly. “My home will fall, and I’m as good as dead anyway. Do you have a family?” he asked.

The man nodded. “Aye, I do. Two daughters and their mother of them. Them, and the families of all my men, are my responsibility.”

“And what would you do if gorgans came to kill them? Could you hold them off?”

“I ain’t never seen gorgans, but I heard rumors of ‘em. From the north a bit, and mostly south. We’re a wandering band, and we cover great ground in a year. But we won’t never return to South Drian – for the towns there are all gone – demolished and wiped clean. No, from what I’ve seen and heerd, I don’t bet we could ward them off.”

Trinian nodded. “More land will fall to this god if we do not band against him, and no part of Minecerva will be safe. I’ve driven them away, held them at bay once before,

but I need your help to do it again.”

The man held out his hand suddenly, gleaming palely in the dim light. “My name is Tarfan, King Trinian. And I and my men will fight beside ye.”

Trinian shook his hand.

“And,” the bandit added wryly, “I’ll vouchsafe Hedgar’s men will fight for ye also. I’ll see to that.”

## The Kara Mountains

Leaving the bandits in the wilderness, and promising to come back for them when he returned to Drian, Trinian pushed on into the more populated west, making his way from desolate, isolated village to desolate, isolated castle. He and his men journeyed from ancient families who had assimilated modern towns, to modern towns that had grown from ancient families. Some were gracious, some suspicious, and some downright hostile, so that they never knew if they would be received with fanfare or driven out by angry mobs. By the time his small host had traversed all the wilderlands of Drian and was approaching the western mountains of Kara, Trinian had developed crow's feet around his eyes.

His heart ached to return to Drian, and each mile that put him further from it stretched him thinner, as if his city were tugging hard at his chest, a line stretching taut between it and him. A little part of himself he left in each hamlet, a heartfelt plea that took a bit from his heart and stayed behind in ungrateful hands. Talking about action

without taking it, meeting strangers and being driven out by them, traveling for days on end without sight of civilization, until finally stumbling upon them as if by chance – all this siphoned his strength from his bones. And though he did not know it, he felt it in the depths of his heart that he was almost as far from his wife as he could get on the continent.

When Trinian heard the screams as he approached Tyre, a town nestled at the foot of the Kara Mountains, his gut wrenched. Mixed with the cries of men, women, and children, he recognized a familiar animal roar.

Phestite glanced at him, his brows drawn low. “Gorgans.”  
“I hear them,” said the king.

“We don’t know how many.”

“It does not matter,” Trinian shook his head, his blood beginning to pump. “We fight.” He raised his sword arm. “Men!” he cried loudly. “To arms! We ride!”

Hoofs thundering, they made their way toward the fallen gates of the city.

These were the same gorgans from the valley of Kazeel. They had fled South Drian, depleted as it was of food, and roamed their way along the Kara mountain ranges before descending into Tyre. They had refused to journey to Drian, left behind by the rest of the host, for they were mad, the chill and fire of their blood driving them into ungoverned rapacity and fury, leaving them useless to obey orders or follow commands. It happened sometimes with Power’s forces – there were those spawned who ate and killed and pillaged without thought, and Power let them have free reign against the mortals. Since enough gorgans maintained their pack instinct and fought for him, he only

smiled gleefully over the terror these ones caused, for it aided his purposes for them to inspire fear wherever they went.

Trinian and his men galloped into the city, roaring battle cries, glistening in the sunlight, clutching their bright, sharp spears. The gorgans looked up without fear; snarling and blind with insanity, they galloped on all fours to meet the riders, and rose up upon their rear feet, towering above the horses, just before the two sides met.

Trinian and his men were not daunted. They had fought these beasts before, and they knew what to expect. They met them in close quarters and mowed them down, killing ten in the first rush. Many of the Drinians were unhorsed, but none were killed. They slashed with sword and knife now, stabbing neck and stomach.

Trinian was elated with battle fury, and he gloried in the skill of his men. Surely, saving this hamlet would bind the citizens of Tyre to their side, and he would recruit more men to lead to battle in Drian. But in the rush, he did not notice a maddened gorgan descending silent upon him, from behind. It had lost three legs, cut off by a villager before the Drinians arrived, and did not stomp like the other monsters. A silent demon, it made no noise as it loped on leg and arm toward the king, raising the other arm to fell Trinian with a single blow.

Phestite tried to warn Trinian; he yelled with his deep, mighty voice, but the king was locked with another monster, and heard and saw nothing else.

In a great act of love for the king he followed so faithfully, Phestite threw his mighty body before the blade, but he was too slow to parry, and with one clean swipe, the creature

severed his head from his neck.

Trinian turned at the same moment, his own beast felled, and stumbled back on instinct and horror. He stared a moment at his fallen companion. Then blindly, with an unseeing rage, he fell upon the one-legged monster, and did not emerge from the battle until every last gorgan lay hacked in pieces at his feet.

Turning around – drunk on anguish – to take his fill of the sight, Trinian returned to gaze at the body of his loyal general. His blessing, the blessing of the kingship, his destiny to overcome Power – it did not mitigate the damage done in the interim. Trinian’s breath came fast and ragged, and silently, his men gathered about him. Gorj stood at his elbow, and the tears came to all, for this general had led them in strength and courage long before their king had come to them. But after a time, Gorj put a hand on the king’s arm and brought him back to himself.

“Sire,” he said softly, “the town’s people were watching, and they approach us now.”

Trinian saw an assembly from Tyre coming toward them, and he stepped forward, numb and hollow-eyed.

He communed with the mayor of Tyre, who thanked him profusely. Though these people were well-dressed and elegant, and lived near the wilderlands where they dealt with bandits and wild beasts, they had an aura of submissive defeat to them, as of helpless children.

In his overflow of gratitude, the mayor gave thanks to their town’s natural goddess, Mercy, whose home he indicated as he bowed in its direction. “She told us you would come!” he cried to Trinian, telling him of her prophecies and care of their people, but the king heard

little of his words.

Trinian waited until the man completed his outpouring of thanks, then recited his own speech accurately, as he had grown used to do, and the Mayor of Tyre professed his people's allegiance, unaware that Trinian was not himself. Only Kett, who stood close behind his master, knew how far Trinian's mind, heart, and soul had fled from this interview.

"We must bury our dead," the king said at the end, when the Mayor invited them to come to the Mead Hall for a meal and lodging.

"Of course. So do we. Please come to my home when you are finished."

They left them in peace then, and Trinian and his men buried Phestite with full military honors. After planting him in the ground, surrounded by shoots of spears and his enemies' weapons, they chanted the Warrior's Death Dirge, the deep voices of men blending in deep, beautiful harmony.

*Unto the dreadful ground you lie below  
We hand over the warrior we know  
And to its grateful arms you-ou bestow-ow  
Your might and brightest glory on earth show-own.*

*Of you the deadful keeper mourns  
For you the final victor is born  
No man the final conflict scorns  
All final fight array is worn*

*We hand over the warrior we knew*



*Unto the dreadful ground will you be true.  
Your might and brightest glory on earth shew-ewn.  
And blood and bones and flowers are betstrewn.*

The men filtered away after that, one by one, making their way to the mead hall to take their dinner and their rest. At last, only Trinian remained, faithfully shadowed by loyal Kett.

“Shall we return?” asked the boy gently after a long while, concern for his master - and the rumble of his own stomach - prodding him to speak.

Trinian shook his head. “I know not – I know nothing. And that is the problem.”

“Sire?”

“I don’t know how to kill Power – or even if he can be killed. But he must be – he must be killed.” He glanced toward the home of Mercy. “This was why I came. To find her. I’m going to find my answer.”

## In the House of Mercy

**T**rinian stomped toward the house of Mercy. It was a sharp-gabled three story house, with flowering vines growing along the walls, and round, pleasant windows seeming to blink out into the world, and from the chimney issued a pleasant curl of light gray smoke. Kett followed behind, stumbling over the stones and ridges of the direct route that Trinian confidently trod, for the king was too impatient to go by way of the road.

He pounded on the door until a lovely young maiden opened it, peering out into the dusk.

“Can I help you, Trinian?” she asked.

He blinked in surprise, but only for a moment, and then pushed past her into the interior. He hardly saw the comfortable living space, full of green plants and the woody smell of fir, pine, and eucalyptus. “I want to know if I can kill the god of Karaka. Power, the high god. Can I kill him?”

Water was boiling on the stove and she went over to it, taking it off the heat and pouring it into three waiting tea

cups. The warm scent of lemon and ginger wafted through the house, tickling Kett's nose where he was standing in delighted wonder with his mouth open; the boy smiled gratefully when she put a teacup in his hands.

"Sit down please, Kett. I have been waiting for you."

"For me?" said Kett in astonishment, as he settled on the bottom steps of a small, winding staircase that wrapped around one of the walls.

"Yes. For your king, and you. You are my favorite."

Kett blushed up to his ears and hid his face in the teacup.

Trinian sat impatiently on the edge of a narrow sofa and Mercy perched on a low, cushioned footstool. She turned to him and studied the king with cool eyes.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked, blowing gently on her tea.

"Can I kill him?"

"I can tell you the prophecy, but it will do little good. You know most of it already, anyway."

"You must tell me," said Trinian, glaring at the golden wood of the floor. "You told Power, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I told him. At the beginning of the eleven hundredth year. He came to me and my sister, and we had to tell him what we knew, and he has used it as an excuse ever since." She sipped her tea sadly, and Kett watched her wonderingly. She looked so normal, prettier than most girls, but just like a real human person. He had never seen a natural goddess before, and always thought they would be unapproachable. But she was just like anyone else he had ever met. Only very good, and very prompt with tea.

Trinian still stared at the ground. "You must tell me what

you told him.” He was afraid of Mercy, though she was not revealing herself in her full might. He knew that she was shading herself for their benefit, but it was not her power that frightened him – it was her truth. And yet he needed to know.

“Oh, no,” she said gently, “I cannot do that. His message, his future, was for him alone. You have a different message, if you want to hear it. But you really do not have to,” she added, though she knew it was useless to urge him against it. “I have seen far too much misery for people who knew their fate. It will not be what you want to hear – it is never so clear as that. And you will drive yourself mad trying to understand it.”

But Trinian was desperate and stubborn, and finally met her eyes. “Tell me.”

She stood up. “Ask the question then.”

He stood too. “Will I kill Power?”

Then her full glory shone forth, and she was so beautiful that Kett fell off the stairs and huddled on the ground. He looked up at her in awe, unable to rise. Trinian, true to his birthright, stood his ground as her words rolled out and disappointed him.

“Beware the god of Power, mortal man,  
 For shall he take thee to himself for own  
 Never more king royal ye shall stand.  
 Beware the land of Power, mortal king  
 For shall you enter the brownish land  
 A death toll for your family will ring.”

Trinian turned pale as paper, whether from anger or fear, he did not know. He trembled and clenched his fists as she seemed to cloak herself again, her light and beauty

dimming, and Kett took his place again, tremblingly, on the stairs.

“That’s it? I came to you for answers, not a riddle.”

“I warned you. That is all I can tell you – all I have. I said you already knew it.”

“But he thinks I will kill him! Why would he think that? He learned it from you!” He took a step toward her, but she stared him down scornfully.

“Are you blaming me for the message?” she asked haughtily. “Or are you going to accept the knowledge that has been given? I have done what I can, now you make your choice about how you will act. Leave my home, if you are so ungrateful.”

At the door, Kett hazarded to look at the goddess, and found that she was once again the simple, beautiful maiden, and he smiled when she nodded kindly at him.

“I will not tell you your future,” she said, “I will not be so unkind. But just know that your faithfulness is your greatest asset. You are blessed to treasure it.”

Blushing again, Kett ducked out and she turned to the king, who still hung back. He was frowning, and struggling with himself, but finally found the grace to say, “I was wrong to blame you, please forgive me. But I do not believe you. You said your sister had a prophecy as well, and I will ask her. Perhaps she will tell me what I need to know.”

She stepped toward him, and laid her hand upon his brow. “You are a brave man, Trinian. But you are lonely and stubborn – you must learn to accept that you are weak, and forgive yourself for it. There is more to life than defeating Power.” She sighed sadly, then added, “My sister is the goddess of Kara. You will find her above the

mountain city. May the King go with you.”

Trinian left Tyre in deep sadness, his heart clenched like a sealed vault, torn between blind belief in the future and fear of losing all that he loved.

XI

DEATH

*“Where, oh death, is your victory? Where, oh  
death, is your sting?”*

*- St. Paul, 1st Letter to the Corinthians*





## The Poison of Passion

**W**aiting for Lavendier to recover enough to travel, they spent three days beside the cave. Howls could be heard from the gorgans at times, and Garrity could do nothing but hope that, defenseless and broken as they were, they would go undiscovered.

The morning after her fever, Lavendier awoke and saw Garrity sleeping with his head against the cave wall. She tried to sit up, but groaned with pain, and that slight noise brought him swiftly to her side.

“Don’t move,” he told her. “You’ll make it worse.”

Suddenly, realizing she did not see anyone else, her eyes widened in fear and she gripped his arm. “The prince, my sisters, did she kill them?”

“They’re alright,” he assured her. “They’re fine. And you’re going to be too.” But his face contracted in pain, and she saw it. Her heart faltered in fear, but she told herself it must be from the wound on his forehead. He said they were fine, and she fell back to sleep.

Over the next two days, they took turns coming in to help her or bring her food, and finally, when Asbult still had not come, she began to suspect the truth. At last, Cila came for the first time at the end of the second day, and looking at her sister's face, she knew for sure. When she left, Lavendier asked that she send Garrity in.

He came in immediately.

"Garrity," she said weakly, but calmly.

"Yes?" he leaned over her.

"I haven't seen Asbult since I've been awake. Where is he?"

The warrior was silent.

"I see," she said, and was quiet a long while. When she did speak again, her words were broken and thick. "I don't – I don't know what to do – with hatred." Tears welled in her eyes. "I don't want to express it because then I would just seem petulant. I was always petulant before. Do I ignore it? What do you do with it? I mean surely – your mother....well, didn't she make you angry?"

His throat clenched. "Yes. All the time," he managed to say.

"Then how did you deal with it?"

He thought a long, steady moment. He took a deep breath and the tension in his throat eased a little. "For most of my life, I did nothing. I smothered it deep in my heart and did nothing. It was a demon, I guess, that I refused to face. It burned, and when it threatened to rise, I stifled it." He looked at her with compassion. "But that is not as it should be. It grew and grew, unseen, until in the light of day, it was a hideous beast with a mind of its own." He scowled. "No. Don't ignore it." He was

silent a long moment, then said fiercely, "You must kill it with kindness, and accept the pain. Accept it Laven, acknowledge it, because otherwise it will always be there, secret and waiting to come out. Waiting to control you. Be patient. You must accept it in patience and kindness. But it's not easy."

She laughed softly, tears falling out of the corners of her eyes and gathering in her ears, and moaned in pain both physical and heart-wrenching. "It never is. But then, everything worthwhile is difficult, it seems."

He smiled at her and sighed, weighted with ancient and new pain.

\* \* \*

On the third morning Viol was on the second night watch, and she suddenly cried out from her perch above the outcropping, "Garrity! I can see gorgans closing in on us on two sides!"

Instantly, he was awake and standing with his sword in his hand. "From where?"

"East and south."

He handed up Jacian to her, who protested only a little in his sleepiness. He was used to running – it was in his bones now, more so than any of the others.

"Go north. Take your sisters, and I'll stay here with Laven. Your best chance is to hide in the treetops. Maybe they won't find you."

"You can't hold them off by yourself."

"But I can give you a fighting chance. Go, no argument." He had already shaken Adlena and Cila awake, and they

scrambled up, grabbing their packs. "Follow Viol," he commanded.

They clambered up the rock face, and he watched them disappear into the night. After all these miles, after all this time, he was going to die now, like all the other men. Maybe his death would benefit the other women, but Lavendier would perish for certain.

He looked into the cave where she lay sound asleep, and sighed. For the first time, he let himself do something he had resisted for years: something he had scorned to do from their first meeting; something that only her goodness had given him the recent and growing desire to do; something that only her imminent death filled him with the courage to do now. He let himself rest in her beauty.

Her brown auburn curls were uncontained, spreading out around her face, framing it in chocolate swirls. Her skin had always been paler than her sisters', but now it was a little more tanned, an even color from their traveling in the sun. Her lips were dark and red, and her lashes were long and curling against her cheeks. His heart ached suddenly – he was willing to die for all of them, but that his death should mean hers was very hard.

All of a sudden, she started up, and he nearly jumped back in surprise at the intensity in her eyes and voice. "Gorgans are coming!"

"Yes. You heard Viol call out?"

She shook her head in fear. "I can feel them coming closer." She closed her eyes. "There are fifteen of them. Their blood is icy cold and another liquid flows in their veins, red hot. They're in such pain!" Fear tightened

Garrity's muscles, and he saw that she was equally terrified at her prescient, mysterious knowledge. She was shivering.

Suddenly, she looked at him again. "There's none to the east. There's a way we could get through."

He crouched beside her. "Are you sure? What is happening to you? Are you sure?"

"Yes. Directly to the east. It's not far – we could get through without being seen."

Garrity deliberated only an instant. Dying here or maybe getting through there.... He went to the fire, sheathed his sword, put on his pack, then hurried back and found Lavendier stumbling as she tried to stand up. He lifted her effortlessly in his arms, still wrapped in her blankets and cloak.

"Tell me where to go," he whispered. He could hear approaching growls and footsteps. It sounded like they were on all sides.

"Left," she whispered. "Straight left." He dashed to the left, pushing through the undergrowth, trying to make as little noise as possible, though he knew the gorgans did not hunt on scent or sound. Unless they lay in silent wait for their prey, they always barreled through the underbrush, effectually drowning all other noise, lumbering about until they stumbled on their prey.

"Right," she whispered. "Just a little."

He swerved.

"Stop."

He paused.

"Ok. Um, left a little and straight – but quickly... they're closing the gap."

He ran as fast as he could, his legs pounding, her added

weight meaning nothing to him, and Lavendier breathed rapidly, her head spinning, the world feeling like it was closing in around her. The gorgans were so near she felt like she could reach out and touch them. Nearer, nearer, coming closer, she felt their every move, their hatred and pain and fiery, icy beings... and then, suddenly, they were behind and falling away! They had escaped the pack, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"You can stop now. We're through." Her voice was weak, and she was shaking. "We're through."

He stood still a moment, his breathe calm in spite of the exertion. Calmly, holding her close still, he took stock of their surroundings. They were still in forest land, with no convenient cover to hide themselves.

"We're going to have to find the others," he told her grimly. "I sent them north and east, but I don't know..." He stopped speaking. Her trembling had continued, and now it had risen to such a pitch that he felt his own body shaking.

"Laven, what's wrong?"

"Cold," she gasped. "So cold." Her breath was coming in gasps, wheezing from her chest. He felt her forehead and it was ice cold. This was not from fright or fever - it was something strange. Her teeth chattered so hard that he could hear them, and he was not sure that she was not dying right there in his arms.

"It's alright." He sat down, holding her close, wrapping his cloak around her so she was pressed to his own body heat. He rubbed her arms, trying to help the blood flow, but it did not work. She shook so violently it seemed she would break apart.

Gradually, the cold crept into his bones as well; holding her was like hugging an icicle. Just listening to her struggle for breath made him take great, gulping chestfuls, and she was turning blue.

There was no way she could bear much more of this, but he did not know how to help her.

Then, all of a sudden, it passed. She grew still, her breath came more easily, and wearily, she laid her head against his shoulder.

He felt her forehead and it was normal again. "What was that?" he whispered.

She lay exhausted, letting her breath come easily again. After a moment, she even sat up and started to pull off the many layers that encased her. Her strength was returning.

"Are you sure?" asked Garrity, putting her on the ground and helping her take off her blanket and cloak.

"Yeah, I'm just a bit hot now," she panted. Her skin was growing red, and in a moment of fear, he reached out to touch her again. Now she was hot as boiling water.

"Laven, you're burning."

"I know, I know..." She was moving restlessly, stripping off her outer dress so only the cotton layer was underneath. She pushed the clothes away, and then collapsed to the forest floor, her eyes rolling about in her head. Still she moved restlessly, clutching at her throat and her chest, her legs jerking spasmodically. Sweat poured down her body, but it did nothing. She felt like she was being burned alive in an oven, and as though all her air had been sucked away. Before, it had felt like it was her throat's fault that she could not breathe, but now it seemed like it was the air's.

Garrity was desperate, looking on more helpless than

he had ever felt in his life.

Her movement only grew more intense, and her arms flailed about and her head jerked. Her legs kicked hard. She was going to do herself an injury with the fury of her movement, so he leaned forward and tried to still her, but she fought him with intense strength, pushing him off, her head lolling around like an infant who could not control its own motion.

Determined, he knelt over her, pinning her legs to the ground with his knees, and holding her arms with his elbows. He struggled to hold her head still between his hands, and could only barely do it with all his superhuman strength.

“Laven, please, you got through the last, you’ll get through this,” he heard himself begging, realizing halfway through that he was speaking aloud. His tears would have fallen on her had her head stayed still.

After forever, though it was two minutes in reality, this fit passed; and more quickly than it had begun, though her color had returned to its healthy hue, she was still as a corpse.

Worn out, he climbed off and threw himself onto the leaves, shaking from the adrenaline and fear that coursed through him, even his superhuman strength exhausted.

Lavendier did not move for a long time, though she felt wholly well now, for her heart was filled with fear that another attack would come over her; but after a time, she sat up, and reaching out, gently stroked his back.

“It’s alright,” she said. “It’s over now.”

He rolled over and looked up at her. She was still weak, but she looked healthier than he felt. With a moan, he sat



up.

“You had the strength of a demi-god.”

“How? And how am I alive?”

His frown was deep, somber, sad, and his eyes swam. His thoughts were muddled and confused, and he was only glad that she looked back at him with living eyes.

“We have to find the others,” he said. “I don’t know, and we have to find the others.”

“The gorgans are gone now,” she said, and he looked at her sharply. She met his look apologetically. “I can feel it. They’re gone.”

“Don’t feel it,” he said harshly. “Don’t try.”

Leaving Lavendier armed with bow and arrow, and only going a few paces from her in each direction, Garrity finally found Adlena, Cila, Viol, and Jacian. They had taken refuge in the trees, and the gorgans had never found them.

Garrity was now convinced that Asbult had been right all along. The gorgans were organized and sweeping the land systematically, and if he turned their group around now to return to Drian, they would all be killed. They had to go on, for better or worse, and so they once again took up the journey, helping Lavendier to walk little distances at a time.

It was slower going and they rested far more often, but everyone was relieved to be moving again. They no longer felt like they were just sitting around, waiting to die.

Viol took the lead as guide and lookout so that Garrity could walk behind with Lavendier, who needed his constant presence. She was faint and weak, but the frightening attack did not come back. She was able to keep them all safe by warning when gorgans were near, and they took

detours, or stopped still when she told them. It seemed that feeling the presence of the gorgans would not always precede an attack, though Garrity was more terrified of another episode than he was of a search party. He begged Lavendier not to use the prescience, but she said she could not help it: she could feel them, whether she wanted to or not.

## The Edge of Death

Cila took up the rear of the group which, since it fostered her desire to be alone, was welcome, and thus it fell upon Jacian, as Garrity had explained it to him, to look after his mother. She was now six months progressed and her belly was extended, her back long-suffering, her ankles sore, and her energy low. It was her son's responsibility not only to always walk and never expect to be carried anymore, but also to bring his mother water and food whenever she asked for it.

It was on the evening of the fifth day, since fleeing the cave, that they saw a brown mass stretch across the horizon, somber, cloudy, and dismal: Karaka.

Garrity called a halt and the ladies sat down with heavy hearts. He left them at the edge of the tree-line and ran ahead to a small rocky hill, with patches of scraggly grass struggling up between the cracks. He surveyed the gray/brown terrain that stretched far and flat before them, like an ocean of mud, waiting to suck you into its bottomless void. The land of Karaka was wet, wild, and

weary, and beyond it, he knew, lay the yellow sands of the Great Desert. Even if they could traverse Karaka alive, without being detected, the desert itself was death, and they would be soaked, then dried, then cooked before they ever reached the mighty yellow mountain peaks. If they did, somehow, manage to make it that far, drained of strength and drained of sense, the mountains would conquer them like a lion leaping upon a gazelle. And what lay beyond all this danger and death – only hope. Asbult would have understood the territory – he might have known how to prepare, the best and safest paths to take, but Garrity was only an ignorant, hopeless mortal, without conviction.

No more would there be the comforting protection of woods, the cool breezes from streams and lakes, water to drink, or food to scavenge. The air would be damp, humid, and drizzly, then hot, dusty, and arid, and the going forever treacherous.

As he stood alone on the outcropping, despairing in his uncertainty, whirling in his thoughts like a man drowning, a hand slipped quietly into his, and he was not surprised. Viol always sensed when he was in need of comfort, though he had never told her anything about his personal scars and fears. But she knew and often came, and so he held tight.

Finally, he turned around, and nearly jumped out of his skin to see Lavendier, not Viol, standing beside him. She was pale as a sheet from walking up the hill, and she was forcing herself to stand.

“What – sit!” He lowered her onto a rock and squatted beside her. “You shouldn’t be up here.” His voice was angry,

but his eyes were filled with concern.

“I was trying to think of someone besides myself,” she said abashedly. “I thought you might need someone to hold on to – that prospect is too depressing.”

“Well,” he said with annoyance, “sometimes you do have to think about yourself.”

She leaned forward and put her hand on his arm. “Are you alright?”

“No,” he took a deep breath. “No, I am not.”

“So tell me,” she begged. “I don’t understand without words and I want you to tell me.”

He sighed and lowered himself onto the stony ground beside her. “My thoughts are not pleasant.”

“Whatever you want to tell me. Maybe it will help. I can tell you dread our journey, and you told me you do not believe there is a haven on the other side.”

“If I could believe it, maybe it would be easier, but that is not the problem. In order to get there, we need to cross Karaka. I have to take all of you *across* the doorstep of the enemy. We don’t know who he is, or his powers. We’re betting against forces we don’t understand.” He gritted his clenched jaw and closed his fists, and his breathing came fast for a moment. It was not easy to speak his thoughts aloud; he took a breath: deep in, held it, and released.

“When I left my mother’s home, I made a vow to protect the weak. She preyed on the lives of the innocent, using them for her own gain, so when I broke free of her, I made a vow to protect anyone weaker than I. And now I struggle because... because I don’t know how to follow that vow. Taking your sisters and nephew, taking *you*, across that land,” he pointed toward the stretch of mud, the defiled

land of the enemy, “goes against everything I *do* believe in. And I am not sure any of us will survive.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But that did not stop Merciec or Asbult. They kept going – even though they might die. I am willing to do that too.”

“I know you are, but the question is whether it’s worth it. I really do not know anymore.”

“You do know.”

He looked at her a long time, meeting her eyes so full of pain, so free now of any taint of selfishness or pride. His heart expanded, and his chest ached. Looking at her was dangerous; it cracked walls around his heart that he had built long ago. But he liked looking all the same.

Finally, he turned away and nodded. “Yes, I do. We must go on. But I so want to go somewhere, anywhere, else. I want to go home.”

She smiled a little. “I’ve never heard you call it that before.”

He shrugged. “I never thought of it that way before.”

Garrity was not an old man, but when people looked at him, they got the impression of age and boundless maturity. Lavendier had known that he was younger than he looked, but suddenly, she felt it. She saw a vulnerability in his eye that perhaps no one had ever seen before.

“There’s nothing for it but to keep going. You are right.” He extended his hands to lift her up. “We have come this far, we will go all the way.”

She nodded. “Yes.” She smiled encouragingly. “Now?”

“First thing in the morning.”

She took his hand, and together, they went back to the others.

\* \* \*

It was that evening that the attacks returned: as before, she started by shivering with cold. Garrity was tending the fire when Viol cried out for him to look at Lavendier, and looking at her, his heart sank like a stone.

“What’s wrong?” cried Adlena, for Lavendier and Garrity had never told the others about her near death episode.

“Bring her to the fire,” he commanded, “and wrap anything you can around her.” They hurried to comply, and Garrity began building up the fire, though he knew this attack would probably be over before it got hot enough. He fetched cold water from the stream, planning for the next.

“Hold her close and keep her warm, and hold her head up so she can breathe.”

Viol, Adlena, and Cila hurried to do as he commanded, and Jacian stood looking on with wide, staring eyes. Lavendier was already wheezing for breath, and her teeth were chattering hard, her whole body shaking. He looked at the three ladies rubbing her vigorously through the cloaks and blankets, and noticed that the shaking was so intense that they shook whenever they touched her. He wondered if this attack was worse than the first or if he was only imagining it, but after a second, he was positive. It had come on faster, and her whole face was already blue. He looked at the tips of her fingers, and she had frostbite.

“Garrity, she’s going to die from this!” yelled Adlena in terror. “What do we do? Why is it happening?”

He shook his head. There was nothing more to do except prepare for the next attack, if she lived through this one.

Numb and methodic, he stood quickly, grabbed his own cloak off his shoulders, which he had forgotten about, and dunked it in the icy water from the stream. He pulled some cooking fat out of Cila's pack, and then stood still. He was as prepared as possible.

Finally, her shaking stilled and she collapsed into Viol's arms. Cila and Adlena sat back on their heels, astonished and exhausted. But Garrity did not let them rest.

"Get ready," he told them, "she's about to start jerking wildly. Pull off all her layers."

"But she's freezing," they protested all at once.

"She won't be in a moment. Hurry!"

Confused, they started to gently remove her wrappings, but they were going too slowly, and Garrity leaned down and started stripping them off. "We have to hurry! Cila, you'll hold down her right arm, Adlena her left. I'll take her feet. Viol, you have to hold her head still. Jacian, you're going to pour the water canteens over her."

They looked at him as if he had gone mad, but Lavendier gasped out for them to listen, so they did as he said. He was just about to remove her outer dress, and Adlena was about to stop him, when Lavendier's face flushed and her chest heaved. She sat up, and with that same superhuman strength from before, ripped off her gown so violently that it tore down the side. She threw it away like a snake.

"Grab her and hold her down!" commanded Garrity as he threw the wet cloak over her, but they could not because Lavendier was still sitting. She wobbled and rocked from side to side, forward and back, her head rolling about on her neck. Garrity kept a firm hold on her ankles, and it was a good thing, for after a moment she grew so



uncomfortable from the rising heat that she tried to stand.

“Grab her!” he shouted, and they did as she fell back onto Viol, her head whipping about as she tried to escape. Her mouth was wide open and her breath came in strangled gasps.

Cila and Adlena strove with each of her arms, practically sitting on them to keep them from lashing out, and sometimes one of the arms would lift them into the air, as if they were merely rag dolls. Viol did what she could to keep her sister’s head in place. Garrity grunted to Jacian, while he battled with her legs, for the little boy to put some fat on her lips and hands, which were quickly cracking and bleeding.

Jacian was clearly terrified, but he did as he was told. As soon as he finished, he ran away crying.

They were all crying, and where they touched her body, their own skin began to burn from the heat. Garrity yelled for Jacian to come back and pour water on Lavendier, and he had to yell twice for the boy to obey him. When the cold water met her body, it steamed away in a cloud.

At last, as before, it ended.

They shook from the exertion of holding her down, but she did not. She lay like the dead, only the occasional rise and fall of easy breathing. She was not asleep, but she was spent.

They stood, and realized that over the frostbite her skin was burned all over, as if from the sun. But the sun had been on the inside.

Adlena whirled on Garrity. “What was that?”

He dug his palms into his eyes. “It happened once before, after the gorgan attack. But this was worse. This was so

much worse.”

“She can’t survive that again.”

“I don’t know how she survived it this time. I don’t know what’s happening to her.”

No one except Lavendier slept well that night, their fear of Karaka replaced by something far more terrible and near. It was only a matter of time, they knew, before Lavendier died a horrible, painful death.

## Karaka

**W**ith a satisfied roar, Power hurled himself into his throne and called through the mighty iron doors into the outer chamber.

“Where is Ferran?” he asked the Secretary, who seemed perpetually melting ever deeper into the chair where he sat behind his black desk, like white chocolate into dark.

“In the tunnels,” his voice was dry and crisp, “feasting on the small gorgans.”

“He should feed some to Farsooth!” At the thought of what eating gorgan flesh might do to a mortal, he laughed gleefully. Then he noticed a figure that radiated a pale red glow standing beneath the curving horns at the wide entrance of the entry tunnel. It took a step toward him and materialized into Passion, draped in her revealing folds of red fabric.

“Temper, temper, my dear brother. Why so gloriously happy?”

“Because, my darling, mankind is but a passing shadow compared to us! They try to resist, and we mow them

down!”

With a pretty scowl, she covered her ears. “Not so loud, *really*.” She went up to him and trailed her perfectly manicured nails along his strong biceps. “But I am quite pleased with what we did to the royal princess, who thought to oppose us with her new, pure heart.”

She left the throne room and Power followed her to the fire that blazed orange and blinding on the far side of the cavern, and scooped some flames into a champagne glass. “On that note,” she smiled, beckoning him to her with a finger, “I came to bring you some good news.”

He strode to her and she handed him a glass. Dreamily, she reclined on a low black bench jutting out of the bubbling black wall.

“Wait!” He stiffened, and stood as if listening to something far away. Slowly, a wide smile spread across his square jaw. His black eyes sparkled.

Passion laughed. “That is what I was going to tell you!”

“Their arrogance! They tramp across my land as if they think I wouldn’t know!”

“They are ignorant mortals, falling to your might.” She laughed. “They really have no idea who you are!”

He roared triumphantly with unrestrained laughter. “I can feel her pain! The gorgan blood rages through her.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

He looked at her and licked his lips, relishing the misery of the princess he had sought to possess. “I want to watch her final moments.”

“Then let us go.”

\* \* \*

It was not like wading across a stream, when you get wet all at once, and then emerge on the opposite side to dry land; neither was it like rain, which soaks through quickly and comes to an end eventually. No. It was unlike any weather the Drinians had known before.

The ground was mud, but not deep and squishy – it was firm and solid, with a thin layer of water over all: water just deep enough to seep into one's shoes above the soles. That was trying because there was no relief, no break from the unending wetness everywhere.

But what added to the misery was the viscous air. A continuing, unending fog hung over everything, not thickening and shifting and thinning again like normal fog, but even and still and stagnant. It slowly, so slowly, seeped into everything they wore, through their skin, and deep into their bones. It seeped into their minds and made every thought insipid and stale. Soon, they shivered from a cold that pervaded them within and without, and no amount of bundling could fight it.

For the first day, whose interminable length felt like an eternity, Jacian whimpered and cried continuously, no matter what they said or how they tried to distract him. After another day, Viol and Adlena found tears falling down their cheeks, beyond their control. To be sure, there were plenty of reasons why they should cry, but a different, extreme, disconnected sadness overwhelmed their hearts, overflowing in tears.

For Cila, whose wells of pain and despair could dig no deeper, there were no tears. The effect of the land upon her was to solidify her supreme, unending, numbing agony of soul.

Lavendier simply shivered like a leaf in autumn, about to be blown, finally dead, from the tree of life. Garrity had to lead her each step, one after the other, or she would veer off from the group and wander somewhere else away from them. She was senseless, numb, and silent.

Garrity pushed forward, one leg at a time past the next one, planting itself in the soggy soil, shifting his weight to it, and beginning all over again. This process filled his mind, and he talked himself through it step by step, holding mechanically to Lavendier's elbow.

They lost count of the number of days. When they tallied the time later, it was only three. Yet it was at least a month's worth of toil.

On the final day, when they could see ahead a vast, yellow plain stretching to meet the pale clear sky, Viol paused in her march at the head of the group. She turned to look at Garrity. He also stopped and looked at her a long, long moment.

"We are almost through," said Adlena, and tears coursed down her face, unhindered.

Garrity looked at Lavendier, who clung weak and weary to his arm. Her eyes were hollow and their brilliant greenness clouded in a dull gray. She was so completely unresponsive. They were already low on water, even though they had filled their canteens to the brim before leaving the flatlands. Their canteens were now half-full but Garrity knew it was still too low and they would not traverse the desert before dying of thirst.

He looked back at Viol. "Push on," he said.

\* \* \*

The sudden change in the atmosphere was extreme and complete. To go from heavy humidity to arid, dry heat in the matter of a single step was overwhelming. Viol gasped as she stepped over the boundary and fell to her hands and knees. She looked back. The fog hung in the air but did not reach her. She stretched forth her hand and saw the thick air wrap around it. She laughed giddily and then returned to crying. Although the environmental change was complete, it would take more than a step to overcome the effects of the land on their minds.

Now they were free from Karaka, but a barren, vast plain still stretched indefinitely before them. After only a short pause, they pushed on.

In the distance, the Yellow Mountains rose high, their black peaks beckoning, urging them on, but the sun was hot, the desert dry, and within one day, they had drunk all their water. They were traveling at night and, under the cover of their cloaks during the day, they tried not to suffocate. It was the beginning of the second day, and though the sun had yet to filter her early pale rays over the peaks, Garrity dreaded its coming.

The girls lay down to sleep, Adlena holding Jacian to her, and Lavendier's head resting in Cila's lap, but Garrity sat down a little ways from them. Though he kept guard, it was not necessary. "We are as good as dead anyway," he thought.

After a time, Viol came to him. She laid her head in his lap and was silent. A long while later, when Garrity was convinced she was asleep, she spoke raspily.

"Garrity, there is a man over there."

Garrity shook his head. "No, Viol, it is an illusion. A

trick of the sun.”

She shook her head listlessly, worn out from the dryness of her mouth. “No, there really is a man; he is coming to us.” But she was tired, so she said nothing else.

Garrity looked tenderly at her head. They would not be able to find any water; it was too late for that. Some, like Jacian and Lavendier, would not last through the next day, and few others the day after that. He had failed them, and if he had not been so near death himself, he would have been very angry.

Suddenly, he heard Cila cry out. “It has come back!”

