



Michael
Raduga

REIGN OF DREAMERS

Elizabeth's Mystery

Reign of Dreamers:

Elizabeth's Mystery

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CELESIA



100 miles



Sunset City

The Tower of Recognition

The Tower of Complicity

The Tower of Need

The Tower of Security

The Tower of Perfection

Sallep

The Tower of Self-Expression

Star City

Parthagon

New Albert

Yarta

Arogdor

The Tenth River

The First River

The Eighth River

The Ninth River

The Seventh River

The Second River

The Sixth River

The Fifth River

The Third River

The Snake River

The Star River

The Quiet River

Star Lake

Chapter 1. A Tragedy on the Outskirts of Sallep



A pigeon landed on the fence before the small wooden house with its thatched roof. The bird proceeded to clean its feathers. In the center of the yard, a bay horse, hitched to a cart, stood chewing hay. Nearby two children in baggy tunics were running around barefoot. A short man in a worn leather jacket was busy pattering about alongside them. All night long the rain had come down, and now, as the warm spring sun had risen, everyone was setting to their daily tasks. The pigeon's morning ritual, however, was interrupted by an arrow flying an inch above its ruffled head, at which the bird shot up into the sky.

“You missed, you missed!” squealed the girl, chasing after the pigeon as a black pup eagerly barked.

“Practice, Thomas,” the man said, patting his son on the back as a smile spread across his simple, rustic face. “Practice makes perfect.”

“Wait...” mumbled the boy.

The plucky young hunter, unwilling to give up just yet, drew the flax string of his ash bow with all his might. However, his second arrow released at the escaping bird met with the same lack of success.

Thomas was two years older than his three-year-old sister, Irèn, who was almost his spitting image. The two children had long chestnut hair and green-flecked brown eyes. Yet where the boy was calm and reserved, a fact apparent from his meek gaze and slightly upturned upper lip, his spirited sister was incapable of sitting still, always looking to get into some kind of trouble. She, with her lively eyes and her nose with a slight bump, was always seeking out new adventures and new victims for her cunning pranks. More often than not, her older brother ended up the unhappy butt of the joke.

Their father, an experienced hunter and fisherman, was carefully loading the rain-soaked cart with this week’s catch: an impressive bundle of dried fish, two fox furs, a handful of rabbit furs, and the carcass of a young buck. It was time for his weekly trip to Sallep, where he intended to fetch at least fifteen silver coins for his haul or exchange it for other valuable goods. He had to give a quarter of the catch over as tribute to Parthagon. The kingdom occupied the entire southern half of Celesia—a solitary land marooned in the middle of an endless and always raging sea—except for an extinct volcano.

“Your mother has gone off to do the washing and will be back by lunchtime,” the hunter said, jumping up onto the cart. “Thomas!”

“Yes, Dad?”

“You’re in charge.”

“Daddy, Daddy, I promise, I won’t to do anything bad to Tommy!” Irèn said ahead of her father’s orders. She, with her chubby hands, was holding up the pup as it wagged its tail and licked her contented round face.

“Yeah, right! Don’t mind if I teach her a lesson this time, do you, Dad?”

“She’s only a little one, son.” The hunter looked at his boy tenderly and, ruffling his unkempt hair, added, “I’m counting on you.”

“Ok, Dad,” Thomas replied, hiding a bashful smile. Meanwhile, his restless sister had left the dog alone and was now trying to take from him his favorite bow, all while sinking her teeth into her brother’s shoulder and growling like a wildcat.

A light snap of the whip, and the creaking cart budged into motion. The hunter’s children, tripping over their feet and frolicking about, accompanied their father with joyful hollers all the way to the edge of their little village. Left to their own devices for an entire morning, the two young rascals could not believe their luck! Irèn, especially, was ecstatic, now that no one could stop her from pestering her brother to death. He was simply too kind-natured to ever put the girl in her place.

On their way home, stopping intermittently to dig something up in the roadside dirt or snap a few branches off other people’s hedges, they ran into a neighbor woman at the main village crossroads. The seamstress, wearing a pale linen dress with a

red hem, appeared terribly upset, wiping her puffy eyes and adjusting the colorful scarf on her head.

“Lady, why you cwyng?” Irèn called out to her. “What happened?”

“Did anyone hurt you?” Thomas frowned.

But the woman, deeply moved by the little ones’ concern, laughed and proceeded to hug and kiss the hunter’s youngsters.

“Don’t fret, my sweets!” she exclaimed mid-snuffle. “Today is a red-letter day! We ought to be celebrating!”

“Celebwating?” The girl’s eyes grew big and round.

“Our king has just had a daughter. We have a princess. They say she’s as pretty as an angel, too!”

“A pwincess? Wow!”

“Spread the word, my good children!”

Thomas was less than overjoyed at this seemingly festive news. He continued glowering, following the neighbor woman with a grim gaze. Even though the mention of the princess made his chest feel heavy and tight, he foresaw the kind of onslaught he would undergo in the very near future. And he was not wrong.

“A bwide, a bwide!” Irèn began to squeal, jumping up and down and waving her arms about. “We found you a bwide!”

“Oh, leave me alone!”

“And you’re the gwoom! You’re the gwoom!”

“If all girls are like you, I’m never getting married! No, thank you!”

“Silly boy! She’s a pwincess! A weal one!”

Thus continuing to bicker and gripe, the brother and sister made their way home. Once back in the yard, the children tried to amuse themselves as best they could: playing with the chubby pup, teasing the piglets and laughing at their squealing

and grunting, playing with their homemade dolls, and shooting arrows at pots and pans lined up on the hedge. But pretty soon, even this got boring, so the children decided to go for a swim, and while they were at it, pay their mother a visit. Between the village and the spring lay two small groves separated by a sunflower field, and as they crossed the field, they were merrily in conversation about the bride-to-be.

A sun-drenched marshy meadow spread before the barefoot youngsters, and at its edge, a gently bubbling brook came into view. The clear stream cut the fragrant green land almost in half and pooled into two small lakes one could've been mistaken for deep puddles. At the larger one, a few village women were doing laundry. The hunter's wife was a full-figured young woman with a soft gaze. Her chestnut hair and green-flecked brown eyes were mirrored in her offspring. Upon hearing the news of the princess and the impending engagement, she laughed a long, tender laugh, her belted linen dress and white bonnet shaking.

"You've got it all figured out, haven't you, my dear girl!" she exclaimed. "But your brother will have to look elsewhere for a bride."

"But why?" Thomas's true feelings finally shone through.

"Aha! Gotcha!" squealed Irèn and pushed him into the water.

"She's not like us, son. We are simple villagers," the woman explained as her children splashed around in the shallows. "They live by different rules. They are...they're just different."

"So it's true what they say about them?"

"It's complicated. When you're all grown up, you'll understand."

“Mom, is it twue they’re all vewy beautiful, and all they do is go to fancy balls and pawties?” asked Irèn, clumsily imitating a ballroom dance while knee-deep in water.

“And that they live almost forever?” Thomas added.

“Wow! Is that twue?”

“It’s not important, my dears. We’re not allowed to go there anyway. And we have our own kind of happiness in the village. Believe me: we’re in no way worse off here than they are in the capital.”

All at once, the women around them gasped and turned their attention to the sky above the treetops: to the south, roughly in the direction of Sallep, a dark pillar of smoke was rising to the heavens. It was soon joined by other pillars. Like giant poisonous mushrooms, they streamed from the forest’s depths up toward the clouds. The mother’s heart began to beat faster and she gave her children strict instructions to go home. She proceeded energetically to scrub the rest of her washing, discussing the unfolding events with her neighbors.

* * *

Thomas didn’t know what was happening, but he knew he had to get home with his little sister, who could not get the newborn princess and the strange people of Parthagon out of her head. On top of that, she was genuinely confused as to why all the grownups should be so worried over a little bit of smoke.

However, having quickly traversed the first wood and come out into the open sunflower field, they were met with a bone-chilling sight. The meadow, so solitary and peaceful on the way there, was now overrun with frightened people making their escape. There were so many of them. Young and old. Adults and

children. Some shouting, some crying, some carrying chests and bundles. One woman in a singed dress ran past them sobbing as she held the limp body of a newborn babe. Many had torn and damaged clothes; some even bore traces of blood. But all had one thing in common: an animal terror in their eyes.

They were all coming from the south—from the direction of Sallep, where Irèn and Thomas had seen their father off just this morning. The empathetic girl felt fearful for the people running past them, even though she did not comprehend the looming danger, unlike her brother, whose arms and legs had begun to tremble.

Speechless and frozen in place, the two children observed the scene for a whole minute. Finally Thomas snapped back to reality, and grabbing Irèn by the hand, bolted through the trampled field in the direction of home. The people around them were so frightened no one even noticed the two unsupervised children. Then Irèn began to stumble and trip over flat ground. By this point, even she had begun to realize something awful was taking place, and her chubby little legs were failing to obey her, constantly getting twisted and caught around each other.

“Get up! Get up!” Thomas cried, as the girl tumbled to the ground yet again. “Come on!”

“I’m getting up,” Irèn barely managed to answer before she tripped once more.

“When did you get so clumsy?”

Once they were past the field and in the trees’ cool shade, Thomas decided to avoid the well-trodden path and ran straight through the wood to gain time. This made Irèn stumble even more and she kept getting entangled in the long branches of thorn bushes. And yet, despite the pain and the scratches, she

never cried once, but ran silently on, occasionally throwing a worried glance at her brother's tense face.

Soon the children were out of the forest and making a beeline for the old familiar village yards leading to their front gate. First Thomas hid the trembling Irèn inside a hay bale leaning against the fence, next to the rows of young carrots and cabbages. Then he ran toward the house. As he ran, he noticed he felt no fatigue, as if a magical fountain of force had sprung up inside him.

“Where are you going?” his sister called out to him.

“Just sit still and don't peek out! Got it?”

“I'm so afraid.” The girl started crying, burying her head in the hay.

“I'll be quick!”

Out of breath, but happy to have found his handmade bow on the doorstep, Thomas was now faced with a difficult decision: Should he run into town to look for his father or go back for his mother? He didn't consider staying home and waiting. Despite his young age, the boy did not consider himself a child. His father had brought him up to make decisions and take on responsibility, often leaving him alone to mind his troublesome sister or taking him hunting and fishing overnight. It was accordingly his father's example that finally pushed the boy toward a course of action—his mother surely needed him most, as she was likely unaware of the stampede of panicking villagers. Thomas sprinted back to the spring.

Running past the sunflower field again, he saw many terrified people still fleeing, but their numbers had dwindled. And when he reached the marshy meadow, the women had gone. Their baskets were scattered haphazardly along the

riverbank, their freshly washed clothes and linens now covered in the mud.

“Mom! Mom!” cried the frightened boy loudly, cupping his palms over his lips. “Where are you?”

Thomas didn’t know he’d passed her in the forest while taking a shortcut through the ravine, and he had no choice but to go back home. Running through the dreaded field again, he noticed only a few straggling villagers. Mostly these were feeble, old, or wounded men and women who couldn’t move very fast, frequently stumbling and having to pick themselves up. Among them were also some who’d packed up their entire households and were using the last of their strength to drag these possessions along. Thomas was beginning to feel tired, too, but he did his best to ignore it.

Back at the house, he immediately went to check the hay bale, but no one was there either.

“Irèn! Mom!” he shouted, looking around. “Where are you? Mom!”

He felt the grip of terror close around him. The inside of his stomach shrank and strained, and his legs felt like ice. Yet he had an inkling his sister must already be with his mother, which would mean they were all right. But where could they be? Running into the house, he found it empty, so he hurried back out to the village street where he continued to shout their names. But no one answered—the village was completely deserted.

The boy ran into the nearest yard, but not a soul was there. Then he remembered the seamstress and ran to her house, but she was also gone. Calling out his loved ones’ names a few more times, Thomas returned to the street. Only now did it dawn on him the village had been abandoned and all of its inhabitants

had fled, just as all those people running across the sunflower field had fled.

Realizing he was alone, the boy headed in the direction of Sallep. Even though the road led toward unknown danger, there he could hope to meet his father. The child simply could not think what else to do. All he wanted was to be reunited with at least one familiar face.

Drawing on the last of his strength, Thomas ran, panting along the twisting and bumpy forest path toward the ominous black smoke in the sky. He was now stumbling, and his heart seemed to be almost leaping out of his ribcage.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a disheveled old woman who lived the next street over called as she spotted him running toward her. “Stop!”

“Have you seen my dad?” Thomas avoided her grasping hands.

“You have to turn back! Where’s your mother?”

But Thomas could no longer hear her. He ran on, dirty, tired, and lost, feeling nothing—neither the passage of time, nor his feet, nor the hard ground beneath them. At some point, he stumbled again and with a smack fell face-first into a cold puddle, soaking his hair, dropping his bow, and scaring a brood of fat tadpoles. Having no more strength left to raise himself up, he barely managed to scramble to his knees before he fell again, swallowing a mouthful of murky water. Then he felt a pair of mighty hands lift him and confidently hoist him over a rugged shoulder. The familiar smell of hay instantly calmed the boy, and he soon tumbled into the beckoning darkness.

* * *

“Bwother...bwother...” Thomas heard a voice calling to him as if from a great distance.

The pitch blackness was pressing down on his eyelids and a damp chill, which smelled of rotting vegetables, enveloped his body. Warm, motherly hands were stroking his head, which rested on a soft thigh, and somewhere nearby Irèn was chattering about something or another.

The grownups were whispering among themselves:

“I won’t tell you what I saw. Not with the children present,” he heard his father say. “But it’s the mutants from Arogdor. It’s all happening again.”

Thomas had only heard *mutant* a few times in his life, and so he didn’t quite understand what they were. He did know they were ghastly creatures and their involvement could only mean trouble. Arogdor, on the other hand, was as familiar a name as his own. The village urchins didn’t go a day without spooking one another with some new terrifying tale about this sinister place. The realm of Arogdor was at the top of the volcano, which, on a clear winter’s day, could be seen rising in the north. And since smoke was always rising from its maw, especially in winter, Thomas believed that monsters resembling giant fiery spiders lived inside the molten lava. This was another point of fierce disagreement between him and his sister. Irèn never tired of assuring him that Arogdor was inhabited by people who were “almost normal.” Normal—but missing their heads. And if one were to go there, that person, too, would have to learn to live without a head, which, according to the girl’s ironclad logic, posed quite a few difficulties.

“But what about the king?” asked the seamstress. “And where are all the knights?”

“I didn’t see anyone. The only ones there, in Sallep, were the tribute collectors. They are useless when it comes to such things.”

“It must’ve been totally unexpected,” suggested another familiar male voice.

“I once had a suitor who was a tribute collector,” the elderly woman said wistfully. “Those were the days!”

“A tribute collector? There’s a crock if I ever heard one!” the same male voice said. “Even if you were the prettiest girl in the village, they’d still find you as homely as a sow!”

“It’s true, I tell you!”

“Please! That’s enough nonsense, you silly old crone!”

“So what are we to do now?” Thomas’s mother interrupted the squabble.

“Either we run, or we wait for the knights to get here,” her husband explained. “Running is dangerous, since we don’t know where to go. Nobody knows anything, and the mutants could be anywhere and everywhere. Sallep is closer to Parthagon than we are, which means we’ve been cut off from the army.”

“So all that’s left for us to do is wait? Here?”

“We don’t know when it will end. What if Parthagon has been defeated and there’s no army coming? One thing’s for certain: if we fall into the hands of the mutants, that’ll be the end of us. You can’t imagine the kind of things they do to people!”

Thomas felt a strange transformation taking place within him. Suddenly all the things that had made up his brief existence faded into the background or disappeared altogether. And once it had all melted away, like frost under the warm spring sun, only one thing of value was left standing solid and concrete: life, only life.

Thomas was so overwhelmed by these new realizations, he opened his eyes and burst into tears. Raising himself up, he wrapped his mother in a tight embrace and only then looked around. The villagers were hiding in some kind of cellar, illuminated only slightly by the dim light of a single candle. In the corner were piles of shriveled up turnips and carrots, and near the wall a neat row of clay pots. Dad's favorite leather jacket was wrapped around Mom's shoulders for warmth, partly covering his little sister as well.

"Bwother!" Irèn cried out gladly.

"How do you feel?" his mother asked with worry in her voice, but the hunter quickly calmed her.

"He's fine. Just a little worn out."

"What should we do then?" lamented the balding old carpenter. His simple, rustic clothes were smeared with mud. It was his voice Thomas had had trouble recognizing.

The hunter hung his head low and sank deep into thought. Only now did the boy notice the bloodstains on his father's gray shirt and the deep gashes on his arms and face. In the bleak candlelight, his eyes looked empty.

"We do, of course, have weapons." He pointed his hunting knife at the crossbow and the axe lying in the corner of the cellar. "But those will be of little help."

"I can find some other things," the carpenter suggested.

"No, no. There's no point!" The hunter raised his voice suddenly. "Our whole village combined couldn't take on one of those mutants. And they aren't likely to just go past here. The smartest thing we can do is hide as best we can."

"How long do we have?"

"I don't know. I suppose by this evening they'll have pillaged Sallep and every village between the city and here."

“Maybe we should try running after all?” The seamstress was almost weeping.

“Where to? We’re cut off from Parthagon, and to get to any of the towers is at least a day’s journey.”

Thomas’s father could not have been more right. The mutants’ attack had turned out to be their most ambitious in decades. As usual, their goal was to inflict maximum damage to the enemy, plunder the kingdom’s territories and steal young children—in order to turn them into future mutants. The birth rate in Arogdor was too low to compensate for losses from constant wars with Parthagon and the high rates of general mortality.

Likewise, the realm’s primitive organization didn’t allow its leader, Werner Eisenberg, to provide enough food and resources to sustain his subjects. Because the might of his army, as well as the might of every individual mutant, depended on the amount of food they consumed, raids on neighboring lands were a vital necessity for Arogdor. For this reason Arogdor’s military commander—the ruthless General Ivar Javer—had orchestrated a surprise invasion that cut off Parthagon’s northern territories. The mutants intended to plunder these lands. They were also hoping the operation would leave King Albert III overwhelmed and then his kingdom could finally be defeated.

After much discussion, the adult villagers decided to stay put and to take all possible measures to ensure their safety in case the mutants entered the village. They agreed to continue hiding in the cellar, since it was in the village’s only brick building, which belonged—up until recently—to the locally renowned blacksmith, Max Lank. He, it seemed, had succumbed to the general panic and run off. Cleaning the other houses out was of

no use, as General Javer's army always burned and raised anything left behind on the lands they conquered. This two-story brick house would also be destroyed, but they had a chance of surviving long enough in the cellar to emerge after the army had moved on. As well, the stench of the spoiled vegetables could mask them from the mutants' keen noses, which let them easily sniff out their victims.

The little time they still had was best used in making preparations for the enemy's arrival. The less cause the mutant army had to stick around the small settlement, the better. Rumor had it the Arogdorians moved on as soon as there was nothing left to raid or pillage. Accordingly, the men left the cellar to go set fire to the neighboring houses. Before setting each property aflame, they let all the livestock and fowl out of their sheds and pens, so they too stood a chance of surviving the ordeal.

The women, meanwhile, occupied themselves with other pressing problems. They needed to find as much clothing and as many blankets as possible, so as not to freeze to death overnight in the cold cellar. Likewise, they had to collect food, water, and candles.

When they'd collected all the useful items in large sacks, the women quickly returned to the blacksmith's house just as the sun was beginning to set. The village, however, did not grow dark—the blazing and crackling houses illuminated its narrow streets as if it were high noon. Pigs, cows, horses, sheep, rabbits, and chickens ran in all directions. Only a small number among them, not knowing where to run, stayed in the vicinity of their burning but familiar pens.

The women went into the kitchen, which was lit by the fiery glow coming from behind the window's blue tulle curtains. A

square table stood in the room's middle and the walls were fitted with a thick-chimneyed brick stove and spacious cupboards with wooden doors. Cast-iron pans, clay pots, wooden cups, ladles, and other kitchen utensils were stacked neatly on the shelves. As they opened the trap door under the table and looked below to the cellar, they were horrified to find neither Thomas nor Irèn. The two children were not in the house, either. Going out into the street, the seamstress called their names, but the carpenter immediately tackled her and put his hands over her mouth. Together with Thomas's father, they crouched low to the ground and dragged her back to the house, where they stopped a second woman in much the same manner. She tried to scream and wrestle free, but her husband's tenacious hands curbed her desperate impulses, and he stubbornly dragged her in the cellar's direction.

Getting the sobbing women down to the cellar, the men lowered their sacks full of provisions down the hatch. The hunter leaned over to the old carpenter's ear and whispered, "Go down there and stay with them. I'll find the kids."

"Just don't get caught out there yourself!"

Crawling and crouching to stay hidden, the hunter noiselessly left the house and circled the immediate area. Soon, though, he had to retreat quickly back to the cellar, as hideous mutants began to appear in the nearby yards. With tears in his eyes and in despair, he knocked on the cellar door and climbed below as soon as it was opened. His wife had kept hope alive, but seeing her husband's helpless state, she pressed herself tightly against him and sobbed.

A short while earlier, Thomas, though still half asleep, noticed Irèn had moved further away from him. At first he put it out of his mind, but soon he was puzzled by the silence around

him. Opening his eyes, he found himself in the cellar alone and hurried to climb out. Over the past week, his sister had been inseparable from her puppy, so Thomas had a pretty good idea where she might've run off to.

He caught up to Irèn at the gate to their yard. She was watching, slack-jawed, as the house she'd lived in her whole life went up in bright-red crackling flames.

"Puppy!"

"Why did you leave the cellar?"

"I want Tumtum!"

"He's run away. Or been taken by the neighbors. Let's go back!"

"Is that twue?"

"Of course. He's perfectly fine."

"What about Dolly?"

The wooden toy in its sackcloth dress lay forlorn on the porch, which was about to be engulfed in flames.

"Quickly follow me!" ordered Thomas, grabbing Irèn's hand, but she resisted.

"Dolly! She's in pain!"

"My dear, darling sister, I'll make you five other dollies," begged Thomas, who was on the verge of tears. "Let's go!"

But the girl, oblivious to what was happening around her, refused to leave. And with a deathly squeal she clung to the woven fence, knocking off the animal skins and skulls that hung there. Thomas realized there was only one way out of this.

Even though the fire had already reached the porch, the boy ran up to the dolly and, yanking it by the leg, rescued the toy from the gaping maw of flame, while slightly singeing his own long hair. He and the now satisfied Irèn hastened back to the brick house.

Thomas suddenly stopped as he noticed, through the raging flames, a strange movement at the clearing between the village and the woods flanking it from the south. He shoved his sister into the overgrown roadside ravine and then threw himself over her. Only a few moments later, through the shrubs and the grass, they both saw a sight that seemed a nightmare or the delusion of a madman. Except it was really happening, making it appear the ordinary world had ceased to exist. The children were seeing their first mutant.

Riding out of the forest on a mighty stallion, the mutant stopped to observe the fiery scene, while sniffing the air intently. Flashes of flame illuminated his grotesque physique in all its immense, hideous glory. He was almost one-and-a-half times the size of a regular person, and his weathered, snub-nosed face, while retaining its human features, looked more like that of an animal. He had a jutting lower jaw, a massive overhanging brow ridge, and yellow tusks protruding over his upper lip. His humongous wide-chested body was covered in outgrowths that were like dark shields protecting every rippling muscle. This natural bio-armor sprouted naturally from his body. The skin under the shields was covered in short, similarly dark-colored fur. But above all else, the children were stunned by his two pairs of muscular arms and the long dark dreadlocks cascading down from his head.

The mutant wore nothing but a pair of trousers tucked into road-worn leather boots. Straps securing a sword sheath and a quiver of arrows behind his back were crisscrossed across his chest. His massive belt was adorned with a pair of scabbards containing two daggers and a weighty oak bow. Bags and bundles of various sizes hung off his saddle. Using his lower arms, the warrior held a wooden crossbar at the front of his

saddle, while his upper arms held a long axe and a slightly curved sword with a long handle.

Looking around, the Arogdorian finally decided to move toward the blazing houses. Then Thomas and Irèn saw he was not riding a draft horse, as they'd first assumed.

They'd heard of mutants before, but this beast, heaving under the unusually cumbersome saddle, was new to them. They could see this tailless creature had some familiar features. Its eyes had something human about them; perhaps even a hint of kindness existed there. It resembled a cross between a horse and a buffalo, only taller and with more muscle mass—not an ounce of fat anywhere on its body. The extraordinary creature's glistening skin was covered in places with dark curls, especially at the chest and stomach. It wore no clothing, discounting the saddle with the scorched-red fabric covers hanging from its sides and back. Its jowls were set above an inordinately wide jaw, and two long braids hung from its tanned round face, which was scrunched up from the smoke. The strangest thing about the creature was its hand-like hooves, for this was a mansteed—a human mutated to resemble a horse.