This attack on Lavendier progressed the same as before, only they were less helpful; and fortunately, they could not see the gods above who gloried in watching the misery of the princess’s final moments. They wrapped Lavendier tight, though it did no good. Not only her fingers and toes were frostbitten, but all the way up to her elbows and knees, and her nose too. Before it ended, her face had begun to blacken. And when the heat started, Garrity tried feebly to hold her down, but he did not even have the strength he had before, and she flailed wildly, her arms hitting the ground so hard that at times she began to dig through the sand, and at one point, they heard a loud crack. Her arm flapped after that, her bone broken clean through. But she did not seem to notice. The worst was that she stopped breathing during both the cold and hot attacks. Her mouth panted for a little while, but it was clear that nothing was getting through. Garrity sat above, holding her when he could, and staring at her, and Viol buried her head in his back. Cila carried Jacian a distance away so he would not have to see. Adlena sat, crumpled and defeated,



upon the sand, as the sun rose to the center of the sky.

When the attack ended, she did not breathe again. Her body was covered over in large blisters, and her eyes were wide, staring, and glassy.

Garrity shuddered and looked away. And what he saw surprised him, and he gaped in confusion: a figure of an old man stood about two paces away, watching them. Watching Lavendier. Then it slowly approached her.

Garrity was too tired to resist. He wondered if this was a servant of Power, come to collect Lavendier's remains. But when he opened his mouth to threaten him, nothing came out, his throat pure sandpaper.

Reverently, the old man, his back hunched and his long white beard trailing through the sand, knelt next to the dead princess. He closed his eyes, put out his hand, and touched her body.

Viol looked up from Garrity's shoulder. Cila and Jacian returned. They all watched him in fascination as his lips moved silently; as he touched her, they saw the boils recede and disappear. Her skin became fresh and natural, her face cleared to her old color, and her lips were not cracked. Miraculously, calmly, she began to breathe.

The man straightened and keenly sized up Garrity. "Pick her up," he commanded. "And all of you follow me."

## The Romance of Karaka

**A**cross the vast, empty tract of Karaka had flown Passion and Power like two black-winged angels. When they reached the very edge - a peninsula of black stretching thin between the Great Desert and Mestraff - the Desert that had always been unconquerable for him, and the woods that were rapidly falling to his might - they saw them, like a troop of tiny, displaced ants, who are lost and trying to find their mound that has been destroyed - the six humans. The gods watched them cross the divide into the dry desert and march for a day, then sink weary into the sand. He and Passion settled in to savor Lavendier's final moments, to feel her heat and chill as if it were their own, and savor the physical sensations... but just as she was about to die, as Power watched Garrity hold her down with super-human strength, he suddenly grabbed his sister and knocked her violently to the muddy ground a hundred yards away.

"How *dare* you?" she screamed, rising up like a mighty avenging demon, but he was not afraid of her. He landed

on the ground and advanced.

“Did you know?” he demanded.

“Know what?”

“You dare lie to me?”

“Don’t threaten me. I have been on your side, fighting *your* battles. Why would I betray you?”

“Then why do you lead me to a man who could be my doom?”

“What are you talking about?”

“That *man*, that *creature*... he is the heir of Strana!”

Her hot reaction to being thrown on the ground turned cold, and she stood regally in the midst of the brown fog, daring Power to touch her again. “You never told me about him,” she said icily.

“He is supposed to be dead. I thought she killed him years ago.”

She flushed white, only the tips of her nose and eyelids a pale splash of pink. “Is that your *son* down there?”

“You think I would ever have a son and share my might?” His anger was only mounting with each moment, and he paced furiously across great acres of land, raging.

“So why do you care?”

“Because he is a demi-god!”

She laughed scornfully at him, and it pierced him to the core.

He scowled. “Do not laugh at me.”

“And why not? You’re even afraid of a demi-god.”

His eyes flashed dangerously at her, but she paid no heed.

“First, you fear a mere mortal. Then you fear Rordan, and now your fear a demi-god? You’re not Power! You’re a shadow of him!”

“Say that again, woman!” he roared at her, “and I will drive you from the earth!”

“Calm yourself,” she whispered. “What have you become? Can you not control yourself?”

He was gasping from the overwhelming urge to destroy something. “I can’t control it,” he said quietly. “My cravings control me.”

“How can that be? You are a high god! We do not crave. We make our choices without the influence of carnal desire!”

“It’s intoxicating, Passion,” he whispered, coming closer and sweeping her into his mortal aura. “The urge to go beyond my divine aloofness. The desire to dominate, to enjoy myself, to gloat over my victims – how happy it makes me. I don’t want to control it.”

“It’s controlling you,” she warned.

“Let it!”

“But if you do,” she cried, “if you lose your ability to control your desires, then how can you control an army? You must find a way.”

“Or what?”

“Or I will abandon you,” she said quietly. “And so will every other god. We chose a divine ruler, not a mortal one. Cease this constant pursuit of the carnal – or else!”

He glared at her, but he had not yet lost all use of his reason, and he knew he needed help to accomplish his goal. “I will find a way to be both mortal and divine. I have not given up on that,” he warned, shaking from the effort to speak with calm, “but I will find a way to control it. If even a demi-god,” and he pointed back toward Garrity, “can control his urges, then what is to stop me? I will indulge

and I will control and I will not have to choose one or the other.”

“Very well,” she said coldly. “Now tell me why you have let fear dominate you with this demi-god.”

Stifling his ire, he answered her. “Don’t you see? Mercy told me the ending I feared – my failure before the coming of the Golden King, where I will have everything I built torn from my hands. How could I accept that degrading, horrid, eternal..I worked for this! I ruled, I built, I designed this earth, and who does He think He is to rip it away from me? I HATE Him!”

“Justice!” she commanded.

“Ah, sweet Justice,” he roared. “What did she show me?”

“She showed you what you wanted to see. Your hope!”

“Mercy said only One can stop me. Only One. Trinian – the king of Drian – he marks my doom. But what if he has sent this demi-god to kill me? He must! Why else would he send him to the Yellow Mountains? Nothing lies beyond them! Justice showed me,” his eyes glowed, “she showed me a reign.” His eyes burned with fiery greed. “A beautiful reign where all I see, all I built, is mine to command. Not just this scrappy, tiny hole!” He kicked the flat muddy ground, and then extended his arms toward the east. “I would rule forever, and no one, not even the Golden King, will stand in my way.

“However!” he turned back toward her. “There’s a however, and it haunts me, stalking my every waking hour like an inexorable predator. ‘Only One.’ I assume it’s the mortal king – who else could it be? It’s he she warned me of, after all. But will he strike the blow himself? How can he, the petty, weak thing?” He leaned toward her, his eyes

practically crackling in hounded madness. “He has sent this god-man to do it for him.”

His chest heaved so hard the mountains in the distance rumbled, and the memory of hearing about his failure was so humiliating, it choked him.

Passion grew bored watching him struggle, and said bluntly, “She told you of your own death.”

He whirled on her with wild eyes.

“It was a warning,” she emphasized. “That’s all. You are the god of Power, of might, of glory! *You*, not some mortal, deserve to rule. By what right has he earned it? You have a plan, you will conquer the world, and do you really believe, for one moment, that a mortal - even a half-mortal - can stand in your way?”

His facial muscles contorted between rage and resolution. “I am a god!” he muttered aloud. “He is insignificant. He’s another piece of the puzzle that I didn’t account for, but he can be solved. We’ll be careful about it.”

He looked toward the group, and saw them stumbling toward a desert oasis behind the figure of an old man, and he had forgotten all about Lavendier. “They’ve found a resting place, and will be there for many days. I will muster Kellan and his beasts, and we will call Terror and Destruction to our aid. We will lead my warriors across the waste and capture this puny demi-god.” He grinned with a sudden, new thought. “Perhaps, I may even learn from him how to control my passions.”

## The Oasis

**L**avendier awakened on a soft surface and as she lifted her lids, feeling fresh and warm and cozy, she saw Garrity's dark brown hair splayed out on the edge of her bed. He had been sitting on the ground beside her, and had fallen asleep.

She slipped quietly out of the covers, careful not to wake him, and looked around. The room was bright and fresh and smelled like lavender, and there was a little antechamber where, behind a door, stood a large tub. On the tub were handles, and when she turned them, hot and cold water came out. Delighted, and convinced she was in a dream, she filled the tub to the brim, slipped in, and let the sand, grime, and grease of weeks of travel melt away.

When she got out, she found a new gown hanging on the back of a chair. She put it on, relishing the crease and rustle of fresh-pressed clothes, and realizing, for the first time, that all this might be real. Lastly, she refilled the tub and returned to the bedroom.

She shook Garrity awake.

“Wake, my dear friend. I do not know where we are, but it is paradise and everything is right and good. There is a hot bath for you in that little room there.”

Opening his weary eyes to see her standing before him, clean and well-dressed and healthy and alive, he, too, thought it was a dream. She smiled at his woozy gaze, stroked his bearded cheek, and then went out the door to let him find that he was wrong.

They all awoke in beds (how many beds did a man in the middle of the desert need?) rehydrated, with fresh clothes laid out and fresh baths waiting. The place was a circle, with bedrooms and stalls along the perimeter, surrounding a courtyard of soft green grass and poppies. In the center of the courtyard, on a raised stone dais, was a fire pit and wooden chairs. Cila, Viol, and Jacian sat in the chairs, and when they saw Lavendier approaching, her sisters leapt up and exclaimed for joy.

Viol ran down and wrapped her arms fiercely around her sister, holding tight to her waist.

“He said you were alright, but I wasn’t sure I believed it.”

Lavendier kissed the top of her sister’s brown head. Jacian was staring at her as if he were afraid, and Cila was crying quiet tears. Lavendier hesitated, unsure how to speak to them or comfort them. For her who had experienced the agony, it already seemed like a bad dream, but to them who had watched her, it was still very real. Gently, she touched Cila’s shoulder.

“I’m alright now,” she whispered.

Cila nodded. “I know.” She tried to smile, but it was a grimace. “I am glad.” She was hugging her arms, as if to recede into herself, to block out the world, and abruptly,



she turned and walked away.

Jacian tugged on Lavendier's sleeve and drew her attention to him. "Are you a ghost?" he asked.

She leaned down. "Feel my face. Do I feel like a ghost?" He ran his little fingers all over her mouth, nose, cheeks, eyebrows, and even stuck them in her ears until she was laughing; he shook his head.

"Then I'm not."

Then, with a pleased grin, he put his arms around her neck and insisted on sitting on her lap while she ate breakfast.

"Viol, where are we?" she asked. The food was hot oatmeal and cold milk, and it was heavenly. "Did we get over the mountains? Everything is a haze, and I remember nothing."

"No, the mountains are still ahead, see? You can see the white peaks over the courtyard wall, over there. We are with a Healer, Laven, and if we were not, you would not still be alive."

The man was a hermit, she explained, living far out in the middle of nowhere on this oasis, and his name was Habas.

"Good morning," came his old, creaky voice, full of life. Habas, an old, bent man with a long gray beard and lively gray eyes, was ascending the dais, with Adlena behind him. His beard reached regally to his knees, and his long, tan robe quietly brushed the ground as he walked.

"Good morning," returned Lavendier.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Better than I have in months, sir, thank you."

"My pleasure."

Adlena wordlessly came up to her, laid her cool hands on her forehead, and kissed her hair.

“So,” he said to them, “your queen was telling me that Gladier is the last of the Healers. Good for him, the old fool.” He chuckled kindly. “I’m sure I don’t know what crime he committed to deserve such a long life sentence, though.”

They sat down together and he told his tale. He was older than Gladier, by far, and had been banished almost all his life; for, as a young man, he had committed a grievous crime against one of his patients. “Men, you see,” he told them, “cannot control a wizard. We do as we please, and answer to none. So we push our limits sometimes. And sometimes, we think we can get away with unspeakable horrors.”

“What horrors?” asked the prince.

Habas handed him a bar of dried almonds and figs. “The unspeakable kind,” he answered gravely. “But, fortunately, I did not get away with it. Fate appeared to me, took me up, and carried me here to this oasis, where this house already stood. He told me that I would wait here, in seclusion, and see no one for hundreds of years. This suffering was to be my punishment.

“And I have suffered. My redemption, he said, would come when once again I saw mankind, and if I showed the kindness and love I should have showed all the rest of my life, then I would die a forgiven man.”

“How can any crime be so great that it deserves such a punishment?” asked Adlena.

He smiled his ancient smile, and shook his wise old head. “We are not as you are, my dear. We are privy to knowledge

that goes beyond the realm of man. It is a gift beyond great, but an enormous responsibility. I knew the nature of my offense, and yet I presumed to think myself a god. My suffering has been no more than I deserved.”

Garrity joined them now, looking as fresh as the rest. He too had a new shirt and pants of light cotton that fluttered in the breeze. He had shaved, and his face was smooth and dark, and his eyes shone as blue as the sky. He came up to them and bowed deeply, but his eyes never left Lavendier, as if he could drink her up by looking at her.

“You are really alright?” he asked her warmly. “How do you feel?”

She blushed and looked at the ground. “I feel fine. Better than I have felt since we left Drian.” She looked around at everyone. “Really, I feel fine.”

“What about those attacks?” Viol asked shakily, and Jacian looked at Lavendier fearfully, as if he expected her to have one right then. His eyes grew big and he began panting for breath, as he had seen her do at the time.

Lavendier grabbed his face and looked him in the eyes. “Jacquee, stop. I’m fine – you see? I’m fine. Nothing is wrong.”

“Are you going to die again?”

Lavendier, and everyone else, looked at Habas.

“What happened to me? Will it happen again?”

He sighed, shaking his head. “I never saw anything like it before,” he said at last. “These gorgan creatures that the queen tells me of are new to me. They were not in Minecerva when I walked among men. When I healed you, there was a poison in your veins. Heat and ice, comingled...I know not – I know not what it was. But it

is dormant now. It will not freeze you or burn you again.”

They all exhaled, as if a pent-up storm were unleashed to wash the world new. Jacian buried himself in Lavendier’s breast, and after a moment, his head popped up, rosy and bright, and he proclaimed, “I’m glad!” and everyone laughed, the tension released.

Habas told them, as Garrity ate, that they were a day’s march from the edge of the desert toward the Yellow Mountains, and when they all recovered, with plenty of rest and nourishing food, he would send them on their way, with ample provisions and good directions.

“But,” he said at the end, “you do not have to leave. You are welcome to make this the end of your journey.”

## Faerie

**T**he hollows in Jacian's cheeks, the dark, deep circles beneath Adlena's eyes, and the bones that poked out under Garrity's shirt all vanished with the ample, healthy diet that the Healer urged upon them. Viol was at last clean and comfortable, and a little color returned to Cila's peaked and yellow face. The air was still and comforting, and they rested in the knowledge that no danger could find them, so that, for the first time since departing Drian, they did not jump at shadows.

Cila spent the days in memories. Every moment of her life with Asbult rose up before her inner eye, and she dwelt on each as a separate sweetness. He had always been with her, since her earliest memories, and she knew he would never leave her. He played with her in childhood, courted her in maidenhood, and together they crossed into the realm of maturity as a married couple.

From before she could remember, she had loved his adventurous, playful nature; his laughing blue eyes, his loud voice, and his fiery hair askew. She had asked him

once why he loved her, she who was so calm and quiet, and he said it was because she was his other half. It was in her presence that he always found a center of peace; it was in her spirit that his could rest.

Now he was laid forever to rest, and she was in turmoil. Her nature could not find calm, it could not rest. She was adrift in a sea of pain, and her anchor, her laughter, gone. How she needed him to get over him! Everything noble, good, terrible, jealous, rational, and emotional was tied to him, and now, she was incomplete, and no one could reach her.

Viol spent her time wandering through the hermitage, traveling outside the sandstone building to the vast desert, where she gazed over the dunes, far, far away toward the west – toward her home. She relinquished herself to the clean desert air, to the wind, and she felt as if cool breezes blew over her soul and aired it out after a long, hard winter. There were dusty, dirty corners from her hardships, but nothing a little spring cleaning did not quickly whirl away. She was innocent, beautiful, and full of hope.

Lavendier, when she was not running around with Jacian, threw her newfound energy into household chores. Not because Habas needed help, but because she was fairly bursting with excitement, and wanted to take care of everyone. She baked and cooked, swept, scrubbed, and even painted a badly drawn archway of leaves around one of the entrances. She did everything badly, but she did it with gusto. She had learned that if she tried something for long enough, she could master it, and she wanted to make up for lost time.

After the first day, Garrity disappeared. Habas told them

not to worry about him; that he was worrying enough about himself. "He must just be left alone," he said. "And he will come back to you soon."

"But where is he?" they asked. "Where has he gone?"

"Not far. There are many places to find solitude here."

Lavendier demanded if he was getting food, and Habas promised to take it to him every day, so she let it be.

Adlena, attempting to enjoy the peace but lost in thoughts of her husband and home, stood gazing, on the third day, toward the mass of mountains that loomed welcomingly before her. The base was of yellow stone, with veils of red and blue that streaked the rock as it ascended. Ever before, the mass had seemed black and forbidding and dangerous. But now, somehow, it had transformed into white and yellow, soft and welcoming.

"What do you see?" Habas joined her.

"I see yellow and white, and above it, a dry, empty sky."

"But my dear, that is only with your eyes."

She looked at him quickly, then glanced away again, her body suddenly rigid and tight.

"You are a gazer," he observed.

"I am a Queen," she said.

He smiled, and a thousand more wrinkles creased across his ancient face. "I am old," he said, "and I know truth. You are a queen, and my old heart leaps to hear it. You are a gazer, and my old eyes drink it in. I am foolish, stupid, after my many years of exile, but I have always known that one day I would meet the prophetess, for it was foretold that this would happen before my death. Tell me about the other sight," he prodded her gently. "You are afraid of it, I think?"

“No, not afraid,” she said too quickly. “Why would I be?”

He nodded. “Why would you be?”

She was defensive. “I do not have to use it – it has served its purpose. Why are you asking me?”

“Why are you afraid?”

“Stop asking me!” she said and whirled away, her new velvet cloak trailing behind her, and putting a barrier between them. Habas sat down on the desert sand and waited patiently for her to return.

After a while, humble and contrite, she did. There was a large stone beside the old man that he had long ago chiseled into an ornate chair, and the pregnant mother lowered herself into it. “How do you know about my second sight?”

“Because,” he said, “I share it, and I recognize the signs in you. As I am sure Gladier did when he first met you.”

“Yes, he said he knew the moment he saw me,” she hesitated. “He taught me to use it, and what had been only dreams before... I knew them with certainty – I could see deep into the nature of things.”

“Such as?”

“I knew Gladier was a wizard and a healer: I could see the mark on his soul. I knew I was a human and an elf – I could see the mark on *my* soul. And, when I saw my husband, I knew he was the rightful king.”

He nodded, thinking. “Yes... And me? Can you not see who I am?”

She stared at the sand and shook her head. “No. I see nothing anymore.”

“But why stop? Why not continue to use your gift?”

She sat dejected and disappointed in herself, shaking her head. Then she looked up in indignation. “Is it a gift? I



have only ever seen five people clearly, and the fifth was so black it terrified me. In my dreams, I am haunted by the images of evil men and women. What if I saw *that* clearly? What if I saw the nature of the gorgans, or the evil god himself. It is enough horror to see it with only my waking eyes.”

He nodded compassionately. “Yes, I see. I understand. Evil is a terrible, frightful thing. But if you let it control you – then that is the real danger.”

“I do not want to see it,” she said firmly. “And I fail to see why I should. All the prophecies have been fulfilled.”

“So you live your life according to prophecies. Again, very dangerous.”

“What would you have me do?” she cried out.

“I would have you embrace the mark on your soul. Live as a complete person. I think you are running from one half of who you are.”

Now she looked sharply at him. “My husband once said something to me very much like that – about my human side.”

“And so to please him, you went too far the other way?”

She smiled abashedly. “Maybe.”

“How has a pregnant mother traveled on foot for so many miles from Rordan to the Great Desert?”

She looked at him in astonishment, resting her hand instinctively on her belly. “What do you mean?”

“Only that you seem in very good health.”

She was trying to understand the connection of this observation with the other one. “My back aches, and my ankles are constantly swollen. I have suffered.”

“Yes, my dear,” he shook his head. “But how much more

suffering there'd have been were you all human. You would not have made it this far."

She blushed. "Why do you say this?"

"Because I speak the truth. And because you cannot get away from who you are, even if you try to ignore it. It runs through the blood of your children too, you know."

She hung her head. She had tried not to think about that before.

"I can help you, Dryad woman. As Gladier once did." He rose up and stood over her. "We must never waste the gifts of Fate."

Adlena stared at him a long moment. To open this box would be to air out all her fears. This long journey had taxed her body, the separation from Trinian drained her soul each day, and she did not think she had the strength to fight anymore. But the thought of Trinian stilled her.

She saw him alone in Drian, facing gorgans and counselors and solitude. She hoped and prayed that he had the strength to face those alone, and she hoped he knew how she believed in him from afar. That she gave him strength, even from a distance, and she realized she had to return the favor - she would lean on him, even in his absence.

Reluctantly, she nodded. She owed it to Trinian that she return to him a better person than when she left; it was the one thing she could do for him.

## The Conclusion of Death

**I**t was on the tenth day, in the evening, when they were gathered around the fire for dinner, that Garrity finally emerged from his solitude. Lavendier had stepped away from the orange glow of the hearth to get a dish, and he materialized beside her. In the darkness, only she could see him, and the voices of the others concealed their whispers.

“You have returned.”

“I have returned.”

“I’m glad.”

He had about him the comfortable aroma of horses, and she realized he must have been staying in the stables. She had never gone to visit the animals.

“We are leaving tomorrow,” he told her.

Dismay sank deep into her heart. “So soon?” She looked involuntarily at her family, roasting chicken on a spit over the fire, and toasting carrots and potatoes, for Habas had a veritable garden in this strange place, and everything, no matter its climate, thrived. It was a mini-paradise. She

turned to him beseechingly. "Must we? Is this not what we were looking for? A safe place to hide? Can we not stop here?"

His head fell. "I wish I could say yes. These past few days I have done nothing but try to convince myself that we should. But something is pulling me toward the mountains."

"What do you mean?"

"It is like the force that pulled me away from living with my mother. There is something there, something calling to us. I have never known anything like it; I had a dream last night..." his voice trailed off.

"What dream? What about?"

"I do not know. But it was silver."

"Garrity, what are you talking about? You seem so certain, but I don't know what you are talking about."

"Cila told me that Asbult said, right before he died, that we would find sanctuary. I have to trust him."

"Why? He was just a man, he had no more knowledge than you. I do not want to leave." She glanced wistfully over the beautiful arched doorways and open roof of the courtyard, where the stars shone brilliantly above. "They are all so happy here. What if we find misery when we go?"

Garrity was silent. He had needed time away from the ladies for clarity and reflection, but now that he was with Lavendier, he wondered how he had stayed away so long. Despite her arguments and pain, he did not perceive anything petty in her begging to stay. With new ears, he heard only her open, honest, loving heart, and he smiled at her in the darkness.

“Will *you* be miserable if we leave?”

She shook her head. “No, not if they are safe. That is what matters.”

“They will be. When we reach the other side of the Yellow Mountains. Do you trust me?”

She looked up into his brown eyes and was surprised by the depths of calm she saw there: she had never seen him so calm, certain, and content, and she unconsciously drew nearer. “With all my heart.”

Viol’s voice cut across Garrity’s next words, calling out to Laven that her dinner was ready. When she returned accompanied by Garrity everyone exclaimed for joy, and Viol, with the difficult but exuberant assistance of Jacian, immediately prepared him dinner.

Adlena gazed hard at him in the red, flickering light. Though her second sight was still limited, she had been developing it with Habas, and could make out enough of a rough sketch of a person. Noting the color, shape, and design of her sisters’ souls, to try and understand the differences, she had been growing more in the craft each day. Some of her understandings were innate, such as the heir-to-the-throne mark she saw on Jacian, which was only slightly different from the one she saw on Trinian; and some she had to study, such as Lavendier’s varied and changing marks, which seemed scarred and brilliant, and blinded her with their intensity. She had been so ecstatic, though hardly surprised, to see how Lavendier’s soul had changed from the dark gray mass it had once been.

Since she had begun practicing, Adlena had been eager to study Garrity, to see what an ordinary man’s soul might look like, but now she was astonished to see, suddenly and

innately, that he was no ordinary man. The grandeur of his nature left her speechless, and she stared at him for a long, silent moment.

“Garrity says we must leave tomorrow,” Lavendier told them.

“No, I don’t want to go!” cried Jacian, who had been throwing pieces of bread into the fire, and watching it curl up into cinders in the coals. “I want to stay here with Habas.”

Garrity sighed and stroked the boy’s head. “I’m sorry, my prince. But this is not the place for us.”

“Why can’t we stay? Why can’t we! I don’t want to go.”

“We have to listen to Garrity,” said Adlena suddenly, still gazing intently at him. “We must obey him.”

There was a strangeness in her voice that made Garrity frown. And when he met her sight, he realized that she was in awe of him: the same awe that had come over Lavendier in the monster’s cave. Somehow, he realized with a dismayed shock, Adlena knew who he was.

“Alright then,” he said uncomfortably. “We pack our things and leave tomorrow at dusk.”

As they all went somberly to bed, Garrity stepped close to Lavendier, and her heart beat loud in her chest. She flushed with pleasure, and told herself, strictly, to listen to him.

“Did you say something to the Queen?” demanded Garrity, his voice harsher than he meant it. “About who I am?”

Lavendier’s eyes widened in surprise. “No. Of course not!”

His brows glowered at her. “That was a very quick

defense.”

“Well, it’s very quick for you to assume I betrayed your secret. I gave you my word!”

“Considering your selfish history, I think it’s not that ridiculous.” He could have bitten his tongue as soon as he said it, knowing it was the most unfair thing he could say to her. But he could not unsay it.

Lavendier filled so completely with shame that she hardly knew what she said in response, but it was exactly the wrong thing. “Considering *your* mother, you have got a lot of gall to pretend you are anything *other* than a selfish half-god!”

He flushed fiercely and his fist flew to his waist. “How dare you!” he cried, his hands trembling. “How dare you?” he whispered. Then he whirled on his heel and departed.





## XII

### JUSTICE

*“Were they not satisfied where they were?” asked  
the little prince.*

*“No one is ever satisfied with where he is,” said the  
switchman.*

*- Antoine de St. Exupery, The Little Prince;  
Translated by Katherine Woods*



## Bandit and King

Sitting on horseback at the foot of Mount Kara, Trinian and his men gazed up at the precipice before them. The peaks of this mountain were robin's egg blue, from mineral deposits, and the city was built from the same stone. It was the largest city they had visited since leaving Drian; built between two peaks of the western mountains, it was a great metropolis that numbered two thousand citizens. The only city in Minecerva that could compete with Drian's five thousand.

The walls and buildings could have blended effortlessly with the blue stone surroundings, an invisible speck from the distance, had the builders wished to conceal; but that had clearly not been their intention. The high blue wall that stretched between the peaks was crowned with a bright yellow stripe, and cone-shaped towers that sprouted above it sported roofs of playful red: it looked like a playful toy castle.

Trinian and his band of soldiers urged their horses onto the winding road carved into the steep sides of the

mountain, and after a two-hour climb, Trinian and his squadron were thick in the forest that bordered the city's exterior.

When they were about half-way ascended, a faceless voice accosted them. "Halt! Who treads the forests of DiKara?"

Trinian pulled up and searched all around, but he saw no one. "Who addresses me?"

"You look," continued the bodiless voice, "to be strong men who value your lives. Speak, if you fear to lose them."

"I am Trinian, king of Drian and emperor of Minecerva, and it is yourself whom it would serve well to reveal, stranger."

A green clad figure dropped from the branches above and straddled the ground with wide-apart legs, just as a confident horsemen straddles his steed. He looked the king up and down.

"Why are you here, Emperor of Minecerva?"

"Are you an emissary of the king of Kara, or a bandit? I do not intend to tell my business to a wayfarer." Yet this was only to determine his own ground, for even if he should turn out to be a scoundrel, Trinian had already made himself willing to strike pacts with such men, and would not shrink to do so again.

The confident man, who was young and light of foot, laughed easily and leaned against a tree. "Such distinctions reveal your naivete, 'Emperor of Minecerva.' Don't you know that every king is a bandit and every bandit a king? This is lawless country in the west, and we make do with any leader we can find."

Trinian was silent a moment and gazed at the young

man. No one, unless he was an idiot, would stand in single challenge against a retinue of soldiers. Trinian did not doubt there were men with bows trained upon them nesting in the trees.

Yet that did not concern him.

Curiously, he was sizing up this youth. There was an unmistakable air of breeding and education about him, as if he stood now in a royal court; and though he spoke lightly of kings as bandits, no thief could have stood so like a rightful lord possessing his land. Though he stood in the woods, he had not been born there.

"I have come to speak with the king of Kara," said Trinian.

The other grinned, and with a bow, declared, "Well then, speak. He's listening. I am King Denin of Kara."

Impressed by his own deduction, Trinian looked severely upon him. "What is a king doing in the woods, instead of his city?"

King Denin whistled and fourteen men dropped from the branches, all clad in green, and all wielding bows and arrows.

"What is an emperor doing," countered the young man, "traveling the countryside instead of protecting his citadel? Come to our hall and we shall hear all about each other."

\* \* \*

Denin and his men sprinted and gamboled as they came to their clearing in the woods, as if free from all law and order. An air of defiance hung over their every twitch of the eye or fling of their arm as they laid out dinner for the travelers. They were all young, some not even

pushing stubble through their chins, and though they kept their voices low and stepped so light they made no sound, they seemed not to care for anyone who could catch them. More and more convinced that these lads were bandits, Trinian studied the easy nobility of their leader.

“Sit down,” declared the king, “and join us for supper.”

Trinian and Gorj seated themselves beside Denin and one of his men, a figure maybe thirty years old – elderly compared to the rest of the band. Kett, quietly, and without asking permission, sat behind the king.

“This is my head man, Krong. I guess this is your head man?” Denin pointed a finger at Gorj, who raised an eyebrow at it, but the unabashed king only handed the soldier a chunk of bread.

“This is Gorj, a captain in my army.”

Denin whistled. “Woah, army. That’s a fancy name for a group of twenty men. More power to you!”

Trinian felt Gorj shift beside him, and though he too felt some annoyance, he was more amused by the other’s irreverence. “This is not my army,” he answered calmly. “Only a contingent. Our army is two thousand strong, and we are preparing to defend the west against the invading god of Karaka.”

This news floored Denin. He sat leaning to one side with one hand splayed across the ground for support, and the other raised midway in the air, flaunting a wine flask. His eyes were riveted on Trinian.

“So many? In Drian?”

Trinian nodded. “We used to be more, before the enemy came.”

“But, I thought Kara was the largest city in the world –

I can't even imagine so many. Surely, with that number, you can hold a grand defense."

"On the contrary, we do not stand a chance. You cannot even imagine the numbers the enemy has at his disposal."

In his travels, Trinian had met many people with different ideas of the situation in the east. Some had heard of the devastation, whether in South Drian, Mestraff, Kelta, or in the capitol itself, but none had heard the correct story, and the differing versions would have been amusing, if they were not so dangerously inaccurate. Some thought Drian and South Drian had gone to war against each other because South Drian did not like to take orders from the out-dated capitol. Some believed the gods had descended to earth to take up residence in Drian, eradicating all the human population therein. The most outlandish was that Rordan had risen from his banks, drowned all three countries, and repopulated them with his own mer-children. When the town under this particular delusion met Trinian, it took all of three days for him to convince them he was a mere mortal like themselves, and not there to test their devotion to the gods. At which realization, they drove him out from their city and barred the gates against him, declaring that they would not welcome anyone who was not sent by the gods.

On account of these wild and abounding rumors, Trinian had chosen to speak the truth as it was wherever he went and await the reaction to it before speaking his request. Depending on the response, he knew how to proceed.

Now Denin wrinkled his forehead and studied the king as a hound inspects a new but suspicious toy: sniffing it out to see if it was really the wonder it professed to

be, or if it was a trap, waiting to catch him unawares. Mostly, the young man was puzzled with the uncertainty of youth. If he had had more years, he might have been more straightforward; but as it was, he yearned to appear capable, and so pretended to understand more than he did.

“The enemy plans to attack you?” he flung out the inquiry in hopes that it would give him direction in the discourse.

“Yes.”

“He’s from Karaka?”

“Yes.”

This did not help much.

“He’s been gathering forces for some time?”

“Hundreds of years, as far as I and my wizard can tell.”

Denin blinked and his fingers twitched as he played with the hem of his shirt. He did not know what to say. “So you’re... trying to catch up then.” It was the question he had planned to ask, but as he said it, he realized just how idiotic it was, given the ‘hundreds of years’ Drian would need to catch up.

Trinian frowned and Gorj, trying not to smile, coughed into his heavy fist and looked out into the forest.

“No,” said Trinian, “we are only trying to contain the damage. It is gods against men, and we may not have much chance of success, but if we do not fight, we will surely die.” No matter how much diplomacy he practiced, Trinian would never be a diplomat, and the boy’s bumbling questions irritated him.

At last, Denin awoke from his casual stance and sat straight, the kingly bearing Trinian had noted before shining in all its power. With a leveling of his shoulders he



put aside his embarrassment. "You had better start from the beginning. Who is this enemy, and what is the situation in the east?"

\* \* \*

Denin sighed when the tale was done, but the melancholy lasted only a moment.

He was youth and he was full of fight.

Leaping to his feet, he paced the forest floor, his chin clenched in his hand, his head thrust forward, his eyes shifting without seeing. It was late now, and his and Trinian's men had long since retired. Only they five were still awake in the forest.

"Of course we must help you to defend the east," he said. "Once they break through Drian they will only travel further until the entire world is at their command. Did you say there are those who refused to join you? The ignorance! The arrogance! They will suffer for their stupidity... they will face their reckoning." He stopped still beside a large tree. His profile was toward them and caught the flicker of the candle, his image seeming to grow gaunt and ancient in the shadows, and Trinian suddenly hoped the boy would live long enough to reach such an age.

"You can promise the aid of all of Kara?"

Denin whirled to look at him and the recesses of his eyes were hollow darkness, where the candlelight did not penetrate. "I cannot."

He came closer. "I only wish I could. I would give my life's blood for my people, and every man here would do

the same for his family and friends. We are a responsible people, a good people, not afraid of a fight. If I could rally them, they would be by your side in a moment. Never doubt it! But I cannot.

“My uncle, you see, is in power now. He has driven me from my people and led them astray. They know no better than to believe him about the lies he spreads.”

Denin told his tale: he was the rightful heir after the death of his grandfather, but his uncle, Xedril, had taken advantage of his nephew’s youth to secure the position for himself. Denin, when he became aware of his uncle’s intentions, tried to protect himself from the coup, but it was too late. His uncle had successfully gained the allegiance of the most powerful lords, and Denin found support only from those who had no power to help him. The young prince was at first treated superficially, as a respected member of the court, which pacified his few supporters; but inevitably, as the youth continually attempted to regain his proper place, his uncle circulated scandalous rumors about him, and those who did not believe them could not refute them. Finally, Xedril – with almost the full backing of the court – banished Denin from the country.

“Yet you live here, just outside the borders,” said Trinian.

“Of course I do. These are my people – my land. I do not abandon them at the first sign of danger.”

“Of course not. Your men love you, that is plain. But thus far you have proven yourself incapable of gaining or maintaining favor with the lords of your country.”

Denin spoke quickly to vindicate himself. “That is true. But I was young and inexperienced. I was pitted against

men with no morals, willing to stoop to any level. If faced with such a foe again, I would know what to expect, and could hold my own.”

Trinian looked at the impassioned youth with keen, bright eyes. “You have impressed me, king of Kara.”

Denin grinned. “Likewise, emperor of Minecerva.”

“Do you expect me to overthrow your uncle and crown you king?”

Denin flushed at the abrupt question. “And why else have you come here but to gain the allegiance of this kingdom? I assure you that my uncle will no more help you than he would surrender his power; yet, if you were to re-establish the rightful heir to the governing seat, you would secure gratitude and allegiance from me, and from my people.”

Trinian rose to his feet so that he stood level with Denin, gazing at him across the fire. Gorj and Krong sat as silent pillars of support. Across the empty lands that shut them away from their people, before the future that threatened to rip away their citizens forever, there was a common bond between these rulers. Two lonely, weighted men stood and looked at each other over a dim light, which hardly pushed away the shadows crowding in the darkness.

After a long moment, Trinian stepped over the flames and put his hand on Denin’s thin, sloping shoulder. “You are a man I want for me, in my struggle against the gods. I will re-seat you as king of Kara.”

Denin’s eyes shown bright. “Thank you, sire. You will not have cause to regret it.”

Trinian nodded. “I know.”

They all turned in for the night, lying down right where they were, each wrapped in his cloak, but Trinian suddenly

remembered his mission to Justice, and swore under his breath.

“Sire?” asked Gorj, who had been very attentive to his king since the loss of Phestite.

“I had forgotten my vow to visit Justice immediately, and brook no delay.”

“This is hardly a delay, sire. Is this not what we came for, to gather soldiers for Drian? No prophesy will change the necessity for that.”

“Yes, yes, but time is running short. Any day now we may receive a message that Drian is under siege, and then we shall have to hasten back with all speed. And shall I not see Justice? I cannot risk that. For even if we do save Drian once again, we have still the god of Karaka to contend with, and I do not know how to defeat him. I must learn how to conquer him.”

“I see sire. But this retaking of Kara is a small thing - I anticipate no problem in overcoming Denin’s uncle; indeed, he sounds like a vain coward, more interested in his position than in building power. They will have a small, surprised force of guards, and we shall easily overcome. I shall lead the assault, and you may then travel to visit Justice.”

“I had not realized,” whispered Trinian, in great surprise, and wishing for light by which to see his captain’s face, “what a companion I carried with me. I have encountered so much resistance from every quarter, that I forgot to look for faithfulness beside me. Yes indeed, let it be as you say, and I will meet you in Kara when my mission is complete.”

There was a balm upon his heart as the king laid himself

down to rest that night. He had been looking for assistance so long at the hands of older men. And yet, from Astren and Phestite, two such wholly different leaders, he had found some same semblance of reserve and formality which rankled his spirit, and seemed to stifle the good works which he longed to accomplish.

But now, all of a sudden, he had found rest in the heart of a man who was his equal in age and intelligence. This man Gorj - Garrity's head man - had understood his passion and dilemma, and thought it not beneath or above him to suggest an alternative. For the first time in many months, the king of Drian did not feel himself so utterly alone.

## In the House of Justice

**A**s the morning dawned the next day, Trinian left his retinue with Denin and, followed without question by faithful Kett, ascended to the tip of the blue mountains toward the home of Justice.

Single-minded as were his steps, the sudden sight of the city caught him off-guard, and he stopped still at a rise of the mountains and gasped at the splendor of it. Red-roofed buildings, yellow spires, and blue walls were all glistening like jewels; pedestrians were dressed in multi-colored costumes of diamond patterns; spices and fruits from the market filled the air with tangy sweetness; monkeys, doves, and cats clung to people's shoulders and added to the general outcry of good-will, haggling, and jostling that filled the space. It may have had less people than Drian, but it was a world he could never have imagined, with more people crammed into one space than he would have thought possible. Kett, too, gaped and wondered. But after a long moment, Trinian shook his head and turned his mind once again to ascending the peak of Kara.

The abode of Justice was a large manor, situated on a cliff above the city, with sprawling lawns, winding hedge mazes, and glorious fountains that glistened like diamonds in the light of the sun. A long, twisting path of red gravel led to her large, blue front door, and she was in the herb garden next to the front stoop, wearing a glorious gown of pale pink gauze and a wide-brimmed straw hat with trailing pink ribbons. She spoke to them from where she stooped, weeding and planting busily, without one smudge even threatening to smear her gown.

“Well, she said you’d be here, and I was expecting it, of course, though you certainly took your time about it. But I am glad you will help Denin – he’s a good boy, much better than his crazy uncle.

“I couldn’t do anything about it, of course,” she continued as she stood up, the practical lines of her austere face belying the frivolity of her gown and ribbons. And yet, somehow, everything about her looked perfectly right. “My father is so very strict about freewill and all, and that sort of rubbed into my sister and I. We only help them when they ask, and even then, it’s just sort of graces; we don’t lead coups, or such like nonsense. A person is a person, regardless of who rules them, and they can choose to be good or evil as they like. *I won’t interfere.*”

She stepped into the red gravel path with bare feet, and did not seem to notice the sharp stones she walked over. She gestured for them to follow her inside. “I suppose you want to know about the dangerous prophecy for the end of time? Well, yes, they always do, though it surprises me how few ask for knowledge of their own future. It’s usually only the desperate ones, you know, and they’re

usually messing things up on their own, already. They don't need my help or knowledge of the future to do that.

"Course, that's not you. Mostly, I'd say you've made all the right decisions so far, though mostly for the wrong reasons. Then again, I'm not all-knowing – not even my father is – so who am I to say? I can only tell you what I know, but you're not going to like it."

She was leading them through the great hall of a foyer, past columns and well-lit sitting rooms and wide hallways, all the way to the back of the manor, where her kitchen was laid out in full glory.

"I have another herb garden closer to the kitchen for easy access," she explained as she laid the herbs, muddy roots and all, on the marble counter tops. "But I like to keep one on every side of the house. They smell so nice.

"Well," she sighed resignedly as she removed her hat, and as she turned to them, they blinked, because she had changed her entire gown by taking off her hat. Now she wore a green cotton dress that fell full to the floor, and nestled snugly along her arms, and her black hair was piled in numerous braids atop her head. "I suppose it's no use trying to talk you out of it – I'm sure my sister tried. And once they know half the truth, they have to know all of it. So ask your question, young king, and I'll give you the answer I can."

Trinian spoke right away, as if her imperious command pulled it out of him. "Can I kill Power?"

As in the house of Mercy, Kett fell to his knees, and Trinian stood his ground, as she, in a brilliance of divinity, answered him:



*“There’s only one to conquer him you fear,  
And only one to hold his might at bay.  
There’s only one to fall so he’ll be killed  
One you love, in land of cruel day.  
When one is thrice pierced of purest sight  
Such sacrifice will lead to your god-might.”*

She faded to a blue cotton dress, with her hair in twisting black tresses down her back, and a tangle of braids on top, and smiled good-naturedly. “I’ve some things for you to take back to Kara. I’ll lend you my wagon to bring them down. Don’t worry. They are for that lad Denin, and his uncle won’t get them. If you want my advice, go straight to the city and wait for your friends there.”

Trinian and Kett departed without another word, each pulling one side of the food-laden wagon, and as he walked, Trinian convinced himself of the virtue of the message. That it meant, undoubtedly, that he could defeat Power.

It seemed someone would die before he could kill Power, but he did not trouble himself with the question of who. It would have to be someone like Adlena – someone who could see with unique sight, but he did not consider that it might be her. She was fully mortal now, and no longer used her spirit nature, so the prophecy was about someone else.

The important part was that he would and could kill Power, and he knew he had to travel to Karaka to do it: “in land of cruel day”. That could only be Karaka. As he wended his way to the city Kara, he was more light of heart than he had been in weeks.

Denin's uncle was as unlike his city as rock is from a rainbow. The culture of the court was stiff, formal, and gray, as if the elite overcompensated for their power with boring precision and uplifted noses. They clearly wished to ostracize themselves from the common, boisterous crowd of the populace, with its colorful costumes and diamond-patterned outfits, by strutting about in gray silk and stiff corsets, which clashed horribly with the warm colors of the walls and paintings around them. King Xedril was a hard-faced, cold man, dressed in stiff black leather, so ramrod in his chair that if he moved, he looked like he might break in half.

"To what do I owe this unlooked for pleasure from a man who carries a cart of vegetables into my city? My guards from the gate tell me you call yourself a king." Xedril reached for a goblet of wine from one of his attendants while he spoke, looking Trinian's physique up and down, but without making eye contact. "Drian does not have a king and never will."

"From what I hear," said Trinian, "you are no born king yourself."

The man's cold, shaved eyebrows stiffened, as if glued into non-expression, and for a brief moment, he met Trinian's gaze. But then he glanced at the far, round window in the wall at the other end of the chamber, and kept his gaze there while he spoke. "It is not good practice to insult a king in whose territory you are visiting."

"Precisely. And it has come to my attention that not only have you insulted your overlord and Emperor, but you

have dethroned his rightful representative in this country.”

“How dare you? You dare to come here, from Justice knows what decrepit hamlet, to tell me how to run my world? I had every right to take over from a naïve child. I was born to this throne – if my brother had had no heir. I deserve it, and I care for it, and after five hundred years, I think we have a right to run affairs without consulting the monarch of Drian! Where were you when the plague of ’54 wiped out half our people? Where were you when Destruction wreaked his havoc and the mountain shook against the bones of our city? Not born yet, that’s where!”

His fevered speech, begun in anger, had mounted in pitch with each sentence, and now he screamed at Trinian, his eyebrows still stiff and unmoving. “The son of a miner, no doubt, you are! Dredged from beneath the earth to pretend to be a king! Guards! Guards, throw these men back to the bowels from whence they came! Take them away!” He was still screaming as the guards escorted them from the throne room and threw them into the dungeons.

## The Emperor

**T**he dungeons were cold and damp and made for an unpleasant sleep. But sleep the two Drinians did, and Trinian's dreams were more troublesome than the rats that pawed at his feet.

First, he dreamt of a wide field, glowing yellow in the mid-day sun, splattered with blue wild flowers that peeked their heads up in the midst of a full wheat crop. His father stood beside him, delivering a lecture he used to give often about the importance of land, of family history, of inheritance. He had always tried to inseminate these thoughts into his eldest son – to arouse a desire in him to lead after he was gone.

The landscape then melted away, and he found that, all along, they had been standing in a mine, digging coal and silver for the elite of Drian. They were servants to the crown – to the new king who had just arisen after five hundred years. Trinian was not a farmer, or a soldier, or a king – it had all been only a dream.

“Who are you to rule a kingdom?” his father asked him.

“Who are you to abandon your mother? Did you think you had won a victory by outliving me? That I would let you abandon your family? You left her alone – she died while you were on tour. You were never a soldier – you have always have been a miner.” He lifted a handful of dirt and shoved it in his son’s face. “This is what we are. It’s what we came from. And it’s what we will ever become!”

Adlena approached Trinian in the mine, a halo of light around her – the misery of the tunnel standing apart from her as darkness recedes from a beam of sunshine. She came right up to him and he thought, “Now my father will know. Now he will see that I really am a king.” But when she lifted her finger, she pointed past him, to someone else in the darkness. Someone else was king, and she had chosen them to leave the cave.

She turned away and the man she had pointed to started screaming, “She has purest sight! She has given me my birthright! She has purest sight!”

“No!” screamed Trinian. “Not anymore! She doesn’t see me! I’m just a miner, and she does not love me!”

She walked away and he wept as she left with the other man.

He must remain, forever digging deeper into the earth. He looked at Nian, still holding the clump of dirt, and then his father evaporated into the air – he was dust. “It’s what we will ever become,” his voice floated back to his son.

Then a third dream surfaced from his unconscious. Afraid to become dust, he grabbed hold of the ground, and found himself on a hilltop, overlooking Drian. The red city beckoned to him. It was vulnerable, and he had left it alone. All at once, as he fell to his knees in shame;

he wanted to return to the mine, to disappear into dust. Anything was better than this betrayal he had wrought on his people.

Adlena was standing on one of the walls and he saw her pierced suddenly by an invisible assailant and fall off the edge, disappearing among the buildings below.

Then, though the city was still Drian, it transformed. It was white, as if purified. A man stared at him from across the expanse, holding his gaze with an intensity that wounded him. It was not accusation. It was not fear. But Trinian felt accused, and he was afraid. The man's skin was golden, so golden it blinded, and then it was red, but Trinian saw it was only on account of the blood that flowed generously from many wounds.

His largest wound was a hole in his side, and from the hole poured blood, mixed with water, washing down upon Drian like a mighty hurricane wave. It was turning the city from red to white. The golden man bent down and lifted up Adlena and she walked into the wound in his side and vanished.

The city did not need Trinian any longer. It had a new king, a greater one, and the son of Nian was so insignificant and so afraid that he longed to disappear. He had no right to dispute a claim over his beloved city, for the new king had bought it with his own blood.

Then the sea of blood rose up in a mighty wave and hit Trinian so torrentially in the face that he awoke, gasping, drenched in his sweat.

"Sire?" Kett was awake in an instant.

"It's nothing. Dreams," the king gasped.

"Of course, your majesty."

“Kett?”

“Yes, sire?”

“She said ‘she of purest sight.’ Who did she mean?”

“I don’t know, sire. It sounds like a goddess to me.”

“She said it was one I loved. Who did she mean?”

Kett’s voice was thick with sadness. “I don’t know, sire.”

“She said it required sacrifice. I can sacrifice. She must have been speaking of my death. It is my death that will wash Drian clean.”

Kett was silent a long moment. “I hope not, sire,” he said at last.

“No one will die, Kett. I will kill the god! I’ll kill him before he kills anyone else. I will sacrifice *everything* to kill Power.”

“I know,” quivered Kett’s voice in the darkness, his heart full of aching sadness and fear for his beloved king.

But all at once, Trinian had no fear when he thought of the final battle. If only he could get his hands around the god’s neck. If only he could squeeze the life from him – man to man, in the final confrontation – then he could save his people and bring peace to the world. Even this journey now was only a side-track in his ultimate, final calling. In that moment, he would triumph.

He must. It was his destiny.

It is hard to say what sort of king Trinian would have been had he been born to it. Would he have been content, like Astren, to allow other men to fight in his name, to send others to search out and build alliances with countries, to wait for the enemy to attack his kingdom? Would he have kept his family with him instead of sending them away for other kings to protect?

Such questions are fruitless. Had he grown up a prince, he would have been a different man, and so a different king. Every choice of Trinian's life had formed him into the man he was now: his upbringing in a tight-knit family, with parents who fostered a belief in hard work and love; his time in the military, when he strove by every action to prove himself and advance in the ranks; and his firm faith in the fact that he was set apart from all others by a divine appointment. Had he been a mere king, in another of a long line of kings, perhaps this belief would not have been so firm. Or perhaps it would have been drilled into him as a title only, a figurehead, which was how Astren viewed his own position. For to Astren, it was not about his own individual actions but about his position: that above all, the old steward believed, was what gave the people hope. Yet Trinian did not see it so. For him, it was entirely about his personal calling. He was no figurehead. He was a person with a destiny.

To Trinian, young, hot-blooded, fiercely loyal, and trying to prove himself, his person was paramount. He had to show the people, through deed and love, that he was their own, their king, their protector. And he was willing to sacrifice all of himself to prove it.

This journey to gather reinforcements was to make sure his people would be safe when he finally left them: when he left to face down the god of Karaka. He would win – perhaps he would die, but he would win – and Drian would be safe at last.

“Everything,” Trinian said again, and Kett only lay down, tears flowing unseen.

Trinian did not sleep again, but sat upright in a corner



of the cell until he heard the shouts and cries without – the war-cries for which he had been waiting. Presently, a handful of mixed company, his soldiers and Denin's, descended to the dungeon and freed Trinian and his servant.

"The throne room is ours," Gorj declared.

\* \* \*

Before a court of outlaws, and a crowd of Karian citizens, Trinian performed the coronation ceremony as he imagined the ceremonies of centuries ago.

But first, he surprised all by calling upon Gorj to kneel before him. With the sacred, ancient words, he elevated his captain to the position of general. All the crowd cheered, for the citizens knew it was to this soldier that they owed the return of their king.

Then Trinian turned to Denin and crowned him as steward of the emperor and king of Kara.

"Do you swear to protect the citizens in your power?"

"I swear."

"Do you swear to guard the weak against the strong, to value peace over war, to provide necessities to those who have none?"

"I swear."

"Do you swear to maintain peaceful associations with the other countries of Minecerva, and to foster well the relationship between your country and the land of Drian?"

"I swear."

Trinian was about to strike Denin's shoulder with the flat of his blade and complete the ceremony, when he paused.

Something tugged at the back of his mind: Rordan and Mercy and Justice swirled together there, and Power too. He could not ignore them, and he asked one more question.

“Do you swear to follow the statutes of the divine so long as they are just, right, and merciful?”

Denin glanced sharply at him from where he knelt on his knees. He had not expected this question, and it was clear he did not want to swear to something he did not understand. But after a momentary hush, he answer firmly, “I swear.”

“Then, with the authority given me from on high, I crown you King Denin of Kara. May your reign be long and prosperous. Long live the king!”

The cheers resounded from wall to wall, the clamor rising to the heavens.

# XIII

## HOPE

*“That there is some good in this world, Mr. Frodo,  
and it’s worth fighting for.”*

*- J.R.R. Tolkien, The Two Towers*



## Habas Holds the Fort

**H**abas watched the princesses, prince, queen, and warrior depart into the shadow of the mountain. He watched until he could not even pretend to see the black speck of their caravan, and then he turned back to his abode. Surely, now... surely, he had treated them with all the grace and charity he ought. Surely, his trials were at an end, and he could pass on in peace. But he stopped still as a cold shudder ran through him. He suddenly felt evil very near. So near, it froze the blood in his veins. And it was coming ever nearer.

He ran to his hermitage and climbed to the top of the southern wall. He looked out toward Karaka in the south and his eyes widened with astonishment.

Four of the gods were descending toward his abode.

He stilled his trembling and stood tall to receive them.

“You do me a great honor,” he said with a bow, when they landed before him. They were so tall that they stood eye to eye with him. Twenty yards behind them there stood at attention an army of at least three hundred gorgans,

waiting for the gods to command them to attack.

One of the four was a goddess. She was seductively beautiful and he gasped at the pull she had even for an ancient denizen like himself. He knew all the gods by name, though he had never met them in person, and knew this must be Passion. He did not look at her long.

Another was wild-eyed, wild-haired, and fierce of bearing. His mighty fists shook with anticipation, and the air about him trembled with pieces of floating debris, as if nothing he destroyed could ever quite settle to the ground; and beside him jumped, like an impatient cricket, a young-eyed, grinning monster, who was more utterly handsome than the most beautiful mortal man. Destruction and Terror.

Finally, in the center of the group, there wavered a being vague of form. He seemed to be both spirit and corporeal, man and mist; he seemed less alive than any of the others, but more terrifying, more intelligent, and more powerful than all three put together.

This fantastic god puzzled Habas and he stared at him in horror. The only possible reason he should look like that, the only unthinkable reason, was that he attempted to claim an eternal stake in the physical, passing realm. Why would any high god wish to rule the earth, when he could reign over the heavens?

"I have come for the mortals." Though his form was vague and undefined, the timbre of his voice rattled Habas in his core. This was Power.

They wanted the mortals. His banishment was nearly ended, and now the gods came to demand a gift from him. If he refused to give them up, they could well extend

his sentence for another twelve hundred years; but if he betrayed the Nian family, then surely that went against Fate's injunction. But Fate was not here now.

He opened his mouth – and caught himself. He had not spent all these years in solitude so he could go from arrogance to blindness. These gods were evil, and he had no right, they had no right – he would not betray his guests.

“They are gone – beyond your reach. You will not find them.”

Terror screeched and Habas clutched his pounding chest in fright. Power leaned down to his ear.

“You cannot stop us,” he whispered, and Habas breathed quickly.

“If it's the last thing I do, I will surely stop you,” the old man said, and then he drew upon his ancient birthright, and summoned the full strength of a wizard.

Ancient power surged within him and he clenched his fists, willing it to build, to fill him, to flow over. From within, a bright light glowed. Without, the wind rose and swirled around him. In moments, a mighty sandstorm whistled about his ears, deafening all else.

Power roared with rage and threw himself upon the wizard. There was an instant of eerie silence, and then a vociferous explosion blasted the desert. Sand, fire, wind, and stone blended together in a whirling cloud, blowing apart and rocking the three gods back so that they had to strain in the wind, and the army behind them was blown over.

When the dust cleared, there was nothing left of the old hermitage, the hermit, or the oasis. Power was on his knees in the midst of the empty desert, gasping for breath and

control. The army, in a mass of angry confusion, struggled back to its feet.

After that, though they searched long and hard for the travelers, driven on by Power's rage and tantrums, they did not find them. The gods flew across the entirety of the desert and screeched with anger, blasting the ground into clouds of flying sand, but to no avail. In his last moments, the wizard had cast an enchantment of concealment over them, and the gods could not break it.

Power's emotions were overflowing, but he stationed groups of gorgans to remain in parts of the desert, with Destruction overseeing the siege; then, bitter and raving, he returned to his palace, crying out, "Where is Farsooth? Where is my army that will claim Drian?"

\* \* \*

Resolve was waiting for the gods when they returned to Karaka, and she beckoned Passion to her.

"I take it from the desperation in our brother's face that you were unsuccessful?"

"They disappeared," her sultry sister confirmed. "There was a wizard left over from the fourth hour who hid them from our sight."

Resolve shook her head and her eyes flashed. "A minor setback, but Power acts as though he will explode at any moment. He has forgotten the true might of mortals, thinking they will be easily crushed, so that when they fight back, he loses all hope! And we are running out of time: the clock will strike twelve in a matter of mere seconds."



“He behaves more and more like a mortal every moment: he is ruled by fear, he lashes out against the smallest triviality... Sister, I am finding myself more and more called upon to control him. I am Passion! I do not wish to control, but to incite!”

Resolve loved control: she lived for it, and now she smiled. “Leave him to me. He will answer to us, or he will find that our lust to control Minecerva may just outweigh his.”

## Cracks in the Heart

**T**hough they had dreaded the return to the heat and desolation of the desert, it was not of long duration, for suddenly, all about them, the desert erupted into blasts, sending sprays of sand and rock into the air, and they fled quickly until they were soon under the protecting shadow of the Yellow Mountain, and they watched the phenomenon in safety until the desert calmed, and they turned to the mountain.

Habas had equipped them with food, clothing, fresh blankets, and most importantly, water; but it was not the things he gave them so much as the fact that they had been given something, which raised their spirits and gave the demi-god and royal women courage to complete the final leg; and now, though they stood gazing to the stark stretches of the cloud-covered peak, their spirits rose.

“It’s so tall!” cried Jacian in excitement.

Garrity pointed above and to the left. “There is a steep step up here, and then it looks like a winding path over there. The climbing may be steep at times, but I think we

will not have to scale any cliffs.”

He jumped up to the rock and reached down to help Cila up.

Adlena put a hand over her stomach, and Viol reached out and took her sister-in-law’s hand in her own.

“Come on,” the girl smiled. “I’ll help you.”

Adlena took her hand as Jacian cried out ‘me too!’, but she looked up at Garrity with a knowing trust, as if to say, ‘If they cannot help, I know it would be nothing for you to carry me to the peak.’

Discomfited, Garrity could not hold her gaze, and Lavendier noted the odd interaction. Her heart still stinging from their fight, she waited till the others had gone on, then said, “She *does* know about you,” as he reached down a hand to help her up.

He grunted as he pulled her to the ledge. “Somehow.”

Garrity moved to go on, but she put herself in his path and did not move. He clearly did not want to talk to her, but she hung her head and spoke anyway, “I’m sorry for what I said to you.”

“We should join the others.”

“Garrity, please,” she looked up at him but he was looking away into the distance. “I know not how she knows. I promise you I never said a word to her. I did not break our promise.”

At last, he met her gaze. “I know,” he said heavily. “It was wrong for me to cast that upon you.”

“Can you forgive me for using your past against you?”

“I would like to say yes... I know not. I have never shared my story with anyone before, and to have it cast upon me... I do not wish to talk about it.”

Roughly, his coat brushing against her shoulder, he pushed past her and followed the others. Tears were in her eyes as she turned to follow.

\* \* \*

It was a challenge to climb the ascent, stumbling over rocks and ledges, and hauling each other up to safe routes, doubling back when they hit an impassable thicket or ditch. Three days of increasing lightheadedness, treacherous terrain, and aching legs, and sleeping on narrow ledges, brought about short tempers, which only escalated until finally Garrity lost his patience with Lavendier when she dropped her pack at a particularly difficult moment, sending it tumbling off a ledge.

“That was the last of the bread from Habas, and now you’ll have to lie on the cold ground, without a blanket!” he snapped at her, and everyone stared in astonishment, for they had never seen Garrity lose his temper.

Lavendier, her heart already over-heavy, stumbled back, crumbling behind a stone to dissolve into tears, and Garrity threw up his hands in frustration.

“Garrity!” cried Viol, aghast.

Adlena crossed her arms, and gazed at him sternly. “I have seen you build anger towards Lavendier in your heart the past few days,” she said bluntly. “Why?”

He looked at her in surprise, but then decided he was finished being surprised by her looks and words, and answered, “She betrayed my trust.”

“She broke a promise?”

“No. She took something that I told her and used it

against me, and then expected me to forgive her for it.”

“Well, why will you not?” demanded Viol, but Adlena held up her hand.

“You have forgiven Lavendier for many things,” the queen said calmly. “Why is this different?”

He was floored, and for a moment only stood confounded. Cila took advantage of the pause to lead Jacian a little further up the mountain, her sore heart not able to bear any conflict among her loved ones.

“I know not,” was his sullen response.

“He is angry because Laven never sinned against *him*. He had never let her into his confidence before, but now that he has, he expects her to be perfect, and he’s mad because she fails,” broke out Viol, in one long breath.

“Your heart has been more pure than Lavendier’s for a long time,” Adlena said gently. “But now the tables have turned: Lavendier is finally a shining white star, and it is you who is clouding your heart with anger and resentment.”

“How is it,” he cried out in frustration, “that you know so much about my heart?”

It was not a rhetorical question: he had finally unleashed the root of his anger. He was a profoundly private man, and resented the knowledge, intimacy, and presumption of their feminine understanding. “Stop telling me about myself! How do you know?”

“It’s obvious,” said Viol simply. “I know you too well not to know when you are being an idiot.”

He gazed hard at Adlena, demanding to know he knew not what. At last, she smiled so bright that her eyes glistened, and then she laughed. “I am a dryad, a spirit

of the wood, Garrity, and I can see your heart as clearly as I see your face. I hid from my ability before, but I was repressing who I am, and now I tell you, because I can at last really see you for the first time, that you must forgive us all for loving you, before you poison yourself.”

“Forgive you for... No, I am angry because she betrayed my confidence.”

“No,” Adlena smiled, her heart released from her struggle to hide her inner sight. “That is not true. You are angry because you let her deep enough inside to hurt you, and now you are trying to banish her; but she will not be banished. You are a part of us all now, and we will not leave you in peace.”

Viol was smiling, her simple, loving nature brightening in the light of Adlena’s happiness. For happiness was spilling over from the queen like an overfull glass, spreading to gather the affections of all her family together into her own, accepting them as she accepted herself, and challenging Garrity to do the same. “We may be set apart from them,” she finished softly, “but for that reason, we need them more than ever.”

The thick wall, hedging Garrity’s heart about on all sides, split from top to bottom and he, with terrified resignation, gazed at Adlena in awe. He nodded, accepting Viol’s embrace as she ran to him.

Then he stepped away and sought out Lavendier. Her heart fluttering with conflicting emotions, she received him as cordially as she could manage, and he stumbled forth an apology. With fresh tears, she welcomed the reconciliation, wishing he would say more but, as usual, he kept silence. However, as a proof of his effort to break

down the walls that enclosed him, Garrity explained to her how Adlena knew his secret, and she accepted this small overture with hope for the future.

At last, they were a united band; not only in fear and hounded pursuit, but in their love, openness, and belonging to each other.

## The Yellow Mountain

“I think endurance,” reflected Viol to Lavendier as they struggled upward at a particularly steep moment in the mountain, “is the true test of strength of character. Trials are all well and good, and terribly difficult in their own right,” she grunted as she pulled herself up to the next cliff, “but to keep going when you are emotionally and physically spent, do you not think that is worse?”

Lavendier extended a hand to her little sister and pulled her up so that they sat together on the cliff face. Laven giggled, then chuckled, then laughed so hard that she gasped for breath in the high altitude.

“What? What?” demanded Viol, smiling at her sister’s spirit and fishing out the water canteen.

Lavendier drank and grew calmer. “I think I’m a bit giddy,” she said, “but really, I think endurance is a very amusing thing.”

The rest of the caravan was ahead of them and had disappeared into a thick blanket of fog that obscured the further heights. Right at this ledge was the last place where



they could see across the desert to the black pit of Karaka, and in the very far distance, the black and green cloud of trees that was the last hint of Mestraff. In all the vast expanse of the world, they were very alone.

“Endurance means doing the hard things, because they are the things that are most worth doing, so I think it’s the most worthwhile and amusing of all virtues.”

Viol took her sister’s hand and they sat for several minutes without words, resting in each other and the last view of the world before they disappeared into the clouds. Their calm was disrupted at last by Garrity’s voice bellowing down to them, calling their names.

Viol yelled back that they were coming, and reluctantly, they pushed themselves into the thick, foggy cover. Hand-hold by foothold, they pushed their way up, up, into the white emptiness, its chill engulfing them in its cold folds. After straining and pushing and climbing, they came at last to Garrity, who had backtracked to find them, and stood dancing on his toes on a large platform.

His eyes shone and he wore a smile that took them both by surprise, it was so radiant and uncharacteristic: his mouth open and his whole face crinkling with delight. He took Lavendier’s hand and pulled her up so fast that he nearly pulled her arm from its socket, but he did not seem to notice.

“Come with me,” he urged them, “just over that ridge. Come on!” He preceded them up the final climb, leaping like a boy, and bending down to give them a hand up.

He lifted Viol over the ledge and she disappeared from sight, then Garrity bent down to pull Lavendier after. She pulled back.

“Not so hard this time,” she told him with as much breath as she could spare, “I want to be in one piece for the journey down.” But as she looked up at him, she saw that his face shone with a hope she had never seen before. Cleared were the deep grooves of his forehead, smooth the careworn bags beneath his eyes. So bright were his eyes, so easy his jaw, that he seemed to shine with an inner light. He bore the face of youth, a face he had never worn in all his life, and he radiated a spirit she had long forgotten: of carelessness, joy, and zeal for life.

“You won’t have to worry about that,” he told her, and with his superhuman strength, he lifted her up, as if she were no more than a bag of cotton, and set her on the very peak of the mountain.

\* \* \*

Beneath her, the ground sloped away at a gentle fall, thickly carpeted, as if for an emperor, with daisies and grass. It sloped in swells and steps all the way down until it met the floor of a giant canyon, and there it widened into a field, like a waterfall meeting a lake, and the soft grass engulfed the entire bottom.

On the other side of the canyon, the ground swelled back up to meet the sky and, in ecstasy, embrace her. On all four sides the mountains rose to their peaks purple, yellow, and white, sheltering a natural basin of a private paradise.

Great weathered oaks and graceful stone pillars dotted the bowl of the basin, decorating the ground that served as a collar for the pristine pool that glistened gently in the center. From the mountains of the other side, a rivulet of

a wild waterfall leapt over the stones of its bed and then fell fifty feet into the lake, rippling the water and keeping it alive.

Here in paradise, life was a celebration that nature celebrated wholeheartedly.

The trees had their arms raised to the heavens and the flowers leapt for joy out of their beds. The exultation was contagious, and spread wonder over the small band who stood to see.

The flashing of the falls, blinding in the way that they caught the sun, filled the onlookers with passion. The majestic sweeps of the mountains gave Lavendier goosebumps. The great round lake in the center calmed Adlena's soul, and a mighty upheaval of giant winged birds, flying to the sky, filled Viol's heart as they soared. The weeping willows, like a protective, nurturing wall, bordered the edge of the lake all around, enclosing Cila's pain with a tender promise of peace. The brilliant sun, beating its rays in time with the sparkling waters and the stirring trees, quickened Garrity's sight and he breathed a breath of relief, releasing his cares. The swell of the ground cradled Jacian and he giggled and laughed at its freedom.

The roaring of the falls, the flapping of the wings, the trilling of the birds, and the beating of their hearts joined together in an irresistible melody, and suddenly, Viol's voice broke out in song. Her tune rose and soared high above the mountains, and then, with a dive, fell to meet them and roll along their peaks; the sound dipped and flew in and out of the soaring birds. It fell lower and dived deep to the base of the pool, before rising again and holding tenor on the surface. Then the ethereal, untouchable

quality of the tone lowered, as it celebrated with the glory of the trees and plants below. It vibrated and pulsed with warmth and life, living and growing and changing.

Lavendier laughed and, as all the weariness, sadness, and exhaustion from her travels melted away, she threw herself into the wind to dance. She moved her arms in lithe, airy movements that rippled through her gown and rustled with the breeze. She loosed her woolen cape and it flew away like a heron after a long flight. Her skirt caught the air and twisted and billowed as she spun and twirled on the grassy slope. Her hair flowed and rippled behind her as she moved in perfect time to Viol's joyous song.

Garrity laughed and his laugh was strong, resounding, and deep. He ran forward and swept Lavendier into his arms. Together, they danced. Joyous and exhilarated, two became one in the poetry of nature.

And it was more beautiful than language.

\* \* \*

Garrity and the princesses made their nest close to the lake, where a rivulet branched out and pure water flowed.

One of the many stone structures, which in themselves were unlike any building they had ever seen before, offered cover like an open-walled house. There were many pillars, six or so, meeting together seamlessly at the top, and all sides were open to the wind and elements. A rivulet gurgled and sang beside their new home and bounced rainbows off the underside of the ceiling.

All was quiet and serene where the waterfall swept with a torrent of coolness across the smooth rocks of its descent,

THE YELLOW MOUNTAIN

the lake sparkled lazy in the sun, and the mountains  
glistened white at their frozen peaks.

It was, in every respect, paradise.

## Paradise

When Garrity awakened in the morning, the first morning in months wherein he awakened without a care, he took a long moment to admire the beauty of the stones, the land, and the water.

As he looked out upon the pristine view, he caught sight of the oldest princess as she knelt beside the river, washing their laundry. Her arms were bare, her brown hair was drinking in the sun and forming golden streaks in the curls, and her back curved gently beneath her worn, linen gown. Far removed, in this moment, from the glittering, ornamented, and veiled woman he had first known, kneeling before him now was a woman more mysterious and adorned, with callused hands and sun-tanned face.

“There was a time she would have scorned that work,” Viol’s voice came from behind him. “But how well she looks doing it.”

He turned around to where she was setting out blankets and beds, dishes and food: making a home.

“Every person looks well when they do their duties with grace,” he said.

“You, for instance,” she observed, looking him up and down. “By far the most handsome man I know, but is that simply because you are the most humble? You always look fine, drawing your bow or swinging your blade, carrying Jacquee or helping Adlee over a difficult path.”

He smiled at her. “Or maybe I am simply handsome.”  
“Maybe.”

She threw a basket at him and he dodged, laughing.

Viol fetched the basket, and trotted down to Lavendier where, as they wrung out the clothing, she told how Garrity was watching her.

“You looked beautiful, and he was noticing,” said Viol. To her surprise, Lavendier did not blush, simper, or glance coyly over her shoulder, but was thoughtful instead.

“I do not feel beautiful anymore. Nor ugly either. I feel like there is no time to think about it. I have been trying to think of other people, not myself, to make myself a better person. It is what *you* do.”

Viol did blush at that, it took her so by surprise. “Yes, I guess I do try to do that.”

“I have wasted so much of my life,” Lavendier cried, with such vehemence that Viol paused in her work and stared at her sister, “trying to live it in all the wrong ways! And what have I gained? Instead, I have lost so much of myself that I am only now beginning to meet *me*. And I have found that the only way to be the self I want to be is to serve others. I care not anymore which comes first – loving myself or loving others. They are all of a piece.”

Up to now, she had been staring out over the water

without seeing it, but now she turned to look at Viol. "I have spent all my life chasing approval, and I renounce it. I will only love, as much as I can. That has to be enough – isn't it?"

The young princess bent forward and took Lavendier's hands in her own, whispering with intense feeling, "I have always found it so! It really is. Don't be afraid to love, as much and as often as you can. Your strength will only grow and you will only be more fulfilled. Lose yourself, my darling, and find yourself." They embraced and held each other for all they were worth, and when at last they drew apart, they still held tightly to each other's hands.

"That was what Garrity was noticing," said Lavendier confidently. "He knows something of this desire in me. It was his influence that decided me on it to begin with."

"When he was looking at you, he said, 'Every person looks well when they do their duties with grace.'"

Lavendier smiled. "That is what I am trying to do." Then, thinking about him, she smiled despite herself. "Do you like him?" she asked.

"Of course. Very much. Do you not?"

Lavendier smiled. "He is very kind."

"Yes. He is good, handsome, strong, brave, and everything else a man ought to be."

Lavendier frowned. "And he has suffered so much."

"Has he?" Viol watched where he was building a scrap-wood pile, against one of the pillars. "Yes, I suppose he must have. Suffering is what makes great men."

Lavendier's eyes widened, "I would still be my other self if it were not for my suffering. How much I owe to this thing I hate!" She laughed, but it was also a sob. "How



could I be grateful for pain? It has torn me away from all comfort, all the things I desired, and yet... Oh, Viol, how different I am now, how different are all the things that I love and hold dear. I do not wish to be what I was before – I am... I am grateful for the pain!”

Pain and joy ran together within her, pushing against the walls of her heart, and she was too overcome to speak again. So she only wept in gratitude, felt, and squeezed the sympathetic hand she held in hers.

Three months passed quietly away. In the valley, Garrity and the girls were as calm as the world around them for here, it seemed, time stood still, as if the rest of the world had forgotten about them, as if nothing outside could reach them in their nest.



## XIV

### PEACE

*“Such certainties all mean... that everything comes to its appointed goal; that in spite of all appearances, underlying all things is - peace, salvation, gloria;... that “God holds in his hand the beginning, middle, and end of all that is.” Such nonrational, intuitive certainties... can be vouchsafed to our gaze even when it is turned toward the most insignificant-looking things, if only it is a gaze inspired by love. That, in the precise sense, is contemplation.”*

*- Josef Pieper*



## Party at Varlo

“**E**xcellent! Take them to the hall. Put a few by each seat in a glass, and stagger the large arrangements along the walls.” Adrea was coordinating a feast, and enjoying it immensely.

It was two weeks since the entire living population of South Drian had marched across the expanse of their country and buried their dead. At each town, after gathering and burying the already decomposing bodies, they cleansed themselves in a ceremony, and then the young men danced wet and naked before the fires, chanting dirges for the departed, singing loud and heartily to send the departed well on their way with Death. And at the final village, after they had looped from the easternmost point up north and back west toward home, just before they arrived, Death himself had come down to them. He floated above the roaring flames as the dancers whirled around him, and looked down upon the lady of Drian seated in the circle of women onlookers.

Adrea sat still and silent in awe, but felt none of the fear

or foreboding that had consumed her when Power came.

Death was nothing like pictures she had seen in books. He sat upon no throne of skulls, nor wielded any mace. His face had a light of its own – not pallid or white like a mortal's, but warmly red, almost hinting more at life than death. Looking upon her, he spread his arms wide.

“In all the years I have roamed and taken from Minecerva, no one has ever honored or mourned me as you have done in this pilgrimage. I cannot ignore your cries – they come to me, beyond this world; they pierce my soul, and remind me of what I have long ago forgotten. At the beginning of time, I had a pact with man: to lead him gently from this world, to teach him to face the afterlife with courage and strength of heart. I have broken it. How thoroughly I almost broke it, you will never know. But I make a pact with each man here today!” The dancers had stopped whirling round the circle and now stood in place to hear his words, a quiet hum of their throats the only sound in the darkness. “I swear that each of you will depart this world in peace. You will have the grace of a happy death. I swear it by the Golden King, whom I have betrayed.”

Afias was standing directly before the god, and the mighty being suddenly enshrouded the prince in smoke. The god and mortal disappeared from before all eyes, and in the midst of the cloud, the god said to Afias, “Do not betray the Golden King. Do not bow before Power.”

Then with a gust of great wind, with a tearing of thunder and lightning in the sky, and with an earth-shattering rumble of the earth beneath their feet, Death departed.

On their return to the capitol the hearts of all the South

Drinians were lighter than air, and there was an exhilarating release from the evil that had hung so long above their heads. Their good mood was only strengthened when, two days later, Captain Wilhem docked in the gulf of Haron, laden with three ship-loads of provisions that would see the entire country through the winter, for Afias's bet on Cronice had paid off.

"This spoon is so clear I can see the flecks of gold in my eyes," Adrea now told a young maid, who was scrubbing for all she was worth.

The girl smiled so wide it seemed her teeth would run away from her face. "Thank you, my lady."

Adrea glided from one work station to another, reveling in the fun and order that Afias had left entirely to her to plan. "I have no pleasure in planning a party," he told her, "but I assure you I'll enjoy it when I'm there."