“I told you they weren't spiders!”

“Be quiet,” Thomas whispered, closing his sister's mouth with his hand and dragging her to the shelter on all fours.

Once back at the safe house, they crawled to the cellar door in the kitchen and quietly knocked. The door flung open and two pairs of muscled arms dragged the runaways down below. After giving the children two sharp knocks on the head, the relieved parents embraced them more tightly than they ever had.

* * *

From different points of entry, the mutants of Arogdor, slowly and with great suspicion, rode into the abandoned village on their mansteeds. There were only two small squadrons, about two dozen warriors altogether.

Accompanied by four mutants, Ivar Javer, commander of the Arogdorian army and leader of the ruthless raid, rode out of the forest.

The legendary general was even larger than the other mutants and stood out among them. He was easily recognizable by his deep-set eyes, his thick black dreads, his steel helmet with its wide twisted horns, and his chainmail, which glistened metallically beneath his striking scarlet cape. In all other respects, he like the other mutants, possessing the same bulging tusks, black bio-armor, two pairs of arms, and a deeply tanned face. An uncanny resolve, strengthened by an extraordinary intelligence, made him the successful commander whom Parthagon had been trying and failing to eliminate for many years.

Having made their way through the village streets lined with burning houses, the mutants gathered at the central crossroads. There they saluted each other, raising their upper left hands in solidarity:

“Hail, Arogdor!”

“Hail, Eisenberg!”

“Whose work is this?” thundered the general as he glanced back at a noisily collapsing house.

“Looks like the locals,” hissed a senior mutant, who was distinguished by the red bands around his shoulders. “They must’ve burned it all themselves again.”

“You sure?”

“Full granaries on fire, livestock walking the streets, and...”

“I see. Find another place.”

“No need. Follow me!”

The general had chosen this village for his troops to spend the night in. The place was so small and insignificant the Parthagonian scouts were not likely to look for them here.

The rest of Arogdor’s army continued its bloody rampage across hundreds of other settlements. Whatever village the scattered units found themselves in by nightfall was where they hunkered down.

The mutants had just established a cordon around the brick house, the only one left standing in the village, when a reserve cart arrived carrying the general’s provisions, as well as two of his female companions. Since the beds in the house were too small, a special feather bed was laid for Javer on the blacksmith’s bedroom floor—after the bedroom furniture had been thrown out the window. The Arogdorians devoted much care and attention to the quantity and quality of their sleep, even in the midst of a battle campaign.

Finally everything was ready for dinner. The square kitchen table was set with an oil lamp and huge quantities of food in enormous bowls. The meal consisted mostly of roast piglets and chickens, as well as flatbreads and nutritious pearl barley with green onions. The spread was to feed just four mutants, whereas a regular family could’ve lived on this amount of provisions for a week.

Javer and a senior warrior entered the kitchen. Accompanying them, heels clip-clopping on the kitchen floor, were the general’s companions—a blonde and a dusky brunette. The women were tall and of slender build, but incredibly voluptuous as well. Despite their thin ankles and delicate waists, their exceedingly ample attributes were almost bursting

out of their long, flamboyant dresses. Their smiling faces seemed remarkably similar, although their features were startling: pointed chins, enormous lips, and tiny noses.

Sitting across from each other, the four-armed mutants tossed their long dreadlocks behind their backs and commenced eating, gnashing their teeth greedily. Eating was a very important part of the Arogdorians' daily ritual. Their colossal size depended on the food they consumed—without it, they wouldn't have been able to maintain their formidable physiques. Any disruption of food supplies or—heaven forbid—famine could lead to Arogdor's defeat in its centuries-old war with the self-sufficient Parthagon.

Little did they know that beneath the table upon which their feast was taking place, Thomas, his sister, their parents, and the elderly seamstress and carpenter were sitting, frozen and terrified. They could hear the beastly sounds of chewing and bones crunching and also partially see into the room through the cracks between the floorboards, which were bending and groaning under the mutants' weight. None of the villagers had predicted this nightmarish scenario. Instead of providing them with a safe haven, the solid-brick house had become a solid-brick trap.

Thomas, still trembling, lowered his eyes from the ceiling and looked at the grownups and his sister, who were illuminated by dim stripes of light falling through the floorboards. His father kept shifting his gaze from one slit to another with intense concentration. He displayed no fear, unlike the poor carpenter, who was barely holding onto his axe while also staring upwards, practically without blinking. The seamstress was rolled up into a ball in the corner, covering her eyes and mouth with her hands. Thomas's mother and Irèn were huddled together on a

blanket in the middle of the cellar, hiding their heads beneath a large pillow to prevent the girl's involuntary cries from giving away their vulnerable position.

"What is that stench?" Javer roared, loudly sniffing the table and the air around him.

"I can't stand it either, darling," the blonde confirmed, earning a steely gaze from the brunette seated across from her.

"Forgive me, General," the senior warrior said. "It must be coming from the cellar."

"Rotten vegetables! Disgusting!" The Arogdorian dame renewed her complaint.

"Yes, and something else as well..." Javer continued to sniff, sending panic coursing through the veins of the poor villagers under the floor. The frightened women tried to make themselves even smaller, quivering, while the men exchanged helpless looks, trying to find some kind of support in each other's eyes. The carpenter lifted his axe as if preparing to launch into the uneven battle, and the hunter slowly aimed the crossbow at the cellar door. Meanwhile, still chewing on the tougher hunks of meat, the monsters slowly rose from their chairs and began circling the narrow trap door, examining it. Javer's lower arms rested on his hips, while the top right arm gripped the handle of the sword behind his back, just pulling it from its scabbard with a scraping sound. With his upper set of arms, the senior warrior grabbed two daggers from his belt and bent down toward the cellar door. "Let's see. What do we have here?" he said, pulling on the handle.

Thomas pressed himself against his trembling mother and buried his face into her hip; his father took aim at the opening. The carpenter quietly laid his axe on the dirt floor and glistening tears began to roll down his flabby cheeks.

Finally, with a creaking sound, the heavy trap door began to lift, flooding the cellar with light.

“Wait!” the brunette jumped up abruptly.

“What?” The general looked at her.

“You’ll let out the terrible smell!”

“And?”

“Can’t we finish eating first?”

“Oh, but she’s right.” The blonde had no choice but admit the truth of her rival’s objection. “Darling, let’s have our dinner first!”

“Damn women! First it’s one thing, then another. How do you even manage to get through the day?” muttered the general, returning his sword to its sheath and going back to the table. His senior warrior did the same, letting go of the trapdoor handle. The villagers could then exhale, having realized they’d each been holding their breath.

The band of monsters resumed their feeding frenzy, wetting their throats with buckets of full-cream milk and water. Suddenly, through the loud chewing and clatter of dishes, a quiet tapping sound came from where the dark-skinned brunette sat. Thomas’s father’s eyes grew wide and he exchanged glances with the carpenter. It dawned on the boy: the strange woman had deliberately saved them from her compatriots!

And, indeed, the brunette’s wide face showed the almost-imperceptible gleam of a smile and relief in her eyes. The other gluttonous guests were too busy filling their stomachs to pay attention to such trivial details.

Having stuffed themselves, the contented mutants either forgot about the cellar or deliberately dismissed it from their thoughts. After such a hard day, all they wanted now was to get

into bed and go to sleep. The knights of Parthagon were already out scouting for them far and wide, leaving them no more than a day to make their retreat to Arogdor.

The long-suffering inhabitants of the cellar rejoiced as they heard the warriors bang the now-empty dishes on the table and quit the kitchen to settle down for the night. Barely able to move their legs, the mutants went to their separate rooms, holding onto their full bellies, which were covered with bio-armor and short tufts of fur. After exchanging a few whispers, the women were the last to leave the kitchen.

The villagers, too, could now go to sleep. Irèn, still clutching her dolly, had fallen asleep under the pillow and in her mother's arms even before the Arogdorians had finished their dinner. Despite his lingering fear, Thomas also gave into exhaustion and fell into deep slumber along with the others. Only his father, the hunter, forewent the comfort of sleep to make sure no one snored or groaned as they slept, which could cost them all their lives.

* * *

The next day, the villagers hiding in the cellar were woken in the early morning by heavy footsteps as Javer and his senior aid walked into the kitchen.

“Where’s the grub?”

“Our convoy was ambushed. And we’d finished last night’s provisions...”

“What’s this?” thundered the general, his words followed by the scraping of a scabbard.

“Forgive me! We didn’t expect the village to be empty.” The senior warrior let out a stifled groan as his throat felt the pressure of cold steel. “They’ve left nothing in the pens here.”

“Then go out and catch us a couple of sheep, you lazy dog. And look inside the stinking cellar. There might be a few good turnips in there still. You’ve got half an hour while I’m being briefed on the war situation. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Must we really, Ivar?” The terrified villagers heard the dear voice of the brunette. “We can wait.”

“I will not wait, woman!”

“What’s the rush? We can eat somewhere else.”

“Don’t listen to her. Follow the order!”

The freezing children once again pressed against their mother who, blood draining from her cheeks, led them to the corner where the seamstress had been cowering since the previous night. The men, for their part, dolefully picked up their weapons and readied themselves for a fight. Tears of despair welled in the women’s eyes. Their gazes darted from the hunter to the carpenter, trying to have faith the men could do anything to change their wretched lot.

At first, the villagers heard the mutants file out of the kitchen, and a blessed silence filled the room. But a minute later, those hopes were dashed like a soap bubble bursting in midair by the heavy footsteps of two monsters coming closer and closer. Finally, they stopped at the trapdoor. With a loud clang, it swung open.

The lantern in the mutant’s lower arm illuminated the cellar, revealing the horrified grimaces of its dwellers. A well-aimed arrow shot out of the crossbow and into the Arogdorian’s massive forehead, while the carpenter’s axe lodged itself deep

into the left bio-armor plate on his chest. Emitting a blood-chilling howl, but not taking so much as a step back, the giant pulled the sharp blade from his body and headed down the stairs, his upper arms brandishing daggers that gleamed cold and deadly. A similarly armed comrade, who smelled worse than a mangy mutt, followed him. The men threw themselves at the warriors with knives in their hands and desperate battle cries in their throats. However, the mutants' long arms, protected by their natural armor, made quick work of the hollering men right in front of the screaming women and children who were huddled together in the corner.

With a broken arrow sticking out of his head and almost doubled over due to the cellar's low ceiling, the Arogdorian pummeled Thomas's father's lifeless body again and again—until there was nothing left but a bloody, dismembered mass. The entire cellar, along with the people in it, was spattered with warm blood and slimy scraps of human flesh. The women continued to wail, holding onto the squealing children. Though they'd tried to shield the little ones' eyes, Thomas, through the stupor of horror, saw every detail of his father's demise.

Soon, the other mutants heard the yelling and the commotion, and they all rushed into the kitchen, including the general and his companions. Circling the trapdoor, they examined the bloody scene before them. "Kill the women!"

Thomas clutched his mother as hard as he could.

"Isn't it enough? Stop this madness!" The half-naked brunette stood in their defense. She received a kick to the stomach and tumbled under the table, sobbing and tearing at her hair. "You're all brutes! When will it end?"

The wounded senior warrior and his assistant ripped the whimpering children away from their mother and the

seamstress. As the dumbfounded women were still desperately reaching their arms out toward the children, the mutants offered a few blows to their heads and chests, their dagger blades sinking into their flesh, and the women's cries were silenced.

Calm settled over the blacksmith's house. Only the hoarse bleating of the hunter's trembling children disrupted the quiet rural morning.

But the general was not yet satisfied.

The mutants froze as he withdrew his broadsword from its sheath and descended into the bloody cellar. Thomas and Irèn were quivering and huddled against each other, thinking that now was their turn. However, in his cool and collected manner, Javer approached the now-dazed senior warrior, and with a blood-curdling crunch, drove his blade into the mutant's bottom jaw, pinning his head to the low ceiling. With eyes bulging out of their sockets, the warrior dropped the lantern, went limp, and fell to his knees, his massive chin still hanging from the sword's hilt and drowning it in a stream of thick blood.

"Thick-headed imbecile!" cursed Javer. "Throw the runts into the cart and head out north. Report the situation along the way."

As soon as the general and his entourage had left the charred remains of the village behind, a score of carts from the supply convoy came rumbling up to the brick house. Pulled by skeletal mares, they were overloaded with looted treasure: sacks filled with provisions and domestic goods. One of the carts, shaped like a cage with thick wooden bars, was packed with small children. They were all dirty, their tunics muddy and torn. Some of them were wounded or bore signs of beatings, and all sobbed and wailed, desperately calling for their mothers and

begging for a little water and bread in their hoarse, sickly voices.

A young mutant with underdeveloped lower arms, and reeking of sweat and some kind of sour rot, led Thomas and Irèn, still stunned, to the cage. But just as he was about to shove them in, a warrior with rust-colored dreads and beard, and red bands tied around his shoulders, stopped him. “And what’s this then, dimwit?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Never mind the girl, she’ll do,” hissed the senior warrior, shifting his bloodshot eyes in Thomas’s direction. “But I won’t be taking this knuckle-dragger along. He’s an overgrown good for nothing! Just look at him, numbskull.”

“I’ve got my orders.”

“Do you now? Well here’s a new order for you: the girl goes in the cage, the boy gets his throat slit.”

As the younger warrior hesitated, his elder comrade tore Irèn, kicking and screaming, away from her brother and threw her roughly into the cage on top of the other children. Then the convoy departed toward the woods, passing through the smoking husk of the village, accompanied by the hysterical barking of a pup who’d appeared out of nowhere. The girl stuck her chubby arms through the bars of the cage, and crying desperately, she reached for her sobbing brother, whom the mutant held tightly by the hair while tentatively grabbing for his sword.

Thomas’s executioner was very young and inexperienced. Unlike the other mutants, his lower arms were somewhat stunted, thin and short, as if they’d stopped growing before they could reach their full size. Looking around as if expecting reinforcements to arrive, he spent a long time trying to work up

the courage to carry out his order, not daring to so much as look at the grubby peasant boy.

As the cart carrying Irèn away disappeared from view, Thomas was overcome by an uncontrollable rage. His beloved sister had been taken from him and was now helpless and alone, and the bloody images of his parents being murdered swirled in a kaleidoscopic vision before his eyes. Then his fear vanished and an animal instinct in him took over. A force he'd never felt before flowed into his limbs, and he had to use it, lest it otherwise tear him apart.

With a sharp jerk, and at the cost of a lock of thick chestnut hair, this new ferocious Thomas tore himself from the bewildered mutant's hands and dove through his legs. By the time the clumsy warrior had turned around, the boy had already disappeared behind the smoking remains of a nearby house. Cursing profusely, a few Arogdorians dropped what they were doing to give him chase. However the child knew his village well and could find his way around it with his eyes closed. Crossing from one fence and charred wall to the next, he almost reached the forest, where the dense thicket of trees would've protected him from the callous monsters. But just as he made it to the clearing where the woods began, he felt a mighty blow to the hip followed by agonizing pain.

Falling into a carrot patch, Thomas saw an unusually thick and long arrow sticking out of his left leg, its point having gone right through his thigh and come out the other side. His tunic was quickly soaking up blood, and the terrible pain prevented him from moving. He could only cry and scream, trying to remove the arrow stuck deep in his flesh, as the mutants, grunting contentedly, gathered around him. They were laughing at the expense of their inexperienced comrade.

“Hey, this little sucker’s braver than you are!”

“Check out his arms! You wish you had a pair like that, huh?”

“They’re twice as thick as yours!”

“Leave me alone, you weasels!” snapped the young executioner, swinging his huge axe breathlessly. But the little villager threw a well-aimed sharp stone at the mutant’s eye and then, to the hysterical laughter of the other Arogdorians, threw himself at him and proceeded to bite his leg. The frenzied warrior at first seemed to have no trouble avoiding Thomas’s teeth, when suddenly he dropped to the ground right beside his unsubdued victim.

The mutants and Thomas all froze in a hush, unable to comprehend what had just happened. But then they saw the arrow in the back of the disgraced warrior’s head as he sprawled unnaturally on the young beetroot shoots. Immediately more arrows whistled, flying through the air and thudding as they hit mutant flesh and armor. Another two mutants fell down dead, and a third grabbed his pierced-through shoulder with a pitiful cry. The arrows were followed by raucous voices, an earthshaking stamping of hooves, and the ominous clatter of heavy steel as a small company of the knights of Parthagon burst from the forest with tremendous speed.

Thomas had only ever seen them in old and rather shoddy paintings, in his imagination, and in his dreams. He loved listening to the stories, fables, and legends surrounding these warriors, which inspired the wooden sword battles he’d wage with the neighboring children. This wasn’t extraordinary—all boys across the kingdom dreamed of becoming knights.

The Royal Knights rode regular horses, albeit the tallest and most powerful of their breed. They were set apart from regular people by their incredible musculature, their supernatural

strength, and their remarkable height. But even though they were all at least two or three heads taller than regular men, they still could not compete with the sheer size of the four-armed mutants. Under their blue capes, they wore thick linen shirts and cuirasses with mail sleeves, collars, and short skirts. Rounded helmets, protected their heads, necks, and faces, leaving only two oval openings for eyes and narrowed slits for noses and mouths. Below the waist they wore thick trousers and immaculately shined thigh-high leather boots. They carried curved rectangular shields, which hung, along with their spears, from their horses' harnesses. They were armed with blue-handled swords, spears, daggers, and special crossbows that could pierce their enemies' exceedingly thick skulls.

Before Thomas, a lightning-fast battle now ensued: the fast-riding knights plunged their long spears and sharp swords into the scattering mutants. Some Arogdorians fiercely resisted; some begged for mercy. But in the end the Royal Knights disposed of the enemy without suffering any losses.

Almost trampling the boy, the knights galloped into the heart of the burned-down village. They were only a dozen but their colossal force made quite an impression on the young boy. This was the first time he'd ever experienced patriotic pride. Which is why, forgetting the loss of his loved ones and the excruciating pain he was in, Thomas, still bleeding profusely, watched with enthusiasm as the armored knights of King Albert III finished off the remaining mutants until he finally lost consciousness.

* * *

The knights of Parthagon, consisting of elite warriors under the command of Niels Dohr, sat on moss-covered logs

surrounding a crackling fire. From the forest's depths, there came the faint sounds of screaming and an owl's portentous hoots. The exhausted men enjoyed the smell of roasting boar. Only a few wounded warriors sometimes moaned or groaned softly.

The yellow flame illuminating Niels's big head and wide cheekbones, his imposing nose and thoughtful gaze beneath his locks of flaxen hair. He appeared a little over thirty, but he didn't strive for physical perfection, unlike most inhabitants of Parthagon. Niels believed men didn't need to be particularly handsome to enjoy all life had to offer. And though many might have sniggered at the idea, in his case it rang true.

The soldier had served almost an entire century in the king's army and strived to become a great general, yet despite his remarkable vitality, he found advancing through the ranks difficult. Even though he was in good standing with the commander-in-chief, the armor above his heart was decorated with only a bronze token bearing the crest of Parthagon in the shape of two interlocking rings. This mark of distinction was the standard decoration of low-level officers bearing the title of centurion. They could command no more than 100 soldiers—a centuria—but more often than not, Niels's cavalry amounted to just a few dozen men.

"Don't worry," said Richard Fein, a strikingly good-looking soldier with long blond hair, nobly elongated features, and bright blue eyes. "He won't get away next time."

"If only we'd gotten here a few minutes earlier..."

"We're getting closer."

"What will I tell the legate this time? How can I look the king in the eyes?" lamented Niels, prodding the coals with his sword. "The same story every time!"

“Wait a minute now. Surely it’s not our fault? We got here as quickly as we could.”

“It’s always our fault.”

Off to the side, from under a blue knight’s cape, Thomas moaned faintly. Niels rose and quickly went to check on him. Seeing the poor child was still unconscious, he tucked the blue fabric more tightly around his small body and returned to his place near the fire, where his fellow soldiers were engaged in a spirited discussion.

“I still don’t get why you decided to bring him along,” Richard nodded toward the villager.

“There’s something about him. We couldn’t just leave him there.”

“Even the mutants wouldn’t take him. And we certainly can’t make anything of him—he’s past the age.”

“He’ll make it. He’ll have no choice.”

“You’re serious?”

“You saw it yourself. He was alone and barely alive, but ready to fight to his dying breath.”

“And?”

“Not every soldier here is capable of something like that. We might be fully grown and trained men, but I bet some of us would still give up if we thought we were done for. This boy, on the other hand. Have you ever seen such courage? And he’s only a child!”

“Well, do as you please. You do understand it’ll be nearly impossible for him to master the Phase? As brave as he might be, he’s in for a rough time in Parthagon. And who will let him into the city?”

“He stands a chance, Richard.”

“He’s an outsider. A peasant! You know our laws.”

Niels spat in frustration and glanced at the sleeping boy. “I know them perfectly. But we have to give him a shot. If the king can suddenly have a child, why can’t I?”

“There’s a strange twist of fate, I’ll give you that. But your situation is slightly different, wouldn’t you say?” Richard playfully punched his friend in the shoulder. “Don’t go comparing yourself to Albert, old chap! What name did they end up giving her, anyway? And who’s her mother? We ought to know that, at least.”

“Elizabeth. They say she’s the child of one of his secret mistresses, some woman who died in childbirth. She was probably just a child herself. You know what he’s like.”

“Hmm, tragic. But she’s still the princess?”

“What choice did he have? That’s why I reckon he’s likely to be more lenient toward our brave little chap here.”

“Well, brother, you’re nothing if not a gambler!”

Having stuffed himself with undercooked wild pork and then nearly busted his gut open laughing at his men’s vulgar tales, Niels gave the order to retire. After checking the patrols, he lay next to Thomas, shielding him from the cold with his mighty arms, and fell asleep.

The knight felt like he’d barely shut his eyes when he heard his grumbling comrades begin to wake with the dawn. It was time to go home. Not waiting to be roused, he attempted to envision the interlinked rings of Parthagon. But it was no use; the scraping of metal in his vicinity disrupted his concentration. Niels then tried to tune into the sounds around him, trying to hear his name being called out, as if someone were actually there looking for him. But even though the world’s noise quieted in his ears, he still did not hear his name. He then went back to the rings, trying as hard as he could to picture them. Suffering

yet another failure, he returned to imagining his name being called out. Suddenly, a thin female voice lustfully uttered, “Niels,” and then vanished. This was a good sign, which is why the warrior tried visualizing the rings yet again. Immediately a brilliant flash of light and two iridescent blue rings came together before his eyes, reverberating brightly against each other!

The magical vision blazed so realistically, it seemed he could reach out and touch it. But the knight had other things on his mind. Realizing he would soon be awakened, he rose and found himself at the top of a precipitous mountain. Black clouds overhead rumbled and spewed out sheets of lightning that illuminated the bare cliffs below. Directly before Niels was an enormous blue sword glowing from within. It had a sinuous groove running down its middle and a ruby set in its handle. Exhaling, he grabbed the magical weapon with both hands, at which instant an enormous gust of wind almost knocked him off his feet and his whole body began to hum. Gritting his teeth, the growling warrior held onto the burning metal, feeling his body ripping as it expanded outwards and upwards. His chainmail and cuirass burst apart with a loud ringing sound and their owner became so large the sword now was a suitable size.

But then the vision was gone and Niels felt his prostrate body strongly tingling. And yet his fingers could still feel the sword’s handle, through which flowed palpable might and force.

“Putting on some more bulk in there, are you?” He heard Richard say and then felt another kick to the shin. “As if you’re not a hulking ox already!”

Meanwhile, Thomas was still sunk deep in nightmares in which his parents’ screams were succeeded by frenzied mutants chasing him, which were in turn succeeded by Irèn’s desperate

cries. Hunger and thirst constantly plagued the boy, which woke him for brief moments before he abruptly fell asleep again, not knowing where he was or what was happening to him. On top of that, the constant bumping and shaking made his left leg hurt. Soon, bright sunlight, the trills of forest birds, and the clapping of hooves on the paved road added to his torments and finally shook him awake.

Opening his crusted eyes with great difficulty, Thomas found himself in a saddle, seated in front of a flaxen-haired warrior with a prominent nose and a tired gaze. Beside them, several other warriors on horseback trotted along in the same calm manner. Riding through a field, the company was approaching an enormous wooden gate set within a stone wall that stretched as far as the eye could see, its top fortified with narrow arrow slits. In many places this wall, which was taller than even the mightiest trees in the kingdom, was covered in moss and vines. Behind the Wall, one could make out formidable towers and the brown-clay roof tiles of tall, beautiful buildings. Thomas had never seen Parthagon but he understood immediately this was it—that wondrous city inhabited by extraordinary people, the stuff of so many myths and legends. Within these walls stood the famed palace of the king.

“Good morning, little daredevil.” The knight winked at him.