Every lay of a fork, every turn of a spit, every dusting of a chair was an act ordered directly toward his enjoyment. Without quite realizing what she did, Adrea asked herself every time, 'Will Afias like this?' Arranged just for him were millions of details he would never notice. And when all was prepared, Adrea surveyed it and beamed with pleasure: it surpassed any party she had ever thrown for her father.

After dressing for the celebration, Adrea went straight to the grain stores, where she found her prince standing in the doorway of the largest silo, gazing at the store of food that would save the lives of all his citizens. She knew that he still doubted their good fortune and returned here again and again to take his fill of the sight.

"Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" Her voice

came from behind him and he turned to answer, but words died on his lips.

Adrea always wore dark colors, and black especially was her staple. It off-set her white skin and straight black hair, dressed her up without effort, and concealed any errors she might let slip in her posture. So it took his breath away to see her in cream.

She was delicate, airy, and pure – like a spirit. For a brief moment, he was even afraid of her. Her hair was piled atop her head in wisps and twists; cream gauze flowed free from her shoulders and drifted around her like a cloud; a crown of delicately-wrought gold flowers encircled her brow. She seemed like a stranger. But then she smiled at him, and she was his friend again.

He smiled too and offered her his arm, and together, they made their way to the hall. He searched back to remember what she had said. “Did you ask me a question?”

“I asked if you’d ever seen anything so beautiful?”

“Never.”

She blushed. Her eyes sparkled with excitement for the evening, and she said teasingly, “I meant the grain silo.”

They reached the double doors and just before they entered, he said, “I did not.”

\* \* \*

The party was a great success. Interspersed between five courses of meat, side dishes and desert, there was entertainment, dancing, and beautiful songs.

Afias had become a folk hero for the people of South Drian, and they had worked him into some of their songs.



Now they honored him loudly for his mighty feats. They sang of how he had fought the group of gorgans on his journey between the capitols of Drian and South Drian, of how his plans had saved them from starvation, and how he had led them all from town to town to put their dead to rest.

One man, generally acclaimed as a great musician, stood before the assembly and in a deep, rolling chant, commemorated Prince Afias:

*"I sing with joy of the marvelous feats  
Of the new-crowned Prince of Drian.  
When came the enemy,  
the gorgans from the west,  
And challenged the Drinians to battle,  
The brave men roared and rallied their swords,  
And screamed and swore and rattled.  
Before the fight there was brief quiet,  
As calm before a storm.  
Quiet such as when you walk  
beside a still, round lake,  
And all is hushed and silent;  
When erupts a flock of geese  
Winging, squawking from the rush—  
So bursts the clamor of war!  
Crying combats, valiant victories  
Belonged to the brother of Trinian,  
And he, above all else, won fame  
As he crossed the ground – a hurricane.  
He met the greatest of the gorgans,  
The leader of the sharp-toothed band.*

*Their clash was fierce and oversha'owed  
 By the gods that gazed above.  
 And Afias, with a mighty sweep,  
 Beheaded the beast,  
 Defanged its teeth  
 And won for us the battle!"*

Applause filled the hall when he finished, but Afias frowned and Adrea had lost her appetite.

She smiled gently at him, her eyes saying, "I know death is not like what he sings, but you must be grateful of the attention, for their sake's. You know we do it for them."

So Afias gave a speech, thanking them for their tribute, and turning the praise onto the people's resilience through this time of difficulty. He said he was proud of all their efforts, and told them he had never expected to love a people as much as he loved the Southernians.

At that, the cheering and foot stamping was so great Adrea covered her ears and thought the roof might cave in. Then the band took out their instruments and the dancing commenced. Afias smiled, for now he could do what he had wanted all night: he asked Lady Adrea to dance.

She floated in his arms with perfect poise. She was always perfection. Yet the smile on her face as he spun her, with her eyes closed, belied rigidity. She was entirely relaxed. And so was he.

## Peace in South Drian

The banquet room was relatively quiet. Most Southernians had gone to bed, but a few stragglers still lounged lazily in the room. No one ever uses chairs the right way at such an hour, and now many sat cross-legged on the tables amongst bottles and left-over hams, conversing above leftover rolls of bread and butter. A group of young people sprawled comfortably on the floor before the blazing hearth, chatting, falling in love, and enjoying their youth. An elderly couple was sound asleep in their seats against the wall, their hands clasped together on one of the arm-rests.

Afias smiled as his glance took it all in. He himself was lounging on two chairs that had been pushed together, and a moment ago, Adrea had been sitting on the floor before him, leaning against the cold flagstones lining the wall to cool her forehead after dancing. Now, across the room, she conversed with the kitchen staff about the leftovers. At last, she made her way back to him.

“Everything set?”

She took a deep breath and did what he had just done: she looked appreciatively around the room. "I am proud of tonight."

"Rightly so. It was a wonderful success."

She turned to him like a child seeking approval. "You really liked it?"

"It was the best night of my life."

She smiled, and her eyes filled with tears, for ever since her lonely journey into the wild, she wept at the slightest provocation. It was as if a lifetime of suppressed feelings were trying to make up for lost time.

"What if everything falls apart again? What if we bow to Power and this is the last good night of our lives?"

Afias frowned, looking at her with the pain of a bear who, after driving away the murderous hunters, seeks to heal its wounded mate. She was staring again at the room full of happy people, her lip trembling. Suddenly, he took her hand and pulled her toward the doors.

"Come with me."

He led her through the towering halls of the palace, across the courtyard of flagstones, and into the flower garden along the eastern wall. Here, the perfume of roses and lilies filled the air, cultivated from the dead earth by a faithful gardener. The prince led her to the dry fountain which did not run because they could spare no water, and tilted her head up to the sky above.

"Look."

With her head still uptilted, she gently lowered herself until she lay on the ground.

"It's beautiful. But why am I looking?"

He lay down beside her and stared at the constellations.

At the warrior with his sword and head just peeking above the horizon. At the frog with his tongue extended just above their heads. At Wisdom with her dress as long as a bridal train, wrapping around the Fate star, which glistened above Drian. If they followed the Fate star, it would lead them home.

“What if this is our last good night?” he asked her. “So what? Look at that sky. There is something so beautiful, so untouchable up there. We are part of something so much more than us, and if we cease, it goes on... It does not matter if everything here ends tomorrow – up there will go on.”

“What matters if it goes on – if we are not here to see it?” Her voice was breathless. She was caught up in the mystery.

“You know. You know it matters.”

“But *why*.”

He rested in the stillness of the heavens. Finally, he said, “I do not know. We matter, or we would not be here at all. Maybe the stars look down at us and say ‘we do not matter, so long as *they* are here.’”

“And if we die tomorrow? You think they still matter?”

After a moment, he said, “What is death? Surely, it is an adventure. What right do we have to fear it?”

Suddenly, she sat up. “No!” she declared. “I do fear it! We are young and still have fight left. It does matter if we die – too many have died already.”

“What if,” he said quietly, “your death saved the world? That would be worth one more death. That would be worth my death.”

He saw her, in the silver light of the stars which made her

dress glow, scowl like she used to do when she disagreed with him.

“Am I wrong?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said tearfully. “Very wrong. You must not die.”

“Why?”

She felt as if her heart were being torn from her chest; as if she stood upon newly hewed foundations which were cracking; as if everything new she had come to hope in was threatening to leave her, but she did not understand these sensations. Thoughts of Trinian, long ago buried in her heart, rose up now and flooded her with betrayal and despair as she wondered if Nian men all were blind and heartless. Whether they had any attachment to the women who gave them everything, all of themselves. Trinian had sent his women away, and Afias now threatened to leave her.

She had already broken her heart over one of them – but this would be... oh, it would be so very much worse! Here, she had been vulnerable. Here, she had found in truth what, in Trinian, she had only imagined. Here, she did not merely imagine a grand future, but felt already - deep in her very core - in the present moment - at home.

As she had come to relinquish control and learned to hope, she had found herself hoping specifically in resolutions. Not the resolutions of grand gestures: of death and mighty deeds, full of sacrifice and finalities; no, that had been the wild, almost hopeless dreams of a grasping woman. Rather, she had come to believe in resolutions of quiet, unassuming endings, to which one's story, when paved with good deeds, led naturally to fulfillment. But her heart was breaking, because she

suddenly knew that this ending was not guaranteed to her. She had relinquished control, and the ending, too, she was being asked to relinquish. All at once, the future was hope, and it was unknown. Even the terrible, the miserable, the final loss, was possible. And yet, still, somehow, she hoped.

Her heart ached with fear, and ached with hope, and all at once, she rose and cried out, "Take me to my room, please. I want to go to sleep."

## The Golden King

**H**orans' long, lanky, naked legs flashed fierce across the bristly grasses of the South Drian wilds.

This messenger from Drian had originally traveled to Varlo with Prince Afias, thrilled at the chance to see more of the world, since he had only ever seen the expanse between Drian and the Rordan forts. Yet, after traversing it twice, he was bored again, on this his third return trip. There were no monuments, no traffic, no cities between the two capitol: only an endless, flat stretch of rocky grasslands, with half a day's run of forest in the very middle. But a job was a job, and it was his to relay updates every three months between the two metropolises.

He arrived at Varlo and made his way directly, with unflagging speed, to the conference room. Lady Adrea and Lord Afias sat together at the far end of the long table, their heads bent low over a document as the prince scribbled furiously. They were engrossed in conversation so completely that they heard nothing of his arrival.



He pulled up short at a respectful distance, mindful of his own musty aroma, and saluted. "Returned with my report, your highness."

Afias looked up in surprise, then pushed aside the document and sat up eagerly, anxious for news of his brother. Horans was accustomed to delivering, impartially, news that only sometimes affected him personally; yet whenever he returned from Drian, he could not help the feeling of warmth that flooded through him when he stood before Prince Afias and Lady Adrea. They were his two favorite people in the whole world. He adored them from afar and hoped they would remain in South Drian to rule it together forever. If they did, he was going to move here.

This was not an opinion held by himself alone. Everyone in South Drian desired it. Only the Lord and Lady themselves still hoped they would return to Drian.

Horans reported, in a monotone voice, Lord Astren's message almost word for word. He laid out how Drian was rebuilding well to its former glory. "It is going so well, Lord Astren informs you, that King Trinian has felt free to maintain his travel east with General Phestite and a platoon of soldiers, seeking unnecessary allies for a conflict that, Lord Astren assures you, will not come again. We have defeated the enemy, he states, and effectively dissuaded them from returning. We are a formidable force, once again, with which to be reckoned. A kingdom with a king, a world with an emperor. You, Prince Afias, and your brother, he said, will learn this in time.

"You are to remain in South Drian until further notice. There is no approaching threat. He sends his love to you, Lady Adrea."

Horans fell silent, his message delivered.

Both were silent and glanced at each other significantly, though Horans could not read their looks. Then the prince dismissed him. Adrea was silent until Horans left, then turned to Afias.

“Does my father mean for us never to return to Drian?”

“Perhaps not until a threat arises.”

“But he seems to think there won’t be one.... What do you think of it? Of his assessment? Clearly Trinian disagrees.”

“Clearly.”

“Well?”

“Well, I don’t know,” he said impatiently. “I’m not in the mind of the enemy, and I’m not in Drian. How could I know?”

“I think he’s wrong. Power isn’t going to give up. Death told you that.”

The prince stirred in his chair, restless and resentful. So well, now, did Adrea know his every mood, that she saw him rise in her mind’s eye before he did it in real fact. He paced the floor, wearing a well-worn groove in the flagstones. Watching him think, she was distracted from thinking herself, and she was curious, seeing the wheels whir inside his head.

“Who is the Golden King?” he demanded suddenly.

She frowned, the name tugging at the recesses of her buried memory. When spoken, the name released a fragrance into the air, like the scent of a forgotten happiness. She wrapped her fingers around her arms, chilled and lost like a child, floating like a seed separated from its source. “I think he’s someone wonderful,” she whispered.

“Yes!” Afias’s voice vibrated, catching the tail end of her words and striking his enthusiasm into them. “Wonderful. But who is he? Adrea, when Death laid upon me the injunction never to betray the Golden King, it was as though I were possessed. My heart beat with purpose, my brain calmed, my body – my limbs strengthened just to hear his name!”

Adrea found she was both smiling and tearing up, her mind calming, her heart beating, her limbs answering. When Power possessed her, she had touched Hell. The very depths of misery, the lowest dregs of existence, of which humanity dare not dream because the reality is too terrible – that was her living nightmare, for she had been made the lowest of low humanity. But the Golden King – he awakened the opposite end of the spectrum. Light and beauty, truth and love – his name carried the promise of eternal happiness, and she wanted to repay him just for the promise of it. “I want to serve him,” she said aloud, and the aloudness surprised her.

“Do you?” Afias fell at her feet, kneeling on the ground, his beautiful, shining face alight with love as he gazed at her. “So do I. I do not know how, but I want to serve him. I want to love him. I do love him – already. Don’t you?”

She laughed at him. He was more animated than she had ever seen. She nodded. “Yes, I do. I do love him. And I want to know him.”

Afias stood again. “To think, we never knew about him. You can’t love someone if you don’t know them.”

“But we do not know him, even now.”

“Alright,” he sat down again, his brain searching for truth, “we do know some things. We know his name -”

“The Golden King,” supplied Adrea, and they both smiled at its sweet sound.

“We know that he is a god.”

“A god?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not. He seems more wonderful than that, somehow. Power is a god, after all.”

“He is *nothing* like Power.”

“Death made that clear. In fact, he is nothing like Death. Death was in awe of him – he feared him.”

“So maybe he is an over-god?”

“Maybe. That is a workable word, at least.”

At that moment, they were interrupted by a servant summoning them to dinner.

“Yes, yes,” said Adrea, then repented her abruptness, and answered formally, “Thank you, page, we are on our way.” But before they parted to wash up – for Adrea still insisted on some traditions – they promised to continue on this wonderful topic, for their hearts desired nothing else but to return to it.

## Romance in South Drian

When they met again in the dining room, Marty stood at the head of the table. Marty was an excellent, kindhearted cook, and a native of South Drian, who had come to love the Lord and Lady as much as anyone else in that country. She had already dismissed the kitchen maids, but stayed behind to tell them what she had prepared for supper. She always wanted to apologize for the simple fare, as if Afias and Adrea were not guiltily aware that she always gave them the choicest food in the country.

After she ran through her familiar monologue, she stood awkwardly, reluctant to leave the Dining Hall. “Begging your pardon, Prince Afias, Lady Adrea,” she said, when they asked if something was wrong, “Horans just come back and was in the kitchen getting his fill of a hot meal, and is it true – you’re staying here with us? Not going back to Drian, I mean?”

“Horans ought not to be relaying our messages in the kitchen,” said Adrea.

“Oh, he did not. That is, we plied him with questions, so he hinted that you wasn’t wanted back home. As that’s what we all hoped for, it’s what we wanted to confirm. Are you going back to Drian?”

“Well, yes, I imagine so,” said Afias. “When our business here is finished.”

“Oh, but it never will be, highness! I mean, our ruling family is gone, and who’s to lead us when you leave? Couldn’t you stay?”

South Drian had always been an informal country. Requests were made simply, with openness, and even Adrea had grown accustomed to its manners. So without a lecture about etiquette, the noble lady merely dismissed the cook with a kind, non-committal answer.

“Do you want to stay?” asked Afias.

“Is it up to us?” she asked pointedly.

“No. But do you want it?”

“Alone? Or with you, the way we are now?”

He shrugged. “Either, I suppose.”

She refused to answer right away, and ate her dinner with a relish, using the food as an excuse for silence. When her plate was empty, the quiet had stretched for too long, and Afias was uncomfortable, wondering if he had somehow upset her.

They sat as two strangers at table, the meal driving them apart instead of binding them together, and when, at last, Afias could bear it no longer, he abruptly stood, his heavy chair grating against the stone floor, and walked out. Adrea remained seated, confounded and gaping after him. She wondered if she had made him so uncomfortable that he had to run away – but that was drastic. He was perennially

polite, even when angry or upset, and never left without a civil word.

She was greatly relieved when he returned, but then he astounded her by walking straight up to her side, so close that his legs brushed against her knees and his long outer vest rubbed her shoulder, so that her heart hurt by the combination of physical nearness and personal distance and she wanted to pull away. He pushed his long hair away from his forehead, opened a piece of folded paper, and began to read,

*“My dearest Adrea,*

*Hear these words I write to you, futile as they are. In this past month, you have grown more dear to me than anyone else in the world. I cannot begin to say how much...”* he read quickly, his voice breaking and stumbling. *“I love you. If you want it, my entire life is yours. By duty, I am bound to king and country; by love, to you. I know I have little to offer – only a poor excuse of a former farmer turned ruler, but with you beside me, I do not feel like a failure. When you believe in me, I am strong. If you loved me, my strength would be boundless. Will you, most beautiful of women, most faithful of companions, most dear of friends, be my wife?”*

He looked at her over the paper, supplying his own words to the written text. “I’m not very good at writing, as you can see. I would try to make you happy. Really. Because I would already be so happy, it would be easy. And I know we would fight, for we are both so stubborn. But I would

be bored with someone who failed to challenge me, and I would rather fight with you than get along with anyone else, and –”

“Are you finished?”

He stopped, his rambling speech cut short so that his mouth still hung open, his cheeks flushed with the force of his fervor.

“We do not fight anymore,” she said.

“Well, we – we do sometimes,” he stuttered. “Like in the garden the night of the ball. Or just now, when I asked if you wanted to stay...”

Her eyes laughed at him openly until he stopped rambling. He tried to smile in response, but he was too nervous, and could only stand awkwardly, shifting his feet back and forth and pushing his hair away from his forehead. Adrea could have sat and watched him for a long time, but she had pity on him, and said, “Those weren’t fights, you wonderful creature. I was just hurt, because I loved you and you said nothing. And now I learn you have loved me for a whole month.”

Afias’s whole face beamed. “Two, actually. I wrote this a month ago.”

Now it was Adrea’s turn to be tongue-tied. He had loved her since she returned to Varlo, when she was still a terrible mess. “Why – why did you say nothing?”

Afias took her hand, lifted her from the table, and led her into the adjoining parlor, adoring her with an unflinching look every step of the way. She had said she loved him, and he basked completely in it. He set her on the couch and sat beside her. “I did not think you were ready. Your soul was in such turmoil.”



“I guess it was – but you should have said something! It would have made it easier.”

“If that is true, then I am sorry. I certainly would have saved myself a lot of pain.”

She relented before his humility. “Well, I guess it was right that you waited. I did not know who I was before, let alone what I wanted.”

She searched his brown eyes, which encompassed her entirely in their gaze, drawing her into his soul. She could spend the rest of her life searching out that soul. He leaned closer.

“What do you want?” he whispered. “Anything you want.”

“I want to fight with you, and reconcile, and talk, and love you – for the rest of my days.”

“That is what I want too.”

“And I want to rule South Drian. I love it here, and if Trinian consents, would you want to stay?”

“Yes. Yes, I do. These people are very dear to me. Anything else?”

“I want to talk about the Golden King, and find out who He is and how we can serve Him.”

“Yes! I want that too.”

“You know, I find it strange,” she blushed and looked down, suddenly embarrassed. “I think I could love you even more if I knew and loved Him.”

He leaned forward and rested his forehead on hers, gripping her hands tighter. “I just had that same thought. Yet, I did not think I could love you anymore than I do now. But I love you more than I did a moment ago, and more than I did a moment before that...”

“Oh, hush,” she said, and kissed him.

\* \* \*

Afias and Adrea announced their intended union to great fanfare in South Drian, but decided to wait until they returned to Drian to perform their nuptials. Afias remembered how sad Cila was when Trinian returned home with a wife, and he wanted his entire family around him when he brought in the newest member. His heart ached for Trinian, Viol, and Cila, for Asbult and even for Lavendier, so Adrea, seeing his pain, insisted that they wait. Until then, they would be content to speak alone, stroll through the gardens, and rule South Drian together.

## A Divine Purpose

**I**n the heavens, the gods were not unaware of what passed below. From the palace, they could see everything with an eagle-eye view, and, roused from their ennui of the ages, called upon by more mortals than ever before, they crowded round to watch the panorama unfold.

Though they had not banned any of Power's supporters from the celestial home, the band of rebels only showed their faces to hurl insults and boast of their progress. Terror, Despair, Destruction, Resolve, and Passion were now strangers to their brothers and sisters.

For awhile, Death was also a stranger, but he had recently returned to Fate, kneeling his pride at his brother's feet, asking if it were possible for the Golden King to forgive him? Fate had embraced him readily, eager to see his family whole again. "As for the Golden King," he told his little brother, "He will do with you what is right. You can only return the favor."

Knowledge and Death kept careful watch over South

Drian and its regal prince. Death was in love with the lady there – it was she who had brought him back to the fold of Fate. Adrea was also the darling of Knowledge, who had found answers through actions where words, flown to the Golden King in prayer, had always failed her. And they both loved the prince, with his magnanimous heart and eager forgiveness, and his willingness to call upon them in his travail.

The other gods, infected by the zeal of their brother and sister, decided to choose favorites as well, and Joy took careful watch of the youngest princess. “She’s not important,” said Knowledge, glancing ahead with her limited foreknowledge. “She will not decide their fate.” But Joy only loved her charge the more for it.

“Yet she never falters in her strength of spirit, and she does not care how small a contribution she makes. I will help her keep her energies.”

Solitude took on the sorrowful princess Cila, eager to bring her some comfort in her unending loneliness. But she did not rest there. As she flew close over the world, descending from a far-off view and absorbing the world through her translucent, divine skin, she found loneliness in every corner of the bereft world. Loneliness of a person, of a nation, of a world. No man was free. And she sought to help the world understand its individual isolation.

Hope blazed like a fiery emblem in the breast of Lavendier, her guiding star in her struggle against herself.

“Has no one taken King Trinian under their wing?” asked Fate, finding them crowded round the parapet, sending down graces like arrows on their special, chosen charges.

“He does not need us,” said Knowledge dismissively. “He

has the divine mark; and Gladier besides, who has divine knowledge.”

“I think you overestimate his autonomy,” whispered Solitude. “I have felt the king’s heart, and it is desolate.”

Most of them ignored her, but Peace heard. She looked gently at Fate. “I suppose I will extend my graces to him.”

“Thank you...” he said; but his voice broke with mournfulness and he turned sharply away. Her heart went out to him; gently, she put out her arm and pulled the great god apart from the others. He followed her like an obedient child into an inner chamber, where she sank to the floor, her aura wrapped around her like a gown, her contentment an ocean of calm. As he sat beside her - his obedient motions belying the strong frame that rippled beneath him like a storm brewing on the horizon - she saw that his kind, stern face was breaking in painful agitation.

She asked abruptly, “Could you rule Minecerva?”

He looked at her in horrified alarm, and she added quickly, “I know you would not want to, and you never would. But could you?”

“Anyone can,” he answered her quietly, still shaken by the question, for she had no idea how much the idea tempted him. “That is Power’s strength. The heavenly throne is open for now, and anyone may sit in it at the end of time. Free Will will decide the outcome, not fate, not myself, not my actions.”

“But you know how it will end, do you not?” she beseeched.

He nodded and rose, his regal blue cloak dusting the floor, stirring her aura like a cloud in the air. “My watch turns ever on, and I know how it will end.” Again, his face

crumpled in misery. "I know both the strength and futility of freewill."

She sighed softly. "Why does he insist on this?"

"Power?" he asked, and when she nodded, he said, "It is his choice. He is free to make it."

"Will you not tell me how this will end?"

"You know I cannot, my love. Wait and see. I must do the same."

"I want Him to come now. My soul aches now, at the end of time."

Fate returned and rested his large hand on her shoulder. "Care for your king, my dear. He is the key."

Peace hung her head. "I always knew I should care for him, but I have avoided it. I am afraid."

"Why?"

"I must be present against our brother. I do not want to be there. I know what must come. I cannot see it, like you, but I know. He has turned away from our King, and there is only one outcome."

"And yet you are Peace. You know you must be there to accomplish it. It is your trial through fire."

"Why do you not have one?" she cried suddenly, her soul riling against her inside her breast. Despite her goodness, this was the one affair that would be her final test, and it stirred up her little sins, airing them for a final cleansing.

"But I do," he told her gently, looking sadly on the world below them. "It is this. I must watch you help them, help the land I love, and I stand here on the edge of unreachable, unable to guide or command. It is breaking me, slowly. Ah," he sighed, and the whole heavenly kingdom shuddered with his sadness, "may He come soon!"

\* \* \*

In Karaka, Power was surrounded by his constituents. Terror whipped about the chamber, a tornado of insatiable energy. Despair was draped languidly, effeminately, over a chair, drinking wine. Terror was cross-legged in front of the fire, throwing anything in reach at Destruction because when anything hit him, it ricocheted into the wall and exploded, and Terror thought that was uproariously funny. Resolve rolled her eyes at her brothers and the chamber clacked with the sound of her pacing heels, impatient to have the conquering over and done with – she hated this waiting before the final hour. Passion did not mind waiting so long as she looked well doing it, so she was leaning fetchingly against the mantle, sipping a fiery froth.

Power sat on a throne three times the size of the one in Drian, but of the same make. Soon, he told himself, he would rule all the world. If he believed it, he could make it happen. Trinian was only a man. *He* was a god.

Throughout Karaka, his army was gathering for the final strike. He was relentless and nothing could stop him, for Kelta was no longer a land of men but of automatons, mindlessly obeying his every will and command. And soon, despite Death's betrayal, Power would send his mindless soldiers through the most secret paths of the dead. He would send them through the middle land, the tunnels that stretched between the mortal and the immortal world, that welcomed souls on their way to the land of the afterlife.

Death had told him how to access the land, and the arrogant god thought they needed him to use it, and that by betraying them all and siding with the mortals, Power

would lose his ability to march on Drian. But Power was a shade himself, and could command shades, and needed no god of the dead to do it. His men would walk through that bitter darkness and come out the other side, ready and able to invade Drian.



XV

THE SILVER LADY

*“A woman is to be found at the center of this  
salvific event.”*

*- Pope John Paul II, Mulieris Dignitatem*



## Karaka in Paradise

**L**avendier and Jacian plodded upward along the southern wall of the mountain. After three months in Paradise, they had left the home by the lake for a day trip, looking for meat, fruit, or anything else they could scavenge, and this brisk hike through nature served to soothe both their wild spirits. The little prince's energy had built up day by day, until it was coiled inside of him like a cat waiting to launch itself at any moving thing, and Lavendier, too, had suffered every moment, for she was falling ever faster and deeper for her demi-god friend, who was forever reserved, proper, and collected. Her heart chafing raw, torn between her own doubts and her attempts to give him space, she was trying to escape the growing passions that swelled her heart like water swells a dam, threatening to flood over and engulf her; in the presence of these new feelings, she struggled to recognize what was pure or what was base in her desires, trying to untangle the morality that was so new to her, with little luck, and only increasing infatuation.

The little prince was blissfully oblivious to his aunt's distress of mind and therefore, by prattling and wandering, effectually kept her from brooding, so that aunt and nephew walked until noon, then afternoon, and finally evening, before Lavendier suddenly stopped still in her tracks and gazed at the sky.

"Why are we stopping?" asked the boy.

"I lost track of the time. We should have turned back awhile ago."

"Are we lost?"

"No. But it will be getting dark by the time we get home. Let's go, dear."

"I'm hungry!"

Lavendier sighed. She wanted to start back, but it would be miserable going if he was going to complain of hunger at every step. She was tempted to tell him to eat and walk, but it would be nice to sit, and there was no danger when walking at night in this land of perfect peace. She knew there was a small cave in the rock face up ahead, so ducking inside, they made a picnic there.

All was well and they were nearly finished, when Lavendier's skin suddenly prickled and she shushed Jacian's prattling. Knowing from the tingling in her spine that gorgans were near, she sat still, and suddenly, she realized she could hear voices. Not the grunts of monsters, but the murmurs of real men.

Her heart beat loudly, drowning out the faint noise. Jacian tried to say something, and she hushed him quickly. She took a deep breath and listened again. Sure enough, voices, faint and distant, were filtering into the cave. She followed the sound, feeling how close the gorgans were,

and it grew louder as she approached the dark rear.

There was a tunnel that led deeper into the mountain, and Lavendier bid Jacian sit still and silent, and await her return. She moved down the black tunnel, remembering that some of the mountains bordered Karaka, and worrying that some of the enemy's soldiers might camp on the other side of the mountain. When she reached the end, she came up suddenly against a rock wall. Yet the voices were louder than ever, almost as if she was right in their midst, and the prickling of her spine was electric. Then she saw light at her feet, and realized there was a hole in the bottom of the wall, and the men were directly on the other side, their voices filtering through.

A deep voice was grumbling. "This war's taking its toll, I tell you. And those stupid beasts are gettin' better treatment than us, you can be sure of that. Stinking rotten fish – and us fifty miles or more from any seacoast! Can kill off a whole army feeding it this way, ya know, without ever meeting an enemy. We's as good as dead now as we ever would be in the war."

A higher, more even voice answered him. "Careful who you say so to. The god's proud o' this land and its bareness, I hear tell, and don't tolerate criping."

"Who's criping? I just don't approve o' anytin less 'an human detency."

"He ain't human, and you'd do well to remember it, and not grouch as if he couldn't hear you. He knows everything in his lands, and can go anywhere on a whim. So just shut yer mouth and eat yer fish."

There was silence for a time, except for sounds like a carnivore tearing its juicy prey, and Lavendier was just

about to head back to Jacian when a new third voice suddenly announced, "All Kelta men to report to General Farsooth first thing in the morning. We're storming Drian in eight days."

Lavendier pushed her head into the crevice, stilling her breathing.

The first voice answered the third. "What? Drian? We'll never make that distance in time. He'll really kill us all this time and for no reason. We ain't all bodiless spirits!"

"Hush yer mouth!" cried second voice, but third voice answered him.

"Word is we're traveling through Drakans, under the power of the high god. Take us no more than a week to march through. So pack up yer wet noses and get moving!"

There were sounds of scuffling and packing and putting out a fire, such that it drowned out any more conversation, and under the cover of the commotion, Lavendier made her way back to the prince.

When she returned she had a moment of panic, for the young boy was gone, and the lunch things were strewn about, as if someone had been kicking them around. But as soon as she emerged into the light, he was there, and he let out a terrible scream on sight of her.

She, surprised and anxious, held out her hands, and with a sob, Jacian's little arms encircled her neck, clinging to her.

"I'm sorry!" he cried, his infant wails trembling in the air.

"It's alright, my darling. It's alright," she soothed, rubbing his back and holding him tight. "Why are you crying so?"

It was some time before he calmed enough to answer

her. "I - I was frightened," he hiccupped. "I thought you were the monster."

"What monster? What happened?"

"He chased me out of the cave. He had a giant whip, and when he lashed it, there was fire."

Lavendier looked back into the dark opening. "Stay here," she said.

"No! Don't go." He clutched her hard in panic.

"I'll be right back. If you call, I will hear you."

"No, no!"

"Count to twenty, then call me, and I will come back."

He closed his eyes and began to speed through his numbers like it was a marathon.

"Slowly." She smiled tightly. "Start again, and I will be right back." Her neck taught and her hand gripping the hilt of her short-sword, she made her way into the dark opening. But other than the one tunnel, down which she had gone, the cavern was empty.

Inclined to dismiss the incident as a product of his over-active imagination, she went back through the entrance. Jacian finished his counting as she emerged into the light, but his eyes were still closed, so he cried out her name, and exclaimed for joy when she responded right beside him.

"Well, my dear," she said, taking his hand, "let's get you home to your mother. I have something to tell them."

## Lillian

Garrity was stacking wood in the light of the full moon when they returned to camp, and Lavendier, leaving her nephew with Adlena, approached him with a heavy step. He smiled when he saw her, set the ax down, and drank from the bucket standing beside the woodblock. He watched her with a discerning eye, noting a mournful taughtness of her pure white brow with concern, for whenever she was worried, the skin on her face would always tighten instead of wrinkle, and Garrity knew and understood.

“Something has upset you. Was it Jacian?”

“He is fine. I left him at camp.”

“So what happened?” As she did not answer right away, he gave her time to think by stacking more wood.

“I encountered soldiers of the enemy.”

He whirled on her and gripped her arms. “Here?”

“On the other side of the mountain. I could hear them through a rift in a tunnel.”

“Are they coming here? Are you both alright?” He looked



her up and down, as if suddenly expecting to find a limb missing.

“No, we are fine. They did not see me. But Garrity, they are on their way to Drian. They are going to attack the capital.”

Garrity released her and stepped back, unseeing, blinking hard, trying to reign in his scattered thoughts. “Which means that Trinian gained it back.”

“I know. We scarcely ever hoped for such a thing; but it seems he will not retain it for much longer. And, Garrity, there is more.” She paused here, doubting her own sanity, wondering how she dared say it aloud. She took a deep breath. “The god is sending his men through Drakans.”

If she had suddenly sprouted a bird’s head from her shoulder, he could not have looked at her with more astonishment. “Drakans does not exist. It is only in tales that old men tell to pass the time.”

She swallowed and persisted. “They said that was their route.”

“Even if it does exist, all the tales agree that it is impossible to find the entrance in life. Surely that is not what they said.”

Her stomach flipped and shoulders tightened, but she refused the urge to lash out in defense of herself. “All I know is what I heard, and that is what they said.”

Garrity paced the ground, his head bent and brooding, and Lavendier sat down on the chopping block. As she watched him move back and forth before her, she thought of all the tales she had ever heard about the eerie underworld of Drakans; a haunting land of shadow and pale light, with specters and muses roaming aimlessly, and

voices filling the inner ear with beguiling, fatal sounds. It was, according to legend, the pathway between life and death, and if the enemy could utilize this passage, then he must have control over the dead as well as the living.

Her breath quickened, and she clenched her fists. Her homeland and brothers, the great power reared against them, and her extreme helplessness in this place, which suddenly seemed to her too large and too flauntingly beautiful, overwhelmed her. It was no longer a haven of peaceful tranquility; it was a den of smug security. It was a place that never changed even if everything else became ugly and vile, and it was too much for her.

“We have to do something,” she broke out, but suddenly, Viol ran up to them, out of breath, to say that Adlena had gone into labor.

\* \* \*

When, towards morning, all the bustle surrounding the birth had fallen into quiet, Garrity returned with Jacian, holding the prince, asleep, in his arms.

Lavendier had come outside the stone house, around which they had hung their cloaks, to catch some air and wash her hands in the early light of dawn. She bent over the stone basin, scrubbing hard, and Garrity watched her uncertainly. Then he made a sound in his throat, and when she looked up, startled, she suddenly laughed aloud. Laughed so hard she could not breathe, and he smiled at her as she wiped tears from her eyes. He asked, in a reverent whisper, if all was well.

“All is very well,” she said. “Come with me and you will

see for yourself.”

Garrity woke the young prince and led him in, and Adlena handed Garrity her daughter. She said, “Meet the man who is responsible for preserving your life. To him you will always owe allegiance.”

The man took the infant in his arms, effortlessly, and not at all as though it were the first infant he had ever held, though he had never, in his twenty-five years, encountered a baby so young. In fact, Jacian was his first experience with a child.

There had been no complications, much to Lavendier’s relief, who had found herself severely taxed by the experience. Every little finger, toe, and nose was healthy and perfect, and Adlena held close to her a beautiful baby girl, shining so white it looked like she glowed. Viol called her a little lily, and Adlena christened her Lillian.

## Romance in Paradise

**L**avendier, awakening later that day when the sun was halfway through the sky, rose with a heavy resolution to find Garrity.

She came across him beside the lake where he was holding Lillian, well-wrapped in his cloak, while Adlena slept.

“How is she?” she asked, barely above a whisper.

“Sleeping,” he smiled.

She sat beside him and, in an uncharacteristic gesture, laid her head on his shoulder and studied the infant in his arms, and he did not seem to notice. Sitting side by side, gazing across the lake, the former characteristically and the latter uncharacteristically silent, Lavendier prepared herself to say what she had to say, but suddenly, it was he who startled her by beginning a conversation.

“Now that I see a baby so close— it makes me want something. Something more than what I have wanted before. I think... I want a chance to see life through my own children’s eyes. I have never felt so before.” At this

strange and open speech, Lavendier's heart leapt and beat hard in her breast. She did not answer, and he continued. "Every time she opens her eyes, she is seeing something for the first time: something new, that we take for granted. Everything she sees is a miracle to her, and she is a miracle to us. I am more afraid and more courageous all at once." He gazed hard at the little girl. Her head was covered with a soft dark fuzz, and her face was pink and soft.

Lavendier wanted him to say more, to include her in his dreams; to say he wanted to have children with her, to live his life with her when they returned home, and her heart was too full to tell him of her resolution. But perhaps he was not even thinking such things. She was a selfish princess, he was a demi-god. She was his friend, his charge, his responsibility, and perhaps a part of him still dismissed her as petty and manipulative.

"Garrity," she began, sitting up now, and trembling, "you must send me."

Garrity raised his head, not understanding.

"To Drian. I have to go to Drian and warn them."

His face darkened, with anger or fear, she could not tell, and she plunged ahead with her explanation. "My life has importance if, and only if, there is a kingdom. And even then, the kingdom will get on without me. You have no other men to send, and you cannot leave the others now. And I know that it must be me."

His face was contorting in pain or rage, and he opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly, Lillian began to cry. Garrity rose quickly, brought her to Adlena, and then hurried back, now with a relieved look on his face.

"It matters not anyhow," he said. "You would never get

to Drian in time to warn them.”

“I have thought of that,” she said, “and I believe Habas will have a way. I cannot tell you why, but I believe it. I have certainty. I can at least go as far as his oasis, and seek his help.”

He was bowed down again, as if a yoke were laid on his shoulders, and he fell to the ground. His firm voice broke and he moaned, “How can I let you go?”

This tongue-tied her, and awkwardly, she rose to her feet, unsure what to say. “You want to complete your mission,” she ventured at last, “I understand. You feel my leaving would, somehow, lessen the success of our journey. I know you want to protect me – but you have to let me go.” She paused, and then asked, “Do you trust me?”

Against the deep, stirring emotions that tormented him – emotions he had ignored and never acknowledged to himself, that he had feared and rejected and buried deep in his heart – her question pierced him. He only looked up at her with tears in his eyes; to which she looked compassionately back, and said quietly, “Thank you.”

\* \* \*

“Come with me.” Locked hand in hand, Viol and Lavendier clung to each other. “I want you to come.”

Viol wanted to go. This drifting sister, who always ignored her when she was young, was now more dear and precious than her own life. This separation was as painful as the one, months ago, with Afias, and all over again, she felt alone; but she looked over her shoulder at Adlena and Cila, Lillian and Jacian. They were helpless, frail, and weak,

and she was capable, nurturing, and strong. "I cannot leave them," she said. "They need me, and I belong to them."

"Yes!" Viol jumped at the suddenness of her sister's cry. Lavendier's face lit up with sudden understanding – the expression in her eyes as loud as her voice. "That's just it, isn't it? I belong to Drian, and you belong here. Garrity belongs to all of you. We belong with who we love. Love makes us belong."

Viol giggled. "I don't think you said 'belong' enough. Say it one more time."

"But I'm right, am I not?"

"Of course you are. Love makes us responsible for others, especially if they need us."

Lavendier watched Cila's slow, languid movements as she responded half-heartedly to Jacian's prattling conversation, and Adlena's brave face as she nursed Lillian and feared for the safety of her husband and family. She realized she had a responsibility to these frail sisters, even as she left them, perhaps forever, and she squeezed Viol's hands. "Take care of them, darling. Keep them safe for me."

Then Lavendier looked to where Garrity was standing apart, waiting for the sisters to finish their adieu, his head low as he scuffed the turf with his boot, and as Viol embraced Lavendier one last time, the young girl promised, "I will. *All* of them."

Lavendier embraced Adlena, Cila, and Jacian, kissed Lillian, and at last stood before Garrity. He cleared his throat. "Here," he said gruffly, thrusting something into her hands. "Take this, and do not read it until you are over the mountain."

It was a letter, for Habas had given them paper, and she put it tenderly in her pocket. "We will see each other soon," she said.

He swallowed hard, and cleared his throat, but found nothing to say. She leaned forward, looking up into his downcast eyes. "Trust me," she said at last. "I have conviction."

He cleared his throat again, and said suddenly, "Here, give me that letter back. You should not read that." He was reaching out his hand, and she leapt back.

"Oh, no!" she cried. "You gave it to me, and there's no way you're getting it back!"

A laugh burst from him in spite of himself. "No, but really... you shouldn't..."

"Really nothing! Goodbye all, I love you! I'll see you soon!" With that, she skipped off at a run to the mountain.



## Melcant

She set out on foot. Getting over the mountains would take one day, and the journey to Habas's another.

On the morning of the second day, when she finally reached the bottom of the mountain, she stopped and pulled out the letter. She tore the seal and read it hungrily, and realized, by the second paragraph, why he had tried to take it back.

*My dearest Laven,*

*I don't know the laws that pertain to the marriage of a Princess of Drian, especially for the eldest daughter, for whom I imagine there are special protocols; but if they allow a captain of the army to seek her hand, I will put mine forth when we return.*

*But my heart fails me at writing those words, for I do not possess conviction that I will return to Drian. From the moment you said you would leave, I have felt a dark cloud growing, and I truly think one of*

*us will meet death before we see each other again. I do not have the ability to predict the future, but the certainty of it weighs on me. It is for that reason alone that I did not want you to leave, and it is a selfish one. You have already faced death, and that moment was the worst of my life. If one of us must die, I pray it is myself. But when I die, I will do so with regret, because it will mean never seeing you again.*

*I send you with my deepest love,  
Garrity*

Her heart leapt to her throat, then sank, then leapt again as she read, jerking about inside her like a restless, caged bird, seeking to break away and soar with glorious joy. He loved her, though he had clouded it with dire predictions. But he loved her, and losing her was the worst thing he could imagine. And she knew he could imagine many terrible things. But he thought that he or she was going to die. She put the thought from her mind, and hoped he believed it no longer, and her words had convinced him otherwise. She held tight to her hope that they *would* see each other again - they *would*.

The goddess Hope blazed like a fiery emblem in the breast of Lavendier, her guiding star at the commencement of her most demanding journey yet, and she knew, with this light of conviction, that Habas would send her to Trinian; with magical conveyance, magical messenger, or winged bird, he would have a way to warn her brother.

She was not prepared, then, to find the desert, where the hermitage ought to have been, utterly empty. Except

for the sun, which filled the oasis with palpable, touchable heat waves; except for the sand, which rolled and blew in eddies through her hair; and except for the little pond and patch of grass around it, the desert was desolate, and Habas was gone.

Lavendier fell beside the water and stirred it with her finger. “Am I mad? Surely this is where I slept, in a beautiful stone house, with a large stone courtyard, and a cool bedroom with a bathtub. Am I mad now, or before?”

“Neither, fair lady.” She started up and glanced about – but there was no one. “My master is gone,” the voice continued. “When he faced the gods without a thought for his own life, his journey was complete. His abode, his body, and his soul were lifted bodily from this place.” A shimmer gleamed above the sand, and a wavering animal seemed to be approaching Lavendier. “But my stall and the oasis remained, invisible to the demons, to wait for you.” From out of the shimmer materialized, full and solid, a breathtakingly beautiful white horse, high-stepping over the scorching sand as if it were only a cool dirt road.

Awe-struck, Lavendier marveled at the contour of its body, the size of it, the beauty. It was larger than most horses, like a thick horse that would carry a fully-clad knight, but it was dainty in spite of its girth. Its coat shone with perfection, as if it carried its own light... and from its mouth issued words.

“We have little time,” it said. “You have an important mission, and I must bear you for it.”

“I can ride you? You are like the king of horses. You are too noble to bear me.”

“All the time you stayed with Habas, you did not meet

me, because I am too noble. For hundreds of years, only Habas spoke with me, because I am too noble. When his home disappeared, I was left behind – because I am too simple. We are only here for the service of others – and my service is now come upon me. This is a task no other horse could complete; so I, the noblest of horses, alone in the world, lonely in my abilities, shaped through magic and solitude, must bear you to civilization.”

## Ride to Drian

**M**elcant, for that was his name, bore her with the speed of the wind over the vast distance of the Desert, Karaka, and Mestraff. From place to place the world flew by with a roar in her ears, and sometimes she remembered a place from before, and sometimes her steed took strange paths.

When they had reached the edge of the desert, he had coiled his legs for a spring, and with a mighty sail, leaped into the air and did not land until the brown, drizzling, depressing mud was behind them. His dainty legs never touched it, and he continued on his way through the stony, leafy courses of Mestraff.

The mighty horse wore a saddle of seamless leather, beautifully crafted and pre-laden with bedding, provisions, and accessories to see them through their journey, so that they need not stop for any reason.

When the first evening fell, they were halfway through Mestraff, and Melcant's pace slowed to navigate in the dark. He did not sleep, but just by trotting a bit slower, he

received refreshment, and when the sun rose high in the sky again, he galloped for hours.

When the sun mounted to its zenith on the second day, Melcant pulled up beneath the overreaching leaves of a birch tree. Its shade was cool after the oppressive force of the sun. He panted, his great white sides heaving and white with lather, and drank from a rivulet flowing past the buckling roots.

He shook his long white head to fling the hair from his eyes.

“Come, my princess, awake!”

He turned and nuzzled her where she lay draped across his neck, having fallen asleep over an hour before.

“Awake,” he said again, and she stirred. Then startled, she sat up.

“Did I sleep? Oh, Melcant, I am so sorry. I cannot believe I retained my seat!”

“You will never fall so long as you are on my back. And I am glad that you slept. Greater trials await you in Drian.”

“But you must be exhausted.”

“I am still strong enough. But you should eat before we resume.”

“Alright. How far are we?” she asked as she alighted.

“We are nearly to the Rordan.”

She gasped. “Already?” With the months it had taken for their caravan to travel through the Mestraff woods still fresh in her memory, she was in awe. Silently, she pulled open the travel bags, and found cheese, sausage, bread, and dried meat and fruit. It was much richer than the meager fare she had packed for herself, and she ate gratefully.

His words about coming trials sank into her mind, and

she asked, "Can you see the future?"

"No. I only know what I was told by the goddess Hope when I was left behind from my master."

"Hope?"

"Yes. She came to me and hid me from Power while he fought my master."

"What happened to your master?"

"Four gods came against him, asking for you and your family. They were cruel, evil gods – I have never seen anything like it. But he would not betray you. He fought them, and when they pressed forward to utterly destroy him, they met empty air, for he had at last been released from his prison. He, and my other companions in the barn, disappeared."

His voice was heavy with sorrow, and his ears drooped as he pulled up grass and chewed it slowly.

"Oh, Melcant, I am sorry," Lavendier went to nuzzle against his nose, "I did not mean to awaken your sorrow."

"Habas taught me to speak and think. It was his magic that awoke my slumbering mind. He was both a father and a friend." He lifted his head, and though, as a horse, he could not smile in the traditional manner, still his eyes lightened at her. "But now, I think, I have a new friend."

"Yes!" she smiled. "And how grateful I am for it!"

\* \* \*

As Lavendier and Melcant traversed Mestraff, flying through the woods as if the very wind hounded them from his depthless eastern caves, just before they reached the River Rordan, there arose before them enemy soldiers,

captained by two Keltan men.

Once ordinary soldiers, they now had oily hair and glinting eyes like the man who once tried to trap Lavendier. For like him, they were befouled by the company they maintained and the commander they obeyed. They had been left to guard the Rordan crossing with a retinue of gorgans.

On encountering their sharp spears and bayonets almost pressing into his sweaty, mighty flanks, Melcant reared his forelegs to the sky and seemed verily to beat against the morning stars and send them raining down. The beauty of a horse when it rears to the sky exceeds the dignity of any other creature, but in an intelligent beast, the grace and majesty is beyond imagining, and this spectacle before the evil men and their gorgans caused them to gape a moment, and hold their weapons loosely in their claws. Lavendier effortlessly maintained her seat and they saw her snow white gown and crimson red cape billow in the eddies of dirt that whipped about her, and her appearance was that of a fell, avenging angel. Her countenance expressed no alarm, at either the steed's mighty height, or the creatures standing below, but looked upon them with a steady, scorching gaze that shook their hearts the more. But though they trembled, the two captains urged their company forward against the unprotected maiden.

With grim precision as Melcant descended, Lavendier drew her blade, and without dismounting, slew every one of the twenty beasts that threw themselves upon her. Not a wound did she allow to inflict her fair companion's hide, not a scratch to impair her fair skin, and within a matter of minutes, Melcant the mighty steed stood in a black sea



of dead gorgans.

He waded through it with no more trouble than if they had been mere water, and halted before the captains. With his pearl teeth, he reached forward and the captains quailed, thinking he meant to eat them alive, but he merely grasped their weapons and handed them to Lavendier.

She clasped the blades and looked at the men. Then she looked toward the horizon and, as if at her precise bidding, the golden sun broke its cloudy barrier and flooded the land, lighting upon the dew and mists, and blazing with a consuming fire. And immediately, a mighty wind rose up and wrapped about every curve and line of the maiden and steed. Seeing this lone girl mounted and wielding so dreadful a blade, blessed so with the kiss of elements, graced thus with such deadly calm, the two captains fled like the frightened slaves they were.

## A Divine Coup

**I**t was the eleventh hour and ninety-eighth minute, and Power had just dispatched his gorgans to invade Drian by passing beneath the Rordan, through Drakans, a realm the minor god had no power over, a secret realm that only mortals and Death could access – until now. For now, Power was half mortal, half eternal, and without killing his army, he could force their entrance into the misty land.

How he gloried in his abilities, and worshipped himself, for he was Power, and he was great, and he was nearly, oh so nearly, perfect! Blind to all but himself, he did not notice that Resolve was malcontented.

She stood in the dark chamber, her tight dress forcing her to stand as erect as ever, her high heels making her taller than her already tall height, and her whip of action glowing white in the black and red of Power's palace, and she disrupted with malicious pleasure his moment of self-adoration.

“You are unfit,” Resolve announced abruptly, and he

looked up at her in angry surprise, “to wield your gifts and rule over the expanse of Minecerva. You have taken on mortal form and have become weak! Do you think we will be content to follow your shifting moods and varying whims, your strange fixations over life and death? You fear a little demi-god, you allow vague prophecies to guide your every decision, and you cannot even fulfill your long-planned revolt without *our* help! You showed your first weakness when you asked for our aid, and it will not be your last.”

Power grinned to conceal his scowl and leaned forward in his throne. “Do you think you could conquer Minecerva without *my* aid? Fool! Never have you possessed my might, my abilities, my cravings! I will rule the mortal realm because I desire it above all else, but you, my pretty sister, you desire nothing more than to show superior intelligence. You think you are so much better than me.”

“I know it!” she screamed. “Test me, and I will prove it!”

Power needed no more urging. He vaulted from his throne, and he and Resolve were locked in deadly combat, and all the other gods cheered them on, not caring who won, but reveling in the fight.

Suddenly, the room was consumed with a calming scent that made the gods shudder, and the two combatants pulled apart to see who had interrupted them.

Peace stood in the center of the chamber. “Why do you seek to kill one another?” she asked, her ageless voice trembling with sorrow.

“Get away, sister!” yelled Resolve. “No one asked you here.”

Peace stepped closer. “No high god has ever turned

against another. Why do you do this now? You can still return to the heavenly palace. You can still greet the Golden King when he returns. Come back to us, brothers and sisters. Come back!"

"We do not want to come back to you," sneered Resolve. "That is the last thing any of us want."

Peace looked slowly around at all her brothers and sisters, begging them mutely, with her deep, sorrowful gaze, to return with her to their role as stewards and not destroyers of Minecerva. But Terror grinned and laughed in her face, Destruction blew a hole through the wall and disappeared into the depths of Karaka, Despair stumbled about the room, avoiding her gaze and refusing to look up from the floor.

At last, the eyes of Peace fell upon her sister Passion. "My darling," she said, "you were once one of the greatest goddesses of all. You filled mankind with the joy of living, you led them to the pleasures of life and taught them to find comfort in a world of trial. Why do you abuse this now? Why do you find pleasure in excess? Come home with me – I know you must miss all your sisters, and Charity most of all."

Passion's eyes narrowed and her red lips curled in disgust. "That little girl always thought she was better than me. You ask why I love excess? It was she who forced me into it! She urged mankind against their own pleasures and made them think they could find happiness by living self-abnegating lives. I had to break through their control, shatter their defenses, rip away their ideas of love, for them to even pay attention to me! And now, I like it. I need never control myself again."

“Do you enjoy living against your natures?” cried out Peace, looking between Resolve, Passion, and Power, at a loss to understand their thoughts. “Can you really take pleasure in killing one another?”

It was in the next moment that Power turned himself, irrevocably, from the path of the Golden King. It was in the next moment that his heart sealed without a crack against the divine warmth that was coming to engulf all of Minecerva. For when Peace had uttered her last cry of desperate love, her offer of cleansing Mercy, her entreatment of lasting peace, Power took up the white whip of Resolve and lashed it in full fury against his eldest sister, and for the first time in Minecerva’s history, one high god killed another.

Peace crumpled to the floor of the palace, and Power stood over her, triumphant, proud, and desperately handsome, and he looked triumphantly at Resolve. “Do you doubt now that I have the power to defeat my enemies?”

Her face was frozen in shock, but then a stern smile slowly suffused her lips. “I do not,” she said quietly. “I will never doubt again.”

Destruction whirled in through the hole he had made in the wall. “I’ve just been to the desert again, the oasis, you know, with the disappearing wizard. Looking for the demi-god, you know.”

“Well? What of the demi-god?”

Destruction vibrated. “He remains hidden, though one of his companions appeared at the oasis. She found a hidden steed of that hermit’s, and has ridden him with furious pace back to Drian.”

“What! And you did not stop her?”

Suddenly, Destruction caught sight of his sister's body lying dead on the ground. "Haha!" he laughed aloud, pointing jubilantly at her, and seeming to forget what he had been saying; he and Terror went back to playing their inane game of flinging objects into Destruction's vortex.

Power turned away in disgust from his sister's body, forgetting it, content to let it grow damp and mold into the floor with all the papers, for his restless mind was turned to other things now.

He had thought Lavendier was dead – he thought he had seen her die in the desert – but even had he thought her alive, he would have had no use for her, now that she strove so hard against his temptations. Any of the princesses were beyond his use now, physically and spiritually, and he put them from his mind. It was the demi-god who mattered – the demi-god he wanted. It was his birth-right, the gift of combining the divine and the human, that allowed Garrity the ability to defy Power, and it was this gift that Power craved. Then he really would have ultimate command over the spiritual and physical.

"If one has left their refuge, wherever they are, then more will follow soon! Scan all the desert, all my lands, and the entire landscape of Mestraff! Deploy as many gorgans as you need, but find me that demi-god!"

## A New Mother

**I**n paradise, Jacian's little brain whirled its well-worn gears. As he seemed to all intents and purposes to be care-freely piling rocks on the lakeshore, he was in fact running through the details of his encounter with the monster in the cave.

In his memory, he saw the tunnel mysteriously open in the rock wall. He saw the light at the end that playfully beckoned him down the shaft. And then, in his trembling memory, he saw the monster leap out of the shadows and chase him into the daylight, and before he knew what was happening, Aunt Laven's arms engulfed him, and he was safe again. The memory ended and he opened his eyes and stared at the rocks.

He had laid them out as a map. This rock represented the giant cliff they passed before they started climbing. This white one was the lake at the bottom. This gray-speckled, flat one was the cave. He stood up, picked up the bread he had tucked in his pocket at breakfast, and slipped away from his mother and aunts.

The journey was much longer than he remembered, and long before he arrived at the cave, the little prince was dragging his feet. On their previous journeys, Garrity would have called a rest, or someone would have carried him by now, but a rest sounded boring. He wanted to get to the cave.

At last, his little legs reached it. He had a good head for directions for a five-year-old, though perhaps there was a greater power guiding him. None of the gods, good or evil, paid him any mind, for they could not see inside paradise, and knew nothing of what was in the cave, but perhaps it was a power above and beyond even their own.

He crept into the dark, the light from without suffusing the space with gray shadow, and once again, there was the magical opening that Lavendier had not seen. He tiptoed close, his heart beating like a drum.

No monster appeared. He climbed into the opening, which was a few feet above the ground, and crawled forward on his hands and knees. The light at the end grew brighter and brighter... until at last, he reached it.

The most beautiful woman he had ever seen – even more lovely than his own mother – was waiting for him. Dressed all in silver, and shining with a white light, her arms were stretched out to him, and in them was the most magnificent blade. Light radiated from it as from the sun.

“Is it for me?” he asked.

“It is for your father.” Her voice was the music of violins.

“Can I take it to him?”

“Yes, my dear child. As soon as you can. It is mine, you know, and it will save your world.”

“What did you use it for?”



“It was my son’s, and it pierced my heart, right here,” on her breast was a rose, and she covered it reverently with her white hand. “Seven times it pierced me, but I did not die. And neither will you, my love. Not till you have lived a full, loving life.”

“I don’t want to live life!” he exclaimed all of a sudden. “I want to stay here with you forever!”

“Oh my darling!” Her arms went out to him, and stooping over his head, she kissed his brow. “I will always be with you. And when you leave this world, I myself will take your hand and lead you from it. But you must never break faith with me, or I will not be able to return for you.”

“I promise!” he breathed; his heart, in that moment, knit to hers for eternity. Then she faded away and, dragging the beautiful blade in his small hands, he backed his way out of the cave.

Just as he reached the outer cavern and was dropping his short legs to the ground, the frightful creature of before, with horns and a tail, flung itself out of the cave, snarling and biting. Jacian swung the sword and with one lucky hit, chopped off its head, and it rolled across the floor. Then both it and the body, which was draping out of the wall, disappeared, and the hole too, was gone.

\* \* \*

Jacian returned to camp at nightfall, dragging the sword as he went, because it was too heavy for him to hold up.

“I got this from the lady in the cave,” he announced to Aunt Viol.

“Where have you been?” she cried at sight of him.

“Everyone is searching everywhere for you.” Without waiting for an answer, she wound a horn at her side, and Cila, Garrity, and Adlena ran up to them from all directions. The mother swept her son into her arms, pressing him tight to her heart.

“Where did you go? Why would you leave? I’ve been so frightened all day!” she cried.

“I’m sorry mother. I met my other mother, and she gave me this sword to give to father.”

“What do you mean your other mother? I’m your only one, darling.”

“No,” he shook his head. “I’m hungry.”

\* \* \*

It was truly a magnificent blade. Garrity hefted it, and though perfectly balanced, it was too heavy for him to wield. He wondered how Jacian had managed to drag it, let alone bear it all the way down from the mountains. It was clearly a magical blade, and Jacian said they had to bring it to the king.

“Right away,” he said. “It’s going to save the world.”

Garrity had learned to let go of his doubt and objections when it came to Adlena’s visions or the commands of the gods. And now the fact that the little boy may have encountered a divine being, and received a prophetic appointment, did not seem unthinkable. He questioned Jacian about it thoroughly, several times, and each time, the little boy’s account was exactly the same. Down to the smallest detail, his story did not once alter. *That* was impossible, so Garrity gave in to the truth of the tale.

“But how are we supposed to get home to your father?” he demanded. It might take months to go back again, but Jacian was insistent that they get home quickly.

“We take a boat,” he explained simply. “Through the mountains there.” He pointed to the east, and Garrity rumbled the boy’s hair, puzzled.

Sure enough, when Garrity inspected the place the next day, he found a wide, deep rivulet that passed through a tunnel in the cliff. He shook his head – surely, that boy had his mother’s Dryad blood running strongly in his veins. A small boat would take them through the tunnel, and if it continued to flow more or less in the same direction, it would meet the Rordan below Kelta, bringing them to Drian in only a matter of days. Of course, it might not, but they had to go home sometime, and they would not pass through Karaka again if he could help it.

So, he constructed a raft. It took him and Viol three days, but when it was finished, it was strong, durable, and river-worthy.

When Adlena asked him, the night he began, ‘why’, he could only look fully and honestly into her eyes, and shrug helplessly. “I think I am powerless,” he said at last. “You and your family have undone me. Adlee, my queen,” the combination of the informal and formal titles, stumbling feelingly from his lips, expressed more than any words; he fell to his knees and caught the hem of her skirt in his war-hardened hands. “I am afraid of you – and you know it. You see my façade – my divinity, and you know the sham that it is. Truly, my lady,” his upturned face was that of a lost child’s – a son without a mother. “When you, or any of your family, command me – I can only obey. I have

fallen even beneath the child.”

His solemnity was so encompassing, his grasp of the transcendent so overwhelming, that she smiled at him, and lightly lowered herself to the ground.

“Sit down,” she told him, “and be not so dramatic... All your life, you have lived without love, and now that you have found it, it frightens you. That has certainly been my experience.”

“But it is more than love,” he said fervently, to try to explain his intense connection to her, the prince, her sisters, and her husband, but he caught himself. The word ‘love,’ spoken aloud, spell-bound him with longing, pain, and fear. He had thought it was more than love that knit him to these people, but now that he spoke it, he realized that that was all it was. And it was enough. It was more than enough, and he had never before been so fulfilled as he was in that moment.

Viol came over briefly to hand Lillian, fussing, to her mother, and Garrity waited until she left before he spoke again. “But it is a bit more, I think. More than the love I hold for him, I have to listen to your son,” he told her. “I think Jacquee has your inner sight.”

“Ah. And so if he says we must go home, you believe him?”

“Why not?” he laughed. “Why not listen to a child, after all that we have seen and done? Is that any more fantastic than a god or a dream or a secret land? Fate has been guiding us every step of the way, leading us in visions and working through our weaknesses. Who is more weak than the little prince?”

Adlena glanced significantly at the small bundle at her

breast, and Garrity smiled at the light blond fuzz that dusted the sweet-smelling head.

“Not her,” he said. “Lillian is our secret strength.”

## The Red Walls of Drian

**M**elcant had, on the evening of the second day, at great speed, crossed the River Rordan and arrived at Fort Saskatchan. It was heavily guarded, and the soldiers received Princess Lavendier with all the grace that her royal name commanded. They offered her a room for the night, but she shook her head, and only made a brief stop to inquire after affairs in Drian.

They answered her questions about how Trinian had retaken Drian shortly after her departure, and how her brother was, now, traveling abroad on diplomatic journeys in the east.

There was great curiosity about the nature of her return, and the fate of her companions who had set forth with her. However, no one there had rank or authority to question her, so that their curiosity remained unsated.

Her brief presence led to speculation and crude jokes on the part of the men, for Dascerice was among the soldiers assigned to the fort, and while she sat upon Melcant at the gate, conferring with the captain of the fort, he approached

them with self-assured expectation.

“Princess, you are safe! How fortunate we are to receive you. Come in, and rest yourself for the night. I’m sure I can find you a comfortable bed to sleep in.”

She nodded at him politely, it with such an alteration in her manner that she quenched any further attempts, on his part, to renew his informal addresses.

Dascerice had bragged before to his compatriots of his royal exploits, and so now, embarrassed, he spread rumors of the princess’s haughtiness and disdain for a simple soldier. “She didn’t know how good she had it,” he told them.

Before the sun had set, Princess Lavendier was thundering away over the horizon, and in no time at all, the great red city of Drian rose out of the iridescent ground and glistened in the setting sun. The round domes of Korem Palace gleamed with streaks of vermillion, and the city walls were pale red sand-stone, ruby spires and brick smokestacks peaking into the reddening sky.

She was home.

Lavendier rode up to the great gate of Drian, with its teal paint border pealed and tarnished, and the gate-keeper hailed her, his gray dwarfish head sticking up above the bulwark.

“I am Princess Lavendier, ridden a great distance to bring tidings to her brother, King Trinian of Drian!”

“Have you a pass to enter the city?” inquired Graybeard.

“No, we have never needed one before. Why should I have one now?”

“All t’citizens of Drian are required t’have passes t’exit and enter the city, by order of the steward. Withoutun, I

cannot let you in.”

“But I am the Princess Lavendier. This is my home! I have an urgent message for my brother.”

The dwarf, however, was firm and would not open the gate. Lavendier felt her weary heart swell with fear and panic.

“Please! Go to my brother and tell him that I am here. He can come and look at me, and he will grant me entrance!”

“The king istno here right now.”

“I know that. I mean my brother Afias.”

“He istno here right now.”

Her panic grew, but then Melcant spoke quietly under his breath, so the man on the wall would not hear him. “Is there no one else in the city who would recognize you?” asked the horse. “No one besides your brothers in a seat of power?”

“Astren. Astren would recognize me.” She raised her voice. “Is Lord Astren here?”

“He is. He ist master of the city.”

“Please send him this message, “The Princess Lavendier has arrived and requests entrance into the city with tidings of terrible weight.”

“I wilt tell him, but your answer mayno take a long while.”

It did, in fact, take until the next morning. Lavendier and Melcant sat without the city gates, within sight of her home, unable to enter or communicate with anyone. The importance of her message nearly drove the princess mad, and she did not sleep all night. To have sped with all haste, traversed the land in two days time, only to be thwarted by her own people! She spent all night calling up to Graybeard and demanding to see Astren.



Astren came out to her at mid-morning the next day, when the sun was already high in the sky. He came out with a retinue of soldiers and servants, and even two of his hunting dogs. He was regally robed in red velvet and green satin, and a few servants preceded him to erect a tent for their meeting.

He insisted she wait while everything was prepared by servants.

“It’s protocol,” he told her, and Lavendier bit her tongue impatiently, reminding herself that he was ignorant of her message. Not until they were comfortably seated on cushions, and Astren had offered the princess a glass of wine, which she anxiously refused, did he allow her to speak.

“My lord,” she said, “you cannot know the distance I have traveled with all haste to bring you an urgent message from the Queen and her captain.”

“Is this message, then, of a military nature?” asked Astren.

“It is.”

“Then such a matter must come before the council. I will escort you to the throne room myself.”

Astren called for his attendants to parade into the city, then gave her his arm, and led her in state through the streets of Drian. Perhaps he expected her to compliment them on their fast recovery, or marvel at the majesty of the place after being absent so long, for he looked at her with an expectant, and then an aggrieved, air, but Lavendier was struck, rather, with the sight of the destruction that still remained. And above all, she was only relieved to be home at last, and to hand off the importance of her

communication to capable hands. She nearly pranced with impatience to meet the council.

Melcant plodded patiently behind, guided by one of the stable hands.

The aged council – men who had always sat around the table, but whom she had never truly looked at before – sat about their business in the throne room, concluding their mid-morning meal and discussing the financial logistics of moving the Healory closer to the habitable regions of the city. They had just decided against such an extravagant policy, in favor of the fact that the current location of the Healory was closer to the palace; “And after all,” they reflected, “why disrupt the system?”

The wise council leaned back in their seats, filled with good food and calm complacency, and they were very pleased to see such a pretty, fresh face enter the room, even if it was muddy and tousled. They received her with a blend of grandfatherly affection and royal grace, hardly recognizing the proud woman who used - in extravagant dress, makeup, and coronets - to disrupt their meetings.

They put her at her former seat but she did not sit down. With a force of passion and relief, she let out the entire story, bequeathing it into their capable hands.

## A Friendship Forged

**L**avendier erupted in anger from the throne room and fled to the royal gardens, where she stormed up and down the large lawn. According to her wishes, the stable boy had left Melcant tied up there, and he lay in repose beneath an apple tree, watching her.

She whirled on him. "What can I do?" she demanded. "They're idiots. They don't believe me." Her heart tightened: saying it aloud did not make their complacency any more understandable, and she growled between clenched teeth, looking like a tiger about to bite off the head of a rabbit.

Melcant stood slowly, wearily, and in self-chastisement, she noticed for the first time how utterly exhausted he was. His sweat from the previous day had dried upon him in lathers and his whole underside was caked with mud. Through the entire journey, he had never slept, and now the fatigue was washing over him. He came over and gently caressed her cheek.

"Bathe," he said, "rest. I can hardly look at you but my

heart breaks. In all the time I have known you, you have never looked so tired. When you are yourself again, you will think of a way.”

Now her heart warmed and she wrapped her arms around him. “And you look no better. Come, I will set you up in the stables first. You deserve a good rubbing down.”

When they arrived in the warm, fragrant stalls, Lavendier had a moment of difficulty with the stable master, who did not recognize her without any of her royal finery, but when she gave the new password, which Astren had graciously communicated to her, he apologized profusely, and offered to take Melcant to his stall and rub him down personally. Lavendier, who would have preferred to care for her friend herself, saw in his eyes that he wanted her to rest, for he knew she would not have been able to even lift the brush, let alone wipe him down.

So the princess made her tired way to her own chambers, which she found closed up and inaccessible. This caused another moment of intense annoyance, but she curbed it, and looking round for a maid, found the housekeeper, who did immediately recognize her, and had a moment of intense panic, believing that the entire royal family had returned without warning. But when Lavendier put her mind to rest on that point, the good woman immediately began preparing the princess’s room. As Lavendier was very patient, which pleasantly surprised the housekeeper and warmed her toward the princess, who had before been so selfish and demanding, she lost no time in laying out the bed, and soon had Lavendier washed, fed, and sound asleep between soft covers.

\* \* \*

Lavendier awakened sweetly to the trilling of birds, and for a moment, believed she was lying on the plains of paradise. Then reality returned, and she arose in a panic, but it is difficult to startle upright in a lush and comfortable bed, so that she felt like a lost sailor struggling to shore as she thrashed about between the sheets. The maid heard her and entered.

“Are you alright, my lady?”

“Oh yes!” said Lavendier blushing, and sitting down, defeated, on the edge, “just out of my element, I suppose.”

The maid smiled, and taking her hand, helped her down. “First things first,” she said, in a wholesome, practical way, “we must get you clothed and fed, and dressed to face the day.”

Lavendier felt relief as she looked into those friendly brown eyes. She had never before appreciated this joyful, round-faced maid, who had waited cheerfully on her for years; but now she valued the advice that she take each moment as it comes. She decided to dress and eat, and then she would go back to the steward and this time, convince him of the impending threat. With new resolution, she donned one of her favorite gowns – which was less elaborately fancy than she once used to wear, but still be-decked with floral patterns and a sweeping train – and the finery made her feel a little better, more confident, and more herself.

As she ate her breakfast, pondering the problem of how to convince Astren to believe her, Lavendier went out onto her balcony that overlooked the city, and in the light of

the new day, she noticed again, with renewed attention, the terrible desolation of the siege. Piles of untended rubble stood sentry over the roads, spires and towers she remembered standing proud against the sky were nowhere to be seen, and the very road beneath her feet was riddled with pits. To her virgin sight, she noticed nothing of the steps that had already been taken to restore the beauty she so fondly remembered, but saw and mourned for the brokenness and ugliness.

A figure on the road below her, climbing up the incline toward the palace, caught her attention, and she looked twice, doubting her sight. Trinian's former best friend, Trigent, was making his way to the palace, and surprised, she called out to him, and he pulled up short in astonishment.

"Wait there a moment," she commanded. "I will come down to you."

"Princess Lavendier," the words rolled with difficulty from his lips when she met him on the road, and he gave an awkward bow. In their youth, he had always known her as Laven, and in those days, he never enjoyed speaking to her. Now, trapped before her, it was clear he was courteous to her only as a princess and a lady, and that he yearned to brush past and hurry on.

She stood awkwardly before him, not sure what to say; but he was a familiar face, and a link to her family, and she desperately wished to speak with him. "How are you?" she said.

Trigent's eyebrows went up, and in confusion, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and boyishly balanced himself on one leg. Then, realizing how he must appear, quickly erected himself. "I am fine. Thank you. Your highness. I

am on my way to see Lord Astren. We have an appointment.”

She blinked in surprise, but carefully did not show it in her expression. “Oh. I am on my way there now. Would you care to accompany me?”

He bowed his head and extended his arm, and they walked down the path together. But Lavendier’s courage failed her after that, for he was so quiet, and she blushed to realize how he must remember her. So she turned her mind to think how she would convince Astren.

The steward was busy concluding another appointment before his meeting with Trigent, and he had no room in his schedule that morning for Lavendier. But she was a princess, and he could not turn her away, so he only ignored her, hoping she would give up and depart. None of the other councilors were in the room.

The steward was meeting with Cartnol, the general in command of Drian’s army, during Phestite’s absence, and the general and steward spoke in moderated tones, only the vague echoes of their speech reverberating from the walls and columns of the room. When at last they parted, Cartnol strode from the chamber with a brisk, hasty step and Astren made a gesture for Trigent to approach. But Lavendier, not caring how rude or hasty she appeared, leapt up and preceded the farmer.

Confused and uncomfortable, Trigent stood back waiting, and Astren listened to her with a resigned sigh. She put her case before him as she had the day before, detailing the coming attack, warning him of the enemy’s quick approach, and chastising him that even if she were wrong, it were criminal not to be prepared. But Astren was

immovable. He told her he did not believe in Drakans, and furthermore, he did not believe the enemy had gorgans left to take the city. Lavendier explained how she had heard the voices of men – that perhaps Kelta had emptied itself to raid Drian. But he only shook his head. Why would Kelta attack through Drakans, when they might descend straight down the Rordan? It was unthinkable, he insisted, and he did not have time to listen to such talk.

His tone angered her, for it implied that she was a petty child, who had ridden all that way under the delusion of a fantasy. When she said this, he argued she could not have ridden so far as she said, and must have been hiding somewhere near Drian, and not beyond Karaka, as she said. This clear falsehood which discredited the rest of her story even further, and he had no mind to listen to her anymore. Realizing that he was only listening to her to humor her, and nothing she could say would convince him, she returned to the long table and sat wringing her hands and frowning her brow, ready to weep with frustration.

Trigent approached Astren who, being more irritated than usual, smiled all the more brightly, and made Trigent uncomfortable. The young man shuffled his feet, and looked back at Lavendier.

“Well,” said Astren, “Let us talk about farming. Have you better news for me than the princess?”

Since Trinian had departed, Trigent had gained access to the throne room by telling the steward he was there to advise him about the outlying farms, as Trinian had told him to do, but he was truly there to keep an eye on Astren, and the safety of the city.

Trigent shortened his usual narrative to merely a few



sentences, then excused himself from Astren, who was only too happy to be left alone, and Trigent approached Lavendier.

“My Lady,” he said, and she looked up in surprise. “Can we speak?”

Her face brightened. Yes, she very much wanted to speak to someone, anyone, who would listen. Stuck inside her own thoughts, she was only going round in circles. She led him to the Royal Gardens, and there they followed the winding paths.

“Your brother wanted me to keep an eye on matters of state in his absence,” said Trigent.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “He did? That makes me feel better. Astren will not listen to me, and I am at a loss what to do. Are you authorized to command an army? Did my brother appoint you for that?”

“I am not sure,” he said sheepishly. “My appointment is more of a secret than not.” He felt like he was in a dream, having this conversation with the empty-headed sister of Trinian. But she was not simpering or batting her eyelashes now, and he found himself ready to believe her story.

She let out a quick breath. “Oh, we need the army! Or this city will fall.”

She stopped suddenly and faced him, taking him aback with the seriousness of her gaze. “The god of Karaka is going to attack again, but Drian has had no warning of the army’s approach, so they have made no preparations. Lord Astren will not believe me that they are coming. But they are coming, and if they do, Drian will suffer even more than she has already.” Her sincerity was both genuine and gripping, and it drew him in. “Our people will all die, and

our leaders, unprepared, will have no choice but to stand by, watch, and be slaughtered themselves.”

“Alright. Go on. How do you know they will attack?”

“I have traveled through the enemy’s lands, and I have heard it straight from his soldiers.”

“You – what?”

“Yes, it is true. They will travel through the shadowlands.”

“Well, I...I see why Lord Astren did not believe you.”

Lavendier sighed and turned angrily away, chastising herself for not finding a more convincing way to tell the tale.

“No, no! You misunderstand: I believe you.”

She looked at him in surprise, her brown eyes flooded with hope. He was surprised too, and looked at her quizzically. “You are so different now. Not at all as you were before.”

She nodded. “I know. And what I told Lord Astren is true. Drian will fall if we do nothing.”

“Can *you* not command the army?”

Lavendier caught her breath. “Can I?”

“I believe you outrank Lord Astren.”

“This is why I need help. I need someone to advise me. I am royalty, but with no idea how to be royal.”

“I will help you, though I know no more than you do. King Trinian left Lord Astren in command of the city, and you cannot simply undermine the command of the king. But perhaps we can get around that. I do have authority from Trinian, so we can use that if need be. But to take control of the army, I might have to stage a coup, and it seems that that would take too much time.” He thought

for a moment. "Come with me."