“Hello!” Thomas answered bashfully.

“My name is Niels. What’s yours?”

“Thomas. Thomas Young.”

“Hey, sleepyhead!” a voice sounded from behind.

Looking over his shoulder, the young villager saw a handsome knight with light-blond hair riding a smoky-gray stallion. Beneath the beaming smile spreading across his

elongated face, he was holding in the crook of his muscular arm a small black puppy, peacefully asleep.

“This little ball of fur wouldn’t happen to be yours, would it? He’s been asleep this whole time, too.”

“Yes, sir, he’s mine.”

“Can I keep him?”

“Of course. You can take Tumtum.”

“A gift for the wife, eh? You pitiful doormat,” Niels grumbled as he frowned at the sundial he’d pulled out of his pocket. “How do they even take men like you into the army?”

The chuckling warriors were traversing a wooden bridge over a marshy moat, where an army of invisible frogs croaked them welcome. Before them, the heavy North Gate, protected from both sides by armored guards, opened slowly with a creak.

“Long live the king!”

“Long live Parthagon!” answered the road-worn regiment.

Thomas was met with a warm breeze carrying thousands of smells and sounds all new to him. At the foot of the colossal gate began a seemingly endless avenue crowded with people and lined with verdant trees, as well as neat two- and three-story buildings. Wherever his gaze landed, something was happening and someone was busy doing something. The smartly dressed citizens were beaming with contented smiles. But finding himself in this place gushing with life, the boy thought of his parents and his sister, who would never see any of this. Grief and gladness mingled within him, creating an overwhelming ball of emotion that became lodged in his throat.

Thomas tried his best not to burst into tears before his saviors, especially Niels. But when a divine-smelling woman with short red hair and slightly pointed ears suddenly enveloped him in a warm embrace, he could hold it back no

longer. His lips twisted into a bitter scowl and tears began to flow from his eyes, dropping onto the freckled beauty's lilac dress.

“Welcome to Parthagon, my poor child,” he only just heard her say over the sound of his sobs.

Chapter 2. The Shining City of the Elect



In his first month in Parthagon, Thomas was almost entirely at Niels Dohr's home. The two-story house consisted of two bedrooms and a kitchen, as well as a bright and spacious dining room. A small orchard grew in the walled-off inner courtyard, and the village boy felt rather comfortable here despite being shut in. He was allotted a cozy room on the second floor that used to house the owner's library, which spanned two massive bookcases. These were replaced by an oak bed and a crate of toys Niels's friends donated. His new life in the capital, residing in a solid stone house, in a room steeped in the soothing smell of

books, seemed like a blissful dream Thomas couldn't quite believe was real each time he woke in the morning.

Niels's older sister, Marguerite, also lived there. She was a red-headed woman with a boyish haircut and permanently sad eyes whose corners drooped in a wistful fashion. She had been the one to put her arms around Thomas when he first rode into town. And though Marguerite looked younger than her brother, she behaved like the experienced, mature woman she really was. Her grandchildren were already grown and her husband, a renowned tribune, had given his life defending the king so long ago she hardly remembered what he'd looked like.

Thanks to Marguerite's savvy housekeeping and Niels's salary of ten gold coins a month, their happy home was impeccably clean and their table was always set with plenty of meat. Soon, Thomas's leg was mended. And the boy started dressing rather well, even by the big city's scrupulous standards. Instead of a simple village tunic, he now sported light-colored shirts with colorful buttons, short brown trousers with suspenders, and leather shoes worn over knee-high socks.

Niels was known as a die-hard bachelor, which was common among the knights. He'd never had any children—none who shared his home at any rate. Thomas became the object of his fatherly affections, and so the child found himself under rock-solid protection. Seeing the knight at home was a great joy, since his army duties often required his absence, sending him toward the volcano to fend off the endless mutant incursions. On occasion, Niels's old friend Richard Fein would pay him a visit. And then, along with other friends, they would throw late-night parties in the courtyard gazebo, right beneath the boy's new room. In the morning, a procession of attractive women of all ages would leave the house, their eyes downcast in

embarrassment. Thomas didn't bother memorizing their faces, as they were different each time.

This new life was so full of excitement and positivity that the boy's memory erased the ghastly reminders of his not-so-distant past. Thomas started actively gaining weight since Niels's house was always fully stocked with food. The abundance of sleep and food was a fundamental necessity for most residents of the capital—just as it was for the mutants of Arogdor.

However, everything was not as simple as it seemed to the young villager. Parthagon was practically impenetrable. Although exceptions were made on occasion, allowing outsiders in was considered a fundamental risk to the kingdom's survival. One reason was the risk of Arogdorian covert agents infiltrating. They would, on occasion, venture sabotage missions. This is why Thomas had spent an entire month under the watchful, albeit sad, eyes of Marguerite and had only heard the commotion of the city he longed to discover through the garden's stone wall. Niels and his friends had been busy knocking on the doors of various officials in order to obtain the authorization necessary to adopt the outsider child.

It soon became clear the stickling clerks and the ever-suspicious security services found two things particularly vexing. First, Thomas was considered too old to adapt to the basic principles of Parthagonian life; and second, they had no information about his past. Since everyone in his village had fled, died, or been kidnapped by the mutants, there was no guarantee he was an ordinary villager and not a mutant spy. And even though it was a very complicated and time-consuming mutation, theoretically any Arogdorian could transform themselves into a little boy.

It was thanks to the widely acknowledged merits of the brave knight and his unremitting persistence that Thomas was finally allowed not just to be adopted but to become a full-fledged capital citizen. Peter Kalitza himself—one of the wisest chancellors in all of Parthagon, as well as a close personal friend and adviser to Albert III—had certified the documents with his signature. Kalitza was only able to exercise such authority with the king’s personal permission. The king had also learned of Thomas Yourg from the province of Sallep.

“They said to tell you your entire reputation now hangs on the boy,” Richard informed Niels, standing in the doorway to Niels’s house and handing him the long-awaited piece of paper. The two friends were dressed in their everyday knightly attire, which consisted of high boots, wide-legged trousers, and blue jackets with puffed-out shoulders and cinched waists over light-colored shirts. Longswords and daggers were affixed to their belts as usual. “You really do like making trouble for yourself, don’t you!”

Snatching the document from Richard’s hands, Niels feasted his eyes on the coveted signature shimmering in the sunlight. “I don’t give a damn.”

“What do you give a damn about, besides women and work?” chuckled Richard, plaiting his lustrous golden hair into a thick braid. “And how about getting yourself a wife already?”

“Sounds about as tempting as an offer to chop off my arm. You live your life perfectly happy and carefree, and then someone comes along to tell you, ‘Don’t you think you’ve got it just a little too good? Let’s lop that arm of yours clear off!’”

“Well, at least you wouldn’t be bored.”

Niels finished reading the chancellor's decree and, having rolled it into a tube, shoved it under his belt. He sighed with relief and his face melted into a wide smile:

"Now I've got Thomas. No time to get bored with him, as you can see."

"So I'm left to chase mutants and skirts all on my own? Oh, cruel world!"

"Hmm, why don't you go cry about it to your darling wife?"

"Which wife would that be?"

"How about the one you've been living with for the past fifty years?"

"Malicious aspersions!"

The two friends cracked up laughing. Indeed, Richard was a womanizer in words and jest only. As if to spite the local ladies, arguably the most attractive man in all of Celesia was a strictly monogamous and exemplary family man. Such a lifestyle was highly uncommon among the mercurial knights, who lived for the day and rarely thought about tomorrow. And even though Richard seemed very far removed from old age, he already had a few grownup children. The warrior spent all his free time with his beloved Lilly and denied her nothing, showering her with constant presents and unreservedly spoiling her with excessive attention. But being so different from the other knights, especially from Niels and his philandering antics, the blue-eyed dreamboat felt somewhat awkward about his ways. That's why jokes about amorous antics were for him a requisite topic of conversation. And, to give them some credibility, Richard would go so far as to bed some village woman in a far-flung corner of the kingdom once in a while. As a rule, these women were ugly and stupid compared to the ladies of Parthagon. Niels, however,

knew these escapades only gave his friend pangs of conscience rather than any real pleasure.

Having bid Richard adieu and gone back into the house, the centurion hoisted Thomas, who ran to meet him, up into his formidable arms and squeezed him tightly. He then took him to the gazebo. Its round lattice walls were almost entirely covered in ivy, creating a pleasantly cool shade.

“We need to talk,” the knight began cautiously, having sat on the bench and placed the boy onto his lap.

“What about, Uncle Niels?”

“From now on...well, let’s put it this way. My sister and I will never fully replace your mother and father. That would be impossible. But they’re letting me keep you, and everyone will think of you as my son. That is, if it’s all right with you.”

“Yes,” answered Thomas, his eyes filling with tears brought on by terrible recollections.

“I will do everything in my power for you to have all the best life can offer. I believe in you. That’s why you’re here. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“But I have one important thing to ask of you. Are you listening carefully?”

“Very carefully!”

“I don’t expect anything from you in return when you grow up. Helping you, Thomas, to become the great man I know you can be is enough. But...”

“What is it, Uncle Niels?”

“Every step you take as my son will reflect on me. I’ve lain my reputation on the line for your life here in Parthagon. Things will be far from easy for you here, but I believe you won’t let me down.” Even though he’d never considered himself sensitive, the

knight found his eyes welling with tears. To hide this from the boy, whom he'd grown very fond of over the past few weeks, Niels again pressed Thomas to his chest. It took his swelling emotions a long time to recede. Meanwhile, his newly adopted son was experiencing similar feelings and was tightly clinging to his savior's massive neck. In his heart of hearts, the boy promised himself he too would become a brave warrior just like Niels and never ever let him down.

* * *

His status as a citizen of Parthagon finally obtained, Thomas no longer was confined to the stone-walled garden. The next day Marguerite took him to the school, which, in terms of size and structure, could've been deemed a city in its own rights, albeit one teeming with hollering children. It had its own parks, alleys, sports arenas, and beautiful structures. Chief among them was the main building, crowned by an angular tower with a black weathervane cockerel. All citizens had to spend a large part of their early lives here—from the day they could walk until the day they turned sixteen.

Parthagonian education was designed such that by the time students exited childhood, they possessed all the necessary skills and knowledge for everyday life, as well as any profession they might choose. Teachers managed to fascinate the children, who attended classes with great pleasure. The students became, with tutelage, happy and open, and they led joyful lives free of strife. There were no educational institutions to attend once one graduated, because they were unnecessary. Only the future defenders of Parthagon spent an additional five years at the elite Knights' Academy. To enroll, candidates were required to

master the art of mutation, which was not within reach for every young man, no matter how diligently he studied.

For Thomas, because the king's subjects outside the capital received no instruction, the school quickly became hell. Had he remained in his village, the boy would've become a hunter just like his father, learning from his know-how and experience. Irèn, in turn, would've become the wife of some craftsman or hunter from another village. They would never have even learned to read or write.

When Thomas entered the classroom, the other children were not only smarter but also several years younger than him, most of them being Irèn's age. Unfortunately, the pedagogical council, headed by the esteemed rector Isaac Newdon, had decided placing him in a lower grade was the only way to go, since children his age were far more advanced in their learning.

Soon enough, Thomas Yourg—the country bumpkin infiltrator from outside the Wall—was the laughingstock of the school. In the kids' eyes, he was so simple no one saw him as an equal. At any opportunity, and there were plenty, they teased him. Children his age and older found it hilarious to see him going to classes with tiny tots, and the little ones made fun of him for being a “lug” and for not knowing even the simplest things, such as letters of the alphabet or the Phase. All that amounted to Thomas finding himself alone. He withdrew into himself, shut himself off from the world. It was all he could do to withstand the onslaught of ridicule, painfully realizing it was well deserved.

The only way out of this predicament: studying. And not just studying, but studying assiduously enough to become like the rest of them, or even better; studying so his peers would consider him an equal—or at least so he could understand the

things the little kids around him were yammering about. He had to give it his all. He didn't want to disappoint his adopted father, the man who'd given him a chance in this new world. Which is why, every day, swallowing his pride, the village boy went to school. There, gritting his teeth and not turning his head in the direction of his ever-present tormentors, he swallowed every drop of the knowledge imparted to him, trying to understand and internalize everything as best he could.

The curriculum for three-year-olds included world knowledge, the basics of mathematics, and language, things Thomas had at least some notions about. He turned out to be an expert on nature studies, having grown up so close to the wild forests. Thanks to his father, he knew plant and animals species native to his woods. These weren't, though, the most important subjects. The most mysterious and unexpected was "Phaseology." Many of the three-year-olds had already acquired a basic grasp of the Phase, but were just beginning the more serious stages of learning. This is why, in the rector's opinion, the boy had to begin his studies at this level.

While the other children had imbibed the concept of the Phase along with their mothers' milk, Thomas found it exceptionally difficult to understand it on even its most fundamental level. That this seemingly boundless field of knowledge had been, for unknown reasons entirely absent from his life, confounded him. He'd never heard of the Phase in his village. Whereas in Parthagon, it was an essential part of life. In fact one couldn't become a knight without perfecting this remarkable skill.

Parthagonian citizens implemented the Phase in two main ways. First, having completed a series of actions upon falling asleep or waking up, they could transform the space around

them in ways imperceptible to others. This was no dream or fantasy, but a shift in their perceptions of the world freed from space and time's bonds. As a result, they could experience anything and be anywhere they wanted. The average Parthagonian could lie down on his bed, perform a certain number of techniques, get up, walk through a wall, and fly beyond the city limits to anywhere in Celesia. There, that person could meet anyone and do whatever suited his fancy while others would continue to see this person lying in bed, since a person inside the Phase state only disrupted the stability of his own perceived space.

Second, this incredible skill had all manner of everyday uses. There were hundreds of applications that Thomas had to learn, but most often Parthagonian inhabitants used their time in the Phase to influence their bodies and health. The most skilled among them could control their outward appearance, their height, and even their age. Denizens of the capital could, thus, live remarkably long lives and, as a rule, remain very attractive, for they had the power to correct any bodily defects. The Phase was therefore a foundation for Parthagon's very existence. It gave people everything they could aspire to: beauty, youth, and health.

For this reason, sleep was the capital's most valuable commodity, since entering the Phase state was easiest on the brink of sleep. Once there, Parthagonians would assume the pattern of their new chosen external appearances. To achieve mutation, they had to practice changing their bodies inside the Phase state several times a day in order to eventually get the result in a few weeks' or months' time, depending on the task's complexity and the undertaker's skill. Then it was necessary to

maintain the mutation via the very same method used to obtain it.

All this was difficult for Thomas to grasp. Nor could he quite believe any of it could have anything to do with him—it all seemed too farfetched. Yet late one morning, when the sun was already climbing toward its zenith, and the birds had already tired of chirping in the garden, Thomas woke and immediately thought of the Phase. Doing his best not to move, he began to try out the techniques he'd been made to memorize: imagining his body spinning around its own axis, visualizing hands rubbing against each other, and even visualizing himself running around the marble statue of Albert III, which graced the pedestal before the school's main building. Achieving nothing, he repeated his attempt: spinning, visualizing hands, and running around the statue. He went through this cycle over and over again—when suddenly, he saw his scratched up palms appear before him even though his eyes were closed!

Remembering what he was taught, Thomas immediately tried to fly up in order to enter the Phase. To his horror, with the air whistling in his ears, he soared up to the old ceiling beams, which smelled faintly of rotting wood. At the same time, his senses became even more acute, and he perceived everything with incredible clarity. He was so frightened by this mystical occurrence he immediately plonked back down on the bed, where, with great difficulty, he finally managed to shake his body awake. Barefoot and wearing nothing but flimsy pajamas, his eyes bulging, he ran hollering out of his room and sprinted down the cold stone stairs. In the sunlit dining room, which always smelled like something baking, Niels's sister, donning a cap and a white apron atop her airy purple dress, was already setting the table.

“Marguerite! Marguerite!” Thomas yelled breathlessly.

“What is it? Good morning!”

“I’ve learned how to fly!”

“What kind of world is this where children learn to fly before they learn to greet their elders!”

“Good morning!”

“That’s better.” Marguerite carefully laid the last plate on the white tablecloth and then went into the kitchen, where steam was billowing from numerous pots and pans. “Now, what were you saying?”

“I just flew!”

“Well, well! And how long have you been able to do that?”

“This was the first time. I didn’t dream it!”

There came the sound of heavy footsteps, and into the dining room, wearing nothing but pantaloons, stumbled the groggy Niels Dohr. His improbably massive and hairy torso, whose bulging muscles rippled with every motion, astounded Thomas. “Wow.”

“What’s with all the screeching?” the knight grumbled. “Are the mutants attacking?”

“Good morning! Our hero has just learned how to fly,” laughed Marguerite in the kitchen amid the clanging of pots.

“Hmm, so that’s what happened. Yes, good, good.”

“Good morning, Uncle Niels! It’s true, I have!”

“No way! It can’t be!”

“All the way up to the ceiling!”

“And I was just wondering who that was walking around on the roof all morning,” chuckled the knight. “And was our future warrior trying to get into the Phase just before this miracle happened, by any chance?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Interesting.”

“But I did learn how to fly!”

With a crack of his stiff knees, Niels sat down on a soft-backed creaking white chair and planted Thomas beside him. Ruffling Thomas’s hair, he looked sadly at the empty plates, the small bowl of partially melted butter, and the jug of milk. But then he smiled happily as his sister brought out a pot of boiled eggs and a basket of hot buns, the smell of which made his mouth water.

“Hmm,” the knight said. “Thomas, I do believe congratulations are in order after all. You’ve had your first Phase experience!”

“And it so happens the celebratory barley is almost done,” said Marguerite, smiling as she went back to the kitchen to rattle some more pans.

“But I couldn’t do it.”

“Did you fly up?”

“Yes.”

“Then you were in the Phase.”

“You don’t get it, Uncle Niels. I flew up for real.”

“That’s how it is, the Phase state. It doesn’t feel different from the real world. Everything seems the same, except you can do lots of things you can’t normally do. Like fly, walk through a wall, or get strong, like me.” Having said that, the flaxen-haired warrior proudly lifted his arm and flexed his muscles, beaming.

“But I didn’t even notice entering it!”

“Nor should you. You’re only changing the world around you, not yourself. For a short moment, your body and your room lost their concrete substances.”

“So that means I can do the Phase?”

“Did you ever doubt it? Congratulations, future knight!”

“Golly!”

“Now, let’s tuck into this celebratory breakfast.”

“Whoopee!”

Marguerite emerged from the kitchen carrying a large bowl of barley porridge. She saw the excited two reaching for baked goods, at which her smile curved into a frown and her voice acquired a note of harshness. “And what’s this supposed to be?”

“We’re,” said Niels, lustily biting into a bun, “celebrating.”

“Both of you, up and don’t come back down until you’ve showered, dressed, and combed your hair. Off with you!”

“But, sis!”

“Chop, chop!”

And even though Thomas was still hopelessly behind his younger classmates, many of whom entered the Phase state every day, from that moment on he felt an unshakable confidence solidify within him. Only a few days later, engrossed in Phaseology, he managed to enter it again. The villager still found the new sensations startling; nevertheless, with each week, he got better at it, and this enabled him to dare to dream of entering the Academy so one day he could become as successful and respected a knight as Niels Dohr.

* * *

About six weeks after he’d begun his studies, Thomas was sitting in the park between the school’s campuses, leaning against a cedar’s rough trunk and absentmindedly munching an apple under the tree’s generous canopy. Both his peers and his classmates still refused to be seen with him, and so he watched their merry games from a lonely distance. That afternoon, he

was enviously watching some of the older kids, aged six or seven, fly a red kite with long colorful ribbons.

A dozen boys were excitedly yelling, battling each other for the right to handle the tight rope, if only for a second. Thomas, seeing such a marvel for the first time, froze with the apple inches from his mouth. That one could make something with one's hands and then have it soar in the sky like a bird, thrilled him. Only a few months ago he would've mistaken this curious invention for magic, but now he could intuit there were no spells involved here, since the Parthagonians didn't believe in the supernatural.

Suddenly, a loud cry sounded and the kite, jerking, plummeted into an oak's dark-green branches, where it remained stuck at an unreachable height. This was the work of Alain Ospe—a restless, dark-skinned child with thick black hair from Thomas's class who was always getting into trouble. This time, he'd been playing tag when he inadvertently ran into the older boy flying the kite. The older boy lost his balance and let go of the rope. The other older boys pounced on hapless Alain and started rolling him on the ground, calling him a "little doo-doo head" and kicking him in the bum.

For a second, Thomas felt a great sense of satisfaction—no one teased him as much as Alain, who was the son of a legacy knight, just like every other kid at the school. But beating the little menace began to seem unjust to Thomas: after all, Alain was still really little, and he clearly bumped into the older boy by accident. Why did they have to treat him so roughly? Did he really deserve it? Forgetting his grudge, the villager suddenly lost his temper and, feeling the blood rushing to his face, he tossed away the apple and ran toward the tussle.

“Hey, hold it!” yelled Carl Linn, a white-haired ruffian with sharp little eyes and a potato nose, just before he received a kick to the stomach and flopped to the ground where he burst into tears.

“Why you little hick,” a chubby reprobate said while swinging his fist, but Thomas immediately knocked him off his feet.

“No, please!” begged the third, the gangliest and scrawniest of the bunch, but Thomas still gave him a smack to the nose and he ended up down on the grass beside his mates.

“Ok, enough! We get it! We’ll stop!” the rest of the brawlers squealed in unison from a distance. They were watching the main scourges of the younger kids all sprawled on the ground, pitifully moaning, sobbing, and grimacing in pain.

“Wow!” Alain exclaimed, having already forgotten about the thrashing he’d just received.

Clenching his fists, Thomas towered over the small boy and fiercely glared at everyone around him, breathing heavily and almost shaking with tension. The provincial newcomer might have been lagging behind in the mental department, but he’d grown up in a wild environment and thus his physical prowess was far beyond that of the coddled city lads who whimpered at the slightest provocation. A strange sense of self-assuredness filled Thomas, as if some key had been turned within him. A few moments ago he’d been nobody—and now he was in control of what was happening around him, the center of everyone’s attention! He was in the thrall of a storm of emotions he’d never experienced before.

“Why were you beating him?”

“We weren’t beating him.” The fat kid began defending himself, but then caught Thomas’s look, which intimated a swift kick coming his way, and fell silent.

“We were just mad about the kite. How are we gonna get it down from there?” mumbled Carl as he got up, wiping his eyes and shaking the grass off his clothes.

“That’s all?”

“You bet that’s all. Let’s see you try!”

“Watch and learn, city girls!” Thomas proclaimed, blowing the hair from his eyes and rubbing his hands as he headed toward the oak tree. “I used to climb saplings like this ten times a day!”

“Wow!” Alain squawked and ran after him.

In actuality, Thomas had never seen an oak this big in his life. And he’d not climbed that many trees, even though he had lived on the edge of a forest. But he wanted to show off and this eliminated any fear he might’ve had. With little effort, accompanied by ecstatic “oohs” and “aahs” from below, he managed to reach the kite and toss it down to the slack-jawed kids. And even though the schoolteachers were waiting for him down below, preparing to teach him a memorable lesson, he hadn’t a care in the world—after all, he was now one of the boys. And that was worth enduring any punishment.

After a stern talking to, the villager returned to the familiar classroom, where everything smelled of watercolors, and potted flowers were placed in great abundance. The walls were hung with drawings of wild animals, maps of Celesia, and portraits of Parthagonian kings. As always, Thomas headed to the table near the back window, where he’d left his neatly stacked books, his pages full of scribbles, and an inkwell with a long quill. He was used to daydreaming the time away in his lonesome corner, but this time Alain had taken the adjacent seat. “Did you see how scared they were of you?”

“It happens.”

“Don’t you know—those were the baddest guys around? Real thugs!”

“The strongest?” The villager chuckled and looked out the window at the sheep-like clouds with feigned indifference. “Not that I noticed.”

“Everyone’s talking about you, Thomas Yourg,” said someone with a timid but bright voice.

Twisting around in his chair, the hero saw Marie Lurie—a small girl in a flowery dress. She was wearing the obligatory black frock that was part of the girls’ school uniform, and her chubby legs were clad in angelically white socks slipped into sandals. Dimples dotted the little brunette’s rosy cheeks and her green eyes shone with almost adult intelligence. Her thick dark curls cascaded down to her waist.

After the day’s exploits, every pupil under seven dreamed of befriending Thomas, but Thomas found it most pleasurable to spend his time with the prudent Marie and the wily Alain. Of course, from time to time, Thomas would try to communicate with his peers, or even the older Carl Linn, but he didn’t find much in common with them.

From that point on, Thomas began to enjoy school, and no one laughed at him anymore, even though there were still times he deserved to be laughed at. As so often happens, the prettiest girls now considered his simplicity authentic and charming, even though only the day before they’d been mortified at the thought of looking at him. When he found out what had happened, Niels laughed: based on his rich experience, he knew his son was now guaranteed all the female attention he could ever want.

Now that Thomas was in such fine spirits, he was better able to explore the city, specifically by choosing intricate routes as he skipped his way to and from school.

Parthagon was an ideal place inhabited by virtually perfect people. Everything in it was thought out to the most minute details: the beautiful stone and brick houses, some of them even taller than the Wall; the neat little shops and ornate theaters; the smoothly paved roads traversed by lacquered carriages; the noisy market with its narrow aisles bursting with fragrances, its stalls selling all manner of household goods and fresh produce; the grand Avenue of Heroes lined with thick chestnut trees and stretching from the North Gate to the main square; the spacious arena used for chivalric tournaments and celebrations; the gorgeous parks where the townspeople pleasantly whiled away their spare time walking their pampered cats and dogs. All of Parthagon looked marvelously cozy and yet sparkingly clean.

What most boggled the village boy's mind was the Royal Palace, located not far from the South Gate. The enormous stone structure had four turrets that widened at their apices, and they rose so high they could be seen from anywhere in the city. The main city square, which was where public gatherings and festivities were held, abutted the palace. A tall white arch decorated the palace's main entrance, its entire length decorated with bas-reliefs depicting knightly battles. An elite guard of the king's strongest and most fearless warriors oversaw the building day and night. Close by, a group of fashionably dressed young ladies kept watch on the warriors, hoping for stray glances in their direction.

Thomas found the people themselves even more interesting. About 50,000 lived in the city. The population, which was

predominantly female, had to remain at this number because the city couldn't accommodate more. This is why the capital had only one school and forbade outsiders to enter. Active knights were the only ones granted rights to bear offspring. Exile or long-term imprisonment awaited anyone who dared violate this law. Boys, from their earliest years, were motivated to seek their fortune in the fighting ranks, since doing so guaranteed popularity with the opposite sex. This is also why there was never a shortage of soldiers in the elite army regiments, even though the Knights' Academy did not accept just anybody. Choosing a military vocation, however, also meant a high probability of death in the first years of service—especially in garrisons stationed close to the volcano.

That the lucky inhabitants of the ideal city could live on for countless centuries was widely rumored but true in theory only. They could affect their well-being and maintain a youthful appearance for as long as they wanted. But this ability depended on their mastery of the Phase. Some could not properly enter it even after a decade and a half of school training. Those unfortunate souls ended up on the joyless margins of Parthagonian life, many choosing to leave and seek their fortunes elsewhere. Even the most adept practitioners had to devote considerable effort to maintaining their mutations. They had to arrange their entire lives around entering the Phase morning, midday, and evening. This was so tiring, and with time people tended to devote less and less attention to the practice. Or they gave it up altogether, preferring to die a natural death. Thus, lifespans varied from forty to fifty for those who had difficulties grasping the Phase, and up to three hundred for those who were masters of the Phase.

In actuality, however, few managed to reach even the century mark due to the high mortality rates. Young knights often died during their constant efforts to deflect mutant attacks. Accidents and epidemics were also common. Sometimes murder occurred or people disappeared, often leaving city life because they'd grown tired of its rules and not always equitable laws. And virtually every day scores were settled at the cost of someone's life. Such actions didn't faze the townspeople and for obvious and understandable reasons: continually enjoying endless comfort was impossible and people lost their sense of meaning. People met suicide with understanding by and large; they didn't really condemn it. The authorities had never really tried to end this sad blight, perceiving it as the norm.

Parthagonians could not only maintain their youth for centuries, if they managed to stay alive that long, they could also control their appearance. They strived to be taller, to have smoother skin and more even facial features. Thus, to the extent one mastered the Phase one also had success with the opposite sex: there was no other way to reach—and maintain—such unnatural heights of beauty. Next to the Parthagon's stunning studs and gorgeous damsels, mortals outside the Wall seemed ugly and misshapen, though their beauty might be praised everywhere else in the realm. Few men in the city devoted little effort to their appearance. Most often they were soldiers who had more pressing knightly mutations to attend to in the Phase state and who were guaranteed female attention anyway.

Among the women, competition was heated. Without eye-popping good looks they stood no chance of nabbing even the scrawniest and most useless warriors. Another downside to the apparent blessing of being able to manage one's appearance: those in the capital could still differentiate between more and

less attractive people and so they always had to continue striving toward impossible levels of perfection. One couldn't stop at just one achievement. People constantly worried over fickle fashion trends. For example, when Thomas had first arrived, enormous bug eyes and pointed ears had been all the rage among the ladies.

Because citizens were obsessed with the Phase, the city's entire way of life was calibrated to provide citizens with the most comfortable and effective conditions for regular practice. Everyone went to bed no later than nine or ten, after which it was forbidden to speak outside on the street any louder than a whisper. They woke any time between eight and ten, and they had a mandatory daytime nap—from two to four—during which the city stood as still as if it were the dead of night. During this downtime, the Parthagonians drifted into sweet sleep, went into productive Phase states, or indulged in pleasures.

As for work, the people of Parthagon toiled at an unhurried pace and only for a few hours a day, most often before the midday nap. They labored four or five days a week at most. Such a lazy way of life was only natural: thanks to the Phase, most common human problems, which took up the lion's share of ordinary people's time, fell to the wayside. The advantage of unending youth allowed the Parthagonians to resolve all their material problems within their first few decades. After that, all they needed was food and infrequent additions to their wardrobe or household supplies. Everything else was taken care of. And in the rare case that someone did fall on hard times, a guaranteed income kept them from sliding into poverty. Each adult was paid one gold coin, or the equivalent amount of ten silver coins, which was sufficient to provide basic lodgings and food. Other accepted forms of currency included copper and less-

valuable bronze coins, all round and roughly thumbnail sized. The emblem of a sword on one side and a stalk of wheat on the other adorned the coins; two interlocking rings framed these images.

Because the Parthagon's vast provinces supplied the capital with resources and food, most city dwellers only had to work hard at deciding how to spend their free time and what to do with their savings. As it happened, some found considering what to do with their savings a serious problem, which if allowed to go unchecked, caused them mental anguish and gave rise to suicidal thoughts. Therefore, it was important the city maintain a roaring cultural and social life, and the Royal Palace put on festive balls on a weekly basis.

All this prosperity, quasi-eternal youth, and abundant free time had surprising effects on the local elites' traditional family values. Finding themselves comfortable and independent, many mature men and women preferred to live on their own. Most simply wanted to get as much enjoyment and happiness out of their days, like Niels or even the king, who had a weakness for young girls of barely legal age. But whereas the insouciant men could easily admit this to themselves, the women continued to look for the perfect one and only—whether real or imagined. They picked their suitors scrupulously, thinking they'd snagged that incomparable and special one time and time again, but the procession of men through their boudoirs never ended because no matter how wonderful the beau of the day appeared, only a week or couple of months would pass before they found someone even better and more enthralling. With rare exception, this pretend search for eternal love was really only a pious excuse for something else, something not talked about out loud.

City dwellers did have to obey some tough restrictions. A special ethics committee, headed by none other than Albert III, forbade certain types of mutations. For example, changing one's sex through the Phase was forbidden, along with erasing recognizable facial features, growing one's physique to a disproportionate size, and growing additional body parts. Knights could only make themselves significantly larger and stronger than ordinary citizens, but they couldn't exceed human proportions. And they were the only ones allowed to make such drastic mutations. Likewise, the city imposed a ban on any intoxicating substances, stimulating beverages, gambling, and other things capable of detrimentally affecting people. The ban also extended to magic rituals and religious cults, but these still proliferated in dark corners.

The ethics committee also monitored the way Parthagonians dressed. People weren't allowed to wear old or dirty clothes, nor outfits too flashy or too revealing. For wearing an unreasonably short skirt, displaying an excessively deep décolleté, or showing a flamboyant amount of skin, a person could be fined a dozen gold coins or even become incarcerated in a prison tower. Consequently, people always looked impeccably neat and often dressed in the most current fashions. Women preferred tight-fitting dresses of the most fanciful shapes and cuts, leather boots or high-heel shoes, and bonnets. Another popular headdress was the chapeau—a hood tapering into a long tail at the back, sometimes with a short capelet around the shoulders. Distinguished, fashionable women made public appearances wearing uncomfortable poufy dresses and sported hennins—tall, horned, or cone-shaped headdresses with sheer veils cascading sometimes all the way to the ground. Men most often made do with a casual blouse, a snug leather jacket, or a belted shirt

worn over short trousers. They wore knee-high boots or sandals in hot weather, and they preferred either to leave their heads uncovered or to don the popular chapeau. Nobles tended to wear wide-shouldered short jackets, round-brimmed hats with feathers, pointed shoes, capes and tight stockings. The tight stockings invariably caused Thomas to snort with laughter every time he spotted them.

The idyll of the fairy-tale city was marred only by the horrid mutants of Arogdor, who were always disturbing the peace with their bloodthirsty raids and who posed a continuous threat to the kingdom's well-being. Fortunately, the Royal Council had enough foresight to protect Parthagon from being enslaved by the enemy. The council was composed of the city's highest officials and led by the infallible king, who enjoyed his adoring subjects' boundless veneration.

Albert Stein—his full name—had spent most of his three centuries on the throne. His family had been ruling the kingdom from its foundation 948 years ago, the epoch from which the Parthagonians counted their years, since before that time darkness had reigned. But Albert's ascendance to the throne had marked a sharp leap up in the living standards and developing the Phase control techniques. Albert's radical reforms led to the creation of the ideal Parthagon Thomas was now discovering. That is why no one had a bad word to say against the king. Everyone sincerely loved and respected him, and the former peasant found himself also swept up in the monarch's mass adulation.

The king's private life however, was shrouded in mystery. Despite having been married six times, he had only one child—the recently born Elizabeth. No one knew Elizabeth's mother, yet Albert had still granted Elizabeth the title of princess, albeit

without rights of succession: if the king were to suddenly die, control of the kingdom would pass on to his chancellor. Albert had made sure of this in light of his lack of heirs or other worthy contenders to the throne. A long time ago, he had brought up a much-beloved son, but the young man, desperately creative, could not bear life in the ideal city. The prince had taken his life at the peak of his youth, and the kingdom had been plunged into mourning for a month.

* * *

The next thirteen years passed by in relative peace and prosperity. During this time, much changed. First, Thomas had all but forgotten his origins. He'd not only long been accepted as a Parthagonian, citizens were also proud to show him off as an example for less-driven youths to follow. Second, he'd gained pretty good control of the Phase, though he still needed to exert more effort with it than city natives. And third, his freedom-loving foster father, Niels Dohr, had finally managed to rise to the rank of tribune, which earned him the long-awaited silver token to wear on his chest and made him spend even more time beyond the Wall.

Thomas, having turned eighteen, now impatiently awaited the moment he too would join the knights and accompany Niels on his journeys. He'd grown into a sturdy lad with thick chestnut hair down to his shoulders and full lips, the upper one still slightly upturned. His imperturbable green-flecked gaze drove the more romantically inclined girls crazy, suggesting thoughtfulness and a spark of simplicity he still carried from his rural past.

Dressed in a white shirt, brown trousers, a thick belt, and shoes with sparkling copper buckles, Thomas, along with his friends, sat waiting on a wooden bench near the door to the rector's office. The office was on the school's main administrative building's second floor, and through the open gallery's arches one could look out onto the campus green with its century-old oaks. There, new generations of Parthagonians were shrieking happily as they launched kites into the sky and watched them glide on the warm spring breeze.

Next to the future knight was the sixteen-year-old Marie. She was blinking with nervous excitement, her light summer dress fluttering under her school frock. The rather curvaceous brunette teased her curls. She had dimples and her cheeks had a shy blush: "What do you think? Is it good enough to pass the practical exam?"

"What have you got over there?" a rolling bass voice demanded to know.

"How could you forget?"

Marie pouted, but still consented to turn her deep cleavage in his direction. Seated beside Thomas, Alain Ospe shook his head of black curls. He'd grown into a smoldering young man—the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome—with a piercing black gaze. Watching the scene unfold, he could remain silent: "How can such a thing of beauty go unnoticed by the son of Niels Dohr?"

Thomas unhurriedly lowered his eyes toward Marie's chest. "I would've made mine bigger."

"You bastard!" The girl turned away in disgust, crossing her plump arms. "That's how it is, then."

"What? You asked for my opinion. I definitely would've made them bigger."

“How could they get any bigger?” Alain opened his eyes wide.

“He doesn’t even know what he’s talking about. There’s no pleasing him!”

The final exam in Phaseology did away with restrictions on mutations, and therefore everyone could change their anatomy as they pleased. This was the only time in their lives the Parthagonians could legally do anything to their bodies. Once the exam was over, without regular maintenance through the Phase, the mutations would disappear after a few weeks or months.

Thus, Alain had attempted to make himself over into a handsome adult, and the result really was remarkable. The rational Marie, who was at the top of her class and a most modest daughter to her loving parents, had given herself an enormous bosom, though she’d already been rather shapely. Thomas, however, was truly not able to appreciate this height of academic achievement, no matter how hard she tried to make him notice it. At least two out of three girls had chosen this same direction for their bodily transformations. And they’d all attempted to casually ask attractive lads what changes they would make, given the opportunity. After several weeks of having the same images flashing before his eyes, Thomas had simply grown tired of it. He’d chosen to model himself after the physique required of the knights, which was a decision many young men made. All hoped to get into the Knights’ Academy and wanted to prove their suitability for this path in the most straightforward way they could think of.

It was now Thomas’s turn to go in, and he nervously entered the geranium-perfumed office of Isaac Newdon, the school rector, who oversaw the final exam. The hopeful graduate sat in the lone chair in the middle of the room and prepared for

detailed questioning. Two other senior teachers sat next to the rector who, clad in a black jacket, was busy leafing through his papers. Over the years these curly-haired twin ladies, wearing identical severe blue dresses, had become like family to the students—unlike Newdon. All Parthagonians despised the ever-present rector and part-time Minister of Education with his nauseatingly slick hair. They all had been forced to sit through his meticulous instructions and nit-picking remarks at some point during their studies at the school or the Academy. Along with his surprisingly unpleasant manner, Newdon was also unattractive. His skittish, cunning eyes peered out from under a huge forehead, and his thin lips—perched above a small, almost childlike chin—were always on the verge of blurting out some nasty comment. He showed no concern about hurting anyone’s feelings.

Behind the rector’s desk hung a portrait of the bearded and rather portly Albert III. The thick, gilded frame took up half the wall. Behind Thomas, bookcases reached the high ceiling and were filled with ancient leather-bound tomes. When Thomas first came to Parthagon, he quickly learned how to read and write and then devoured all the books Niels had long forgotten on the room’s shelves. Initially, the boy had wanted to learn as much as possible about this world so he’d be less of a country bumpkin, an insult people had often heard flung at him during those first painful months at school. But as he read, he became addicted to reading, and this love of the rustling page never left him, regardless of circumstance or other more temporary obsessions.

“Your work is good enough, of course, to pass the practical exam,” squealed Newdon, his eyes gliding over Thomas’s large,

though not quite knightly, torso. “Though I would’ve gone for something else if I were you.”

“Thank you!”

“You know, it’s quite surprising you’ve managed to achieve this level of mutation! How are you this good at Phasing? Remind me who your real parents were?”

“My father was the Sallep region’s most famous hunter, and my mother took care of the housework.”

“Odd.” The rector shot an inquiring glance at the twins, but they only shrugged in unison. “Very odd indeed.”

“I’ve done my best to live up to the faith Parthagon had placed in me.”

“A commendable thing! Now tell us about all the other applications of the Phase.” The rector narrowed his gaze as he reclined back in his leather chair, looking at Thomas as a hungry owl watches a helpless field mouse.

Inhaling the red geranium’s calming aroma, Thomas rattled off all the known applications of the Phase, which took him ten minutes. Even during their primary years, once they’d studied the techniques of moving and finding objects inside the Phase, children began to embark on Phase-state journeys across Celesia’s wondrous landscapes and the labyrinths of time. After that, they were initiated into the intricacies of meeting relatives and friends, celebrities and historical personalities, alive or dead. Then they were taught the relatively simple ways of applying the Phase to unleash creativity, realize desires, get rid of social anxiety and other ailments of the soul, as well as entertain themselves, and much more. At the school, Thomas was taught the Phase state could theoretically be used to gain new knowledge and solve complex problems, but this area of Phaseology was still under-researched. Therefore, ordinary

Parthagonians were forbidden from venturing into these domains so as not to inadvertently harm themselves and others.

Satisfied with his answer, the exam committee now asked Thomas to list the methods of entering the Phase. Because Thomas had had a far harder time than his peers mastering the skill, he understood this question better than other students. First he discussed the indirect method, which involved various techniques applied upon awakening. This was how he had managed to enter the Phase state the first time. Then he explained the direct method, carried out independent of sleep, which Thomas still found the hardest to perform, as did many others. Next he provided a detailed overview of the techniques used to achieve conscious dreaming, which was another way of entering the Phase state. Finally, he concluded by enumerating the non-autonomous methods, including using various devices, plant-based substances, and pair work, in which one partner would partially wake the other at certain moments.

By this point, Thomas had warmed up and forgotten about his initial trepidations. For the next half hour he spoke fluently about the techniques for deepening and maintaining the Phase, finding and moving objects around inside it, the paradoxical principles of controlling its space, and its environment's curious properties. Finally, having unsuccessfully tried to stump Thomas with a few trick questions, the punctilious Rector was convinced. "All right, Thomas Yourg," he squeaked, rifling through the papers. "And where are you right now, this very moment?"

"In your office, sir."

"Thomas!" The twin teachers couldn't hold back.

"Oh, I meant to say in the Phase state."

“Oh, yes? And how do you figure that?” Newdon lifted his sharp eyes.

“Because we’re always in the same place. The Phase state we enter is the same as our daily reality, only without the stability of space or the ability to influence other conscious beings.”

“So right now, all around us, is a kind of Phase?”

“Yes, but a stable one. Reality without object stability—that’s the Phase state we learn about at the school. Whereas the stable Phase state—that’s the ordinary reality we’re in right now.”

“Good. But I wouldn’t recommend a teaching career either. Shall we give him an A then?” Newdon glanced at the two teachers beside him, picked up the certificate covered in handwritten notes, and scribbled his signature at the bottom.

“Thank you, rector!”

“Here are your papers.” Newdon extended his thin, tired hand toward Thomas. “Best of luck!”

“Thanks again!” The young man shook the rector’s limp hand, having obtained the grade he needed to get into the Knights’ Academy.

* * *

The following day, bright and sunny, the emotional graduates bustled around the school’s main square. They were decked out in blue gowns and square academic caps. It was just before lunch. Strings of colorful bunting hanging from oak tree branches rustled in the breeze. In the square’s center, the statue of Albert III looked festive. It was decorated with flower garlands and wreaths. In the background stood the main building’s high tower and weathercock.

Off to the side the kids' nearest and dearest congregated. Among them, celebrating Thomas's achievements, were the Dohr siblings and Richard Fein, that faithful family friend. As was customary, the guests were attired in their best festive garb and the knights wore freshly polished armor and laundered blue capes.

Finally, to triumphant fanfare, Newdon, shrouded in his perennial black jacket, ascended onto the platform. Thin black stockings enveloped his reed-like legs, and he wore fashionable shoes with long, pointed toes. Before approaching the podium, surrounded by flags bearing the Parthagonian coat of arms, he spat on a comb and used it to slick his hair even further back.

"Long live the king!"

"Long live Parthagon!" the young people shouted back in unison.

"Welcome, graduates of the year 961 and loved ones!" Newdon screeched over the sniffles of the misty-eyed parents. "This moment of parting is both sad and happy for us all..."

"I can't believe it," whispered Richard to Niels. "Only five minutes from now, he will be one of us. Who would have thought?"

"Yes, who would have thought." His friend winked back, wrapping his arm around his tearful sister. "To be honest, I only came to feast my eyes on this year's practical exam work. And it is a sight for sore eyes. You wouldn't happen to have any pals graduating from the school next year?"

"Javer sees this kind of thing morning, noon, and night—not just on graduation day."

"Every day? Makes a fellow want to tell this king of ours to go to hell."

"I'll go rogue if you will."

“Sure thing, just make sure you don’t bring your dearest Lillian along!”

“I always knew he could do it,” said Marguerite and blew her nose into her handkerchief, paying no attention to Richard’s barely contained giggles. “He’s lived through so much! My poor boy!”

“He’s going to show them what for at the Academy too!” Niels remarked proudly.

When Newdon’s speech concluded, students tossed their academic caps in the air with much joyful whooping and hollering, and then the celebratory feast commenced on the square. Marie and Alain, after much pestering, got Thomas to overcome his shyness and join them in the dance circle. He didn’t see the point of such odd rituals and therefore felt uncomfortable performing such strange bodily motions. He always felt everyone must be looking at him and quietly laughing at his awkward movements.

“Come on, come on!” Marie kept tugging at his arm.

“What are you doing?” Thomas said. “Cut it out!”

“Let’s go again!”

“That’s enough already!”

“No, it’s not enough!” Marie joyfully squealed, and then wrapped her arms around his neck and planted a brisk kiss on his lips. Having finally executed a maneuver two years in the planning, she burst out laughing and ran off to dance with the other girls.

“Well, she finally got up the courage.” Alain laughed looking at the blushing Thomas, who was less than overjoyed at this unexpected turn of events. He realized Marie had a different outlook on what he took to be just a friendship. He’d always seen her antics as a fun game, but now he realized everything

was becoming serious and grown up, and that actions might have consequences he'd never considered before.

As twilight fell, the crickets commenced their chirping and the campus's neat lanes emptied. The festivities had died down and the graduates slowly began to disperse to their homes. Thomas, as he'd become accustomed to doing the last few years, walked Marie home. She had calmed down from her earlier excitement, and now tension existed between them. At least that was Thomas's impression, and he couldn't find any suitable topic of conversation to break the awkward silence. The young man felt uncomfortable in these strange new circumstances. The girl, on the other hand, holding onto her squire's muscular arm, seemed to be sunk in an almost religious reverie.

"Off to the Academy tomorrow?" she finally asked, looking into his puzzled eyes with great tenderness. They came to a halt before the Lurie family home.

"Yes. I've been waiting for this my whole life."

"Me too."

"Really?" Thomas said with some surprise.

"But of course. Good luck, my knight! And thanks for the kisses," she quickly pressed her burning lips to his, and then briskly disappeared inside.

Befuddled, Thomas could not quite see what he'd been thanked for. After all, he wasn't the one trying to steal kisses. And he didn't know what he was supposed to do now! However, these confused thoughts soon faded as he considered his long-awaited admission to the Knights' Academy. Soon he'd finally be able to avenge his family! The older Thomas became, the more confident he felt that his poor sister Irèn had survived and sooner or later he'd get to come to her rescue.

His longtime dream finally about to come true, Thomas tossed and turned all night in nervous anticipation and therefore couldn't get into the Phase state necessary to maintaining his knightly mutation. And although one lost night wouldn't do any real damage, he was still very worried. When the sun's first rays pierced the shroud of night, Thomas was already standing before the austere gray structure crowned with two prison towers. Only the rare narrow window and three human-sized steel shields engraved with the rings of Parthagon disturbed its minimalist facade. The building stood on the city's northern periphery and adjoined the outer Wall. It was empty; after all, Parthagon's happy inhabitants were still fast asleep at this early hour, protecting their eyes against the light with thick curtains or special masks. Having circled the revered Academy and its outbuildings a few times, and filled his nostrils with its stables' sharp smells, Thomas sat in front of its tall doorway. Letting his mind wander, he slipped into a whirling kaleidoscope of vivid dreams.

Waking, he found himself in a buzzing crowd full of familiar faces: last night's graduates were nervously waiting for the admissions committee, who would decide their fate, to arrive. Every now and again, young men—Academy cadets—went in and out of the building. These lucky few were already allowed to wear the coveted blue broad-shouldered jackets and daggers on their belts. By their size alone one could tell which of the five years of study they were in. Spotting freshmen was even easier. Despite their relatively modest proportions, they looked at the young hopefuls with smug, condescending smirks. Everyone found this extremely irritating, especially members of the graduating class who didn't differ in physical appearance from

the active knights and who would soon be assigned to their garrison to commence their service.

Suddenly the crowd came alive and, appearing out of the blue, Alain yelled in Thomas's ear, "they're coming! And you almost slept through it!"

"Yeah, you wish," Thomas grumbled, getting up and smoothing his wrinkled garb. "We'll sleep in Arogdor."

"I'd rather sleep at my mom's house, if it's all the same to you."

The honorable committee quickly moved toward the entrance and past the silent graduates who'd parted to create a narrow corridor. The committee consisted of the dreary old rector and a couple of massive centurions, who had bronze tokens on their chests and whose heads floated well above the crowd.