Trigent led Lavendier to the Library of Korem, a chamber she had never visited in the five years she lived there, where they approached the scholar in the dark building, who sat behind his desk.

"We need the files on royal protocols," said Trigent.

"Those are in the deepest undercroft, where we keep the Scrolls of the Ages. No one needs those," said the ancient scholar, dismissively.

"We do," said Trigent, "This is the Princess Makopola of Drian, and she requests them."

It was the first time Lavendier had heard her full title used in an official capacity, and it awed her: the full importance of her position impressing itself upon her in its totality. 'Makopola' meant she was the eldest princess, and it had been used at her coronation. She had only ever thought of it as another proof of her pretty importance, but now she understood that it could bequeath her power and credibility, and that she was not merely another princess.

The scholar was sufficiently impressed, and led them deep into the bowels of the undercroft, where they pulled out the scrolls on royal law and protocol. Returning to the palace, they poured over them in detail, and eventually, after hours of searching, Lavendier found it. The law read, "If any member of the Royal family, sharing at that time in the grace of the Ruling Monarch, chooses to override an official of the Monarch's appointment, he or she may do so, as long as the override is temporary and of monumental importance, and the Monarch is notified of the override as soon as possible. Without such deferments, the overrider is subject to receive the full measure of the Monarch's

displeasure.”

“Yes,” said Trigent, “we have found our answer, my lady. You are a member of the Royal family, in the grace of the king, and this matter is of ‘monumental importance.’ And you have no intentions of keeping this from your brother.”

“Well, I am not so sure,” said Lavendier guiltily.

“What do you mean?”

“When my brother sent me away, I used harsh words against him, and he chided me. We fought as no brother and sister should. I am not sure I am truly in his good grace.”

Trigent smiled at her. “Your scrupulosity does you credit, and I cannot get over how different of a person you are. But, my princess, siblings fight, and he sent you away for your own protection – not in banishment or public disfavor. You need have no fear regarding that stipulation of the document.”

Lavendier smiled in relief, and took a deep breath. “Very well,” she said, “so then.”

## Princess Makapola

**L**avender appointed Trigent as her personal squire, and their first action was to dispatch a messenger, with one guard to accompany him, into the wilds of Drian to find Trinian and bring him home.

Then Trigent advised her to place her faith in General Cartnol. "I have heard him in conference with Lord Astren. He is faithful to the King, and seems to hold the safety of Drian as his closest interest."

When she sent for him – which was what Trigent instructed her to do, for he said that "a princess must not walk amongst the barracks of boisterous soldiers. She must protect her reputation above all else to maintain respect from the men;" – the general came immediately.

She received him in the palace sitting room, which had been only recently opened for her use, and he knelt before her. "My Lady, your highness, my princess," he stumbled over his words, out of his element in a fine sitting room before a royal lady.

"General," she said, "there is an army approaching from

Karaka to attempt, once more, to conquer Drian.”

“My Lady?”

“Lord Astren does not believe it and will not mobilize the army. But it is true and the army must be mobilized.”

The general looked at her a long moment in confusion. “Your highness, if what you say is true...”

“It is true.”

“How do you know it?”

“I have it on good authority. I have been through Karaka; I have crossed those watery plains and climbed the mountains beyond. I have been through terror, death, and life again to discover this news and bring it back to Drian. I did not know, when I left the city, why I was sent away, but I see now that all along greater powers guided my paths. And yet here I return miraculously, it seems, from beyond the realm of men, to deliver a message that can save our city, and I encounter doubt and disloyalty in the council. It is not to my liking that I must go over their heads; but it is my intention, for I am determined to save the city.”

Suddenly Lord Astren, having heard that the princess had summoned the head general to her chambers, and fearing the consequences of her rash actions, burst into the room, his kindly face discomposed with helpless, raging alarm as he glared at her from beneath raised brows. “Princess Lavendier, have you no respect for the council?”

“Lord Astren,” said Lavendier, “I have called General Cartnol here in order to protect—”

“If you go against the council, you are battling forces with which you *cannot* reckon. This council has stood for two hundred years, and a pretty girl with an ancient title

is not going to upheave its authority in the space of two days.”

“Authority is irrelevant if an enemy truly marches upon our city!”

“Enemy! There is no enemy! We have heard nothing, we have seen nothing, and no army marches through a dead shadowland!”

He was a confused old man, trying to ignore things he could not understand, and desperate to retain his grip on what he did. He was not insensible to the fear of an approaching army – on the contrary, that fear consumed and drove him, so that he refused to accept the truth of Lavendier’s warnings. If there really were an army approaching, it would be his duty to muster and send out forces against it, but he quaked before such a duty. He nestled into the fantasy that it was far more likely that no threat approached, and his anger and denial grew with each attempt to prove him wrong, so that he now felt as if there was a personal vendetta arrayed against him. “We shall see how many people in this city believe you and listen. You will lead a skeleton of a contingent, and you will face nothing. And when your brother returns –”

“He will applaud and praise you, your highness, for your circumspect foresight.” General Cartnol stood and faced the steward. “Lord Astren, you have ruled this country well for fifty years, and thus I am inclined to believe that you are not maliciously planning its downfall. Be that as it may, the royal family has first power in this land. And as general of the king’s army, I will personally see to it that every soldier of the land follows Princess Makapola Lavendier to war. You would do well not to stand in her

way.”

Lavendier shone with gratitude, and said kindly, “I will keep the council apprised of my actions.”

Shaken in his power, yet unable to relinquish his stubborn perceptions, Lord Astren shuffled from the room. He had no practice in changing the way he saw the world, and it was too late for him to learn now.

As soon as he was gone, Lavendier turned to Cartnol. “I have already sent for Trinian, but he will not return in time.”

“I am sure he will return as soon as possible.”

“But will it be soon enough? Does anyone have news of Prince Afias?”

“Only Astren would have that information, my lady.”

“Then Trigent, you must get it. Follow him.” Trigent bowed, and hurried out.

Awhile later, her squire returned, accompanied by a tall, thin companion, with long legs. “My lady, this man Horans carries the news you seek. Lord Astren would not speak to me, but when this man arrived, he sent him to you.”

Horans bowed deeply, impressed at being received by such a fair princess. “My lady, I carry a message from Prince Afias. It runs thus: ‘I remain in South Drian, Lord Steward, for now, at your bidding. But my heart yearns to return home. Lady Adrea and I are engaged, and we await your blessing. Should you or my brother need us, we are at your disposal.’”

Tears actually sprang to Lavendier’s eyes on hearing the words of her brother. She and Afias had always been bitter antagonists, their mutual stubbornness a flickering fire upon which they piled constant fuel, but nevertheless, he



was her home. Despite her rebellion and ill-repute, he had always given her a rook to live under, and hearing his words, vicariously delivered, brought him so near she felt she could touch him. "When do you return to him?"

"First thing in the morning, my lady, with your response."

She nodded, swallowing her tears. "Very well. You will say this: 'Message from Princess Makopola Lavendier. I am returned to Drian to save her from a dire fate. Drian is about to be overrun by the enemy, and I have not the forces to drive him back alone. I have sent for Trinian, but still, it is not enough, and he is absent. Return, dear brother, and meet the enemy from the rear. They will not expect it. When you arrive, we will already be at war.'"



XVI

TERROR

*“Do not be afraid; our fate  
Cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.”*

*- Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy*



## The Third Battle for Drian - Part 1: Begin

**T**he Army of Drian stood in the outer courtyard of the Palace of Korem, between the barred, wooden, red gates of the Drinian city wall and the iron barred gates of the palace. They awaited the appearance of their general and wondered amongst themselves how a woman - the princess Lavendier, none the less, whom they all knew by ill-repute - could possibly lead them to victory.

Suddenly, a great white horse appeared on the brow of the swell, climbing with slow and regal steps to the drawbridge, alone and flashing in the sunlight. A rider, clad in the gold of the fields and the blue of the sky, colored over with the blue and silver armor of Drian, and adorned with a silver crown of fourteen stars, sat astride him.

“Behold!” cried the voice of Trigent, riding beside Lavendier as her squire, and holding aloft the blue, gold, and white banner of Drian, “the Maid of Drian! Princess Makapola Lavendier!”

“Brothers!” cried the voice of Lavendier, carrying over the heads of the army, ringing in the ears of every man: stronger, braver, and nobler than they could have imagined any woman’s voice. “I call you here today to face an enemy you all know, you all have fought, and you all have cast down. I call you here today because once again he threatens our city, and once again, we must safeguard our homes and our families.”

The army was bent forward, listening intently. “My brother our king returns here to lead us, but the enemy is swifter, and outdistances him. Who will lead you against these bloodthirsty, relentless hordes? Who but a member of the Royal Family? I, Princess Makopola Lavendier, claim today the right to defend my home, my people, my country, and to wage war against the evil god!

“Once...our city fell,” she said, with emotion, “but never again!” and here, at last, the men cheered. They cheered for their country, and they cheered for their homes, and they cheered for the heartache they determined never to feel again.

“We won back our country, we will conquer again!” Cheers. “We will conquer for Drian, and for our king, and for our gods!” Cheers drowned any further speech. They were cheering their coming and past victories, their Royal Family, and somehow, the age-old concept of the gods broke through into their minds, and they cheered for that. They cheered for a victory for something greater than themselves.

When it at last subsided, she continued, with Trigent lifting high the banner, “Remember, brothers. Today, I ask you to remember. Remember your wives and your

children; remember your sisters and mothers. Remember your love of your city. Remember!" The thundering roar was deafening. "We will fight with the steadfastness of the midday sky; with the brilliance of the ripe golden fields; we will conquer and there will be the whiteness of victory upon that field today! We will conquer!"

Forgotten then were any ill-thoughts of the princess, for who she had been no longer mattered to them, but only that she would lead them in victory against the enemy. And the cheers that erupted stormed the skies above, ringing and reverberating against the red walls, so that when the army of the enemy emerged from the land of shadows, it was greeted by a great, concerted roar that seemed to be the wails of a million blood-thirsty souls.

\* \* \*

The soldiers of Kelta, weak and trembling from their journey, reared back at the noise. Their march through the land of ghosts had been harrowing, maddening, a veritable journey through hell, so that their nerves were driven to a pitch, and now they threw up their weapons in the brilliant sunlight before an invisible army.

And that might have been the end, before there was even a beginning, so great was their superstition, had Farsooth not kept his head and retained his deep fear of Power, for he was afraid of no ghosts or ghouls – only the shadowy presence of Power, which consumed him and drove all his actions. Therefore, he seized his own weapon, and when the cries of the Drian soldiers lessened, he screamed at his men that what they heard was but the cries of flesh

and blood, of an unseen but not unreachable army, an army that had revealed itself to its approaching enemy – revealed its numbers and intensity.

“Pick up your swords, you cowards! Do you fear men – flesh and blood men? Do you fear spirits, when you are backed by the greatest spirit of all, filling you with power and strength beyond this world? You are cowards, you are women! We are faced with an army of great number, but we are fourteen hundred strong! Prove yourselves and nerve yourselves!”

\* \* \*

Lavendier was determined that the battle take place nowhere near the homes of the city. She marched her army outside the city gates and to the plains of Drian. Her home had once been defiled with the carcasses of beasts – but never again. The city would remain safe and clean, a beacon beckoning the victorious men back into her waiting arms.

The morning shone bright in her heart as she sent out the fist charge, protected from above by a rain of spears, and her men acquitted themselves beyond her wildest hopes. They decimated Farsooth’s first wave, rising victorious out of the first clash.

Through it all, she attributed nothing to their own merit. She did not think, for even a second, that it was her passion which drove her men above and beyond, and when the second volley of the enemy soldiers raced toward them, and she released her own second wave, the Drinians again returned to her victorious. So it went on through the



morning and afternoon of that first day.

She observed all from the rear of the army, coordinating the soirees on a strategy board, and holding back most of the army for the final conflict, for Cartnol had warned her that eventually, Farsooth would launch an all-out attack.

“He wants us to exhaust ourselves the first few days, my lady, but we cannot fall for such a cheap trick.”

“I thought that in the first battle for Drian the entire army attacked at once?”

He nodded. “The enemy was confident of himself then – he thought Drian would be easy prey to his onslaught – and sadly, he was correct. For then, he had more soldiers than he does now, and besides that, they were gorgans. This – an army of almost equal size – is a different game, your highness.”

\* \* \*

From their black seats in Power’s palace, the evil gods noticed the princess’s advantage on the field, for they were watching all through an enchanted mirror on the wall. At the beginning of the conflict, they had rejoiced in an easy victory, but now, they sat forward nervously on their seats, biting their nails.

“Is this how you train your warriors?” cried Terror, foaming at the mouth, his habitual grin turned to a sneer. Destruction kicked the wall, caved in a portion of the chamber, and screamed in fury.

Power was white with rage, and he turned it against his brothers. “If I could cross that river, I’d show them how it is done. Ah!” he cried, clutching his chest as if he

had a heart, and it were wringing itself inside of him with impatience, “where is that demi-god? If I could but take his birthright, I would know how to control these petty Keltians!”

“Why don’t you lead this fight yourself?” taunted Destruction. “Why are you so afraid of Rordan?”

Power whirled on him. “You don’t know what you’re talking about! You feared him plenty when he was turned against you!”

“Time is almost up, Power,” said Passion softly. “What have you to lose by facing a minor god? The Golden King is almost here, and you cannot prevent his coming unless you own Drian. You have dragged us all into your deadly bargain – if Trinian does not kill you first, I will. I swear I will. Face Rordan – put him in his place!”

After one hate-filled glance at all of them, Power stormed from the chamber, draining himself as he dragged his heavy, half-mortal form through the air, pushing toward the river bordering Drian. The gods cheered and goaded and egged him on, and they followed to watch.

## The Third Battle for Drian - Part 2: A Divine Struggle

**R**ordan was waiting for Power. He stood on the watery divide, his mighty bulk soaring to the skies, his thick legs taller than the trees, his beard rippling to meet the water that rushed at his feet.

“So, you have come against me, Power. I told you once, I will not let you pass.”

“Who are you to order me? I am a high god!”

“Let me tell you a story, Power,” said the river. “Once, a king appointed his household to watch his lands while he went away. He said, ‘When I return, I will bring many rewards, and you will all be free of your responsibilities – if you have served me faithfully.’ When he left, they kept good care of his land, but after some time, when he did not return, the reward seemed too distant, and many began to search for immediate gratification. Some of the servants did not want to wait for the king’s return.”

“Why do you beguile us with this thinly-veiled tale?” cried Power scornfully. “The analogy is too blatant to be

entertaining.”

“Do you not want to know how it ends?”

“Not your version!” And with that, Power threw himself upon the natural god, and they engaged with all the fury of hell and earth. A hurricane rose from the deep waters, a blast of mud met it, and their meeting washed over and over again upon both shores, sinking the banks and widening the river with each assault.

\* \* \*

On the morning of the third day of battle, Lavendier spoke to her men again before the imminent all-out attack. She could see Farsooth across the vast distance of the field, preparing to launch his campaign and she praised her men’s resolve, their hope, their prowess. She told them there was no doubt in her mind they would win the field before the day was out, and they all believed it, because they saw her conviction and caught hold of her hope. Then she rode to the front of the lines to lead them all to victory.

\* \* \*

The Drinians cheered to the skies, and Fate’s palace rang with their hope, where, on the balcony, a cheering squad of gods was assembled. As the two mortal lines prepared to ride out and meet, Hope grew vocal and passionate, urging on the princess, and the other gods crowded around, their hearts all in.

“Look how she blazes at the head of her charge!” cried Hope. “My, is she not grand?”

“Her sword is like a blade of a thousand stars,” said Knowledge. “See how it catches the light. Oh, there is a ring about her, the enemy soldiers can barely come near! The men all love her so.”

“Look at that animal!” they cried a little later. Melcant, who would allow no other horse to carry his beloved into the fray, was a weapon unto himself. He kicked, reared, and rode with a vengeance of fury. Although Lavendier held her own in swordplay, she seldom had a chance to demonstrate it, so faithfully was she protected by her steed and men.

“Look to the shores of Rordan!” cried Death suddenly. “Power is attempting to cross the divide.”

“No,” said Knowledge. “Should he lead the battle, mankind will surely fall.”

They watched anxiously, but Power could not gain the upper-hand, no matter how mightily he hurled himself against Rordan. It was a fire throwing itself against a wall of water, angry and impotent.

But beside the shores, Terror was growing impatient and paced, glaring at the two divine combatants, hearing the sounds of the losing Keltians, and at last, he declared, “I have everything to lose, Power! If you will not lead your army, I will!”

The young god bounded across the divide to Drian and stood above the army of gorgans, grinning like a dreadful jester upon the mortal beings lined up for his killing delight. He laughed when Destruction and Resolve flew across the river and lined up beside him. With deliberate step, Passion too left Power alone to grapple with the minor god, and joined her siblings.

Seeing this, Knowledge pulled back from the edge of the heavenly palace and stood up with flushed face and shining eyes. "Not if I can help it," she said, and clad herself in samite pants and a shining white shirt. "If Power and his followers will meddle in mankind's affairs, then so shall I."

Joy clutched at her arm. "You cannot! We never have. Not like this. They must rise or fall as it is fated. They are mortal, and it is their fate."

Knowledge took a deep breath, and glanced to the sky, to the place where she hoped to see her beloved King return. She wanted only to please him. Then she looked to Fate.

"I will abide by your decree," she said.

Fate looked at her gravely, and the moment hung in a second of eternity. Below, the armies lined up again to meet. Terror and Destruction whetted their maces, Resolve and Passion sharpened their whips. Lavendier and her straggling army, their courage strong, would crumble like cinders beneath a raging fire.

"You were always meant for this," he said gently. "Go. And may the Golden King go with you."

\* \* \*

As the Drinians rode to meet the gorgans, the bright blue sky darkened beneath an invisible cloud, and a foul wind rose up with the stench of death upon it. The men shuddered, and Lavendier's skin crawled. She sensed that something evil was in the air - some new device of the enemy; but nevertheless, she rode at the front of the ranks.

Trigent and Cartnol flanked her on either side as she spurred her men on with words of confidence and courage,

and so great was her beauty and resolve that they forgot their terror at the change of air and thundered forward bravely. But suddenly, on the left flank of the rushing army, a contingent of Drinian soldiers flew into the air, as if thrown by an invisible club the size of a tree. Then, on the other side, thirty more men flew to the sky like rag dolls, swiped away by an invisible enemy. Melcant reared in horror, and Lavendier screamed. The army, panic stricken, whirled in confusion, some men racing forward, some stock still, and some turning back, all in disarray.

“My princess, you are losing men!” cried Melcant. “They are retreating.”

Trigent had disappeared into the mayhem, and Lavendier could see General Cartnol nowhere.

“Do we retrench?” her faithful steed demanded, but her mind was a void, and all she could think was that they *could not* retrench: if they did, the city was lost and they were dead. As she struggled to think of what to say, the darkened sky suddenly blazed with a shaft of light. It pierced through the grayness like a beam of peace, truth, and hope, and it was piercingly, achingly beautiful. Then another broke through the sky, and a third. Five rays, in the full fury of their golden beams, combated the foulness of the air. A gentle breeze blew hope again into Lavendier’s heart, a wafting breath that smelled of roses.

“To me!” she cried now with a great voice. “To me!” And the Drinian army regrouped around her blade.

## The Third Battle for Drian - Part 3: The Prince of South Drian

**P**ower pulled back, snarling, from Rordan. “Who do you think you are? You cannot kill me! Why try?”

Rordan, as ever, spoke with calm might, though his breast heaved from the strain of the battle. “I am not trying to kill you.”

“Then let me through! Or when I rule I will cast you down!”

“You will not rule.”

“Do you still believe in that fantasy? The Golden King is a broken promise! He will never return.”

“Then I will wait forever. I do not wait for him to reward me – I simply wait for him.”

\* \* \*

Lavendier’s men fought with a fury that would have made Trinian proud. Behind Lavendier’s banner they forged a



line of defense, though it was just that – a defense, for no matter how hard they tried, they could not achieve another assault. The enemy, at last, had the upper hand, and their greater numbers told their advantage. Farsooth and his men felt, also, the presence of their evil gods in the air – as the Drinians felt theirs – and it filled them with resolve.

Trigent had returned to her side, and once again organized a circle of soldiers around her. After an hour of assault, Cartnol rode up.

“How do you fare here?” he asked.

“We have lost three.”

“Ah, you are doing well. We lost twenty. My lady, they are losing heart.”

“We must hold strong! Afias will not be able to get here until this afternoon. We must hold until then.”

“And if he does not come?”

The smell of roses still burned bright within her. “He will.” And so confidently did she say this, that Cartnol believed it, and the whole army seemed to gain strength. “I will rouse them!” she cried suddenly, and Melcant thundered to the edge of the circle of Drinians that enclosed her, and it parted before his hoofs. Lavendier was now in the very thick of the battle, mowing down enemy soldiers and gorgans as she passed from contingent to contingent, thundering with hoof beats and rallying cries, instilling passion and resolve into her men.

\* \* \*

Lavendier did not, for one moment, doubt her brother’s advent; but that did not lessen her relief when, over the

crest of the hill behind the enemy, rose Afias's army bearing down upon the enemy's rear.

She learned later it was the entire population of South Drian that rode behind him. When they learned that their prince was leaving them to rescue his city and sister, they had marched to his front door, laden with any weapon they could grab hold of, and refused to be left behind.

Now they bore down on the enemy, and in the final hours of the afternoon of that third day, fought their way through the ranks, until the Keltians were routed and retreated to their camp for the night, and Afias and Lavendier were mounted face to face.

"I knew you would come," she declared, her face and voice shining so resplendently that for a moment, he did not know her. Then he was thrown back ten years, to when he sister was still young and innocent, and he knew her.

"Come!" she cried, turning her mighty charger and leading him back to camp.

When she dismounted at the command tent, Trigent ran up to take Melcant's bridle, and she embraced her brother warmly, armor and all. In that open gesture, she put behind them all the years of discord and strife, and he held her close. His loyal heart had ached for his family desperately, his soul yearning for the comforts of hearth and home, and Lavendier symbolized that loss for him, so that, though he was still staggered by her transformation, he was over-laden with joy to embrace her.

When they parted, Adrea approached. "Is this all the men you've had to fight with?" she asked.

"We had more in the morning, but yes, this is all."

“Where is my father?”

“At the palace, my lady. He – well, he was not able to lead the charge.”

“Is he ill?”

“No, no, I do not mean to give you alarm. He is well, and waiting for you eagerly, I am sure. But let me kiss you – you who will soon be my sister. There, I feel somewhat whole again, seeing you both here.”

General Cartnol approached them, and Lavendier broke off her greetings to discuss the battle with all three.

## The Third Battle for Drian - Part 4: The Return of the King

Trinian received the message his sister sent him with surprising speed. She had sent a young messenger accompanied by a single soldier, who himself was equipped with nothing but a sword, and thus by being lightly accoutered, hoped to avoid appealing to robbers. Successful in not being waylaid on the road, they traveled freely until they tracked their king to the mountains of Kara, and came upon Trinian the morning that the third battle of Drian began.

Trinian lost no time. He did not doubt the message for a moment – it was precisely what he had feared, though he was surprised at Astren’s haste in sending for him. Yes, he thought it was Astren who led the army, for he still had hope for the old man, and Lavendier had strictly forbidden the messenger to mention her name. The princess, sensing in her heart that Trinian’s belief in her was less than Afias’s, had intuitively sensed that he might not respond to her summons, if he knew it were from her. Perhaps she was

wrong, perhaps he would have returned, but his speed might have lacked urgency and his heart been filled with doubt, and now was no time for hesitation.

Now he gathered his forces with full urgency, while Denin gathered his, and together, they rode forth to Drian. Along the route, Trinian dispatched Garrity's men to the cities who had promised assistance, ordering them to lead the charge, without delay, to the capital. "Tell them the time has come for the king of Drian to have need of them. Tell them this is the final confrontation. Lead them back as swiftly as you can, and wait for me at the crumbling palace of the Brawgs."

The route he himself took was direct and quick: down the mountains and across the plains of the wilderlands. He had no fear of wayside robbers now, for they were a formidable force, and besides, most of the robbers had, by now, sworn their allegiance to him.

When he had nearly reached the crumbling ruins of the Brawgs, Tarfan and his men appeared suddenly beside their caravan.

"Are you returning to battle, sire?" asked the bandit.

"We are. The gorgans have returned."

The bandit lifted a battle axe in the air, and all his men did the same. "And we fight with you!" he cried, and his men cheered and clamored and roared.

\* \* \*

Terror's wings of panic flew him away from the battle and back to Power, like a whipped dog returning to its master. "Death and the Goddesses of the Heavenly Palace

have engaged us, Power," he complained. "We can't get anywhere near the Drinians."

Power, locked in a fierce hold with Rordan, both their mighty arms straining and their strong legs groaning, suddenly kicked out with his leg so that they both went down, and then slid aside and crawled from the now-enormous river, with its churned up, messy banks, and stood back, gasping, looking towards the unreachable banks of Drian, the unwinnable battle of his men, the utter inadequacy of his allies, and he roared in frustration. But then he remembered Farsooth. Yes, he had possessed him for a reason. He had given him strength and cunning and long life, but most of all, he had made him a vessel for his own might, and Power, summoning all the spiritual strength he still retained in that half-mortal form, propelled himself spiritually across the expanse and entered into his servant.

All at once, though it took every straining muscle of his mind, Power could see the battle. It was hazy and dark; but still, he had sight. Farsooth was standing on a makeshift platform in the rear of the fight, sending out his men and gorgans, but holding himself apart. From this vantage point, the entire battle was laid out like a panorama: riders galloped over the fields, striking down beasts that stood as high as the horses' heads; foot soldiers grappled hand to hand on both sides, and generals reformed their ranks, charging again and again. The red and black colors of the enemy blending with the blue, gold, and white of Drian, which blended in turn with the green and yellow dress of the South Drinians.

Power looked about desperately for Trinian. Where was he? His anger mounted, his desperation tightened, his

hold on Farsooth wavered, but he mastered it and glanced around once again, and then he saw the leader of Drinians, and understood his fatal mistake.

Suddenly, Power was blown to the ground, his eyes snapped open, and once again, he was grappling hand to hand with Rordan.

“The princess!” he screamed at Terror, as he was thrown to the ground. “The Drianians are led by the egotistic maid.” He rose up and threw himself at Rordan, throwing him into the water with an earth-shaking splash. “I should have ensured her death in the desert! I should have murdered her in the wilderness.” Rordan slammed his shoulder into Power, and the high god stumbled back, gasping for breath. “Through our hands, through my incompetent, worthless, lazy allies’ hands, she has slipped away again and again, and now she leads the army!” He whirled on Terror. “Go! Set Farsooth beside her and kill her once and for all!”

As Power turned back to engage Rordan, he shook with consuming hatred and anger. Where. Was. Trinian? Then he saw Despair approaching him from the west.

\* \* \*

The sky grew dark above Lavendier, and Melcant faltered in his steps.

“The gods are near,” he whispered. “Ones that do not love you, my princess.”

Suddenly, a man dropped out of the air beside her, riding an enormous gorgan like a steed, wielding a mace and looking as shocked to see her as she to see him.

Then the sky clattered like thunder, and two beings were suddenly visible above them, a fair shining lady of hope, and a whirling tornado of panic, and they were locked in unyielding combat.

“Kill the egotistic maid!” cried Terror to Farsooth, as he whipped around Hope, fleeing her as she staunchly defended her charge. “So commands Power, and he will reward you with everlasting life! Kill her, and we will win the war!”

Farsooth needed no urging, so much did he fear Power’s displeasure if he failed, and he threw himself upon the Maid of Drian and her horse.

\* \* \*

When Trinian mounted the swell of the Korem valley, below him was a terrifying blackness of enemies, a redness of blood, and a whiteness of light breaking through the clouds in splendor. It was a striking sight, and he witnessed it as though it were a painting, having nothing to do with him, for it did not feel real.

He surveyed the battleground carefully, looking for General Cartnol, and at last he saw him: riding like mad, with twenty Drinian soldiers behind him, across the fields to where a man with oily locks and black eyes fought a maid dressed in silver armor, locked in a whirl-wind of clash and blow. These two seemed to be the center of the action, one riding a steed of magnificent size, and the other a gorgan like a horse.

The rest of the field was a thorough blend of Drinian, South Drinian, Keltian, and gorgan warriors, but the sky



was the terrifying part. With each passing moment, it lowered and darkened, and Trinian feared what would come about if the darkness met the human warriors. Even as he sat taking in the sight, he heard more and more hoofs galloping up behind him and gathering in ever larger numbers, his allies banding with him now in this final battle.

Trinian rode out a few paces and then turned to take sight of the army behind him. Rank upon rank of farmers, bandits, lords, nobles, and peasants, from mountains, fields, valleys, and forests stood behind him, rallying to his banner, ready to face and defeat the enemy of mankind, and Trinian's throat swelled. He rose up in his seat.

With a few words he called upon their courage, upon the staunchness of their arms, and upon the glory of their victory. He conveyed the heat of his own pumping blood, and heated theirs, so that it was with a mighty roar that they descended to the battle.

## The Third Battle for Drian - Part 5: The Conclusion

**H**ope and Terror's battle was a supernatural echo in the sky above the battle taking place on earth between Lavendier and Farsooth. Every time Terror tried to descend upon Lavendier, to kill her with one swipe of his immortal hand, Hope threw herself in the way, bearing more pain with each blow than in the entirety of her previous existence. But she held her ground.

All across the field, the gods fought against each other: Resolve thwarted by Solitude, Destruction hindered by Knowledge. Passion raged against the foils of Death, and the mortal armies went untouched. Within the mortal ranks, Charity and Joy strengthened the fighters, banishing their anger and fear and leaving only single-minded love of their country.

Resolve looked up from her clash with Solitude and suddenly noted Trinian's arrival, and his army as it stretched across the horizon and bore down upon the enemy's ranks. There were too many mortals now, and she understood

that the battle was nearly ended. It was the in the eleventh hour and ninety-ninth minute, and she was desperate. Trinian must die.

She saw Terror fighting with Hope above the Princess Lavendier, and with a sudden resolution, she flew to his side, pursued by Solitude.

Resolve flew high into the sky, gazing down in desperation, aware that should Farsooth be killed, all was lost, aware that should Trinian live, they would lose the city. The Keltians would lose the battle, the gorgans would retreat in disorder, and she would face the infinite consequences as the final hour struck. With fiery fear, she summoned every sinew of her eternal being, outdistanced Solitude, and together with Terror, threw herself down upon the ground.

Hope, rising to thwart them, was thrown aside by the intensity of their combined attack, all three screamed with pain at the collision, and with a shriek that, to the mortals, sounded like the roar of deadly thunder, Resolve and Terror swiped their fists against Melcant's rider and against Cartnol and Trigent and their men as they rode to her side. Thus horse and maid and twenty Drinian soldiers were thrown like ragdolls into the air. Solitude locked again with Resolve, but for Lavendier's men, she was too late.

\* \* \*

Trinian watched the bodies flying high, batted into the air like balls kicked by a child, and it left his mouth dry with terror. He whirled his steed toward the slaughter,

and in his mind, the words of the prophecy rang, "Only one...Only one... Only one."

He alone must kill the evil god. He alone must stop the siege. He alone must hold Power at bay.

"Sire!" he heard Kett's voice break through his monomania and saw the boy galloping toward him across the field, ever steady, ever faithful, ever near. "Sire, there are gods killing men in the field!"

"There's only one, Kett!" Trinian cried, his mind bent on one thing, his will determined to face it, his heart steeled against it, speaking now as a mad man who must face his destiny or die in the attempt, and only Kett, who had been with his master across all the miles of prophecies, alliances, and disappointments, could have understood his meaning in that moment. He shook his head as he reined in beside his beloved king.

"No, sire," said the boy. "There are two."

\* \* \*

Lavendier had felt the blast like the slap of an angry wave, and for an instant, lost consciousness. When she awakened, there was a roaring in her ears so loud she could hear nothing else. She saw Melcant lying far from her, bloody and red and still. General Cartnol's dead eyes, still open, stared blankly into nothing. Trigent was lying at her feet, and she screamed his name.

He was not dead. He staggered up, then fell down again – numb across his body and his leg hanging uselessly, hindering his movement. He had been gored through the thigh by an ally's spear as he struck the ground; but he

ignored the wound, and looked around in a daze.

Farsooth still stood, alive and well, the only one to escape the carnage, and he was smiling upon them in glee. Trigent reached for his sword, but it was missing, blown somewhere else, so he grasped Cartnol's hilt, drew the blade from the dead man's hands, and dragged himself across the ground, making his slow, painful way to face the enemy leader, who taunted him with a smile of rage.

Trinian and Kett were fast making their way across the field, the king with murder in his eyes, slaying gorgans right and left, and the boy with faithful persistence on his boyish, thin face.

It was not until Trigent reached the gorgan steed that Farsooth finally lifted his weapon. Languidly, almost lazily, he reached out and stabbed Trigent in the stomach, and Lavendier screamed again.

"Trigent, leave me!" she cried. "You cannot fight!" But her squire paid her no mind, and once more, he lunged toward the enemy, summoning the last of his waning strength to plunge the blade down upon the man, as secretly, he twisted the pole of the banner he held in his hand – for yes, after all this time, still he kept the banner gripped in his fist – and lunged the pointed tip into the soft belly of Farsooth. Farsooth was too secure in his safety and saw only the blade, so that he was pierced before he understood, and he toppled from the gorgan steed.

Trigent fell to the ground, bloody and wounded and still, and just before unconsciousness flowed over Lavendier, leaving her utterly helpless, she saw the gorgan rise to its feet and help Farsooth to stand.

The great gorgan, Kellan, bloated in size beyond belief,

made large by Power and made deadly by Farsooth's training, smiled as he stood upon his four legs. He roared as he swung his mighty arm against Trigent's body, sending it flying through the air, and he stepped forward to kill Lavendier.

At last, at that moment, Trinian arrived and fell upon the gorgan, stabbing down with his spear toward the monster's neck. Steel met frozen blood and the beast, as he roared in pain, stabbed the king of Drian's horse and it fell, throwing Trinian to the ground; then he swiped out his hand and Kett's horse reared back in terror, so that the boy lost control and galloped away against his will.

Trinian fought desperately hand to hand, defending himself from the gorgan as it turned on him. Farsooth watched from a distance, grinning once again, despite his bleeding stomach, for he had been promised eternal life, and he was certain of his victory. Engrossed as he was with watching the king battle Kellan, the Keltian leader had lost interest in the large-scale battle, and did not know that Trinian's forces had nearly finished the day. With a calm, slow grin, he opened his mouth. "I would like to do the final honors, if you do not mind."

Kellan gurgled a laugh, his thick blood oozing from the wound in his neck, and effortlessly kicked the king to the ground, planting his foot upon the inside of his elbow and wrenching his blade out of his hand. Trinian felt his death approaching, and he squirmed, but could not get free.

The gorgan gestured formally to General Farsooth, and the leader, with oily locks and black, dead eyes, stepped forward with a courtly nod of thanks. He withdrew a pure black dagger that glistened dully in the sunlight.

Farsooth raised the blade to kill the king, and Trinian kept his eyes wide open to face his death.

It was in this moment that Trinian knew he was not the one who would die, so Power would be defeated. Facing the point of the blade, knowing his death was upon him, Trinian understood that his wounds could not redeem the world, for his life was no more important than any other's. He was a king, appointed by Fate, left to rule and to defend, but he was only a mere mortal, and his life was only worth as much as anyone else's. In order to kill Power, someone must sacrifice themselves whose life was more valuable than a high god's. Someone who could pay the price of such a death.

All of this passed through him in the matter of a moment, as he stared at the tip of the black blade, and he swore in his heart that if he lived, he would allow this sacrifice, whatever it was, and he would no longer shoulder the responsibilities of Fate. Farsooth's knife descended.

Kett, who had flung himself from his steed and ran back with all the strength of his legs, hurled himself across the king's body, the young boy had but one last thought: that he loved his king, and how sad his king would be when his loving servant died. The knife finished its descent, pierced the lad through the ribs, and with a cry of pain, he jerked – and was still.

Trinian stared into his page's white, lifeless face and empty eyes. Farsooth blinked at the new body draped before him. The gorgan roared in fury.

Trinian leapt to his feet, took hold of Kett's blade, and with all the fury of an avenging angel, sliced Farsooth's neck from his body – so that at last, the possessed man

was dead. Then Trinian turned to the gorgan and fought a furious battle of might and main, but across the entire field, the sky lightened, the enemy soldiers threw down their blades, and only the gorgans still fought, driven by madness until they met death.

Trinian stabbed the beast's stomach, sliced his throat, but still he stood. Trinian parried the beast's claws, whirled, and stabbed again, deeper this time, and seared his own hand in the fiery blood of the beast, then kicked at his already sliced head so that it dislodged and rolled away, and finally swiped stomach from his legs; at last, Kellan the first son of Ferran, monster of another world, was slain.



## A Council of Men

**T**rinian, overcoming his shock at finding Lavendier not only home, but in the midst of a battle, and not only in the midst of a battle, but lying maimed at his feet, rushed to her side, knelt gently, and felt for a pulse. A horse nuzzled his shoulder, and looking up, he faced a white horse greater than any he had ever seen.

He lifted her from the field and tenderly, draped her across the horse's neck. He climbed up behind and took her himself to the gates of Drian, where Adrea met him and with only a brief word of greeting, took Lavendier away into the city. Then the king turned back to the field as Gorj and Denin rode up to him.

"They are frightened of us," cried the young king. "The battle is ours!"

"Indeed," Gorj said with satisfaction. "the gorgans are fighting to the last breath, but the humans are scattering northward to Kelta."

"Chase them then, my faithful friends," said Trinian, laying his hand upon his generals' shoulder. "Finish the

gorgans, and capture any men who surrender.”

Gorj and Denin galloped away to lead the squadrons and rid the land of the terrible beasts, and Trinian made his way into the capitol. Afias came in at the head of his squad, and met the king at the gate, and as Trinian embraced his brother, fierce cheering erupted from the citizens who were bordering the main road of the city, hailing the victorious return of their king.

Trinian waved to the crowd, but as he looked about for Lord Astren, he did not find him. “Where is Lord Astren?” he called to Afias above the noise.