Passing by the sleepy Thomas, who was still barely aware of what was happening, Newdon huffed with an irritated grimace and halted before him. The officer knights at his sides also stopped, as did the rest of the crowd, frozen in torturous anticipation. The former peasant could sense something was awry. His vision darkened and white lights began to dance before his eyes. The rector was examining him with contempt and glee, his tiny eyes blinking under his disproportionately huge forehead. If the silence were to go on a moment longer, Thomas felt his heart would stop.

"What are you doing here?" screeched the familiar voice.

"I don't understand."

"I'll ask you again then: what are you doing here?"

"I'm enrolling. The Knights' Academy..."

"Impossible." Newdon cut him off, eliciting a gasp from the crowd. Thomas rocked back in shock. "You're an incomer. You

are forbidden from applying by the Academy's charter and by Parthagon's general security regulations."

The usually cool and collected villager didn't even notice his nervousness had turned into indignation. "You don't say!"

"Didn't you know?"

"I have the required grades!"

"There are laws, re-gu-la-tions, my friend. Go home and stop mutating. That's for real kni..."

Newdon's mouth was shut by the villager's stone fist, which made a terrific crunch as it connected with its target. Like a feather, the rector went flying into the arms of his former students, where he girlishly gasped and lost consciousness—or pretended to at least. The two centurions pounced on the incensed Thomas to prevent him from beating the rector to a pulp. Despite his fierce resistance, they easily knocked him onto the hot pavement, pressing a sword against his neck. Alain was about to rush in to help his friend, but another blade stopped him, suddenly frozen before his befuddled face.

* * *

After two weeks languishing in the cold and damp prison tower attached to the Knights' Academy, Thomas finally emerged to breathe the free air of a warm summer day. The scandalous news of him assaulting the rector created a stir in the capital, but the citizens almost unanimously accepted the punishment as just. They did feel sorry for the young man whose dreams of knighthood had been extinguished, and so no one looked him in the eye as, withered and downtrodden, Thomas slouched his way home.

His whole life in the city he'd been anticipating the moment he would enter the Academy, and now all his plans lay in ruins, because he'd lost in the unfair fight with bureaucracy. He couldn't believe Niels and his many buddies, hadn't known incomers couldn't become knights. But if they'd known, why had they kept it to themselves? How could they let him end up in this shameful predicament? What had he done to deserve such humiliation?

When he finally reached the Dohr family home Marguerite met and warmly embraced him. She'd spent two weeks worrying over her poor nephew. She made Thomas take a shower, even though he'd resisted—and this despite the cloud of pungent stench surrounding him. Once showered, he was fed some piping hot fish pie and sent to sleep in a freshly made bed in his room. Thomas slept the sleep of the dead through to late evening. When he finally woke in the dark, he used a piece of flint to light a candle and began gathering, into a travel satchel, all his most indispensable possessions: his favorite books, some knight's gear, other trinkets, a pouch full of coins he'd saved throughout his childhood in order to one day buy an expensive sword.

The exhausted Niels Dohr returned from his work beyond the Wall and, without even removing his filthy armor, he went up to see his adoptive son. As he came in, the knight tried to embrace Thomas, but Thomas pushed him away, nearly knocking him off his feet.

“I see,” Niels said slowly. “You think I knew. Is that it?”

The young man kept sullenly packing his satchel.

“And where is it you're going exactly?”

“Nowhere.”

“You think I knew and kept my mouth shut while you got your hopes up?”

“You’re not exactly the lowliest person in the realm, Niels.”

“I am a battle commander!” the knight barked. “I don’t give a rat’s ass about those paper-pushing weasels! I barely bump into them in my line of work. Their asses are busy warming up benches at the Academy while my men die every day over the other side of the Wall. Do you understand?”

“And you couldn’t do anything about it?”

“Thomas, I haven’t had a moment’s rest since you were locked up. I knocked on the door of every authority. I studied all our laws to the letter. I went to see the chancellor and even wrote to the king. But I couldn’t find a way. What’s more, if you continue maintaining your knightly mutation, they will take harsh measures. Perhaps against me as well. But we’ll figure something out. We’ll find something useful for you to do. Just don’t get so worked up.”

“Something useful?” Thomas chuckled bitterly.

“Of course! You’ve been through worse. So what have you got in mind?”

“I’m leaving. Going somewhere where I can chop up mutants and get as strong as I want.”

“Stop this nonsense, Thomas. You don’t know what you’re talking about. And don’t forget your duties as a citizen of Parthagon still hold beyond the Wall.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

Frantic, Niels tried to stop Thomas from storming out, but Thomas once again pushed him away. The tribune could only spit out a futile curse and kick the bookcase, causing it to topple and litter the floor with old books.

Clattering down the stairs, the failed knight bumped into Marguerite, who'd run out of the kitchen to see what had caused this noise. "What's going on? Where are you going, Thomas?"

"Thank you, Marguerite, for everything you've done for me." He hugged the red-headed woman and kissed her on her hot forehead.

"What is the meaning of this?" she whimpered, raising her hand to her mouth. She helplessly glanced at her brother coming down the stairs.

Thomas addressed him. "Thank you for saving my life, Niels Dohr. I will always be in your debt. Ask anything you want of me, but for now, I have to go."

"I don't want anything, you knucklehead! Don't go!"

"That can't be helped, I'm afraid. Goodbye!" Thomas walked through the door, though Marguerite was trying to stop him.

"Wait! How will you make it without us?"

Thomas turned away from the sobbing woman, hitched the heavy satchel onto his shoulder, and headed toward the North Gate—the one he'd entered through thirteen years before, having barely survived one of the most vicious Arogdorian attacks in history. The guard asked his reason for such a late-hour departure, and Thomas fished out his precious Parthagonian citizenship papers, the ones it had taken Niels such time and effort to obtain, and with a few brusque motions tore them into tiny pieces, which floated slowly to the ground. The guard signaled to his fellow knights and the huge gate creaked open in the silence of the sleeping metropolis.

"Thomas!"

Turning, he saw Marie running toward him and reluctantly stopped.

“Where are you going?” the girl mumbled through her tears, throwing herself at her beloved’s chest and kissing his indifferent face with her salty lips.

“I’m going home.”

“What will you do there?”

“I’m on my own now. There’s nothing here for me anymore. Goodbye!”

“And me? What about me, Thomas?” Marie couldn’t believe her ears.

“We’ll see each other again someday. Give my regards to Alain,” Thomas replied, swallowing a bitter lump in his throat. He tore himself free of Marie’s embrace and, with confidence in his stride, left the capital, leaving the crestfallen girl, as well as all his shattered dreams, behind him on the other side of the presently shutting gate.

Chapter 3. The Black Knight's Reward



Stopping occasionally along the winding road to ponder his fate or enjoy a nap, Thomas took more than a whole day and night to reach Sallep, the town he'd frequented so regularly in his childhood. The road took him through forests and over hills dotted with fruit orchards, pastures, and green fields where this year's harvest was already ripening. The locals he occasionally encountered greeted him with surprised looks, eyeing the peculiar foreigner from head to toe. The men and women couldn't figure out who he was nor what he was doing there, but all would bow and remove their wide-brimmed black hats or

white-linen bonnets as he passed. Even though Thomas no longer looked like an ordinary human, he wasn't yet massive enough to pass for a knight. Looking at his city clothes, they had no trouble guessing where he'd come from, but trying to deduce how he'd ended up in these parts was a different matter. The coddled city dwellers rarely left Parthagon of their own free will, let alone by themselves and at such a young age.

In the years since the mutants had razed Sallep to the ground, the town had been almost entirely restored, resuming its role as the busy, beating heart of the surrounding abundant province. Finding himself on its newly paved streets lined with neat wooden houses, Thomas went first to the market where his father had bartered his weekly catch in order to feed his family. As soon as he saw the market stalls, he could hear the bustling crowd and smell the familiar bouquet of fragrant spices, freshly baked bread, medicinal herbs, and raw fish, countless vegetables, and turkeys roasting on the spit. Four carts of the Royal Tribute Collection Authority flanked the market's entrance. The tall, handsome young men manning these carts were loading them with the town's tributes—goods, coins, and other resources the capital needed—under the local young ladies' watchful eyes. Having walked along the narrow market lanes and watched the people of his native province go about their business, Thomas bought a hefty chunk of dried meat and a couple of warm flatbreads, and then he headed north toward his home village.

The closer he got to his birthplace, the more he felt his heart's scars contract with pain. He still remembered the road's every twist and turn and easily identified the spot where, running after his father, he'd fallen headfirst into a puddle. A little further on—in a pine forest flooded with the tree bark's

powerfully perfumed oozing yellow sap—was where, that same day, the worried neighbor woman had tried to stop him. And then Thomas came out into the clearing and smelled that intimately familiar odor of the village yards tinged with the faint stench of manure. He'd hoped to see at least a few surviving farms, but, to his surprise, discovered an entire resurgent village. Walking amid the sturdy houses and marveling at the sight of it all, he stopped before that fateful brick house of Max Lank the blacksmith, which was unchanged, a mighty walnut tree blossoming at its threshold. Two stocky boys—maybe three years old—and a slightly older-looking, fair-haired girl peeked out at him from behind one corner of the house, then the other. Barefoot and shaggy-haired, dressed in baggy tunics, they reminded Thomas of himself and his sister when they used to spy on strangers in just the same manner.

From the workshop beside the house came the sonorous din of someone landing rhythmical blows upon the anvil, and brown smoke billowed from the chimney. After hesitating, Thomas decided to enter the brick house, but a miniature elderly woman with a small round face and light blue eyes met him at the door. Her features kindled a spark of recognition, and he remembered it was the blacksmith's wife.

"Max, come quick!" she called, wiping her hands on her yellow apron and eyeing with suspicion the handsome young man dressed in city garb.

The racket coming from the workshop stopped and an irritated voice roared, "What is it now?"

"Come here and see for yourself!"

"What's she up to this time..." A sweaty elderly man wearing trousers covered in burn marks, great knee-high boots, and a sullied apron over his naked torso came into the yard. Despite

his age and his body's abundant gray hair, he was surprisingly well built, colossally tall, and boasting a sizable beard. Still holding his hammer, the blacksmith approached Thomas with caution, drilling him with the squint he'd been scrutinizing the world over with since he was a child.

Thomas gave in. "Don't you recognize me?"

"Why should I?"

"It's me, Thomas Yourg."

The woman quietly gasped, took a slow step back, and covered her mouth with her hands. The confused blacksmith stared at the young man even more intently, trying to identify familiar traits in his face.

"Well, I'll be!" the mighty villager said and grasped Thomas into his iron-like embrace, his tearful wife quickly following suit.

"Where have you been? Where is your sister?"

"Who's Thomas Yoog?" a child's voice sounded from the bushes.

"Someone who disappeared many years ago when the mutants attacked. Quick, run and tell the neighbors. Go!" the woman commanded, and the girl took off, glancing curiously at the strange-looking compatriot as she hurried her brothers along with shoves and kicks.

Toward evening, the villagers gathered in the blacksmith's yard, where a table was laden with enough food to satisfy any appetite. For the first time, the young city dweller was compelled despite his protests to taste sweet wine, a drink forbidden in Parthagon. Whatever he said or did, the villagers couldn't get enough of him, circling him in a constantly gabbling, merry ring—like bees around a jug of syrup. His appearance amazed them, as did his wondrous stories about life

in the capital. The kids, who looked on while staying close to the adults, found these especially interesting. The bravest among them tried to touch the guest without being noticed, which Thomas readily allowed them to do.

In his tipsy state, Thomas recognized only a quarter of his native village's inhabitants. As it turned out, few had survived that great calamity, but those who did all came back and did their best to restore the village to its peaceful way of life. Among them were Max and his wife, who, as cruel fate would have it, had lost five children in the massacre. None of the survivors had had news of Irèn and could only guess at what destiny befell her at the mutants' hands. Thomas's parents, together with the other victims of the Arogdorian raid, had been buried in the old cemetery on the village's eastern outskirts. Thomas began visiting their graves almost daily. He had temporarily taken up lodgings at the blacksmith's house.

The failed knight was still in a state of dreadful befuddlement. From his first days in Parthagon he'd had one clear purpose: to become a knight and then take his revenge on Arogdor, its leader Werner Eisenberg, General Javer, and his entire band of mutants. Now all the plans had been stamped into dust and he had to think of a fresh way to achieve his aims. Finding himself in an aimless haze, Thomas decided to keep maintaining and elaborating his knightly mutation, hoping it would come in handy in the future. And even though such tampering was illegal, he was convinced no one would ever find out this far from the capital. He felt he had no other choice, since he wouldn't turn his back on his mission as long as breath was left in his body. He was beginning to regret he'd made the irrevocable decision to leave the capital without thinking it through. After all, in his endless obstinacy, Niels really could've

found a solution sooner or later. But Thomas's current course of action, albeit criminal and dubious, would still advance him toward his ambition, which warmed him to think of.

The villagers, who were open and simple people, especially when considered in the light of Thomas's sophisticated upbringing, were receptive to his wishes. They gave him shelter, looked out for him, and took care of him, because they took pride in the young man he'd become. To allow him to earn his supper, which was sizeable given he'd set his heart on attaining knightly proportions, the blacksmith had hired him as an apprentice, with the promise that Thomas's growing muscles would not be idle. And though showing the pampered city boy the ropes took some time, his superhuman strength was well suited for the rough trade, and the blacksmith's business was soon roaring like never before.

* * *

One day, having worked up a sweat in the workshop, Thomas went outside to get some air. Leaning back on a haystack and closing his eyes, he thought over what the usually taciturn blacksmith had just told him about his family. Thomas had pressed him for details as a way to pass the time.

His past contained secrets he hadn't suspected. Whereas his father had come from a family of hunters and his ancestry had been well known in the area for generations, his mother's origins were shrouded in mystery. His father had brought her to the village after being absent a long time and had told everyone they'd met in one of the outer provinces to the southeast of Parthagon. Supposedly it had been love at first sight and the young woman immediately consented to leave with him. That

had been easy enough to believe, except the young lady had looked a little too attractive for a simple provincial girl and had worn strange clothes.

Thomas felt a wave of relaxation sweep over his exhausted body, and his thoughts began to transform into an endless series of images, the stuff of light dreams. He'd almost fallen asleep, when his consciousness suddenly switched back on, reminding him to use his skill of entering directly into the Phase, as he'd been trained to do at the school. He attempted several techniques without tensing his muscles, but couldn't break through the stability of space so he began to plunge once again into oblivion, falling into a shallow sleep.

After a couple of minutes spent drifting through some senseless dream plots, his consciousness switched on again. Thomas then began once more slowly alternating Phase entry techniques: visualizing hands, trying to feel and see them before his closed eyes; rotation, wherein he imagined his body spinning around its vertical axis; the phantom wiggling, which consisted of trying to move his palms up and down without using his muscles. He repeated this cycle over and over, until for a moment he blacked out and then immediately woke up.

Then Thomas perceived a feeling of rotation. This meant the physical space around him had been destabilized and he was in the Phase! His body quickly began to hum, a buzzing in his ears, and he used this momentum to simply try to get off the ground. At first the movement seemed heavy and stiff, but then he could rise to his feet, which ended the vibrations and sounds.

Thomas ran down the dirt road, rubbing his coarsened palms against each other and looking at their deep lines. His vision became so sharp he could see his hands' every tiny crevice as well as every leaf on the farthest treetop. The richness of colors

around him dazzled him. This meant that the Phase had deepened and stabilized. Now he could use it to achieve premeditated goals or simply explore. Even though Thomas was naturally tall and could sense his own bulk, and his Phase body had already become accustomed to its knightly frame, he still tried to feel even bigger and stronger. And after a short pause, his body started to grow rapidly. He could hear tearing as his torso expanded in width and length. Now he just had to maintain these proportions for as long as possible. This was the most challenging thing to achieve in the Phase, since the space around him was constantly trying to restore its stability and spit the practitioner back into ordinary reality.

Performing various dynamic actions best solved this problem. Usually Thomas would amuse himself by flying into the sky like a falcon or swimming underwater like a fish, but this time he decided to visit his sister, whom he now thought about every day. Flying, he saw a knight on a black horse riding out of the forest, but Thomas didn't deem this important. Closing his eyes, he focused his attention on Irèn, simultaneously trying to maintain his perception of his knightly frame. Rapid movement occurred, and he found himself in some tiny room, almost entirely bare except for a flimsy table and, in a corner, numerous pairs of women's shoes. A bed was in the room's center, occupying almost the entire space. On it, a beautiful girl with chestnut hair was dozing naked under a brown fur blanket.

Thomas sat down next to the girl, smiling and running his hand across her warm cheek, which made Irèn slowly open her big sleepy eyes. She yawned at length and then sat up. "Hello!"

He laughed. "You've become quite the sleepyhead."

"Hey, what are you doing in this shithole?" his sister asked, tugging her brother's arm forcefully.

“What the...Irèn?”

His vision and bodily perception started to dissolve into a gray veil. To combat this, Thomas began to gorge himself on sensory inputs in a frantic attempt to maintain the Phase. He was running his fingers over the smooth floorboards and feeling the bedsheets’ soft fabric, peering at his hands’ lines and the walls’ tiny bumps. Thus, he managed to quickly restore some stability to the rebelling space around him, but the surprises didn’t end there.

“Those are some impressive callouses you’ve got on your right hand,” Irèn said, this time in a strikingly familiar, masculine voice, tugging once more at his arm. “What have you been up to, you pervert?”

This time it all came crashing down. Space recovered its usual properties and Thomas found himself sitting on the grass next to the haystack. Before him was Alain Ospe, making quite the racket with his armor as he shifted in place, looking down at his older pal with a cunning grin. Since he’d only just begun working on his knightly mutation, even the smallest-sized cadet armor dangled off him and clanged about like the pots hanging on the woven fence behind him.

“What happened to not disturbing folks while they sleep?” Thomas grumbled, feeling simultaneously irritated and overjoyed. He leapt up to hug his friend.

“We ain’t in Parthagon, and you’re nothing but a country bumpkin,” Alain said with typical ease. “I had quite the time finding you in this shithole. You’ve been gone for far too long.”

“Watch your words. I was born here, you know.”

“Oh, well that explains why you’ve always been such a knucklehead!”

“Well, then, noble knight,” Thomas smirked at his guest, “what brings you to this shithole?”

“I’ve had an idea. And I can’t listen to Marie’s whining anymore!”

“An idea? Sounds fishy already.”

“Remember the tournament?”

“That’s it? That’s what you came here for?”

“You don’t get it! I’ve studied all the rules and consulted with Niels.”

“There’s a case of the blind leading the blind.”

“Stop interrupting!” Alain nudged his friend’s shoulder. “Here’s the thing. It’s an open tournament! Anyone can participate. Remember? Every year there’s plenty of country bumpkins like you getting knocked out in the first round.”

“So what you’re suggesting is I go up against the best knights in the realm and then spend the next year growing a new arm or leg inside the Phase? Thanks, but no thanks!”

“That’s not all. Do you know the prize for winning?”

“A hundred gold coins, as usual.”

“Or?”

“Or what?”

“Or a personal favor from the king.”

“I always thought that was just a rumor.”

“That’s why I’m here, stupid! Isn’t this the chance you’ve been looking for?”

Knitting his brow, Thomas stared into space. This adventurous plan seemed insane. How would he go about defeating the finest knights in the land, those who’d been honing their mastery of weapons for decades? What was the likelihood that Albert III would agree to a non-standard request, even if he, a recent schoolboy, did by some miracle manage to

win the tournament? On the other hand, what did Thomas have to lose for a chance to rejoin the company of legendary warriors and to pursue his life's main purpose?

"What did Niels have to say about all this?"

"That it wasn't a realistic plan. But if you decide to go for it, he'll support you and do everything in his power to help. It's up to you."

"I'll think about it."

"Think away," said the freshman cadet of the Knights' Academy, his armor jingling as he mounted his coal-black steed. "I see you're in bad shape without Marie. The sight of your palms alone is enough to bring a tear to my eye!"

"Alain, I've been working as an apprentice at a smithy," Thomas replied, embarrassed.

"Hey, you've got nothing to be ashamed of. My hands are also busy day and night."

"Stop it, I'm serious!"

"So am I! Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

"Just try it, you ironclad pip-squeak!"

"Good luck to you, blacksmith!"

"Why you little..."

Laughing, the black-haired citizen of Parthagon spurred his horse, which galloped back into the forest, and left behind him a cloud of dust and his solitary friend, sunk deep in thought.

* * *

Finally, after two sleepless nights of deliberating and fantasizing, he'd decided he didn't really have a choice. Thomas would try his luck by going along with Alain's crazy idea.

The Royal Knightly Tournament took place annually during the last weekend of October, to celebrate the end of the harvest. Then the capital's food stores would be brimming with goods from the provinces, which guaranteed Parthagon's self-sufficiency and meant its citizens would not go hungry, at least until the following fall. Since his first year in the capital, Thomas hadn't missed a tournament and was well acquainted with its simple rules. It wasn't just a parade of masculine bravery, but the most anticipated event in Celesia. Therefore the king spared no expenses to make it a memorable affair.

The celebrations of strength and valor began with a selection jury choosing the sixty-four best candidates to participate in the tournament. Those chosen then had to overcome two opponents in back-to-back crossbow duels in the first round. The second round consisted of defeating two more knights in mounted battles with spears. The remaining contestants would battle using swords in the semifinal and final duels. Of course, such risky battles often ended with participants severely mutilated, if not dead, but this did nothing to deter scores of brave warriors from entering the contest every year.

Although the tournament was advertised as open, residents of the volcano and its foothills were prohibited from entering. The victor was awarded 100 gold coins, which could provide for several years of very comfortable living. Because this award was so enticing, few remembered the other reward option: a personal favor granted by the king. In fact, throughout the centuries-long history of the festival, no one had ever claimed it. Unsurprisingly so, for the enormous wealth at stake could fulfill the most extravagant desires and still suffice for a year of revelry—before the next tournament came around.

A few days later, esteemed guests from the metropolis, in the persons of the honorable tribune Niels Dohr, the handsome Centurion Richard Fein, and the beautiful Marie Lurie in a flowing bright-green dress, visited the blacksmith's house. Having rendered the locals speechless with awe at their appearances, they took turns embracing Thomas, who still felt rather embarrassed about his petulant flight. Niels behaved as if there'd been no quarrel and nothing unusual had happened. He'd known the boy needed only a little time in order to re-evaluate he'd said and probably deeply regretted what he'd done. The knight held the reigns of a black-and-white stallion whose white socks, as well as tar-black mane and luxuriant black tail, attracted everyone's attention.

"Is that a new horse you've got there, Niels? He's a stunner!"

"No, my feeble-brained son. This one's for you."

"What?"

"What kind of a knight would you be without a horse?"

"This is incredible!"

Thomas nearly leapt in the air for joy. Once his emotions settled, he circled his new, huffing friend. The horse had a long white spot on the bridge of his nose and huge clever eyes under silky eyelashes.

"This is Vector. He's four years old."

"Good name."

"He was supposed to be your gift for getting into the Academy."

"Is that so?"

Thomas gave Niels a long, warm hug and then tried to straddle the horse, but Vector nervously neighed and stood on his hind legs, throwing his clumsy rider straight into a puddle—to much general merriment. The villagers and knights gathered

around the young man as he groaned in pain and showered him with advice about taming the animal, after which the eternally hungry warriors sat down to their long-awaited supper.

The blacksmith's wife served up a magnificent meal on the kitchen table. The festive tablecloth was laden with simple rural dishes, the main course being a freshly slaughtered lamb to satisfy the appetites of three gigantic knights, as well as the relatively puny blacksmith. Having feasted and each emptied a large mug of strong sweet wine, the slightly inebriated men began to discuss how they should proceed.

It was mid-July, which left Thomas three months to get ready. He had to gain as much height and weight as possible to get at least close to the optimal knightly stature of seven feet, three inches. The ethics committee forbade going beyond this threshold, as any further growth would make maneuvering difficult and would be hard to maintain. Many Arogdorians suffered this affliction.

To allow Thomas to train properly, Niels had brought with him several exercise spears, an old sword with a chipped blade, and a crossbow. He'd planned on purchasing special tournament armor and the required ammunition, but Max insisted it was his duty to forge them—with Thomas's help, of course. The competition played an important social role in Parthagon. The ladies prepared their best outfits for the event a year in advance in the hopes of dazzling the husbands of their more fortunate girlfriends and of drawing the most courageous warriors' attentions. The knights would not be outdone by the women as far as spectacle was concerned. They purchased expensive, custom-made armor, often sacrificing its practicality for the sake of flashiness.

To teach Thomas the finer points of crossbow marksmanship, they decided, on Max's advice, to call in a famous hunter, a distant relation of Thomas's, albeit one he'd never heard of before. Richard volunteered to train Thomas in horse riding and spear fighting, as he was among the best in these fields. Niels would take up sword fighting, having firsthand experience with its nuances. As a youth, the tribune had tried to win the tournament several times.

An enviable team of each discipline's best mentors would now test Thomas's resolve and motivation. The idea of entering the tournament no longer seemed completely crazy. Alain had most likely never suspected his idea might prove so viable.

Marie too refused to stay on the sidelines. To everyone's surprise, she volunteered to stay in the village for the training period's duration. After all, who would help with the household chores? And who would monitor the tight training schedule, making sure Thomas got enough sleep and his much-needed Phase practice? This line of reasoning made Niels burst out laughing, but it also proved difficult to argue against. Thomas began to suspect his romantic life was ever so slightly bending in one direction, and that soon he might be unable to turn back. However, he did nothing to resist this progress, because for the first time, seeing her in the company of ordinary village women, he could truly appreciate all the fine qualities and attributes of the angelically fair-skinned and devilishly shapely city girl.

Marie noticed Thomas acting awkward around her, sneaking shy glances at her décolletage, which plunged to depths forbidden in Parthagon. Feeling the power she exuded over the drooling men around her, she put on her most serious and disinterested expression. And with this move, which every

woman masters from birth, she finally knocked the young man off his feet.

Having eaten and drunk to their hearts' content, the guests decided to stay overnight at the blacksmith's house, which made their hosts unspeakably happy. By some curious coincidence, Marie was left without a room, and she was afraid to stay in any of the neighboring houses. What was there for Thomas to do but propose she stay with him in his modest room? Besides the straw mattress on the floor, the room had practically nothing in it except for books stacked in the corners and weaponry hanging on the walls. The only decoration was an old poster of an awkwardly painted knight thrusting his blade into a four-armed mutant.

"Don't you be making any moves on him now, you hear?" Niels warned with pretend gravity, as he went past their doorway holding a lit candle. "Under no circumstances!"

"Well, of course not! I would never." Marie blushed. She'd already changed into a light cloak, beneath which a white nightgown shone in the light.

"I mean it. I know all about your womanly tricks!"

"What are you babbling about?" Thomas tried to intervene.

"You'll see when you grow up. By the way, I advise you not to get too comfortable." Niels winked. "If you get my meaning. That's all. Lights out! Everyone in bed! That's an order! Pa-rum, pa-ra-ra-ra-rum..."

The singing tribune slammed the door shut, and his steps made the walls quake as he headed toward his bedroom. In the silence, the chirping of crickets and the prolonged hoot of an owl wafted in through the open window. A warm, caressing breeze blew in, pregnant with fragrant, rural aromas. The

apprehensive young people stood facing each other, not knowing what to do next.

Thomas was even more perplexed than Marie, realizing it was up to him to show initiative. Fortunately, nature stepped in, and some inner intuition guided him to gently take Marie's delicate hand and lead her to the window. Holding her close to him by her waist, he languidly whispered, "Thanks for coming. I'm really happy to see you."

"Did you miss me?" Marie issued a barely audible murmur, lowering her gaze and biting her succulent lip.

"Of course," Thomas replied somewhat dishonestly. But it was the right answer.

"I thought we'd never see each other again."

"How could you? I would've found a way, whatever it took," he said—a shameless but perfect reply.

Another awkward pause followed. Thomas felt this was maybe the moment to take the next step. No, there were no maybes about it: this was what was required, what was needed of him! Bending toward the girl, he moved his hand from her waist to her nape and, closing his eyes, raised her sweet face toward his own. He barely grazed her plump lips and felt her hands on his arms, which he flexed under his shirt.

* * *

The next three months flew by for Thomas as if they'd been three short weeks. His daily schedule was planned down to the minute and enforced by the unflinching Marie, who gave him no slack even when it came to innocent little digressions.

The distant relative who was to train him in the crossbow, with his stockiness and simple appearance, reminded Thomas of

his father. This hunter hailed from the area near the western bridge across the Snake River and he stayed at the blacksmith's house a few days a week. Richard and Niels were also frequent visitors, imparting their expertise in the areas of spear and sword combat. Along with all this training, the former city dweller needed to ride the headstrong Vector daily and also work from morning to night in the hot smithy, forging his spectacular armor and armaments. Thomas also had to enter the Phase several times a day in order to complete his mutation into a knight, which required him to have hearty snacks at every opportunity.

The young warrior was at a seemingly insurmountable disadvantage against the competitors he would face. But not once in the history of the Royal Knightly Tournament had any knight ever prepared himself, with help from masters in their fields, so thoroughly. And everyone participating in this difficult process, including Thomas, knew this well. The more time passed, the more they gained confidence in the villager's shot at winning. Thomas's motivation ran to the marrow of his bones, and he studied and trained so diligently he made visible progress from one day to the next, justifying their boldest hopes.

While the men were busy with this training, Marie, like most young women her age, inhabited several parallel universes simultaneously. She alternated between wanting to return to civilized society one moment and thinking she'd live the rest of her life in nature's bosom the next. But foremost planning out her relationship with Thomas absorbed her. In second—and very respectable—place came the lover himself. Then there were household matters to take care of and upkeep of the blacksmith's house. And she also had to look after her own self, upholding the Parthagonian identity with pride and sharing

beauty tips with the little peasant girls who worshipped her like a saint. Somehow she still managed to monitor Thomas's schedule with ease, as if she were born to organize.

The tournament itself was of little interest to Marie, although it certainly couldn't hurt for Thomas to win it. Why? Because she'd then be the fiancée of the royal tournament winner! She still hadn't decided which outfit she would wear to send the court harpies into fits of jealous rage, but there would be time to prepare her coup. After all, it wasn't an accident she'd managed both to graduate with honors from the school and to snag the one guy always the center of everyone's attention. All these concerns would flicker out briefly as late at night she found peace in her beloved's gentle embraces, only to reignite with a vengeance the next morning.

The day before his departure, Max and Thomas had finally finished the decorative elements of the tournament armor. Unlike the standard knight's cuirass and chainmail, the tournament armor covered the warrior's entire body with metal shield plates. In order to make it look spectacular and expensive, the smiths added filigreed edgings and mirror inserts made of reflective polished steel. To complete the effect, the blacksmith's wife sewed Thomas a bright yellow cape. The helmet, with a long vertical ridge at its top, had a forward-angled visor and matched the armor's stylings. Steel falcon wings decorated its sides. The sword had a ribbed hilt for a double-handed grip, an elongated guard, and a long blade with a wide reflective edge. The blade's iron base let it be relatively flexible and elastic when Thomas made brisk strokes, and the outer steel layer lent the cutting surface sufficient toughness.

The horse's armor was a separate issue. Since stallions already had a difficult time carrying the massively heavy

knights, tournaments were the only occasions they were covered in armor. In order to save time, Niels had purchased a used horse's cuirass, as well as the head and neck plates from one of his deceased soldiers' relatives. Once the old steel had been properly polished and adorned with filigreed edgings and mirror inserts, the well-fed Vector looked equal to his rider.

And so, early one Friday morning, dressed in his tournament attire, having tearfully bid farewell to the devastated Lanks and the other kind-natured villagers, the young couple rode out toward Parthagon. All the way into the forest's dark depths, barefoot village children, who'd fallen in love with their exotic metropolitan guests, accompanied them. If luck was on his side, Thomas would stay in the city and bring glory to the small village on Sallep's outskirts. Nevertheless, Max asked his wife not to touch anything in Thomas's room, which Marie had kept in immaculate order.

They reached the North Gate by evening. Although Thomas, looking at the Wall overgrown with moss and the towers rising behind it, felt the old sting of betrayal, he realized he'd missed the capital with all his heart. Once the privilege of living in this astonishing place had been his to give away; now he had to earn it back with his blood. Thomas had felt comfortable in his native village and perhaps could've lived out the rest of his days there in peace and comfort, but only Parthagon could give him the means to avenge his parents.

The guards immediately recognized Thomas, even though his suit of armor mostly hid him, and gave him a temporary permit to stay in the city as a tournament participant. Rumors about his secret training somewhere near Sallep had quickly spread among the soldiers, who sincerely worried about their legendary comrade's adopted son. No one believed the brave youngster

stood a chance, but the attempt to resolve his dilemma through risking his life aroused universal admiration.

Having accompanied Marie to her parents' home, where her mother and father were overjoyed to see their daughter after months of absence, Thomas rode on to Niels's. As he looked at the familiar streets, which evoked so many pleasant childhood memories, he could hardly believe what was happening. After removing the hefty horse cuirass and tying the tired Vector to an entrance post, where fresh hay was waiting for him, Thomas entered the Dohr house. For a moment he paused at the threshold and, closing his eyes, took a deep breath of the familiar smells of sweet pastry and fresh bread, which had been staples of his childhood and which he thought he'd never smell again. Then, having eaten a hearty supper with his happy foster father and tearfully elated aunt, the villager went up to his old room. There, surrounded by the aroma of old books, he fell asleep almost immediately.

Upon waking, Thomas and Niels had a quick breakfast and headed to the arena, where the jury would select the tournament participants. The sandy tournament grounds were oval and surrounded by tiered wooden stands, which could hold thousands of spectators. Along the empty stands' perimeter, huge blue banners bearing the rings of Parthagon were waving in the wind. On the south side, almost at ground level, was a platform with a tent, from which the royal party and their courtiers would observe the games. The platform was teeming with workers who were making sure that by Sunday morning the arena's most illustrious guests would be comfortable watching the fights scheduled to go on throughout the day.

As predicted, passing the selection round didn't prove difficult. First, the jury ordered the applicants to assemble and

put on their armor. Then they asked the applicants to take up wooden swords and, one after the other, walk into a circle of four officers, who attempted to knock them down with heavy clubs. Although overcoming these huge knights was impossible, this trial allowed the jury to assess each warrior's fighting spirit. Some were instantly frightened and went into a defensive stance, falling to the sand without having made a single attack strike. And some, like Thomas and a few dozen other brave souls, rushed into battle, cleverly dodged the clubs, and managed to get in a couple of hits before being toppled by crushing blows.

In the end, the jury selected sixty-four of the most daring warriors, as well as two spare ones in case someone lost their nerve at the last moment. As always, almost all of the participants were either acting knights or senior cadets at the Academy. Most of the outside contenders were unsurprisingly rejected, with the exception of Thomas, an agile fellow clad in simple chain mail, and a proud-looking, brown-haired man with an aquiline nose. He sported unusually flashy black armor with fine decorative elements and leather inserts, topped off with a cape of flowing black silk. His ferocious, angular helmet, adorned with spikes and a narrow-slitted visor, gave his future rivals a flash of fear. And though the young man introduced himself as the son of a well-known merchant from the southern city of New Albert, they unanimously dubbed him the Black Knight.

That night, over dinner, Niels gave Thomas last-minute instructions. "Whatever happens, just do your best. Don't think about the rest."

"Easier said than done." Thomas frowned, chewing on his umpteenth meatball.

“You know, I see now I always lost because I couldn’t help overthinking things.”

“How’s that?”

“I was always thinking about what would happen if I won, rather than focusing on fighting. I fantasized about the wealth, fame, and women I’d get. Instead I should’ve kept my eyes on my opponents who used my sloppiness against me.”

“Women? Really?”

“And to think that I was the best prepared.”

“What a shame.”

“A shame indeed. So just switch off your brain and concentrate on the fight. You’ve been well trained for every situation. Let your instincts guide you.”

“What else?”

“You know all there is to know. There’s nothing unrealistic about your ambition: a friend of mine once nabbed the hundred gold ones his very first try.”

Yet the motivation driving Thomas was far more serious than that which had driven young Niels, and the villager once again spent the night before an important event tossing and turning.

* * *

The following morning, having gotten no decent sleep, Thomas polished his flashy armor, strapped the heavy cuirass onto Vector and, accompanied by the Dohrs, left for the arena. There, in the musty and dark room under the spectator seats, the contenders were already warming up. The noise of scraping and clanking metal was unremitting, with occasional sighs and cries punctuating the monotonous din. Already they could hear outside the noise of the crowd.

Mentally preparing for the first round, Thomas was sitting on the long bench with his falcon-winged helmet on when the Black Knight plonked down beside him. Having lost the habit of living in luxury the past few months, the villager looked the Black Knight over and admired the quality of the armor embossed with finely detailed ornament:

“Expensive, was it?”

“Depends for whom,” the stranger huffed and turned away, lowering the visor of his terrifying helmet.

“So there is life beyond the Wall after all.”

Glorious fanfare sounded outside, announcing the king’s arrival. The head referee, starting the long-awaited event, the pinnacle of entertainment in the prim and proper capital, by shouting, “Long live the king!”

“Long live Parthagon!” The arena stands shook.

After the distinguished guests took their seats in the tent, the announcer began calling out the warriors in pairs. Grabbing their crossbows with deliberate arrogance—not wanting to show any weakness—the two contestants would then bravely enter the arena to the beat of the drums. A few minutes later, only one—very pleased, as a rule—would return to the thunder of applause. Thomas was in the twenty-seventh pair, which meant he had to wait a while. This led to random thoughts, treacherous nerves, and enveloping fatigue, as if his young body were trying to protect itself from imminent danger by lulling his restless mind.

Suddenly, through the pleasant haze, the peasant heard his name being called and he jumped to his feet, looking around with a puzzled and slightly dopey expression. Grabbing a crossbow in haste, he was almost deafened by the drums at the anteroom’s exit as he ran into the sunlit arena.

“Thomas Yourg, Sallep region,” the referee, clad in bright red stockings and a wide-brimmed feathered hat, announced ceremonially to the spectators’ applause. “Our youngest contestant, eighteen years of age.”

Just as they’d hoped: the sun reflecting off his armor’s polished inserts and sword, as well as his bright-yellow cape dragging across the sand, elicited the crowd’s approving cheers. The female contingent paid especially close attention to the tournament’s theatrical element. They preferred to close their eyes or turn away during the battles, considering them senseless entertainment for silly men.

By the time his tired eyes got used to the bright light, Thomas found himself in the oval stadium’s center, with thousands of jubilant Parthagonian citizens watching him. Somewhere in the raging crowd, he could hear his school friends’ encouraging whooping, and he managed to make out the Dohrs, the Feins, the rather bulky-looking Alain, and the tense-looking Marie. Her blue silk dress clung to her curvaceous figure in a most fortuitous manner and shimmered with a white gleam in the sun. As usual, the stands were full of other reverent ladies also dressed to the nines. They saw the tournament as an opportunity to surprise their suitors, upset their former husbands, and try to provoke their ruthless rivals’ envy.

Thomas suddenly realized Albert III and his regular retinue were missing from the spectator crowd. However, upon hearing a disapproving whistle, he realized he’d been standing with his back to the kingdom’s most influential and respected people. Turning sharply, he saw a podium with a cone-shaped blue tent in which a group of expensively dressed people crowded together. They were talking to each other animatedly,

occasionally casting disinterested glances at the tournament field. In the tent's middle, near the platform's edge, two wide armchairs towered. The proud king and the refined princess, under reinforced guard, sat on them.

Tall and thin, wearing a light white dress, the thirteen-year-old Elizabeth looked slightly older than her age. Her long blond curls, uncovered by hat or head ornament, fluttered in the gusty wind. A modest pearl necklace adorned her exposed tender neck. Her omnipotent father, who looked about forty, was dressed in a brown coat and matching tight stockings. He wore black shoes with an extended toe, and a gold-plated dagger hung from his wide leather belt. Albert was tall and bearded, with brown hair and a slight paunch, which gave him solidity. Even from a distance Thomas could make out his good-natured gray eyes and his radiant smile.

Studying the other people in the tent, the villager was amazed many of the women were already familiar to him. Thomas, still in a bit of stupor, was pondering whether Niels could be the key to this riddle when he came to his senses: somewhere nearby an opponent was waiting for him! Indeed, a huge warrior in sparkling armor had been eyeing him from the side this whole time, savoring the easy victory ahead.

Like all the tournament rounds, the crossbow duel was a dangerous affair. The contestants' bellies were hung with red targets made of rotting wood before they were led to opposite sides of the field and given blunted arrows. The task was to hit the opponent's target three times. Competitors were prohibited from moving or turning when shot at—after all, the tournament's purpose was to test for speed, accuracy, and courage, qualities essential to any knight in real combat.

A whistling arrow struck the target on Thomas's stomach with a blunt thud, causing a cheerful cry to erupt from the stands. This finally sobered the villager up. He raised his crossbow only to discover that in his hurry he'd grabbed someone else's weapon by mistake! And though he missed his first shot, almost breaking his opponent's helmet visor, he fired all his next shots at the target's center, a second before he received his opponent's last arrow. Tedious hours of training with the hunter had prepared him for this. And it had not been for nothing that archery had been his favorite childhood pastime. To the crowd's loud cheers, the red-stockinged referee declared Thomas Young the duel's winner and sent him back under the stands. The beaten rival, heavily sighing and throwing the target off his chest in frustration, slouched over to his fans.

In his second duel, armed with his own crossbow this time, the villager won easily. The battle lasted less than a minute, thus concluding the first round. After a long break, during which the distinguished guests had a chance to have a hearty dinner and a bit of rest, the tournament continued with the long-awaited spear battles. Thomas and his Vector were matched up against a stylish looking fellow sporting armor draped in blue cloth, and a matching blue cape with the Parthagonian coat of arms embroidered across its surface. His saddle was strapped to a nervous and not-too-bright-looking bay horse in excessively heavy armor. The fighter had to constantly restrain the bay in order to stay on his side of the field.

The referee gave the command, and the warriors charged toward each other at great speed, their blunted spears pointing forward. As they met, the villager's spear broke with a loud crack against the fashionable cuirass, and to the audience's

collective gasp, the elegant fellow tumbled from his saddle onto the sand. Thanks to Richard's training, Thomas soon easily overcame the next rider as well. Thus, already having four victories under his belt, he went straight into the final round: the sword duels.

Waiting to start his fight against the mountain-like warrior—the reigning champion—who was shooting him menacing glances from beneath his visor, Thomas was surprised to discover the Black Knight had also made it through the first two rounds. This meant they could meet in the final if both overcame their rivals. The situation was unusual, and grounds for a possible scandal in the royal tent. It was likely the first time, as far as anyone could remember, outsiders had made it into the third round—a considerable blow to the Academy's reputation and to Parthagon as a whole.

When he finally found himself before a raving crowd, faced with his formidable opponent, Thomas didn't feel nervous. Niels had taught him all the secrets of tournament sword fighting; thus he knew to see the fully armored knight's huge size and frenzied rage for what they were—a gift. Although the champion was doubtlessly stronger and probably had a better command of the blade, the villager had only to endure the first few minutes of battle. His strategy consisted of deftly dodging blow after blow and making his rival chase him by continuously moving through the sand throughout the entire battlefield.

As expected, the massive knight quickly tired after a few furious attacks and then began to drag his sword in sheer exhaustion, becoming easy prey for his young and swift opponent. To the crowd's uproarious laughter, Thomas delivered a final crushing blow to the barely upright champion's helmet. And it dawned on him he was only one step away from the

coveted goal. He grew even more excited when, returning to the break room, he bumped into the Black Knight, who was unperturbedly putting on his angular helmet in preparation for his own semifinal battle. The knight was a picture of concentration, showing not an ounce of emotion—as if he were not even human.

Trying to catch his breath and stop himself from shaking, Thomas did his best to maintain his focus. But he couldn't let go of the thought that in a few minutes he could ask the king to be admitted to the Academy, his lifelong dream. What would the king say in response? Would he welcome the city's adopted son back into the fold?

But before he could even take off his helmet, he was called back into the arena. Somehow, the Black Knight had already punctured his powerful opponent's neck. The defeated man was receiving emergency care right there on the sandy tournament grounds. A disgruntled rumble rolled through the stands, and in the royal tent the usually calm Albert was in a fit of rage, showering his courtiers—who, for once, were lost for words—with choice epithets. There were no acting knights in the Royal Knightly Tournament's final battle! For the first time the title and the main prize would leave the hitherto-undefeated Parthagon.

While the doctors tried to help the gravely injured warrior, Thomas approached the stands. Marie rushed to him, throwing her arms around his neck, looking truly magnificent in her blue silk dress.

“You're not hurt?” Her big green eyes looked him over with concern. “I believe in you!”

“Keep your mind on the battle! Get out of here!” roared Niels, pushing the overwhelmed Thomas back toward the arena’s center.

“I’m trying...”

“Just do what you came here to do. Go!”

Meanwhile, the poor, bloodied wretch had been taken away, and the agitated referee, looking at the royal tent with caution, announced the final battle, inviting the opponents to take their places. As the trumpets sounded, Thomas glanced at the frenzied king, who was shaking his plump fists, and immediately received a sliding blow to his visor. Barely dodging the next attack, he tried to apply the same tactic of exhausting his rival. But this was a mistake.

The last three months, Thomas had intensively trained for battles with enormous knights and was therefore intimately familiar with their habits and weaknesses. Now, though, he was confronted with a much lighter and more resilient opponent than any Academy knight. The black armor and cape continued to flash before his visor. Veering to the left, then to the right, the merchant’s son delivered endless skillfully aimed strikes, forcing Thomas to keep moving around the sandy battleground.

A growing premonition of impending defeat aggravated these problems—no other thoughts were left in Thomas’s exhausted mind. Niels had pounded it into him that giving even the slightest bit of slack meant instant defeat, but this was of no avail to Thomas now. Instead of desperately fighting and making use of his size and strength, the villager was lost in the clouds, thinking and worrying too much. This while his cold-blooded and purposeful rival was attacking ever more accurately.

Depleted, waving his sword at random now with his last remaining strength and seeing practically nothing before his clouded eyes, Thomas felt unbearable pain shoot through the right side of his waist. His eyes glazed over, time stopped, and he sagged to the ground. The last thing he heard was a high-pitched ringing in his ears and then darkness was swallowing him whole.

A few moments passed, and then his head burst open again with the roar from the stands, along with Marie's desperate cries somewhere in the distance. Falling even lower on his knees, the devastated Thomas hazily saw his loved ones trying to break through to him, but numerous arena guards restrained them. Before him the Black Knight was indifferently wiping his sword with a bloodied handkerchief.

Life for Thomas emptied of meaning: he had lost the tournament; all his foolish dreams had once again been burned to the ground; all his efforts had been in vain. He wouldn't return to Parthagon; he wouldn't enter the Academy; Irèn wouldn't be saved; and no one would exact revenge upon the mutants.

His weapon wiped clean, the Black Knight returned the handkerchief to the pocket under his breast-plate, where, for a moment, Thomas saw something gleam. Something like a blade! This distracted Thomas from his dreary thoughts, since the referees kept a watchful eye on the armaments, and no outside weapons were allowed inside the arena. The villager realized no one could see this cunningly concealed dagger.

The doctors were still concentrating on the victorious stranger's previous victim, who was leaving the world with hoarse and convulsive moans. So Thomas was left to bleed out as the fumbled reward ceremony commenced before him.

However, the young man had stopped feeling the pain, suspecting something shady was afoot. He kept his eye on the stranger in black armor at all times.

Meanwhile, the referees had disarmed the victor of his sword and roughly dragged him toward the tent. Casually, as if he didn't know any better, Thomas too rose up and took a few steps toward the podium. Then he dropped back to his knees and resumed groaning as soon as the guards cast irritated looks in his direction.

"Your Highness." The Black Knight made a deep bow, removing the spiked helmet covering his jet-black hair and determined face with its proud aquiline nose.

"This is outrageous!" cried Albert. "Who are you, damn it?"

"The son of a simple merchant."

"What son? What merchant? You've bested my most skilled knights! That's unheard of! Take your money and go back to whatever hell you came from!"

"But I wish to collect the other reward."

The royal tent issued a collective gasp, and the referee dramatically announced to the hushed spectators, "The winner has refused the gold!"

"Nonsense!" barked Albert, surprised. "What does he want instead then?"

"To kiss your breathtaking daughter's hand," the stranger announced, looking into the king's frightened eyes. The entire arena, with its thousands of spectators, grew silent. Only the fragile blue-eyed and pale-skinned Elizabeth—the brightest and most noticeable person in the whole senseless mess—didn't even blink. She looked on indifferently as if the unfolding events had nothing to do with her, her father, or anyone else in this perishable world.

Initially, Thomas was certain the Black Knight must be plotting an attempt on the life of the beloved king. Who else could the hidden dagger be meant for? Yet he'd had it all wrong! What would the knight want with this insignificant girl? Or perhaps Thomas was suffering from exhaustion-induced delirium, and nothing bad was about to happen.

Taking advantage of everyone's attention being elsewhere, the villager started to slowly crawl closer to the podium, feeling the rush of blood bring heat to his face.

"Is that it?" quietly uttered the sweating Albert.

"Yes."

"One kiss? No joke?"

"One innocent kiss on the hand, and then I will leave Parthagon immediately."