“I have not seen him.” They pushed their way through the crowd, waving and nodding and relieved when they ducked into the shelter and privacy of the tents surrounding the Healory.

Gladier and his apprentices were tending many men in the fields about Korem, in makeshift tents, on cots and tables and beds, but though most soldiers were outside, the princess had been brought into the inner sanctuary of the house. So beloved was she by the wounded soldiers that those who were awake limped out of the house to give her privacy. But she was unconscious and knew nothing.

Thus Trinian found her lying in state and solitude in the center of the room, white and pale and wrapped with bandages, and Adrea and Astren were standing to one side, waiting.

Trinian went straight to Adrea and took her into his arms. He held her close, her black straight hair falling gently against his cheek, and her head nestling into his shoulder.

Until he had embraced Afias under the gate, Trinian had

not let himself miss them. But seeing their faces made his heart swell, and he was at a loss for words. At last he released her, and Afias came up beside the young lady comfortably, and put his arm around her as if he belonged there. When Trinian saw how close his two friends stood together, his heart swelled again. Yes, this was as it should be. Adrea had always been a sister to him in his heart, and now she would be so in truth.

“We have your blessing then?” Afias asked quietly, understanding the look in his brother’s eye.

“Heartily. And I am very glad.”

He turned away then to see Lord Astren standing apart, and he frowned at the angry light in the old man’s eye. He went to him and bowed respectfully.

“Lord Astren, thank you for recalling me to the city. Drian owes you her safety.”

“I did not recall you,” the old man spoke in a strangled voice, thick as if choked with tears and fear. “If I had had control, the city would have fallen. I would not have willed for it to fall, but so it would have been. I am no Lord. I am a coward.”

Trinian stepped back at the intensity of the old man’s hatred. “Did Trigent lead the army then?”

“It was Lavendier,” said Afias. “Did you not know?”

Trinian’s throat tightened. He glanced at her upon the table, and struggled to understand that his selfish, willful sister had recalled him to the city. “What happened?” he asked softly.

Lord Ferand, whom Trinian had not noticed standing along the wall in the shadows, strode forward and told them, simply and briefly, how Lavendier had arrived with

news of the enemy, how she had taken over the army and sent for her brothers, and how she had led the men in battle. Astren sat bowed through it all, his head buried deep in his hands, shivering with shame and self-loathing.

“Where was Gladier?” was all Trinian could think to ask when the lord finished. The tale was too strange for him to ask about Lavendier. He failed to picture any of it, since he could only envision her in her selfish, willful, and pouting vanity. He had not seen her fight, lead, or sacrifice herself for the city. He saw her in intense color and spiteful energy, or as pale, white, and unconscious. He could not imagine her as a determined leader.

“I do not know,” Ferand answered. “I have not seen him, before, during, or after the battle.”

Trinian put the thought aside for a moment, and turned to Afias. “Tell me of South Drian. How stand things there?”

Afias immediately told him the highlights of the past several months, concentrating most of all on what they had learned about Power, Death, and the Golden King. Adrea stood near her father all the while, struggling to understand what to make of the steward’s brokenness, but hearing Afias mention the Golden King brought her to interject. “He’s wonderful, somehow,” she told Trinian fervently. “Really wonderful, but we don’t know who he is.”

Trinian’s heart was beating fast – full of thoughts he could not understand. “Where is Gladier?” he cried. “Has he abandoned us? I need to speak with him.”

“I have been plenty occupied.”

There stood Gladier, framed in the light of the dying day, in the doorway of the Healory.

Trinian confronted him in anger. "And where have you been?" he demanded. "Drian has sustained and driven away an attack, and I am told you were nowhere to be found."

"Drian did quite well without me; I've been busy. Very busy. Watching other battles you couldn't see, and now tending to patients surrounding my Healory."

Gladier went to the princess on the bed, and Trinian saw that she was awake, watching them quietly. The wizard cupped her oval, smooth face in his gnarled hands. "Yes, my darling brave warrior, you did not fight alone. The gods were for and against you. Honored are you, who is so hated, and so loved."

Gladier had never said anything like that to Trinian, nor used such a reverent tone, and the king's heart clenched.

"What battles?" he demanded impatiently. "Who fought for and against her?"

Gladier knelt before a cabinet, and once again brought out the scrolls of the gods and a map of Minecerva. "Never before had I received a vision of them, but by their grace, I saw what no mortal ever has. I recognized them each, face by face, and they were majestic, shining, and radiant; deadly, terrifying, and beautiful.

"As you know, Power cannot bodily cross over the River Rordan and is confined to his realm. He tried hard to cross over, to kill you himself, but Rordan opposed him in a fierce combat and he could not conquer. A great battle they raged, destroying much of the land about the river. Power was maddened by his failure, and when he failed –" His voice stumbled and caught, and Trinian looked at him sharply.

“What is it?”

“Trinian, as long as he reigns from Karaka, he will continue his attempts to overthrow you. He sent the other gods, Terror, Resolve, Destruction, Despair, and Passion, across the divide to destroy us all. But the heavenly blessings too descended, and acted as a shield between the deadly spirits and the frail mortals. Joy, Death, Knowledge, Solitude, Charity, and Hope are on your side. Call upon them, and they will answer.”

“What did Power do when he failed?” he demanded.

Gladier sighed heavily. “He raced across Mestraff, and with a group of his beasts, intercepted a boat traveling down a river from the border-mountains: a boat that was traveling toward Rordan.” He was pointing to the map as he spoke. “The boat held the royal family, my king. All of those still alive.” Stillness hung in the chamber for an eternal second, and then Trinian trembled.

“Adlee?”

“She is alive,” he answered calmly. “I saw Garrity set upon by Power’s gorgans, and they pulled the queen out after him. Garrity sent off the raft as a last act, before falling, senseless, beneath their weapons. Princesses Cila and Viol and Prince Jacian are even now on their way back to us. But they took Garrity and the queen.” A moan, deep and despairing, wrenched from Lavendier, and Gladier turned to her gently. “They took them, child,” he said. “They took them to the Karakan fortress. If they are still alive, what misery awaits them?”

\* \* \*

More clammy and shady and shadowy than ever, pressing ever more deeply into one's mind with all-consuming desolation, Karaka enshrouded the queen and the demigod like a moldering grave. Here, Power triumphed over his newly-gained prisoners, gloating and planning, and Garrity lay broken and bloody on the floor.

Adlena stood, untouched, beside him, tall, brave, and terrified, and at her breast, she clutched baby Lillian. She gazed deep into the being of Power, but she did not shudder. She looked into the very depths of wickedness, saw the decrepit nature of his being, and yet she refused to despair. For she was a queen, a dryad, a human, and a believer; she believed that goodness would triumph, that Trinian would find a way to defeat the pure evil of the god, and she believed in Fate.

Suddenly, Garrity awoke, his eyes crusted over with bruises so that he lifted his lids with difficulty. He looked without seeing, and Adlena bent down to touch his arm soothingly. Groggily, he moved his head and moaned.

"It's me, Garrity. It's Adlee."

"No!" he muttered, clutching his stomach which was one great bruise.

She shushed him, soothingly running her white hand over his back. Lillian made a quiet baby sound, and Garrity opened his bloodshot eyes in horror. "No, no," he repeated desperately, and despair rushed over him like a tidal wave, and he could not move.

\* \* \*

"Are you too, then," Power was watching them, and he tilted

his head at her, grinning wickedly, “a daughter of a god?”

“My mother was a Dryad. I am no demi-god, only the daughter of a spirit of a wood. But most of all, I am the queen of Drian, and you will suffer for bringing me here.”

He raised his head and laughed, a deep, rising laughter that shook the black and miry chamber, and brought her near to tears. But it went on too long, just a bit too long, for Power was utterly, completely, and powerfully mad. “Your husband, you mean? Yes! He will come to save you, spirit of the wood. He will most surely come,” he leaned forward – but did not like to touch the baby, and paused an inch from the queen’s face. “You can count on that.”

\* \* \*

Trinian’s mind whirled, drowning out the voices that surrounded him – “Only one, only one, only one. There’s only one to fall so he’ll be killed/ One you love, in land of cruel end of day.” From where he stood, rooted to the ground, far from his wife and far from Power, he suddenly cried out, “We will go now! Why do we wander around Minecerva and wait for him to attack? Why do we defend rather than advance? I can kill him – Fate has foretold it, and I must go. “There’s only one to conquer him you fear,/ And only one to hold his might at bay.”

“How?” breathed Lavendier faintly, trembling in pain of body and soul.

“Through Drakans. Yes!” he cried in defiance of their shocked faces. “If he has control over the underworld, then so do I; for he may have power of life and death over mortals, but I have power of life and death over *him*. We



saw where the army came out; we will go back the same way, and with steeds the speed of the wind, unencumbered by an army, we will arrive before he knows to expect us.”

## To Karaka

**L**avendier slipped out of the Healory in the night, knowing that Trinian planned to leave with Afias in the morning, and stumbled haltingly to the royal stables. There she told all to Melcant, who wept with her and nuzzled her, and spoke soft, comforting words that soothed her sad, weary soul. When she asked him to carry her brothers on their journey, his only reluctance was in parting with her. “Of course I will carry them. It will be my honor. But yet my heart fills with foreboding, for I expect this is the last time I will see you.”

“Say no such thing. I cannot bear another death.”

“I do not say death, for I doubt that I will ever die. But I think I will only stay a little while longer before I rejoin my master, wherever he has gone.”

“I am so selfish – I do not want you to go.”

He pushed his velvety muzzle gently against her chest, and she wrapped her arms around his head and held on tight. They stood thus a long time. Finally, when she released him, he said to her, “I have never met anyone so

selfless and brave, my dear, dear own princess.”

Lavendier returned to the Healory and sent one of the young healers to bring Trinian to her, and Trinian came in the opening hours of the morning, before the sun rose above the horizon.

“I had to speak to you before you left,” she said softly.

“Well. I am here.”

“Garrity is going to die, Trinian,” her voice broke, and she was speaking around the cracks in her heart, but she pushed past her tears to say what must be said. “He foresaw it, and now I think he was right. Power wanted me in Mestraff – he tried to possess me twice, but when I overcame his temptations, he did not care to stop our band, though we traveled across Karaka. We are ants to him, creeping, crawling, invisible creatures that he only cares about if he can use us. What I am trying to say is... Trinian, he wants Garrity for something. And the queen too. You must be on your guard, for what if he has possessed them? What if he possesses you and takes the birthright?” Trinian listened disbelieving, disconcerted by her heart-breaking tears that glistened like stars on her white cheeks, surprised into listening and heeding what she said. “You will be careful?” she begged. “You will?”

He stepped nearer and took her hand in his, pressing it and trying to speak, but her tears were working upon him, and he too felt them stinging his eyes. “Adlee would never...” he broke off, unable to finish the thought.

“Not if she can withstand it. She and Garrity are both greater and better than I – we must have faith that they have had the strength to resist. But Trinian, what of Lillian? If the god uses her against them...”

Trinian frowned at her. "Lillian?"

"Your daughter, Trinian. Lillian is your daughter."

He shook, then, like a dry leaf in the wind, and groped until he found a chair and landed in it. Burying his pale face in his large, dry, cracked hands, he was a mere shell of a man. Lavendier watched him silently, letting him grieve, and after a moment, he lifted his head and pushed himself up. "No!" he declared. "No, Adlee will not give in. Nor Garrity either. And I will kill the god who would take them from me. I will kill the god who would hold my daughter captive! Laven, if you and I could withstand him, then so can they. If Garrity dies, it will be in resisting the god, and not at his mercy. He is a great and good man."

"I know he is!"

Trinian hesitated for a moment, a new realization suddenly flooding his mind, and he looked at his sister with fear. "Laven, Gladier said nothing of any other men in that boat."

"No."

"Then Merciec...and...?" he asked.

"Only Garrity was left."

"Only Garrity.... How did you bear it?"

His words were so unexpectedly tender that she collapsed into tears, and his arms encircled her and held her close. She wondered how she had born it, and how she could bear it again. All the death, all the dying, just so she could live, just to gain one more moment of suffering on this earth. The fresh loss of Trigent tore at her heart, ripping open wounds that had barely begun to close after Merciec and Asbult. She knew she would continue to fight and live and go on, for remembering Garrity's words, she

knew she would never again despair of her own life; but oh, she did not want to go on if another person was to be the cost for her to keep living.

“You must come back,” she sobbed. “You must.”

Trinian was pierced with love, and he said, “My dear sister, I have been a hateful fool. I have ever hurled anger against you, for I did not know the courage of your heart.”

“No, no.” She pulled back and looked up at him. “I deserved all of it and more. I was an utterly wretched woman, and I tried to do the unforgivable. Oh, I shudder to think how I nearly betrayed you. Your anger was just and you were right to be suspicious. Do you have conviction that you will return?” she asked suddenly.

“I have hope,” he whispered.

She nodded. “Yes. Good. That is the same thing.” Then Lavendier told him to take Melcant. “He bore me here in three days. If you want to travel quickly, he is your way.”

“Thank you – I owe you more than my life, Laven. I owe you my kingdom, and my trust.”

Trinian, not privy to the secrets of his sister’s soul, did not know the healing weight of his words, but their utterance sealed a wound deep in her heart, as her love healed his. As he grew confident in accepting the love of his family, her wound of childhood betrayal, loneliness, and desolation – a wound that had twisted and dug deep within and led her, after her father’s death and her brother’s departure, into a life of selfishness, greed, and self-pity – closed, and she smiled at him.

\* \* \*

“I command thee!” cried Trinian at the ground. “Open to the king!”

Nothing moved. Seated astern Melcant, Trinian and Afias had left Drian in the light of the morning sunrise and ridden to the entrance of Drakans. But when they arrived, it was only a large hill in the side of the landscape, and no tunnel led to the bowels of the earth.

“I am the one destined to preserve Minecerva, and I command you to part for me!”

Still the earth was as solid as ever. Embarrassed, Afias shifted in his seat, but he said nothing.

After a long moment, wherein Trinian’s frustration flared near the point of tears, a great warrior, who glowed with an unearthly light, wielding a blazing, fiery sword, rounded the hill and approached them.

“Who are you to command the earth?” this warrior demanded, his voice deep and reverberating across the lawn, so that Melcant’s legs shook with the earth.

“I am the Emperor of Mincerva. Who are you?”

“I am not important. But you cannot pass this way today. It is closed. Come back tomorrow.” He turned around and headed back around the hill.

“I will pass this way!” cried Trinian, not knowing how like a willful child he sounded. “I have business this way!”

“Come back tomorrow,” said the warrior calmly, and then he disappeared around the hill, and though they searched for him, they found him not. Trinian wept with anger, but he was defeated by the immovable ground and unyielding warrior, and had to return to Drian.

That night in the stables, Melcant did not sleep. He heard a voice calling him – young and joyful and confident.

He followed the sound – out of the stable and across the city. Still the voice called, and the horse, making sure that the gate-keeper slept, leapt lightly over the gates and ran northeast to fort Saskatchewan. Outside the fort, a little child was making his way on the path toward Drian.

“Hello horsey!” he cried in delight. “Aren’t you big and lovely! Can you take me to my father the king?”

“I can.” He laid down so the child could climb up. “Are you Prince Jacian?”

“Yes! And I have something to give my father.” The boy was dragging a heavy sword behind him on the road, and he held it before him as he clambered over Melcant’s back. Once the horse was certain the boy was settled, he stood and carried him carefully back to the city, marveling at the weight of the sword on his back. Melcant called the password at the gate, the gatekeeper opened, thinking it was the child who spoke, and horse and rider walked up to the palace.

They arrived just as Trinian and Afias arrived at the stables to saddle Melcant.

Jacian, solemnly, dropped from the horse’s back and approached Trinian. With two hands, he held up the heavy blade, holding it effortlessly, and knelt before his father.

“This is a blade to defeat all blades, given me by my other mother. With it, you will defeat all evil.”

Trinian gazed in wonder at his son, who had seemed to materialize before him, older now than when he had left. He was transfixed by the solemnity of the child, and stepped forward to accept the sword.

Grasping it by the hilt, he was awestruck by its beauty, and it practically leapt into his fingers, feeling like an

extension of his own arm. The balance was made for his powerful frame, and it was easy and effortless to hold. He tested it against a tree standing near, and without meaning to, sliced the entire trunk in half. The tree crashed to the ground, even knocking over another as it fell, and filling their ears with the sound of snapping branches.

“It was given to me in the caves,” explained Jacian, “and it’s not ours. Just to borrow for awhile, until I give it back to my mother.”

Trinian knelt before his small son. “I’m going to get your mother. I’m going to save her.”

The prince put his small hands on his father’s shoulders. “I know you will, for you are brave and strong. You will find both my mothers, and bring them both back.”

Trinian was disconcerted by his son’s open faith. “Who – who is the other one?”

“I can’t tell you. You just have to meet her.” Trinian took his son in his arms and held him close, letting the boy’s faith inspire his own, though he did not understand his words. Then, with the new sword wrapped safe in his cloak, Trinian and Afias mounted Melcant and rode back to the mound.



## The Keeper of the Dead

**T**his time, there was no sign of the man with the flaming sword. There was, instead, a gaping hole in the hillside that swallowed any light, gulping it down like a ravenous beast. Melcant stepped fearlessly within, and instantly they could see nothing. Even looking over their shoulders, they could not see the light of day, and the horse stood uncertainly a moment.

Trinian urged him forward, kicking him in the ribs and commanding “gee-up,” but Melcant stood unmoving.

“I don’t know if you’re going to get him to walk,” Afias murmured. “Even I am terrified.”

“Yes,” said Melcant, and both men nearly jumped out of their skin. “This is the land of the dead, the in-between where eternity and mortality are ever at war. Without light to guide us, we know not what we will find.”

“Does Lavendier know that you speak?” cried Trinian.

“She does.”

“Oh.”

“I am willing to obey you, your majesty, but I may well

be leading you to your death.”

Trinian sat up straight on the back of the horse, and squared his shoulders. “Let death come if he dare. This is the only way.” Then with a grand gesture that he hoped was worthy of a king, he unwrapped the sword from his son and held it aloft in the tunnel. To the astonishment of all three, it shone with a burning gold light that pulsed like a heart, and they could see clearly the way ahead.

“The Golden King be praised,” breathed Afias, and Melcant stepped forward, unurged, into the in-between of life and death.

They traveled two hours in the realm of darkness, Melcant sweeping through like an owl in the night, galloping at full speed. The brothers’ hair stood straight out behind them in the wind.

They were almost to Karaka.

Suddenly, so suddenly that Afias nearly slid off his back, the great horse stood still, only his haunches trembling.

“What is it?” asked Trinian.

“The keeper.” He whispered it, like a curse that could not be said aloud.

“Who is the keeper?”

“My doom. My salvation.” But then he shook his mighty head, like a normal horse would shoo away pesky flies from his mane. “I’m sorry. I am overcome. He is the one who leads souls to the other side. I am afraid of him, although it is my time. He is coming to us.”

Afias shifted in the saddle and pushed his hair away from his forehead, for he was remembering his encounters with spirits, and did not wish to be sidetracked or tested before reaching Karaka. “We should go.”

“No,” said Trinian after a moment. “I wish to speak with him.” He dismounted and waited.

After a moment, they heard a scratching sound that grew nearer and nearer, but though Trinian shone the sword all around, they saw nothing. There was a moment of silence, and then a deep, heavy sigh.

“Reveal yourself!” cried the king. “I know you are there.” Silence. Then the sound as of a pebble dropping.

“I command you! I would speak with one of the dead!”

“You have no power here.” The cracked voice came suddenly from beside them, and Trinian whirled the sword to reveal a man who was no more than a skeleton, sitting propped up on the ground. He has no eyes, only sockets; no mouth, for the jaw bone had dropped away. No arm on the left side, and no pelvis bone. His legs stretched before him on the ground, disconnected from his ribcage, which was propped against the wall.

Trinian, with all the majesty of his title, stood before the keeper of the dead and declared, “I know that is not true, or I could not have come so far. If the enemy can command the dead, then so can I. For I know the prophecy that I will defeat the enemy.”

The creature of skeleton and flesh jumped up and cackled suddenly in the solemn king’s face. Then, with his bones flying disconnected in the air, he began to leap about and flap his skinny arms in twisted, free-flying convolutions. “Think you know so much!? Think you know the extent of it! Rule the world, why don’t ya? Rule the dead, mortal man!”

Trinian flushed. “How dare you mock me? How else could we enter this land of the dead?”

The keeper stared at him smugly. "I owe you no respect. You have no power here. My orders hail from a higher authority, and it is only by his grace that I do not rip your soul from your body, and all those with you, for clomping with your loud, corporeal boots through this forbidden land."

Afias strode forward at that, placing himself securely before Melcant and gripping his sword; but the king, hearing the stir behind him, held up his hand.

"Very well," said Trinian calmly, looking squarely into the keeper's eye sockets, "who is this higher authority?"

But the keeper had said all he intended and now he closed up firm as a vault, and returned to his position on the floor.

"I want to speak to Nian, son of Ankysis," but the keeper folded himself up, and sat still and silent as a statue.

The sounds of hollow hoofs startled them all as Melcant approached the keeper. "Will you be here when we return?" he whinnied hesitantly, falteringly.

"No."

The horse's head drooped low. "I had hoped... I had hoped you had come for me."

"So I have."

Melcant cantered backward in fright. "Now?" he whispered.

The keeper tilted his head and seemed to consider. "Not now. Later. Finish your journey, but you will never exit the tunnel."

The horse bent to the ground and bowed as low as he could, his sides shaking in terror. "Thank you," he said.

Then the keeper vanished, and only the stony, sloping wall faced them. Melcant waited until the king and prince

resumed their seats on his back, and then, silently and with measured tread this time, they resumed their journey.

## The Rightful Heir

Power stood in the center of the massive hall, his land emptied by the last attack on Drian, his war leaders killed there by his enemy. He was alone in his black land, and he knew these would be no defense against the coming of the mortal king. But he smiled, for he still believed he had the upper hand in his corner. The king could not win.

He stood over Garrity, soldier of Drian, son of a goddess, slayer of serpents, and Power put out his hand to end the life of the infant princess. He did it in the sight of the mighty man, and he who had stood his ground against terrible assaults, who had forged himself in his own standard of virtue, who had refused to be seduced before any temptations, caved before the god who craved mortality.

To save the innocent princess, Garrity gasped out of his bloodied mouth 'yes.' Yes, he would yield himself to the god and relinquish his birthright. The god might take what he desired, could learn to be a perfect blend of mortal and

immortal, and with a triumphant smile, Power stooped, and he took it.

Power felt the right course through his being – at last, he understood what it was to be human! He understood the frailty, the thrill, the sensual pleasure. He grasped the will, the soul, the heart; the passions, the resolve, the terror, the despair – ah, he knew it all! In his being, he held the perfect balance between divinity and humanity. He felt the power return to him that he had, for some time, been losing. For second upon second, he had relinquished bits of his divinity to attain aspects of humanity, but at last, he could wield any powers, any purposes, any physical feats he desired!

Finally, his stupid brothers and sisters would see that he, not they, not the Golden King, not a puny mortal, was meant to rule the world. And he would drive the stupid gods from their heavenly palace, he would stalk across Minecerva, he would rule over the living, the dead, and the divine. He strode the chamber, running his hands through each other, over and over again, impatient now for Drakans to deliver up its puny king; eager now for the final conflict.

\* \* \*

Melcant paused. It was still dark all about them, with no sign of an exit.

“Melcant?” whispered Trinian reverently. His mood had calmed since the beast’s encounter with the keeper. “Why do you stop?”

“This is it,” said the horse. “One more step and you are

out.”

The king and prince slipped off his back. In the golden glow of the sword, the horse’s head was held high.

“Shouldn’t you at least try to leave?” asked Afias. He felt that Melcant was such a noble creature – too noble to die like this, without a fight.

Melcant understood, and his eyes smiled at them. “I am older than you think,” he whispered, trembling. “I am ready. When you see Laven again, tell her... that I never loved another mortal as I did the Horse Maiden. You will tell her?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now go. Save them, and rule Minecerva as you were meant to.”

They touched their foreheads to his, and then stepped forward.

In a moment, they were out. All at once, a gray mist surrounded them and mud squelched under their boots; above them a gray mass of towers blended into the clouds.

“We are here,” said Trinian, gripping his sword and remembering, with dread, his last visit.

“Do you know the way?”

He had seen it all too often in his nightmares. “Yes.”

As Trinian led his brother down twisting passages, through dripping, squelching tunnels, and down winding ramps, his panic increased. The closer he neared to Power, the better he remembered their last encounter. Since learning he was king, he had clung desperately to the belief that, in face-to-face combat, he could finally defeat the god. But what foundation had he for such belief? Only the fear he had felt emanating from the shade. Only the echo of



obscure, confused prophecies. Only one.

After a little while, Afias asked quietly, "Why did you want to speak to father?"

"It was only by his help that I escaped Power before." The king stopped still suddenly. "Afias, can I really kill him?"

Afias sighed, standing like a statue in the murky chamber, frozen in place by uncertainty. He had not stopped Power, even when he was only a shade. How much more powerful could Trinian be than himself?

"I thought you said the prophecy favored you."

"It does. It did. I do not know. 'For shall you enter the brownish land, The death knell of your family will ring,' and 'There's only one to fall so he'll be killed, One you love, in land of cruel end of day. When one is thrice pierced of purest sight, Such sacrifice will lead to His god-might.'

Afias was shivering, for this was the first time he had heard these words, and they chilled him to the bone. "What do they mean?" he whispered.

Trinian kept speaking, as if he had not heard. "Mercy and Justice both said I would misunderstand it. I thought for a long while that it was my death of which the prophecy speaks. Afias, the future is well if it is my death, but what if..." The terror in his voice was tangible, and slid over both of them like a slimy thing, filling them with dark foreboding. "It could speak of you."

"If it does, then all is well," said Afias hesitantly. "But I do not possess purest sight."

Trinian's eyes were wells of battling terror, but he spoke nothing, certain now, and gasping for bravery. "I sent her away. So far away, and now for this to be the end of it."

Afias said nothing, his heart aching for his brother. At

last Trinian spoke again, and now his voice was full of steely, fierce resolve.

“Prophecies are warnings, that is all. I must not let them control me.”

“When Adrea and I were attacked in South Drian,” said Afias after a moment, “I called on the gods to help me. Three of them drove him from the chamber.”

“Three?” said Trinian, grasping hold of the idea. “Yes! We must call on the gods! Gladier said gods fought on our side in Drian, but even they were not enough... Their powers must not be greater than Power himself. Afias, who is powerful enough to defeat Power?”

Afias smiled gently, and sighed with a sudden peace. “The Golden King.”

There was a sudden scent of pine in the chamber that invigorated Trinian, and he looked sharply at his brother, and nodded once. “One thing I know for certain: Power and I must meet. We must fight; this is the end of time, and now the conflict will be decided. It is my destiny, and so, I will face him. Call on the Golden King, brother, for perhaps it is *His* destiny that will prevail.”

Resolved, dreading, and hopeful, they continued toward the hall, and finally, they came to the center chamber. The secretary was at his desk, as always, sorting papers and lit like a glowworm. Who read those papers? Why did he sort them? He sorted them like he breathed, absent-mindedly, and like it was very important. Trinian approached him with his sword point out. “Where are my wife and child?”

The secretary looked up and smiled. It stretched across his face like a dark cavern opening on a white salt mine. “I’ve been waiting for you. You’re a little late.” He looked

down at a water-clock at his elbow which held no water, and could reflect no sun, then handed Trinian a sheet of paper. "Sign this, please, and I will send you through."

On the paper was recorded the two prophecies of Mercy and Justice to Power. Trinian read it, and then dropped it like it was burning hot. "How dare you! What is this?"

"Oh, it'll be ruined now. I'll have to make another." He scrabbled busily on a new sheet of paper.

Afias stooped down and read it without touching it:

*"Beware the rightful heir of Drian's throne,  
his coming brings the end you fear.  
Since rightful mortal heir is the inertia  
For reign of rightful King of Minecerva."*

*'And only one to challenge your great might  
there's only one to end your usurpation.  
To defeat him sustains your lasting nation  
To overthrow maintains your mortal station.'*

"I don't want any of your tricks," gasped Trinian at the grinning man, who reached out to hand him a new copy. "I am not here to prove myself, or take a bet. I am here to defeat the god who is killing my people. I am here to save my family." He thrust the side of the blade just under the secretary's throat, glaring into the white eyes in the pale, indifferent face, trying to convey the urgency of death through his deadly gaze. "Bring me to Power."

The secretary was not moved, but only shrugged, and pointed toward one of the back corners, for Power was in his living room.

Trinian and Afias approached and saw the roaring fireplace with a handsome shadow leaning comfortably against it, watching them as a lord might watch some guests who had come to his home.

“King Trinian,” the powerful voice rumbled, “welcome again to my palace. I see you found your way in. I am glad; it can be a bit bewildering. But the secret is very simple, you know – all the tunnels are the right ones. They all lead out, and they all lead here.

“Wine?” he held out two glasses filled with glowing liquid that looked like fire. When they made no move to take them, he shrugged and put them on the mantle. “To each his own, I suppose.”

“What is your game, Power?”

“No game. Such a word implies that there must be a struggle and then a victor, but I have already won, you see. So I play no games.”

“We both know you will not win until you take my life, and that will not be as easy as you think.”

“I don’t know if you have met my sister, Passion. My dear, this is the king we were always fighting.”

A beautiful, cold, magnificent woman, dressed in a glowing red gown, was standing in the doorway of the hall. She approached and took up one of the goblets.

“Charmed,” she said dismissively, and then turned to Power. “I see you have managed, at last, to reign in that awful temper of yours. So glad, brother.”

He smiled triumphantly, but it was a calm, collected smile. “Is that why you have come back then?” he asked. “Crawling back to me because you recognize, at last, that I am the greatest of all the gods?”

“Maybe. That may be why the others are returning. But really, Power, I am just so very curious. So very, very curious now, at the stroke of the twelfth hour, to see what all your plans will come to.”

Afias shifted uncomfortably, his adrenaline high and racing, his mind muddled, standing before two gods at once. His knees shook. “Trinian, what do we do?”

Power went suddenly erect, and his motion was so strong and forceful that Afias was bowled to the ground beneath it. The prince was on his knees, quaking and powerless, but Trinian stood unmoved.

“You want your family? Here they are!” said Power magnanimously, pointing to a side chamber.

Trinian turned to see the wild-eyed god Terror, smiling like a hyena, drag Adlena into the chamber, and Lillian was clutched in her arms. Behind them came the whirlwind of Destruction, who deposited Garrity upon the black floor, and he was only a red smear against it.

## Mortal Station

“We found these in your throne room!” the two brothers clamored to Power. “What are you doing with them?”

Trinian stared at his friend, broken, bloodied, and lying as if dead. He wanted to look at his wife, but he was afraid of her, afraid of the prophecy, afraid of confirming his fears by catching the gleam of purest sight in her eyes.

He looked up at last, and blushed. She was gazing at him as she had done, years ago, in the Sacred Wood. He was full and open, naked in her sight, and her eyes revealed him to himself.

All at once, he saw himself without any pretense. Not as a king, or a husband, or a warrior, but only as a man; a man, lonely and uncertain. A man who had pushed away his friends, lost his companions, and tried to protect all others by isolating himself. A man who thought he commanded the earth, but the earth had a will of its own. A man who thought he could face off against the gods, but the gods were immortal.

He was only one, and he remembered his moment on the battlefield; that moment when to be the one did not seem so grand and unique and special. It was a fate beyond him, a call he could not answer, a command he could not control. It was humbling, belittling, and beyond him.

Power laughed, and Terror and Destruction cackled and roared with him. Passion giggled, and Resolve stepped forward out of the shadows, smiling coolly. “Oughtn’t you to explain, brother?” she asked.

Power pulled himself up again, and Trinian braced against it, still standing. Adlena did not waver, and Garrity and Afias were already on the ground. “I am mortal now, can’t you see? I have secured that right from the broken demi-god there, and now, at last, you could stab me through the heart and I would die. Yes, little king, I am mortal, so why do I exult over you? You see, you can defeat me, or I can defeat you. It is a battle with fate that we both play, but Fate won’t tell us anything. I railed against him, I railed against you, and I struggled to learn how my might could topple yours. I have tried to take from you by force, by cunning, by numbers. Should it not be easy? Should there be any contest? I am POWER – you are puny.

“But then I remembered. The Golden King never did favor the strong, and Fate has always been his happy lackey. No,” continued Power calmly, “I am weak against you simply because I am strong. It is a paradox, and the Golden King thought he had me trapped by his clever paradoxes. He did not reckon on my figuring it out.” He leaned back against the ledge, and Passion glided forward. Her beauty blinded them all for a moment, and again, plunged into darkness of sight, Trinian swayed. As the brilliant light

cleared, he saw her heading toward Adlena. Trinian tried to grip his sword blade tighter, willing his numb body to move, but he was immobilized by so many gods, their presence sucking him dry.

“I have never been one for brute force,” Passion explained. Her words like honey dripping from the walls. “Cleverness has been my tool. Outthinking, outmaneuvering, outbeguiling my foes, and I do believe I have convinced Power to try my ways.”

With his attention on Power and Passion, Trinian failed to notice Terror until he was upon him and had wrenched the great sword of Jacian out of Trinian’s hands. In a whirlwind, the god gave it to Passion.

“What are you doing, my dear?” asked Power.

“You have tried my ways, big brother; now I think I will try yours. I will kill queen and daughter. I will make this king suffer everything before you take his life. Oh brother, how gloriously we shall rule this world!”

Now, in the final hour, Trinian’s head buzzed as if filled with a million insects; his body had no feeling, he was falling slowly through a miasma of pain. He had fought to protect his family and save his world, and now the prophecies were coming true. Only one to die of purest sight... she must die so he could conquer. Only one, Only one...

“Trinian.” He had not heard her voice for so many months. She spoke his name quietly, as if it were just the two of them at home. It was gentle, understanding, and urgent. He looked up.

*Let them. Let them, and let me go.* He heard her as clearly as if she had spoken aloud, her eyes telling him to let her



die. *Do not cling to me now – do not keep me now. Save our world.*

There was a darkness threatening to spread across Minecerva, to wrap its black shadow about it in a strangled embrace of death. And there was his wife, with a sword at her breast, foretelling the ending with her gaze, and sacrificing her life. *“When one is thrice pierced of purest sight, such sacrifice will lead to His god-might.”*

Bereft of his faculties, weak to his core, he did not make the decision. In total and final trust, he let Adlena make it for him. “Golden King!” Trinian cried into the chamber, and his body filled with strength. “Gods of goodness – gods who have failed us in our petty trials – I forgive you. Come to me now; fight with me now – erase the evil that threatens our world!” and with a shove off the ground and a roar that ripped through his soul, he threw himself at Power.

On impact, Trinian discovered just how fully mortal Power had become. He was a physical existence with which he could meet and grapple, no longer a shadow but a substance, and they locked in deadly combat. But Trinian knew, immediately and without doubt, that Power was far stronger than he. Though the man would fight to his dying breath, the battle would be brief, and over the mortal king of Drian the former high god’s victory would be decisive.

And so it would have been, had Passion killed Adlena, but in the moment that Trinian threw himself upon Power, seeking to choke the life from his black and mortal body, Passion stabbed the queen to find, to her horror, that Adlena did not die.

The queen screamed in agony as Passion stabbed her, but she did not fall to the ground. She lurched down, shaking in pain, yet still in possession of her every movement, and placed Lillian on the floor – safely out of the blade’s reach. And then, to the horror of all, for all now looked upon her, she stood up again. The sword was through her back, through her heart, and piercing cleanly out of her chest, and Passion drew it out with a horrible, twisted grimace. The goddess had never grimaced before, and it was so horrendous, so true to her real nature, that it stripped her of all her bloom and façade. The stabbed queen looked upon her and Passion’s true self shone through at the queen’s glance, and suddenly, before the Dryad, Passion was a wrinkled, shriveled, ugly thing.

With a scream of terror, desperate and consumed now with killing the queen, Passion plunged it in again, and even a third time; but though Adlena cried out, and was as pale as death, she was not dead.

Backing up in all-consuming, shaking fear, Passion left the blade in the queen’s heart and ran – shrieking and mad – never to be seen again.

Trembling with pain, Adlena gripped the blade, pulled it from her chest and hurled it away, clutching her breast which was whole and without a mark. Slowly, breathing quickly to regain her bearings, color returned to the queen’s face.

Power was entirely distracted, and while he had absent-mindedly held Trinian at bay, he had stared at the action of the two women as if watching a play, mesmerized, and trying to find out how the actors tricked their audience. He did not see Garrity, who had lain dying upon the ground

all this time, lift his head. He did not see the former demigod drag himself up from the floor with a weak, stumbling heave, and with an effort of will, grasp the blade that lay upon the cave floor. He fatally did not see that with the last of his strength he cried, "My king!" and threw the sword as he fell to the ground, and perished.

Trinian caught the blade and cried aloud as if his voice were a trumpet: "Victory for the Golden King!"

Power whirled toward the mortal king in a last, final, desperate act to save himself and all for which he had fought. Terror and Destruction too, finally realizing, in a moment of panic, the consequences of all their actions, the complete loss of everything they wanted, roared down on Trinian. Afias could not stand but he could move, and he threw himself in their path so that they tripped over him, tearing his back with their wild force.

It was the twelfth hour, and Trinian took the blade, swung it around, and pierced the god of Power.

\* \* \*

The sword that had pierced Adlena three times, but had done her no harm, was not harmless to Power. It was glowing – a brilliant, golden glow, that pierced shafts of light all through the darkness of Power's mortal form, and his darkness was powerless beneath it. Adlena stared at Trinian across the room, her pain powerful, lasting, and sweet, and their eyes locked and held, their love communicating across the distance.

Around them, Terror and Destruction were fleeing. At last, the light burned so bright that all were blinded and

closed their eyes against it, and when it was gone, the roof of the palace was wide open to the blue of the sky, and Power had utterly dissolved in the light.

It was at that moment, in the celestial palace, that Fate's watch chimed twelve, and the gong of the bell was so loud that it reverberated in the heavens, and drowned all sound above and below.