Albert scratched his head. He looked uncertainly at his daughter, and then he looked over the new champion in his expensive, high-quality, black armor. The stranger was staring intently and coolly at the imperturbable princess.

"Well...I suppose there's no reason I shouldn't grant your request. Elizabeth?" Albert turned toward his daughter, as if things were now out of his control.

After a pause, the princess slowly extended her thin wrist toward the bold stranger. He took a step closer, took the hand into his own tanned, long fingers, and bent down for the kiss. As if for convenience, he held his armor's chest plate—right where Thomas had earlier noticed the flash of metal.

Feeling it was now or never, Thomas, disregarding the monstrous pain in his side, made two quick leaps and rushed toward the stranger. The knight, in turn, sharply pulled the screaming princess closer to him and, already armed with the dagger, threatened to inflict a fatal blow to her neck. However,

the villager's heavy body knocked down the knight with a deafening clang of armor, and the blade only brushed against Elizabeth's alabaster shoulder. The royal guards finally woke up, and as the crowds roared, their swords were soon flashing as they plunged between the immobilized criminal's black armor plates. His protests and curses quickly turned into gurgles as he drowned in his own blood.

"An agent of Arogdor!" cries sounded from all around.

"Get him!"

"Don't let him leave here alive!"

In the tent, panic ensued, but Albert, scarlet with fury, quickly took control of the situation. He ordered the blood-spattered Elizabeth to be taken away immediately and then demanded everyone be silent. The yelling and cries from the stands also subsided as the spectators tried to overhear what was happening on the podium.

Two knights picked up Thomas, limp, by the arms and stood him up on his wobbly legs. For the first time, he beheld the king up close, while the other guards carried off the frightened girl.

"Remind me. Who are you?" Albert turned to his daughter's barely breathing savior.

"Thomas Yourg."

"Not the orphan Dohr picked up that one time?"

"The very same."

"You did not—I repeat—did not win the tournament! But under the circumstances, you may ask me for anything you desire. I am clearly in your debt."

"I wish..." Thomas tried to stay conscious in order to seize this momentous opportunity, but his tongue and body were no longer under his command, and his eyes were growing dim. "I..."

“Your Majesty, he wishes to restore his status as a citizen of Parthagon and enter the Knights’ Academy, in spite of our laws.” A shortish man in a gray caftan spoke up softly as he pushed his black braid over his shoulder. His disarming voice and his wise-looking face—round and with a flat nose—instantly pacified the tent, including the king. It was none other than the Chancellor Peter Kalitza.

Chapter 4. A Meeting between Old Friends



Five years at the Knights' Academy flew by for Thomas. He had to study intensely and almost completely lacked free time. The future soldiers continued to be initiated in the secrets of mutating through the Phase so they could reach and maintain the necessary size and strength. From morning to afternoon they were trained in horse riding and weapons skills. The second half of the day they spent learning about general military theory, mutant raid tactics, famous knights' biographies, and the history of Celesia's major battles. The young men took in all this knowledge so, should they be found

capable and lucky, they could advance to the highest ranks of service. Every soldier began his career as an ordinary private. Then, based on length of service and feats in battle, he could move up the officer ranks to centurion, tribune, and as high as legate.

As the former villager learned the military arts, the general situation in Parthagon's provinces was gradually deteriorating. Troubled times had beset the once happy kingdom, and so the Academy took in more and more cadets to train in the art of war, significantly curtailing their learning program. Mutant attacks on the border territories had become the norm, sowing growing discontent among the population. None of this, however, could be blamed on the knights' lack of skill and valor, nor on the king and his chancellor lacking strategic foresight. The Arogdorian army had simply amped up its activity, coming down from their volcano more frequently and using more sophisticated methods to wreak havoc throughout the civilized lands.

Niels Dohr, having earned the rank of legate and the post of Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Knights' Army, now wore gold-plated armor and was practically never home. Together with the newly promoted tribune Richard Fein, he was busy deflecting the mutants' never-ending attacks and patching up gaps in the kingdom's weakening defense line. At home, his sister Marguerite was awaiting his return and bemoaning the chivalric path Niels and Thomas had chosen, since defenders of the realm were now perishing in even greater numbers than before.

And so, on a cool March morning in the year 966, it came time for twenty-three-year-old Cadet Thomas Yourg and his fellow senior-year classmates, including Alain Ospe, whose

father had recently died in the war, to join the ranks of the Royal Knights. Both Thomas and Alain had reached the maximum permitted height and weight, acquired all the necessary combat skills, and passed their military science exams with distinction.

The ceremony was held in the arena, where in front of the packed stands, Albert III handed each graduate his long-awaited sword engraved with his name. The young people took turns kneeling before the king, each wearing sparkling clean armor and blue capes, as he paternally placed his hands on their heads. “The heart and soul of Parthagon is in your hands, my son,” the king solemnly declared, giving a polished sword with a blue-leather hilt to an ample-lipped fellow with shoulder-length brown hair and green hazel-flecked eyes. “I hereby pronounce you a knight of the realm!”

“I swear to serve the crown and Parthagon until my dying breath!” Thomas exclaimed in his booming voice. “Long live the king!”

“Long live Parthagon!” answered the thousands of spectators in the stands.

The warrior kissed the cold blade and snuck a glance at Princess Elizabeth, who was behind her father and looked slightly bored. Since the fateful tournament, her appearances had become exceptionally rare.

The seventeen-year-old girl had grown even taller and her face had gained a mature aspect that only underscored her already dazzling appearance. As she had before, she watched the fuss around her indifferently. She had huge blue eyes frozen over a small button nose and a slightly pouting mouth. She appeared carved from white marble by some brilliant sculptor. Only the wind betrayed that she was alive, lightly tossing her

long blond locks and fluttering that same skimpy white dress over her thin body, above which shone her iconic pearl necklace.

The king performed the same ceremony for each of the 103 new knights, including those who'd made it through the accelerated training program. This number was catastrophically small considering the current circumstances. Everyone was expecting Eisenberg's mutants to tire any day now, and for peace and quiet to return. But currently the situation was so dire that, on the chancellor's advice, the traditional feast and the royal ball in honor of the newly minted soldiers had been cancelled. The ceremony ended with just a choir performing the usual boring patriotic songs, after which everyone went home. The fatherland's new defenders were to be speedily dispatched to the depleted garrisons.

That evening, Niels Dohr came back to the city and, after a series of meetings in the palace and at the Academy, made it in time for family dinner, where he was finally able to congratulate the new graduate. "Good on you, son! You picked just the right time to make your dream come true, Thomas. We could use a knight of your mettle right about now." The tired legate shoved a fried chicken drumstick in his mouth, pulling out only the bone. "I'm thinking of sending you out for a stint at the Tower of Self-Expression, and then, maybe after six months, moving you closer to the volcano."

"Isn't it too early?" wondered the worried Marguerite.

"The time couldn't be more right!"

"Can I go with him?" asked Marie, wearing yet another flowery dress. Over the last few years she'd become an integral part of the legate's family, rarely leaving his house.

“No way,” Thomas said. “Privates aren’t allowed to take women along. The safest thing for you right now is to stay inside the Wall.”

“There’s no arguing with facts.” Niels winked as he ate yet another drumstick.

“And how long do I have to wait this time?”

Lowering her green eyes, Marie started fidgeting with her thick braid. In her dreams, she was already wearing a white dress and introducing herself as a knight’s wife. All these years, Thomas had promised to get married as soon as he graduated, but now it looked like the wedding would have to be postponed to an undetermined date.

“Not long. I’ll come back, and we’ll arrange the whole thing straight away.” It was the only thing he could promise his fiancée as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and kissed the dimple in her cheek.

“Are you sure this time, my love?”

“Marie,” Marguerite interrupted the cooing of the lovebirds, “you’re with a military man now. Don’t delude yourself. The most important thing you’ll need is patience.”

“A lot of patience,” added Niels. “A whole lot.”

The girl could only sigh heavily and put her arms around Thomas, who was engrossed in his food and his thoughts. After all, she had always been after something at every stage in their relationship, and would probably continue waiting even after the wedding. Marguerite was right: she had to accept it and live for today.

Suddenly, without a knock, the front door creaked, and rapid heavy steps sounded in the hallway. Agitated and out of breath, Richard burst into the dining room. Everyone around the dining table froze and looked at him. Before he said a word, they knew

another invasion had taken place. Sobbing, Marie clung to Thomas's neck.

* * *

The situation turned out to be far from standard: for the first time the mutants had attacked the city of New Albert, which stood on the coast of what—up until now—had been considered one of the safest regions in Celesia. Their attack had been successful, and they'd come in from the sea, which also seemed impossible, since the Arogdorians didn't have the technology to build a navy fleet with their primitive level of engineering. The strategy of Eisenberg's people had always been ridiculously simple: mutate to be as strong as possible and attack the enemy head on.

The next morning, after receiving the tragic news, the commander-in-chief and his adopted son, for the first time went out together on the retaliation campaign. For the experienced Niels, despite the situation's unusual nature, what was happening was still pretty routine. Even the raid's unique circumstances failed to surprise him—after all, the mutants had been employing unprecedentedly creative approaches for a while now. Only a few years ago, all they did was forge ahead in blind, stupid fury, which was what Parthagon's primitive defense system had been designed to deflect. Now, the mutants were finding more sophisticated ways to inflict damage to and plunder the kingdom. And for some mysterious reason, they'd stopped taking children, which before had seemed crucial to their existence. When they raided a settlement now, they exterminated everyone.

Thomas's mood, despite the danger that lay ahead, was festive. Instead of being sent to one of the towers, where he might have spent years bored, Thomas was posted to Niels's headquarters. Niels had managed this for him and was taking Thomas along to New Albert. The beaming knight was confident in his strength and in the Parthagon's army's invincibility, and therefore wasn't worrying about his life. His hot blood was raging as he thought how his goal was finally within reach and he would soon singlehandedly slit the throat of the first unfortunate mutant to cross his path. And the same fate awaited the second, third, and hundreds of other mutants—until those vile creatures were wiped off the face of Celesia! The horrific image of the bloody cellar in Max Lank's house hovered before his eyes as bright and clear as if the slaughter had happened yesterday.

The town of New Albert, populated by 10,000 people, was named for its founder, Albert II, the current king's father, and it was in Celesia's southwestern outskirts. It was a lovely port town located on a narrow peninsula in a bifurcated bay that went out to the open sea. It was the only city one could reach from the capital not only by land but also by water. The Quiet River, which flowed down from the inaccessible Yarta Mountains in the southeast, circled Parthagon and then, 100 miles later, spilled into New Albert's deep bay.

The capital's messengers, riding the swiftest, most resilient horses, could reach the besieged city in just one day. However, the massive knights with their heavy equipment needed two or even three days to travel this distance, even on their specially trained horses. Niels had decided to shorten their journey by using some merchant ships, which would allow the troops to arrive twice as fast. To use the ships, he'd had to secure

permission from Peter Kalitza to confiscate all the galleys in the port. This way the three centurias from the first cohort could arrive at the affected area within a day. At the same time, support convoys loaded with provisions and spare armaments had been dispatched by land to arrive a day later than the main regiments.

Although the number of troops deployed appeared small—about 300 knights altogether—their actual might corresponded to half a thousand four-armed mutants. Such a regiment required an abundance of supplies, which they had. This was a large difference between the armies of Parthagon and Arogdor. The mutants coming down from the volcano relied little on rear support, using their convoys to export pillaged resources and to sustain themselves along the way. The only exception to the rule was Ivar Javer—still alive and kicking—who never neglected his own personal comfort during the incursions.

Slowly sailing by southwestern Celesia's endless plowed fields, the eleven merchant galleys—one large, the others small-to-medium sized—reached the vast delta in the early morning. There the lazy river merged with the sea in New Albert's northern bay. Waking up on the narrow bridge to a deafening horn, Thomas put on his armor before everyone else and then saddled the fatted Vector on the deck, among the oars and the yawning rowers. Over the main galley's side, fitted with twenty-one pairs of oars, were beautiful white buildings scattered on the hillsides, over which, here and there, thin columns of smoke from dying fires stretched up into the sky. Listening to the seagulls' cries and the creaking of the single mast, Thomas eagerly awaited landing.

"Where are you off to?" He heard Niels's calm voice as he approached. Niels was wearing an open linen shirt and holding

a mug of warm milk. “You’ve given everyone here quite a laugh.”

“Why’s that?”

“The first to land will be the most experienced knights.”

“When’s it our turn then?”

“Don’t forget, you’re in my staff now. The legate takes up weapons only when things get really desperate. Usually it means defeat and disgrace.”

“Well, transfer me into another unit then!”

“Cool it. You’ll get your chance,” the knight snapped with some irritation. He took a long sip of milk and calmly walked off to take care of his morning affairs. It looked like what lay in store for him was not a battle to the death against the mutants but a date with another of his lady friends.

“God damn you, Niels!” Thomas swore impotently as he watched the vessels ahead dock in the bay just outside the town, getting ready to attack from the rear.

Meanwhile, the three dozen warriors on the first galley to dock at the central pier were getting ready to land. Tribune Richard Fein headed them up. His long hair fluttered under his helmet, and his steely blue gaze was studying the devastated surroundings. Sailing along the silent shore in the morning breeze, he saw all the traces of mayhem and destruction the Arogdorians typically left behind. Of the many fishing boats and merchant ships usually crowding the shore, only charred remains were left sticking out from the water. Local residents’ corpses lay bloated on the embankment and in the surrounding streets. Among them were the local garrison’s mutilated bodies. Apparently, these knights had gotten here first and had fought the enemy in an unequal battle to the death. There were still

screams sounding from somewhere in the city's depths, but Richard knew they had arrived too late yet again.

Having landed on the pier, the tribune ordered his men to go on reconnaissance in the immediate area. By the time the main forces approached, he had a good grasp of the general situation, which he reported to Niels, who was now in his gilded armor—a shining gold token on his chest. Richard then took a dozen warriors and galloped with them through a narrow alley to where the ring road circling New Albert's central hill began.

At the road's far end, lined by beautiful two- and three-story white houses, many now burned and charred, the roused knights stumbled upon a small group of mutants traveling on foot. They fired arrows into the Parthagonians, wounding one in the leg, and then ran off to cowardly hide in the nearest house's yard. Richard ordered his soldiers to put away their crossbows and to take up swords. Then with a blood-curdling cry, he ran after the four-armed intruders. The other defenders of the crown rushed after him and proceeded to hack at the enemy. They skillfully stuck their blades in between the mutants' bio-armor plating while evading the axes whistling above their heads. In spite of their fierce resistance, the Arogdorians soon found themselves trapped within a small area, thereby becoming easy targets for the enraged knights.

At the end of the short battle, Richard and three other knights had been wounded. The same number of Parthagon's bravest had been killed, while the dismembered corpses of mutants amounted to six. But even destroying this small and disoriented enemy group was a real achievement. Especially since Arogdor's entire army usually consisted of only 2,000 to 3,000 mutants.

In the afternoon, the knights gathered at a long dining table laid out to feed all three centurias. It was set up, to the outrage of the screaming gulls, right on the sun-drenched embankment, which had been cleared of reeking corpses by local residents who had returned from hiding. This was the first time the townspeople had faced such a disaster, and they didn't know whether to thank the soldiers or curse them for coming so late.

"Well done." Niels congratulated his friend, patting him on the wounded shoulder and chewing on a bit of flatbread. "I see you haven't lost your skill since becoming an officer."

"I have a good example to follow..."

"Where did those beasts get such fine ships?"

"It's more important we know where they sailed off to."

"Wherever they want, my friend."

"What are you going to do?" inquired Thomas, observing for the first time what a battle against the mutants looked like—as opposed to the tedious Academy simulations.

"I've ordered additional troops to be dispatched to the garrisons of Sunset City and Yarta. Hopefully they're only interested in the larger town, because we're not capable of defending the entire coastline."

"The reinforcements won't make it in time anyway. What did the local people have to say?" asked Richard, rubbing his wound, which was bleeding again.

"They arrived on four galleys, sailing out of the night fog, and landed with cries of 'Hail, Arogdor!' Looks like there were just over a hundred of them. All on foot. After that, it all happened as usual."

As it turned out, the New Albert residents got lucky: many managed to safely hide in the nearby forest, since the mutants had not bothered cutting off the narrow peninsula on which the

settlement stood. In the city, the Arogdorians had run amok for just one day. Although they tried to inflict maximum damage, the stone-built city did not suffer as much destruction as expected. The four-armed creatures did manage to almost completely ransack the food reserves, however. Apparently this had been their main goal.

With the city garrison restored and reinforced, the army was setting out to leave New Albert, when, like a bolt from the blue, a breathless messenger brought new tragic tidings. Occurring almost simultaneously with the naval attack on New Albert, a widespread offensive had begun throughout the kingdom's eastern areas. Since these places were much farther from Parthagon than the port town, news of the invasion arrived in the capital just after the last galley bearing Niels's knights had departed. And although the messenger was sent to follow their trail, he couldn't catch up with the flotilla no matter how fast he rode.

Having announced the fleet's imminent departure, Niels gave a fresh messenger an order to send part of the second cohort to help defend the Star City province—in case this hadn't already been done. Watching all this chaos, Thomas realized he'd have to say goodbye to his romantic ideas about war. Instead of preparing for valiant battles interrupted by cheerful periods of rest, he should've been ready for constant exhausting journeys. The Academy had taught him this, but until now he'd believed this was nothing but senseless exaggeration.

* * *

The eve of the following day, the first cohort arrived back in Parthagon, having made a swift return journey upstream

thanks to a fair back wind and the worn-out rower's superhuman endurance. The very next morning, with fresh troops from the second cohort, the commander-in-chief set out on a long three-day ride. His destination was Star Lake and the city of the same name standing on its shore. Star Lake lay to the northeast, and he passed through Sallep and the Tower of Self-Expression. According to the legend, which gave the lake its romantic name, the lake had formed in times immemorial when a bright star had fallen from the skies and plummeted through the earth's crust into its core.

The seasoned legate knew by the time he arrived there, over a week after the attack's onset, the mutants would've already left the devastated area. If the mutants were to be knocked out, it would have to be by the dispatched garrisons of the Tower of Self-Expression, the Tower of Need, and the Tower of Security, as well as the soldiers of Star City. To Thomas's great frustration, the task didn't include an attack on the enemy. The commander's mission was to supply the city with fresh reserves and identify the gaps in the defense system that could've led to such a large-scale failure.

The night Niels had spent in Parthagon, before heading out again, he'd endured a barrage of insults and threats from the irate king. But the existing system simply didn't allow for more effective action. Of course, having intimate knowledge of the confrontation between the two kingdoms, Niels had thoughts on how to overpower the mad leader of Arogdor. But they didn't conform to the Parthagonian rulebook and Albert and Kalitza rejected them.

Eisenberg's monstrous army was almost entirely concentrated at the volcano's crater or guarding the hard-to-reach gorges at its foothills. Parthagon's valiant troops were

vulnerable because they were dispersed throughout the kingdom's vast territories. Because the troops were dispersed, the mutants could act efficiently, focusing their attacks on the numerous breaches in the kingdom's defense.

Once upon a time, in the middle of an endless sea, the water suddenly began to bubble and hiss, turning into a boiling whirlpool, and from it a volcano emerged. Spewing out rivers of burning lava, which flowed from its southern slopes, it formed a vast land to the south, shaping newly born Celesia.

Thousands of years later, at the now-extinct volcano's foothills, the first people counted ten major gorges traversed by turbulent icy rivers. Since those ancient times it became customary to call them by their number, beginning with the northernmost First River. The next river, to the east was called the Second River, and so on until the last Tenth River in the northwest. The southern gorges, along which flowed the meandering Third, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Rivers, eventually formed life-giving waterways throughout Celesia's central lands, which came to be inhabited by Parthagon's subjects. On the volcano's north side, there was only dangerous gorges, mountainous rivers, and steep cliffs leading into the sea.

To contain the ever-hungry mutants, the Parthagonian army built four watchtowers at the foot of the volcano: the Tower of Need at the Third River, the Tower of Security at the Fourth River, the Tower of Complicity at the Fifth River, and the Tower of Recognition at the Sixth River. This last tower was in the far west, not far from Sunset City—the kingdom's most independent province. Additional fortifications—the Tower of Self-Expression and the Tower of Perfection—were constructed further to the south to guard passages to less-protected areas. Through them passed the eastern and western roads to Sallep,

which merged in the city and continued to the Parthagon's North Gate.

Each tower was manned by servants and maintenance crews, along with 100 soldiers—that is, a centuria of knights. Such power allowed garrisons to independently repel attacks of up to half a thousand mutants. Two to five dozen knights protected the kingdom's largest cities—Sallep, New Albert, Star City, Yarta, and Sunset City. They maintained order in the towns and would, if necessary, heroically lay down their lives repelling the first wave of invaders. There were about 800 knights guarding the lands under the king's dominion, and two more large cohorts, totaling about 700 brave warriors, were always at the ready to rally. This system had been working smoothly for centuries, but recently had begun to suffer painful setbacks, as if the mutants had gotten smarter.

By the second day's end, as Niels Dohr's weary troops passed the Tower of Self-Expression, they began to stumble onto burnt-out villages and their inhabitants' mutilated corpses. The tower's garrison incurred no significant losses, since the mutants rarely attacked such impregnable fortifications. Therefore, the knights stationed there had spent all this time in the ravaged territory seeking out dispersed enemy groups and their resource convoys, and eliminating them.

To Thomas's continued disappointment, the main troops arrived too late for battle and could only helplessly gaze upon the consequences of one of the century's largest raids. It could only be compared to the bloodbath in the Sallep province eighteen years ago, when the capital had nearly come under threat. This time, having come down from the volcano past the eastern Towers of Need and Security under the cover of night, hundreds of mutants had headed in a wide offensive line

directly to the south. Rounding Star Lake from both sides, they found themselves in Yarta Mountains' foothills only five days later. Well-fed and tired, the Arogdorians dispersed homeward in a disorganized fashion, guarding the supply convoys now bursting with plundered goods. During the raid, they'd successfully pillaged hundreds of small villages and farms, inflicting tremendous damage to Parthagon's well being and its king's reputation.

Now finally entering Star City, with its rural scents of hay and manure, the troops found the city's one-story houses almost untouched. And while some neighborhoods had a few charred buildings, this provincial settlement had been spared the bloody carnage they'd seen in New Albert. Niels's knights gathered in the town square, where a deserted market, a slightly singed town hall, and the local garrison's gray barracks stood empty.

The scowling local commandant, wearing dented armor, limped his way toward them. His unusually broad shoulders and his predatory eyes looking out from his wounded face struck them. "Long live the king!"

"Long live Parthagon!"

"Greetings, Legate Dohr!"

"Have you counted up your losses?"

"In the city and the three tower garrisons—around fifty knights."

"How many?" Thomas couldn't help his outburst, realizing this was half an Academy graduating class.

"Fifty."

"What about the enemy?" Niels continued, shooting a stern look at his son.

“Hard to say... no less than two hundred, I’m guessing. We were hunting them down in the forests like the rats that they are.”

“Civilians?”

“Most of them escaped, but the food stores have been emptied.”

“They must’ve been hit by famine again over on the volcano,” suggested Richard.

Thomas still couldn’t believe for over a week they hadn’t been able to lay their hands on a single mutant, had been forced to watch the consequences of the Arogdorians’ terrible escapades from the side. Rolling up the well-worn map of Celesia and tucking it under his belt, he turned to Niels with hope in his voice. “Are we going to keep playing catch, then?”

“Something tells me this isn’t even close to being over, my friend. Looks like our old pal Javer has grown tired of life in his god-forsaken crater.”

“Bloodthirsty fiend!” Richard cursed and spat on the ground with heartfelt disgust. “What’s he up to?”

The very mention of the elusive general’s name made Thomas’s hands shake as they gripped his new sword’s hilt. His narrowed eyes filled with blood as he imagined that accursed monster stomping around these parts just a short while ago, walking the same trampled roads, seeing these same blossoming trees—revenge had been so close!

They decided staying in Star City for a few days would be prudent. This way they could get some much-needed rest and cogitate on a plan for further action. Although the city was unremarkable—a large village, more or less—it had an amazing lake, which was deep, like the sea and round like the moon. Fed by cold streams flowing down from the Yarta Mountains, the

lake was so vast walking around it took several days. Standing on the fishing pier and admiring this natural wonder, Thomas thought of Marie, who certainly wouldn't object to spending a week here.

Marie herself had been overcome with worry, and to ease the pain of parting with her beloved, she'd moved into his room at the Dohr house. Marguerite was only too pleased—she also found it hard to handle the terrible news that kept arriving from one kingdom or another.