Every mortal in Minecerva shrieked and cried out in terror, looking to the heavens at the unexpected sound of something greater and louder than thunder. Every god, good and evil, shook in their celestial robes, anticipating what they knew was about to come. In Drian, Gladier stepped outside and basked in the glow of a sun so bright it filled him with unutterable joy. In the heavenly palace, Fate leapt from his throne with more energy and joy than he had shown in twelve hundred years, and in Karaka, the humble assembly of trembling mortals, broken, bleeding, stabbed, and dying, felt a sudden surge of glorious hope.

How could they hope? It was little, shy, and unassuming, but there it was in all of their hearts, and Adlena and Trinian smiled at one other.

As if in a dream, the dark palace melted away into pooling mud, grass pushed up between cracks in the dirt floor, and the dripping mud turned to water. The room around them expanded, and soon, they stood in a large, green, open meadow beside a lake, and Adlena recognized it at once.

They were in Paradise.

## XVII

### THE GOLDEN KING

*“Those ancients who in poetry presented  
the golden age, who sang its happy state,  
perhaps, in their Parnassus, dreamt this place.  
Here, mankind’s root was innocent; and here  
were every fruit and never-ending spring;  
these streams—the nectar of which poets sing.”*

*- Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy*



## The Advent of the Golden King

**T**o each of the gods, the coming of the Golden King was a separate, intense, and deeply personal experience. He came all at once, and each saw him all at once, but it was as if his coming was meant just for them.

To a few, a very, very few, it was unadulterated happiness. Fate was consumed with burning passion, Knowledge shook with utter ecstasy, Hope flitted about as if she had never been quiet or shy, or knew how to be so, and Rordan wept without ceasing, his tears fountains of song raining upon his bubbling beard.

When The Golden King entered the palace, they were drawn to him as to their own hearts. He embraced them, kissed them, enfolded them, and they overflowed with joy. And then, to their unspeakable wonder, another goddess stood beside him – Peace, more radiant, timeless, and beautiful than ever. It was - as no mortal can ever imagine, but which, in their deepest souls, they yearn for with every fiber of their being - a perfect moment.

To others, the happiness of His coming was blended with fear. Death, Joy, Charity, and Solitude quivered behind the pillars of the palace, too frightened to show themselves without being called forth, knowing that they did not deserve to stand in His presence. Yet, oh! how strongly their hearts desired it! They had loved Him late. But looking upon them, with His infinite, understanding gaze, they accepted His love, He purified their imperfections, and they too rejoiced in His presence.

Destruction, Plenty, and Famine had no such qualms. They had done what they were ordered to do at the beginning of time, they told themselves, and they had no fear. They walked unafraid into Fate's center chamber, where The Golden King now presided from the throne, and stood unafraid, almost defiant, before Him. They stared Him down until they could stare no more, and then they ran away screaming. They threw themselves from the parapets and lost their intellects, and they became senseless elements: wind, rain, and heat.

And finally Passion, Despair, and Terror were nowhere to be seen. Whether they too had turned to elements of the earth to serve it as they had never done, or whether they were so full of hatred that they chose to abide in darkness, wailing obscenities and grinding their teeth, stripped of their powers and fleeing the Golden King's healing gaze forever, will never be known.

The mortal world felt him too, though not all knew why the sun suddenly grew so bright and drew all eyes to it. Not all knew why the world smelled suddenly of sunflowers, and why the grass was freshly washed, like linen drying in the summer breeze. But the four mortals in paradise – the



half-Dryad, the king, the farmer, and the infant – they saw him. He came to them.

All at once, seeing the Golden King before him, Trinian understood in full what he had only faintly grasped before – that he had not killed Power on his own strength. That he could never have touched a god without the aid of a higher being. That it was always arrogance to believe he could. All at once he knew that the prophecies were children’s whispers in the dark about the adult world. That he had never really known what was coming. That he was unworthy of it now that it was here.

For the first time, he fell willingly to his knees before a god. Kneeling in Power’s chamber had been a twisted foreshadowing, a pale glimpse of the fear and awe he would feel before the Golden King, and in dutiful yearning, he could not stand before him. He was all at once too afraid and too in love.

“I did not kill Power,” whispered Trinian.

## Of the Creation of Minecerva and the New Battle

**T**he Golden King smiled, and his smile was a ray of sunshine across a golden plate. He was gentle and ageless, beautiful and mighty. There was a buoyant youthfulness to him even as he was weighted with the knowledge of the wise. Without answering Trinian, he reached out and took up baby Lillian who was still lying on the ground, grabbing at a dandelion and cooing. When she saw His golden countenance, her face lit up with her very first baby smile, and He played with Lillian like she was the only important thing in the entire universe. Finally, He dragged his eyes away from her to answer her father.

“You did kill Power, as much as he can be killed. But only because you allowed Me to work through you, and because of the sacrifice of your friends.” He looked to where Garrity lay broken on the green grass, and He looked at where Adlena stood, her heart pierced, but not dead. “It was only with the aid of those who were both divine and human that the sacrifice could be made to atone for

Power's great wickedness. You, a mere mortal, were not like him enough to make that sacrifice."

"I have no power. I thought my birthright... In my arrogance, I thought I had a special gift, but I am just a man." The sword had crossed over with them, and now Trinian picked it up off the grass. "This is yours, oh God. Please take it from me – I have no right to wield it."

A silver lady stepped forward, and Trinian started. His vision had been consumed by the Golden King, but now he realized a lady, all in silver, and shining with a white light, had stood beside the Golden One all along. She took the blade from his hand gently, stroking him as a mother soothes a worried child. "This was mine. I gave it to your son. It has served you well, and you may keep it." She handed it back and turned to the Golden King. "This is too much for them."

At once, both their lights dimmed, and they diminished to the size of a mortal man and woman. Trinian had been too in awe before to realize what giants they had stood. From his knees, the whole world looked large.

The Golden King was now a man, and he stepped forward kindly with the infant. "Rise."

Trinian stood, and for the first time, he could truly look at his daughter. She was perfect, each hair and finger, each little ear a curve all her own. As he looked, he wondered how she could have come from him, who was so flawed and wrecked, and his heart ached over the failings he had unwittingly bequeathed to her. He had not thought such things at Jacian's birth. At the time, he thought he would learn to be a perfect father, but time had come and passed, and he was more broken than ever.

“She is yours,” he suddenly gasped, looking with new awe at the God. “Isn’t she?”

“They all are,” the Golden One affirmed.

“I know,” he looked at her again, and his daughter glowed as if woven from light. “I know.”

The god held out the babe. “But I gave her to you, to keep for a time. She is yours still – until she comes back to me.”

Trinian took her in his arms, his love and yearning breaking his heart. He felt Adlena come from behind and rest her tall head against his shoulder, stroking her daughter’s pink hand with her long finger.

Afias kept silent, watching everything. When the god and goddess appeared, his eyes had seen the woman first. She was breathtaking, and he had forgotten everything for a long, refreshing moment. All his cares, worries, even his physical ailments had melted away, and he knew he could rest in her presence forever. Then she had lifted a finger and pointed to the God, and his eyes followed obediently. His first glimpse of the Golden Giant was less awful than his brother’s. Less terrifying. He was seeing him through the eyes of the Silver Lady, and she was gentle and soft. The lady loved the Golden King, and Afias loved the lady, so he loved the God too. And yet he has loved the God before he had ever met the Lady. And now he would love them both forever. His heart went out to her like a child’s, like Jacian’s in the cave, and like him he could have cried out, “I want to stay here with you forever!”

When the mortal king and queen of Drian stood aside with their child, the Golden King knelt beside Garrity’s lifeless body. The god licked his finger and touched each

open wound separately and patiently. When he was done, he stood up and commanded, "Get up, warrior. The battle goes on."

Garrity stood up and cried out in joy to see the God, as if greeting an old friend. Then he knelt on one knee, as a knight before a king, and the God blessed his brow.

"What battle, Sire?" he asked eagerly.

"Much has been destroyed." The Golden King turned to include them all, and Trinian and Adlena stepped forward to listen. "Now it is time for you to build. To spread, teach, pass on, and prosper. To battle against the evil that Power has left in your hearts. To teach future children to fight. You, more than anyone," He told Garrity, raising him from his knee, "know that the inner battle must be fought forever."

"I have grown so weary, fighting on my own," Garrity said. "Will you be here now?"

"I will be here always, guiding you from afar. But I am afraid you will sometimes be weary. That is the way of it."

"And when the battle is over?"

The god smiled wide, and they smiled too, He was so infectious. "Then I will come to bring you to Me, and you will be with Me forever."

Garrity laughed. "I can do that then. For You, I think I could fight forever."

"So could I," said Prince Afias and Queen Adlena at the same moment, and they all laughed.

"And you, my son?" asked the Golden King of the earthly one, his eyes sharp and demanding. "Can you serve me?"

Trinian did not answer for a long moment. He saw himself so clearly before this Being; a God he now loved

with his whole self. Beside him, he was no better than any man. No better than Power, even, for he himself was greedy, weak, frightened, and proud, and Trinian wept. "I am not worthy." Everything he had wanted: to keep his family safe, to defend Drian, to be a powerful king – they were weak desires. Good on their own, perhaps, but his motivations had been imperfect. He had wanted them from fear – fear of losing what was not his, fear of failing, fear of being alone. He had sought love when he should have given it, and feared love when he had it.

He had struggled to love his wife and son. He had sent his family away to hide from them. He had even run away from Drian to escape the tears and pain. And when he had come home, and Lavendier had given all of herself to him and to the city, he had looked upon her with suspicion. He was not even a man, but lower than a worm. Still he wept. He was utterly broken and entirely undignified. He was no warrior, but a victim of his own vice.

The Silver Lady bent down, lifted him up, and escorted him to the Golden King, bringing him so close that he had to stand eye to eye, and to his surprise, the golden eyes were kind. They were bottomless amber depths to a heart burning with love, aching with love, longing to pour its love upon him. The question was not whether he could serve, but whether he could receive love.

He thought of Phestite, throwing his body before the blade. He thought of Afias, departing Drian because he asked it of him. He thought of Kett, Trigent, and Cartnol blown dead on the battlefield. He thought of Lavendier, bleeding out in the Healory. Finally, he thought of something far less dramatic. He saw his bright, happy

brother-in-law standing in the fragmented light of a command tent, offering to serve his family: "In this matter, I offer you my service," Asbult's voice echoed in Trinian's mind. He was loved. Even in a place beyond death, by a person gone forever, he was loved.

"I can serve you."

\* \* \*

The day waxed long into the evening, and they all sat in a circle on the grass. The King and Lady spent the time telling stories of the past, the present, and the future.

They told how The Golden King created the heavens and the earth, and left the gods of the heavens to guide and form its growth. How He had always promised to return, but that the mortals forgot, and the gods almost did. A very few had kept faith, and they told how it broke His heart.

He told how He had bestowed free will, the most precious and awful of gifts, and how His creatures had misused it at their own discretion.

"But know that you were never forsaken. I had my eyes upon you all the time. In my unending love, which does not vanish with the faults of a few, I made you instrumental in your own salvation."

He told of the prophecies, the wizards, the natural gods, and the blessing of the monarchy, and that all such blessings were His way of making Himself near, even when He was pushed far away. "But now it will be far more difficult to ignore me. Men will try, and they will fail. The gods can never do so again."

“What has become of the gods?” asked Afias, who was like an unafraid child in this meeting, constantly questioning and interjecting, for the presence of the Silver Lady emboldened him.

“They have all received their dues. Those who loved me without err, both the natural and the high, have been appointed your special guardians. They will be able to live in both my kingdom and the mortal realm simultaneously, living in glory with me while guiding you until the end of time. Upon Rordan, though you knew him as a river, I have bestowed the rank of high god. Those who loved me late I have drawn close to me, to live in my presence, to abide in my heart, forever. They do not wish to dangle still in the land of time, for they are too weak, and I am glad to hold them close.

“The natural gods will not rule the physical domain any longer. Minecerva’s infancy is no more, the world is fully formed, and their time of glory is ended. Those who served me will join me in the heavens, and those who did not, will become the elements they were given to rule. Finally, as for all those who hate me – whether mortal, demi-god, natural god, or high god – I will abide by their choice. If they have no wish to be near me, then they will stay far from the light, gazing out into bottomless darkness; or if they desire to come to me now, at the very end, and pay for their crimes, this too will I allow.” At this His face was drawn, like an old man whose life has been nothing but struggle and trial. His brow wrinkled fiercely, His chest heaved, and His face was blotched and red. His hand shook as He passed it over His eyes. “How I mourn for them. How I will miss them.”



Lillian cooed and reached out her arm from where Trinian held her, and the Golden King gathered her close to His heart. His gold-red beard tangled in her infant fist, and He was smiling again.

“If we are no longer in infancy,” said Afias, “then what do we do now?”

The Silver Lady answered. “Now you grow and learn. No one will be holding your hand – you will have direct access to all graces. Now Jacian must learn the art of being a Healer, so that the king will not stand in fear of the natural world. And Viol will find her own calling – indeed, she is already finding it.”

“Yes,” the Golden King was practically glowing again, “she has never met me, but she knows me already.”

The Silver Lady nodded. “These young people will pave the way in your new world.”

When the sun was disappearing behind the purple ridge, The Golden King stood, and they all followed suit. “This place will never again be as it is now,” He said sadly. But then He brightened. “But it will help to purify the effects of my wicked servant on the land.”

He stretched out His arms toward the mountains to the south, those Lavendier had once crossed to hear enemy secrets, those that partitioned paradise from Karaka, and with a great rumble, the mountains parted at the center and swung outward like mighty doors. When they were pointing straight out, they fell still, and paradise was connected to Karaka by a deep gorge. Before anyone could speak, the King handed Lillian to Adlena, and then He and the Lady bowed deeply with warm smiles, and vanished.

Afias stepped forward to try to catch them, but they were

gone, and quite suddenly, paradise too disappeared, and when they blinked, they all stood outside the red walls of Drian.

## Romance in the Healory

**T**hey were too dazed to do anything for a long time. They had not eaten, some of them in many days, but no one was hungry. They had all nearly died, but no one was tired. They all felt wonderfully well, and gloriously confused.

The calm broke with the thunder of hooves. Gladier, Viol and Jacian galloped up to them from out of the city gates, full-tilt and reigning in sharply. The old wizard practically flew out of his saddle as he grabbed Trinian's shoulders, his wide robes flapping in the wind and his beard bristling like he was three hundred years younger. "I saw Him. I saw Him!" he cried joyfully. "And you saw too, I know by your faces. He told me everything – all of it, the creation of the world, the call of the Healers, and by glory, it's a marvelous tale! And now I say, at last I can be at peace!" He did a little jig on the lawn.

As soon as the wizard let his sovereign go, Trinian darted to meet his son and swept him close into his arms. He pressed him to his heart, smelling his curls that were full

of wind and fresh air. "And mother too!" the little boy cried, bringing Adlena into the embrace. "And this is Lillian, my little sister, who you hadn't met yet. But you brought her home anyway. And she's got lighter hair than me like yours, but I've got like mother's. Did you bring my other mother's sword back?" And he chattered on, telling them how scared Cila and Viol had been when they found him missing at Fort Saskatchan, and how relieved they were when they found him, and how scared they were for Trinian and Afias. "But I knew you'd find a way to save them."

It was left to Viol to greet Afias and Garrity, and she never could remember afterwards who she hugged first, but she held them heartily.

"Power's dead," said Afias superfluously.

She smiled at him.

\* \* \*

Afias led Garrity to the Healory, his light feet hurrying along the stones of the path, his heart making his feet dance with anticipation, but Garrity felt like a weight was settling deeper and deeper over him with each step.

"Come along, my friend!" Afias looked over his shoulder impatiently. He was now knit to Garrity through their experience together, but his heart yearned for Adrea, and his tongue could hardly keep still until he could tell her everything about the Golden King. He whirled on the path and gripped Garrity by the shoulders.

"They are waiting for us!" he cried jubilantly, and because she must have heard his voice, Adrea suddenly

appeared, running toward them out of the Healory. "Rejoice!" cried Afias in a voice so loud and jubilant that all three of them laughed. He ran forward, caught her in his arms, and whirled her around in the air. "Rejoice, my love, and be glad, for the Golden King has come to us, and he loves us with a greater love than we can ever love him!"

"You saw him?" she asked in disbelief.

"We saw him!"

"Can I?"

"No, I don't think so. But he's here, even now, and he promises never to leave, and he swears we will see him at the end of our days. He is waiting for us!"

She was laughing, and cried out, "Well, it's terribly unfair of him to make me wait, but I don't mind! So long as he is waiting, it is enough. It is more than I ever hoped."

"There's more," said Afias as Garrity passed him and went toward the doorway. "I have to tell you about the Silver Lady." Adrea side-stepped around her betrothed and caught Garrity's arm before he disappeared inside. "Wake her up," she told him. "She's been waiting for you, and it's not fair to let her sleep."

He nodded, and went inside.

Despite Lady Adrea's words, he half expected Lavendier to throw herself into his arms, to encounter her vibrant, bursting energy, and he braced himself for it. But his arms remained empty, and he looked around the room.

She was asleep in the center, and he was suddenly in the cave again, bloody from Asbult's death and shaking because she was dying... He shook himself. He was so raw. So happy. And so in awe.

He approached the bed cautiously and sat down, swal-

lowing and trying to think what to say. But words had never been enough for him – Lavendier was always the one to speak. He wanted to kiss her, to hold her, and to keep her safe forever. To show her she was loved – but so many men had said that to her before. She was jaded, a woman of the world, and he had never loved another... While he agonized, her eyes opened and she looked at him.

“You’re here!” She sat up and threw herself into his arms, just as he had thought she would. But she was weak, and her energy lower than he expected. Her head fell softly into the groove of his arm. “I was so afraid – Gladier knew not if you were alive or dead. And then he said you were fine, but I could not believe it.”

His heart swelled at her closeness, and he held her tight. Long, hard, and close.

After a moment, she sat up, and he loosened his arms. “He said you were covered in gashes all over, let me see you.”

She inspected him seriously, a puzzled frown growing over her eyes when she saw how whole and healthy he was, so that finally he had to laugh, and with the laugh, he said it simply. “I love you.”

She stopped inspecting him, and looked into his eyes. Deeply. As if she doubted him.

“And I am sorry,” he continued, his voice overfull with emotion, choking him while he tried to say the words. “Laven, when I fled my mother, I swore to myself I would never tie my life to another’s; it was always easier to risk death instead of my heart. But you, Viol, Jacian, Cila, Adlena, Asbult, and Lillian – you all loved me so fervently that I could not keep you out.

“When you left paradise, I had only begun to let you in. But since then my heart has been cracking from the inside out, until now it is wide open and yearning for you. Yearning with the deepest love. For it was not until I lay dead before the Golden King and felt the new life that coursed through me, that I finally realized just how broken I was. It was when the Golden God touched me, healed me, and made me new.”

Her eyes were shining in bewilderment as she looked upon him. “Garrity, what are you talking about?”

“I died.” He smiled because it was an amusing thing to say. “I died, and the Golden King brought me back. He healed me – not just in the flesh, which is weak and will break again, I don’t doubt. But He made me whole again, so that I can love, fully and without reservation. He gave me a new mother, a silver mother, and I no longer have to fear the old. But above all, he opened me to love you as I always ought to have loved you. I am yours. Yours forever.”

She was crying. He still had his arms wrapped around her, and she sat with her arms around his neck. She could not speak.

“Is it enough to say it? Teach me what to say; I know not. I want to tell you I love you, but the words aren’t enough. Too many other men have said them to you before me.”

“I care nothing about any other man – only you. It is enough.” Her eyes glistened with a brilliance that made his heart ache. She rested her warm forehead against his, and she whispered the words that convinced him that they really were. She told him, “I love you.”

## A Family Portrait

**H**e stayed with her a long while as she lay in bed, recovering from her joy. They were hand in hand, content to rest in this new sense of belonging. Until suddenly, Lavendier remembered that, lately, Gladier had been sending all her visitors away. He might return and insist that she rest – he might even send Garrity away, and she clenched his hand hard.

“What is it?” he asked.

She looked up at him with dancing eyes. “Can you break me out of here? Please? I want a change of scene, and I dread that the doctors will send you away, for they keep driving away everyone else. You are truly the best medicine for me,” she added quickly. “Please?”

He smiled. “I cannot say no to you. But are you strong enough?”

“You are. Carry me.”

He laughed heartily at that, and taking her easily in his arms, they slipped from the Healory, and Lavendier told him to take her to her quarters. Neither of them thought



about how he had once feared those chambers, and how she had schemed to trap him in them. Not, that is, until they stood in the main room, and the thought occurred to them both at once, and they laughed gaily.

“Oh, how I despised you!” he remembered, placing her gently on the couch.

“And I wanted you for a trophy. Oh, I was despicable!”

He knelt on the ground beside her. “Don’t think about it. It is past now – we have only the future.”

Her face suddenly sobered. “I do have much to regret though,” she murmured.

He frowned. “I know. And I am sorry.”

“You said before that many men had told me that they loved me. You would be surprised how few there really were. ‘I want you,’ they said more than anything else. ‘I need you.’ But not ‘I love you.’ I love you means that you belong, and no one really wanted to belong to me.”

He leaned forward. “I want to belong to you,” he whispered.

She smiled tenderly and played with his brown hair. “You already do. Do you not know it? And I have belonged to you a long time; my happiness is in your hands.”

“I am not worthy.”

“Say not so. Say you will try to be worthy. Say you will love me even when you are weak. Say you are honored to hold my happiness. Because it is yours no matter what, so you may as well claim it.”

“I do claim it! I do. You already have mine, for you were with me in the Karakan chambers. You gave me strength. I have grown in my love for you, even from a distance.”

“Every moment I was traveling or defending the city, I

thought, 'What would Garrity think? What would he do?' I wanted to make you proud, even if you could not see me.'

"Always. I am always proud of you."

"Do you know," she asked after a quiet moment, "I want to go on another adventure with you? You would think I would be sick of them, after everything."

His eyes shone happily. "You might think."

"But I love adventure!"

"And I love you."

"Afias and Adrea are engaged to be wed," she said after a long silence, in which the sun disappeared behind the garden wall outside the windows, and the sky was a rich, velvety orange.

"Oh?"

"Do you not think we should all be married together?"

"I do."

\* \* \*

Viol found them an hour later, asleep; Lavendier on the couch, and Garrity with his head on her knee. The girl curled up comfortably on the floor and watched the stars come out in the sky. She sat there reflecting about the Golden King, and what Afias had told her He had said of her, until Cila peeked in and joined her. Then Afias and Adrea came, and finally Trinian, Adlena, Jacian, and Lillian. Garrity was awake by then, leaning against the couch, and Viol was leaning against him. Adlena and Jacian sat with the king on another couch, each of them trying to snuggle as close to him as possible. Afias sat on the floor, Adrea reclined beside him, and Cila watched them with tears in

her eyes as she held Lillian close to her aching heart.

By now, all knew that Asbult was gone, and their hearts were heavy, even in their happiness.

Outside the chamber, the servants were airing out the rest of the family's apartments, laying them out for bed, but no one wanted to leave the circle. It was for this, the quiet miracle of love and family, for which they had fought, and they basked in it, their hearts aching and hurting and full.

Lavendier slept a long time, but she awoke at last, and was delighted to find them all around her. She wept and laughed openly, and her bright presence made them all even brighter. Garrity noticed the change, and with tears, remembered Asbult's words: "You could not help but be happy in her presence... If she was happy, you wanted to laugh and dance and kiss everyone. You wanted to rescue her, defend her." Yes. He was happier in the glow of her presence, and he would fight the battle as the Golden King had asked of him – for her, and for the world. They all would.

From somewhere, in the brilliant glow of the Golden King's presence, Asbult was smiling. And laughing gaily, he loved them.

## The Marriage

“**A**ll the laughter and merriment within, and I find you here.”

At the sound of Garrity’s voice, Viol turned and smiled softly. It was after the joint wedding, and she had slipped quietly from the noise of the reception and sought the solitude of the outer portico overlooking the city. “I wanted to soak up the joy of this moment.”

Garrity came and leaned against the balcony. He gazed up at the silver light of the stars. “Beautiful.” He clasped his hands together in delight, and she put her little one over his.

“Yes,” she sighed, and there were tears in her eyes.

“And now,” he said, turning to her and taking both her hands in his, “we must find you a husband.”

She laughed at him, but shook her head, smiling. “I shall never marry.”

“And why not? Do you not see how happy we all are?”

“I do. But it is enough for me that I see you with Laven, and Afias and Adrea together; that is not what I want for

myself.”

“And will you still say so, I wonder, when you find the one you love?”

She shook her head again firmly. “There is no one like that for me, for it is not my purpose. I seek happiness just like everyone else, but I know it will look different for me.” She looked at him and though he was nodding, his brow was furrowed in a frown. “You think I am wrong?”

The noise and music from inside grew louder as the verandah door opened and Lavendier came through. “Here you are! I should have known I would find you two here together, away from the noise.” She went to Garrity, who drew her possessively into his arms. She belonged to him, and they smiled at each other at the thought.

Then Garrity looked at his new sister. “I think you are right. The Golden King said your life would be different than ours.”

“Yes,” Viol laughed at the thought. “Yes, I have thought about that. When Afias told me that the Golden King said I knew him, I knew He was right. And I was closer to figuring out my future than I have ever been. It is so close, I can taste it.”

Lavendier laid her head on her new husband’s shoulder. “What will it look like?”

“I am not sure yet, entirely. I will be alone, but not alone. I want to live for the Golden King – but I know not what that will look like yet. But oh, how I love Him!”

Lavendier touched her sister’s chin. “Look at you.” The dark green gown Viol wore accentuated her full figure and the light from the stars shone upon her hair and in her eyes. “You are so grown-up.”

“She is a woman,” said Garrity, “full of understanding, who knows her own mind.”

Viol blushed and hoped they did not see it in the dark light; but they did, and it only added to her beauty.

“But come,” said Lavendier impatiently, “won’t you two come back inside with me? The last dance is about to begin. Afias and Adrea are already on the floor.”

“May I have the honor?” Garrity asked her.

“Why do you think I came looking for you?”

He kissed her, and she, laughing, grabbed Viol’s hand and drew them both inside.

## Epilogue

Freed at last from the strain of watching his brother wreak havoc on the mortal realm, Fate rejoiced to sit in the Golden King's presence and preside over Minecerva. He requested the honor of personal companion to the Kings of Drian, and The Golden King granted it. Eager to guard and guide, Fate settled over the world and took up a flaming sword and a ruling scepter, but his watch he threw far away into the sea. Let it sleep there while it ticked its rounds – the Golden King's kingdom reigned, and nothing could undo it.

Gladier took Jacian into the Healory and trained him there. Old as he was, and ready to pass on to his eternal rest with the Golden King, the wizard refused to die until the prince could step into his official role as Healer King. It was not until then that the old man, at last, found the peace he had yearned for so long.

Garrity and Lavendier took up Asbult's mission to chart the entirety of Minecerva. They were a roaming, adventurous couple, friendly and fierce, eager to meet new friends and form new allies. As they traveled from one adventure to the next, Lavendier gave birth to two boys, Asbult and Habas, and later a girl they named Melcanta, and called Mel. Garrity and Lavendier never slackened in their pursuit of truth, constantly questioning the nature

of love, power, and destruction. They asked themselves whether there was goodness in the realities that had been so abused by the evil gods. They tried to understand, and they taught their children the value of a never-ending thirst for truth.

Afias and Adrea, requesting and receiving the permission of King Trinian, moved to South Drian, thereby reinforcing the strong bonds between the two countries, and putting themselves to the task of building safe roads for frequent travel between the capitols. Over the years, Adrea grew calmer and more contented in nature, and Afias more animated and adventurous. When not overseeing matters of state, they liked to stay home, reading books aloud or strolling through their gardens, planning and building new libraries, universities, and shrines to the Golden King and Silver Lady; but every now and then the urge to travel would take one of them suddenly, and they would pack up and go on an adventure – usually to Drian’s capitol. They had nine children through the years, and raised them like crops, keeping them watered, fed, and in plenty of sunlight.

Trinian loved Adlena more every day, and she grew daily more comfortable with herself and her rule. She became the people’s queen, walking among them and listening to their needs, ministering and helping where she could, using her inner sight to give her wisdom and guidance. She also took a personal interest in Jacian and Lillian’s education, and learned so much from Gladier in the process of her son’s apprenticeship that she built the very first Drinian Hospital.

Trinian spent his reign in spreading devotion to the



Golden King, and decided to leave the neighboring kingdoms to govern themselves. Helping them if they asked for it, and staying away if they did not, he went down in history as the most fair, loving, and open-hearted of all kings.

Princess Viol remained true to her resolution, though she had many suitors and proposals through the years. She knew that she needed to live alone, set apart from others, so she lived alone in a little hut, simply dressed in a plain blue dress, with her hair down and her hands hard at work in the soil, planting and growing her own food, and through it all she fasted, praised, and prayed. In solitude, she hoped to learn how to love the Golden King perfectly. And beyond belief, she was happy.

Not just happy but joyful; glowing with radiance. Her family marveled at the beauty that increased in her every year, and the peace, calm, and joy that breathed from her every look and word. She was content and fulfilled, and never thought to want company.

Until one day, a request came to her door that she could not refuse. For on opening it, there stood upon the step her petite, pretty sister, with sad green eyes and a black veil over her blond hair. "Take me in," said Cila, her weak voice softly begging. "I have tried to live alone, but there is no purpose. You have found it. Teach me your secret – give me a reason to live."

First, she took her in out of charity, but Cila soon blossomed under the strict rule that Viol lived, and presently, despite her initial regret, many more women joined them, dedicating their lives to living for others, communally and singly, in quiet meditation, song, and prayer, and

## TRINIAN

active ministering. And these gathered women and their rule of life spread like wildfire through all the world, and it was these pockets of praying, celibate women (and eventually, men as well), hidden away in the recesses of the wilderness, living apart from society, that were the driving force behind all the peace and enrichment of the years that followed.

Over it all, the Golden King looked down in love, and blessed Minecerva.

## THE END

## CODA

*“No anguish I have had to bear on your account has been too heavy a price to pay for the new life into which I have entered in loving you.”*

George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

# Character Index and Pronunciation Guide

## Mortals

- **Adalam** (A-duh-lam) – First King of Drian
- **Adlena** (Ad-len-uh) – Dryad, Queen of Drian, wife of Trinian
- **Adrea** (Ad-ree-uh) – Heir Stewardess of Drian, daughter of Lord Steward Astren
- **Afias** (Ae-fee-us) – Prince of Drian, brother of Trinian
- **Armand** (Ar-mond) – A sailor of Kelta
- **Asbult** (As-bult) – Prince of Drian, husband of Cila
- **Astren** (Ast-ren) – Lord Steward of Drian
- **Cartnol** (Kart-nol) – Soldier of Drian
- **Cila** (See-la) – Princess of Drian, sister of Trinian
- **Dascerice** (Das-kuh-ris) – A soldier of Drian
- **Denin** (Den-in) – King of Kelta
- **Desmond** (Des-mond) – A soldier of Drian
- **Ferand** (Faer-and) – Lord in Drian and one of the six councilors to the steward
- **Faring** (Faer-ing) – Waiting woman to Lady Adrea
- **Ferran** (Faer-an) – A gorgan, son of Kellan
- **Farsooth** (Far-sooth) – A soldier of Kelta
- **Garrity** (Gaer-i-tee) – Soldier of Drian
- **Gladier** (Gluh-deer) – Wizard and Healer
- **Gorj** (Jorj) – Soldier of Drian
- **Habas** (Hab-is) – Wizard and Healer

MORTALS

- **Hagar** (Hag-ar) – Squire of Leghorn
- **Hedger** (Hed-jer) – Bandit in the Wilds of Drian
- **Horans** (Hor-ans) – A messenger of Drian
- **Jacian** (Juh-kee-an) – Son of Trinian
- **Jeroe** (Je-ro) – Servant to the Nian Family
- **Kalaban** (Kal-i-ban) – Ship's captain in South Drian
- **Kart** (Kart) – A bandit with Tarfan
- **Karth** (Karth) – A soldier of Drian
- **Kellan** (Kel-an) – A gorgan
- **Kett** (Ket) – Soldier of Drian
- **Krong** (Krong) – Soldier of Kara
- **Lavendier** (La-ven-deer) – Princess of Drian, eldest sister of Trinian
- **Lela** (Lay-la) – Servant to the Nian Family
- **Lenora** (Le-nore-uh) – Squire Hagar's wife
- **Lillian** (Li-lee-an) – Daughter of Trinian
- **Lucer** (Loo-ser) – A dragon
- **Melcis** (Mel-kis) – Lord in Drian and one of the six councilors to the steward
- **Mendican** (Men-di-kin) – An ancient healer
- **Merciec** (Mer-see-ak) – Soldier of Drian
- **Nian** (Ny-an) – Trinian's father
- **Phestite** (Fes-tyt) – Head general of Drinian army
- **Ronarge** (Ro-narj) – Last King of Drian before Trinian
- **Secretary**, the – assistant to Power
- **Tarfan** (Tar-fin) – Bandit in the Wilds of Drian
- **Trigent** (Try-jent) – Farmer in Drian
- **Trinian** (Tri-nee-un) – King of Drian, son of Nian
- **Viol** (Vie-ohl) – Princess of Drian, youngest sister of Trinian
- **Wrelle** (Wrel) – King of Kelta

- **Xedril** (Zed-ril) – False king of Kara

# Gods

- **Fate** – Responsible for leaving humanity free to practice their free will
- **Peace** – The oldest of the goddesses, responsible for guiding humanity in the way of peace
- **Power** - Responsible for guiding humanity in the practice of power; bent on conquering Minecerva
- **Terror** - Responsible for guiding humanity in through the process of fear and flight
- **Passion** - Responsible for guiding humanity in the use of passions
- **Resolve** - Responsible for guiding humanity in resolution
- **Death** - Responsible for guiding humanity in the process of dying
- **Famine** - Responsible for guiding humanity in the practice of loss
- **Plenty** - Responsible for guiding humanity in the reality of having enough
- **Destruction** - Responsible for guiding humanity in the practice of building up and tearing down
- **Joy** - Responsible for guiding humanity in the practice of joy
- **Charity** - Responsible for guiding humanity in the

practice of charitable love

- **Solitude** - Responsible for guiding humanity in the practice of solitude
- **Hope** – Youngest of the high gods, responsible for guiding humanity in the practice of hope
- **Rordan** (Roar-dan) – Natural god of river Rordan
- **Strana** (Stra-nuh) – Natural goddess in Kelta
- **Mercy** – Natural goddess of Tyre
- **Justice** – Natural goddess of Kara
- **The Silver Lady** – The mother of the Golden King
- **The Golden King** – The highest god of the far heavens



## Places

- **Austro**, country (Ah-stroh) – Easternmost country to the north of Cronice and east of the Kara mountain range
- **Drian**, country (Drie-an) – Central land of Minecerva, incorporating the capital of Drian, the wilds of Drian, and the small towns scattered throughout
- **Drian**, city (Drie-an) – Capital of the country Drian
- **Drian**, wilds of (Drie-an) – A collection of barren lands, crumbling ruins, and small towns inhabiting the eastern arm of the country of Drian
- **Kelta**, country (Kel-tuh) – Northernmost central country of Drian
- **Varlo**, city (Var-loh) – Capital of South Drian
- **Varlo**, palace (Var-loh) – Palace in capital of South Drian
- **Kara**, country (Ka-ruh) – Eastern country of Minecerva located along the Kara Mountain range
- **Kara Mountains**, mountain range (Kar-uh) – Mountain range stretching from the northern to the southern tips of Minecerva, between Drian in the north, South Drian in the south, Austro in the northeast, and Cronice in the southeast
- **Karaka**, country (Kuh-rok-uh) – Easternmost country

of Minecerva, stretching from the northern to the southern tips, between Mestraff to the east, ocean to the west, Rordan to the southeast, and the desert and Paradise mountain ranges to the northwest

- **Korem** – Palace in capital of Drian
- **Leghorn**, town (Leg-horn) – Central northern town in the wilds of Drian
- **Lapita** (Laa-pee-tuh) – Southernmost island off the coast of South Drian
- **Mestraff**, country (Mes-trif) – Western country of Minecerva stretching from the northern to the southern tips of Minecerva, between Drian to the east and Karaka to the west
- **Paradise**, country – Northwest country located in the corner of Minecerva behind the northwest mountain range
- **Desert**, country – Northern country of Minecerva between paradise mountain ranges to the west and Mestraff to the east
- **Yellow Mountains**, mountain range – Northern mountain range stretching from Karaka in the west to Austro in the east
- **Cronice**, country (Croh-nis) – Easternmost country to the south of Austro and east of the Kara mountain range
- **Ringwold**, fort (Ring-wold) – Fort just west of the Rordan river in Mestraff
- **Rordan**, river (Roar-dan) – Western central river of Minecerva stretching from the northern to the southern tips of Minecerva, between Drian to the east and Mestraff to the west

- **Rarks**, town (Rarks) – Central western town in the midst of the Mestraff woods
- **South Drian**, country (South Drie-an) – Southern-most central country of Drian
- **Tyre**, town (Tire) – Central eastern town at the foot of the Kara mountains



## About the Author

Inundated in Narnia, Middle Earth, and Florin as a child, I am now the author of two fantasy novels, *Halfbreeds* and *Trinian*. When not slaying monsters with the pen, I co-host the Podcast Literary Leviathans with my brother Tim, and write on my blog [TheFairyTaleBlog.com](http://TheFairyTaleBlog.com), where I celebrate my love of the literary classics and help my readers to approach, understand and love them!


Did you enjoy *Trinian*? Please leave a rating and review on Amazon - it really helps me out! And feel free to shoot me fan mail at [elizabeth@thefairytaletaleblog.com](mailto:elizabeth@thefairytaletaleblog.com). I respond personally! You can follow me through email, Pinterest, Instagram, and Facebook.

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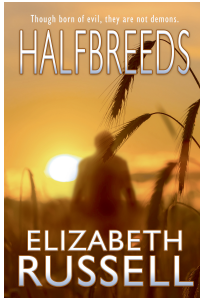
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## Also by Elizabeth Russell



### **Halfbreeds**

In a village wrapped about with strange monsters and superstition, a new kind of child is born. Half-man half-monster, the villagers fear their own children and, turning against them, burn them at the stake. But a small band of resilient Halfbreeds escape their executioners and take up their home in the wild. In a desperate attempt to find their place in the world, these children question what it really means to be human.