And indeed, there seemed to be no end to the bad tidings. Around the same time Thomas and his adoptive father had arrived in Star City, the seemingly omnipresent Javer had reached Yarta by sea. This city was the kingdom's crown jewel, bordered from the north by exquisite and inaccessible mountains, and from the south by a turquoise gulf. This unique geography created a special climate, and so tall palm trees lined the city and golden beaches where one could bask all year in the sun and the warm gulf waters. Monkeys inhabited the surrounding jungle, and they often frightened the locals out near the waste dumps on the city's outskirts. Yarta was widely believed to be the happiest place to live, even though the city possessed nowhere near the riches of the capital, Parthagon.

The worst news was that Javer had not only attacked and pillaged this cozy town, which had never known war or strife, but had decided to fortify himself within it. All signs indicated he intended to pluck this juicy piece of land from Parthagon's grasp.

King Albert III's subjects were stunned, as the mutants had never before acted with such daring insolence. Also, Yarta was a nearly impenetrable natural fortress, located very far from any

regular troops. Wresting it back from the enemy would be no easy task.

The atmosphere was of general shock. The troops thought things would only go from bad to worse, and this hung over them like an airborne contagion. But Thomas was happy. He believed for the first time he had a real chance not only to actively battle real mutants but also to get at Javer himself. He could hardly believe the closure he'd been waiting for could be within reach so soon.

And indeed, after painful deliberations and intense discussions with the officers, Niels Dohr decided to take the surest route. He'd already had so many chances to catch his great nemesis, but the accursed Javer, by some supernatural sense, always managed to sniff out the danger and evade even the most cunning traps. Now, taking two centurias of his best knights with him, the commander-in-chief decided to shorten the journey from Star Lake to the eastern shore by cutting through the woods. There, they would get on the road that rounded Celesia from the Tower of Need at the volcano's foothills to Yarta in the south. Once they'd reached the captured city, he hoped the long history of confrontation would finally end. The route would take about a week, and he prayed to the gods Javer would not change his plans at the last minute but stay put.

Niels had sent Richard to ride with the messengers to Parthagon so he could take command of two more centurias and lead them to Yarta from the west. The tribune also had to select three of the sturdiest merchant galleys. Once he'd loaded them with another 100 soldiers, he'd send them to the same destination by river and sea. This move would cut off all his opponent's escape routes. Previously, people had believed

Parthagon had no need for a navy: realistically, Arogdor could only be accessed by land, and the backward mutants couldn't get their heads around building so much as a rickety raft. The Parthagonians therefore had not undertaken any maritime operations for generations. This time, however, they had no choice.

* * *

This was the first time Thomas and Niels had spent this much time together, and it made them grow closer as grown men. Thomas had always seen Niels as an experienced mentor, but now he'd become mature enough to see his nurturer and protector from a different angle. He didn't understand a lot of what he saw. For example, almost every conversation that touched on Javer made Niels oddly on edge. Thomas had always believed that personal vendettas against the mutants were his exclusive domain, but perhaps it wasn't so. Given the bloodthirsty general's vague backstory and the colorfully varied rumors about his past, some secret possibly underlay Niels's strange behavior.

As the procession slowly descended from yet another picturesque hill on Celesia's southeastern coast, the young knight, bored to distraction, could no longer hold back his curiosity. His mind brimming with guesses, he lightly spurred Vector forward and overtook the legate. Glancing at his foster son, Niels recognized the inquisitiveness gnawing at him. "I know that look. That's the look you had when you insisted on knowing how girls were different from boys."

"Ha ha, and you had to go and fool a child!"

"Anything to get rid of the competition, my friend."

“So, what’s the story with you and Javer?” Thomas nonchalantly chewed on a stalk of straw and squinted at the afternoon sun behind the Yarta Mountains.

“Where’s this coming from? What story could there possibly be?”

“Well, just look at you,” chuckled the interrogator and gestured toward his superior’s fingers, which were squeezing the horse’s reins so tight they’d turned blue.

“It won’t make you feel better.”

“Hate him all you want, but you have to admit he has to be a genius to keep evading us all these years without so much as a scratch. Don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t say without a scratch. When he’d just gone over to their side, we left him without an army many times.”

“What did you say?”

“Once, we had them trapped between the Fifth and...”

“No, when he’d gone over from where? Then it’s true?”

“Ah, yes,” Niels sighed heavily. “Didn’t you ever find it strange he’s so different from other mutants?”

“I’ve always found it strange!”

“It’s such an old and unpleasant story, we tend to avoid mentioning it.”

“I’d heard the rumor, but since they never said anything about it at the Academy...”

“That’s the last thing they’d tell you about! The brightest hope of Parthagon becomes the champion of Arogdor. What could be more disgraceful?”

“Come on, Niels, quit stalling. I’m not asking for your hand in marriage here.”

“My friend, getting married is easy. Any fool can get married! Staying single and popular with the ladies, on the other hand:

that's a gift few possess." Niels laughed, but then grew serious again, sighing. "Well, hold on to your saddle then. As hard as it is to imagine, once upon a time, the noble Ivar Javer had been my best friend. Mentor, even, you could say."

"No way!" Thomas pulled so hard on the reins the startled Vector halted abruptly and swiveled his ears in alarm. "You've been keeping this from me all these years?"

"We trained at the Academy together."

"Stop it!"

"He was a real handsome fellow back then. To be honest, he was also smarter and luckier than me. Even though he'd come from a pretty poor family, he'd always been the best at everything. He even won the tournament once. Why do you think I entered the bloody thing so many times? To prove I was just as good!"

"I couldn't win it, either."

"You were just a child. None of us could've reached the final at eighteen!" replied Niels in agitation. "That's not the point. He advanced fast through the ranks, unlike some other nitwits like myself. Everyone was in awe of him. Women threw themselves at him, while I've always had to lure them in: come look at the stars; let's go sit on the roof; you know the drill. Everything fell into his hands. He mastered every skill, every art with such ease. The one thing he never learned to do was recognize the limits of what's allowed. We had a very young queen back then—Jane, Albert's fourth wife."

"Hold on." Thomas stopped again in disbelief, letting the mangled straw drop from his slack-jawed mouth. "Even you wouldn't go that far, Niels!"

"That's what I'm telling you: he'd lost his grip on reality," sighed the legate. "Jane Goodnall was breathtaking, and what

happened between them was true love—all-consuming, hopeless, stupid love. She couldn't resist everyone's darling and managed to see him in secret. Once became twice, and twice turned into an affair. They kept at it until she got pregnant, and then the truth came out. Publicly. Thanks to that son of a harpy, Isaac Newdon, your honorable rector!"

"Figures. That scumbag," Thomas hissed. He spat, remembering his own sad tale.

"As you can imagine, the king took it—how should I put it?—rather badly," Niels said with a sly wink. "There followed scandals, resignations, the couple's unsuccessful attempt to escape. In the end, the eight-months-pregnant Jane threw herself out the window of the palace's eastern tower, where the princess is kept nowadays. Young Javer was stripped of his citizenship and exiled in disgrace. You already know where he applied his talents next. I'm still amazed he wasn't executed. Even back then he already had a knack for escaping a tight spot!"

"I can't believe it. So you could've stayed friends? It's not like you had a falling out."

"That's the worst of it." Niels tensed his fingers again, his face flushing crimson. "To me, he is still a close friend, the guy I grew up with, who I saw as exemplary, who'd always come through for me. Even though I've never seen him again, I've had countless opportunities to admire his handiwork. Think of your childhood. Think of what we've seen over the past week. I just can't wrap my head around how he can do these things! What's happened to him? Could it really be just revenge for Jane and the baby?"

Niels spurred his horse and galloped ahead of the procession, which twisted along the narrow road between the mountains

and the sea. The befuddled Thomas had something to think about the rest of the way: General Javer had suddenly transformed from a ruthless monster into an ordinary man with a tragic fate.

On their journey's sixth day, the views were growing ever more spectacular. On their left, the army was still traveling the endlessly blue seacoast, with its gentle rolling waves, but on the right they were now flanked by steep bizarrely shaped cliffs. These were signs they were approaching Yarta. And indeed, the next day they glimpsed its glimmering turquoise bay in the crevice between the mountains. The black two-story galleys bobbing next to the empty pier signaled that someone had dared disturb this paradise's peace. The single-mast vessels' dimensions alarmed the incoming soldiers, and their decks' bronze battle rams shaped like bleating sheep's heads only added to their apprehensions.

As the knights barricaded the road and set up camp, Niels looked for signs of Richard's approach from the west, and for signs of his humble fleet's arrival. The next morning, he noticed through his telescope one large and two medium-sized Parthagonian merchant galleys cautiously approaching the bay, looking rather modest compared to the enemy's giant ships. By evening, they'd spotted Richard sending out signals from his hilltop camp across the city. With everything in place, Niels decided to launch the attack on Javer the next morning.

"You're not yourself." Thomas was remarking on his adoptive father's distracted manner during dinnertime around the fire. The lights of the besieged Yarta had just begun to flicker in unison with the bright stars in the cloudless firmament.

"Maybe he's just sick of it."

"What do you mean?"

Looking around him gloomily, Niels inched closer and lowered his voice, “I can just tell—he’s up to something.”

“We seem to be doing everything right.”

“That’s just it! Every move I make is forced. The city must be taken back, otherwise I’ll be branded a traitor. Get it?” The legate sighed heavily. “But this is Javer we’re talking about. He wouldn’t just give up, stay put, and make himself an easy target. That filthy beast knows I’d have no other choice but to get my ass over here.”

“Whatever he’s up to, they’ve only got four galleys here, Niels.”

“And?”

“How many can there be? One hundred? Two hundred foot soldiers, perhaps with mansteeds to boot? Even if there’s three hundred, we’ll make mincemeat out of them all!”

“We’ll see, Thomas. We’ll see...”

* * *

The decisive moment came early the following day. Niels picked up two smoking flares and gave Richard a sign to commence the offensive. Crossbows locked and loaded, 500 blue cloaks descended onto the beautiful city of Yarta simultaneously from three sides, their deafening roar filling the air, the earth quaking under the thunderous beating of hoofs. As expected, the mutants had had enough time to secure their position and cover the only roads leading into town from the east and the west, as well as prepare several lines of internal defense. The only surprise turned out to be the attack from the sea, which they’d learned about only the day before it began.

Predictably, the knights began to suffer painful losses even while still approaching the Arogdorians' first line of defense. They suffered a severe lack of experience in breaching such serious fortifications, since until now the enemy had never entrenched themselves so firmly in any one settlement. The four-armed mutants shot hundreds of well-aimed arrows from a multitude of secure positions, hitting one knight after another, as well as their horses.

Encountering such fierce resistance, paradoxically, calmed Niels. Javer's enigmatic plan was not as devilish as all that: he intended to create an impregnable defense and to hold his position with an iron grip. Sighing with relief and seeing Thomas writhe in torment, the commander-in-chief relaxed to the point that he, reluctantly, allowed his son to join the attack.

The young warrior howled and jumped for joy as he slipped on the rounded helmet with identical oval slits for eyes and mouth, saddled the neighing Vector, and raced to the front. Hiding behind a huge boulder, Thomas began to shoot arrows from his crossbow, trying to pierce a breach in the defense of a yellow house—so typical of Yarta—where the enemy had established a secured sniper post.

Once they'd slightly thinned the defense, the knights rushed into the house, their swords at the ready, while the surviving mutants retreated to the second line of defense in the next city quarter. Not one to be left behind, Thomas, no longer capable of reason, threw himself into battle with a desperate wail. When he reached the liberated house, he dismounted, and upon rushing into the modest hallway, ran into a tusked, dark-skinned mutant who'd been wounded in the chest. The Arogdorian's thick dreads pushed up against the high ceiling

and he exuded that nauseating aroma of sweat and sour rot the former villager still remembered well from his childhood.

The enemy had no intention of surrendering, and he rushed at the wild-eyed Thomas, swinging his rusty axe. Thomas dodged the killer blow and punctured the mutant's belly, between its bio-armor, with two precise sword strokes. As the four-armed monster fell lifeless, rocking the building's foundations, the jubilant knight, harnessing all the rage inside him, drove his blade into the mutant's massive forehead. Nailing the mutant's cracked skull to the oaken floor, Thomas was sprayed with hot blood from head to foot.

Finally, the vengeance building in him over the long years erupted like some kind of volcano. Drowning in the turbulent lava of emotions, wildly shouting, his mad eyes jumping out of their sockets, the orphaned villager pulled out his sword and ran it into his victim's carcass over and over. Until weight lifted from Thomas's shoulder and he began to come to his senses, feeling different than he'd felt all those years. He was transported into a different world, felt as if he'd been born again and had become lighter and lighter. Having excised his emotions, he could only now feel the true depth of his desire to destroy every mutant to the last. But from now on he'd be cool and calculated about it.

On the western side, they used the same strategy to break the defense line. Under the blond tribune's command, the knights penetrated deeper into the limestone city. Niels tensely watched the troops' movements from his headquarters on the eastern hill.

"Legate Dohr!" called an aide who was pointing to the sea sparkling in the sun. Four black galleys were approaching from the west. The fifty long and synchronously moving oars

emerging from each were slowly but confidently driving the ships to shore, making them look like huge, nightmarish centipedes.

“Now I see what you’re up to,” Niels remarked grimly, as if Javer could hear him. “But it’s no use, you old fool!”

Indeed, by this time the Parthagonians had already seized the galleys moored off the coast and pierced all the main lines of defense. From three sides they were squeezing the panicked mutants against the sheer rock face, over which they were trying to escape. Seeing their comrades’ bleak states, the enemy reinforcements dared not come to shore but confined themselves to shooting flaming arrows, burning down every vessel at the pier.

Fifteen minutes later, Niels and Richard joyfully embraced in Yarta’s central square, framed by leafy palms. Behind them glistened the turquoise cove and before them was a magnificent view of the city’s upward-creeping, narrow alleys. Above all this beauty towered the unattainable mountains’ rocky peaks, topped in places by soft whipped-cream clouds.

“So did you get to see the old lady?” teased Niels.

“Let’s get you married off as well, shall we? I know—you can marry Javer! You must be so sick of women by now.”

“There’s a swell idea! Thomas,” he called. The young warrior just returned from the battle lines, dripping with enemy blood. “You haven’t seen my bride anywhere, have you?”

“What? What bride?” asked the distracted knight. An arrow was sticking out of his left shoulder.

“Did you see our friend Ivar Javer?”

“They’re all going into the mountains. We can’t pursue them any farther.”

“Seriously?”

“What should we do?”

“Those creatures were raised in the mountains. What can we do? But they won’t get far,” Niels remarked with a contented grin, watching through his telescope the struggling mutants. “Press them as far as you can. Then we’ll see.”

Suddenly the commander-in-chief’s smile disappeared and he directed the telescope to the eastern mountain slope, then to the western one.

“Son of a syphilitic whore!” he yelled. “Richard, Thomas, get the supply convoys into the town! Hurry!”

Not sure what was happening, the novice knight directed Vector to the road leading out of the city to the east, where support convoys were stationed at a temporary camp. As he squeezed the last bit of effort from his tired horse, he noticed hundreds of lively mutants rushing down from the mountains on their mighty mansteeds in the precise direction he was heading, their dreadlocks twitching about their heads like frenzied snakes. Turning around, he saw the same happening on Yarta’s western outskirts and realized with horror he’d not make it in time to warn the convoy.

By the time the convoy drivers saw the danger and tried to escape, they stood no chance of outrunning the incredibly fast mutants. Thomas could only watch as they massacred the drivers without exception, often slicing them in half with a sweep of an axe or a sword. A dozen warriors had remained behind in the camp, but they too were defeated, unable to repel the shrieking avalanche that descended upon them seemingly from the heavens. All other reserves had long since gone inside the city, since the legate had made the fatal mistake of considering Yarta taken.

Once they'd taken over the two key positions on both sides of the city, the mutants didn't attack immediately, closely watching the panic in the smoke-filled city instead. Albert III's glorious army, composed of the king's greatest warriors under Niels Dohr's command, was now trapped between the rocks and the sea. The Parthagonians had lost their support convoys, as well as their cellars. Yarta's tiny food stores had also been emptied, the population either having been exterminated or hiding somewhere in the vicinity.

General Javer, who knew all the military secrets Parthagonian commanders are taught, didn't wish to risk his victory by dragging out the final act. Having gathered his mutant troops, he gave the order to commence the counterattack, counting on the fresh forces to finish off the exhausted and befuddled knights. The king's subjects, meanwhile, hoped to use the fortifications they'd recently overtaken from the enemy. However, it turned out all the barricades and blockades were props meant to trick the eye, which explained the city's remarkably easy capture.

Nevertheless, although it meant losing half his army, Niels had created a circular fortification around the city's center. This was where, not too long ago, Yarta's wealthiest denizens resided in their thick-walled mansions—as if designed to withstand a long siege. Around the area's perimeter, passage from all adjacent streets had been blocked and barricaded, with guard posts placed at key points. The wounded soldiers and oarsmen hid in the stuffy cellars. Thus securing themselves, the Parthagonians could only watch with pain in their hearts as the frenzied mutants continued their rampage outside the shielded enclave. For an hour, the tramping of mansteed hoofs was heard all over the city. The Arogdorians combed Yarta's streets,

ruthlessly finishing off the roaming knights and oarsmen, causing piercing screams to erupt in the evening air followed by malicious laughter.

His doomed enemy now cornered, Javer commenced the tactical siege. He knew the knights couldn't last longer than a few days, since Niels had no hope of getting help, food, or water for at least the next week and a half. And to make sure neither party got bored waiting for the inevitable, he ordered the mutants to climb onto the rooftops around the enclosure and shower the hastily mounted fortifications with flaming arrows.

* * *

The next three days were hell for the Parthagonians who had the dubious fortune of surviving inside the protected perimeter. Every few hours, they had to fight off mutant assaults meant to exhaust them and dampen morale rather than actually break through their defense. While some rotation occurred at the defense positions, made possible by recruiting oarsmen to the task, in a cellar the commanding staff worked night and day trying to come up with solutions for each new problem that arose. Meanwhile, Javer did everything in his power not to allow the trapped commander-in-chief and his remaining army to relax for even a minute. And indeed, faced with hopelessness, Niels Dohr's patience and self-control dwindled with every hour. The same went for Richard and the other officers. They increasingly blamed their sorry outcome on the legate, who until recently they'd worshipped.

In their ordinary life in the garrisons, the knights slept at least 12 hours a day, consumed unlimited amounts of food and water, and, in general, spent their time in comfort and leisure.

Now they found themselves dealing with constant tension, feeling their lives threatened at all times, and surviving on almost no provisions at all. Not only were they prevented from entering the Phase, which they could have used to quicken recovery, they also weren't getting any proper sleep, which further rattled their nerves. Because their dehydrated bodies required colossal energy just to stay alive, the enfeebled warriors began to lose weight with every passing day. Their bodies were hungrily devouring the surpluses of mass they'd built up with such effort over time.

To try to ameliorate this catastrophic situation, Niels allowed his troops to slaughter the most exhausted and crippled horses, and eat them. This helped preserve their strength, but the voracious Parthagonians could not eat all their four-legged companions, without whom they'd be deprived of any hope of salvation.

Things were even worse for the injured, as there was no way to properly dress their wounds or alleviate their suffering. The entire small medical team had been lost along with the support convoys.

Niels was barely able to remain upright due to exhaustion, and, to his great sorrow, his adoptive son was in the grip of feverish delirium. Along with a few small wounds, the arrow that had pierced his shoulder had caused him to lose a lot of blood and left behind a swollen wound that had quickly turned black. It was constantly festering, and the infection was quickly spreading to the rest of his body. Without doctors and with no opportunities to get into the Phase in order to self-heal—a skill taught at the school and the Academy—the young man had almost no shot of holding out even a few more days—not enough time for reinforcements to arrive. Due to Yarta's remoteness,

any large garrisons would have only just learned about the legate's defeat, and they would take at least a week to come to their unfortunate comrades' rescue.

News of the tragedy had, in fact, just reached Parthagon and shook the capital to its core. The besieged knights friends and loved ones were beside themselves, tensely anticipating the campaign's outcome. Marie, of course, was one of these inconsolable souls. Her heart sensing something wasn't right, she decided to visit Thomas.

Since her worn-out nerves prevented her from relaxing, the poor girl had to wait in Thomas's bed for sleep to come. After a series of nonsensical, nightmarish dreams, she suddenly woke up and, without moving or opening her eyes, began to go through techniques of entering the Phase. She envisioned her body rotating, tried to imagine hands before her eyes, tried to rock herself in various directions, and also make herself expand and shrink. Running through the same cycle over and over to no effect, she changed her approach and, concentrating all her mental energy, tried to imagine as if she were in Yarta. She pictured herself touching the stone floor in a typical Yarta house and almost immediately felt she was no longer in bed. Instead, she was in a cramped cellar, where, in dim twilight, groaning men were strewn on stretchers and the floor. The stability of space had been disrupted, and she was finally in the Phase!

Marie searched for her fiancé among the dying warriors, because she had a gut feeling he'd been injured. To maintain the Phase, she concentrated as much as possible on her sensory perceptions and not losing her intention of finding Thomas. After venturing a few feet inside the cellar, she spotted him on the floor, bloodied and unconscious. At first she began sobbing and rushed to hold him, but then, frightened of being ejected

back into everyday reality, she quickly recovered and began healing his wounds. With deft gestures, she tightened the skin around Thomas's cuts and scratches, causing his body to glow with bluish light. Although the school taught that such rituals were irresponsible heresy—a bunch of mystical superstitions—she would try it if this were the only way she could help her future husband.

Meanwhile, studying a map of Celesia by candlelight, Niels and Richard came to an obvious conclusion. The raid on Star City and its surrounding provinces was only a distraction to allow no fewer than half a thousand mutants to travel to the inaccessible—or so they were thought—ridges of the Yarta Mountains. The mutants, accustomed to harsh conditions, easily waited out a week among the rocks, replenishing their strength with supplies picked up along the way. The entire operation, including the decoy attack on New Albert, looked well thought out—unlike any that had preceded it in the history of clashes between Parthagon and Arogdor.

Even though he felt guilt weighing heavily on his shoulders, Niels didn't lose sight of his present task and decided to spend every last drop of effort trying to find a way out of this mess. Attempting to get onto the westbound road out of the city to join up with the reinforcements most likely heading toward them was one of their most desperate options. Although the exhausted knights had little chance of surviving such an adventure, they would at least die a brave death. It was better than perishing in agony beneath the mutant's watchful eyes—the mutants who'd now taken to occasionally showering the Parthagonians with sacks of excrement.

At the beginning of the siege's fourth day, just as the stars came out to shine brightly upon the indifferent sea, a four-

armed monster with a white flag unexpectedly approached the barricades and handed the soldiers a note. It announced that Ivar Javer was inviting Niels Dohr to a friendly dinner. Realizing the general must want to offer him a deal, the proud knight could only agree. After all, a dinner could hardly threaten his wreck of a life. And if the dinner did pose a threat, his dying would no longer be a great loss. In the event he didn't come back, he ordered Richard to take command, while he took off his armor and went to the meeting unarmed, not looking back.

Four mutants led Niels to the hill where several days ago he'd camped and ordered the storming of the ill-fated Yarta. The trampled meadow was filled with crackling fires, the loud chatter of soldiers, and the snoring of mansteeds, who, Niels noticed, had the most unusual variety of haircuts. The air was filled with the mouthwatering aroma of roasted meat mixed with the mutant's abominable stench. From all sides sounded the exuberant, patriotic cheers of warriors chugging wine and beer by the bucket:

“To Arogdor!”

“To Eisenberg!”

“To Javer!”

Humiliated and ridiculed, spat at and showered with refuse, the legate was pushed into a huge red tent displaying the Arogdorian coat of arms—a volcano with a four-pointed star above it—embroidered on the walls. Armed warriors stood in each corner, and at the table an inordinately massive mutant with thick black dreadlocks and familiar deep-set eyes was hungrily shoveling food into his mouth. A scarlet cape covered his back, and over his bio-armor he wore chain mail that in many ways imitated the Royal Knights' armor. Three of his four

hands were occupied with steaming hunks of piglet, while his lower right hand held a jug full of milk. On the table, next to the huge tubs of food, lay a helmet with twisted horns and a curved sword with a wide groove on its flat face.

“You just can’t seem to put the past behind you, can you?” Niels said hoarsely as he looked over the general’s chain mail.

Javer glanced coldly at his former friend, biting off enormous pieces of meat with his monumental, tusked jaw. The smell of the food was driving the hungry knight crazy, as he’d eaten no more than two half-cooked horse ribs in the past three days.

“You have, however, lost some of your good looks.”

In response, unswallowed scraps of meat came flying out of Javer’s mouth, spattering everything around him. Dropping the meat from his hands, the mutant began to bang his fists on the table, purposely cackling so loudly his laughter could be heard in the heart of Yarta.

“That’s funny,” pronounced the General with some difficulty. He had a heavy bass voice and was wiping the tears from his eyes as he tried to collect himself. “You, on the other hand, are still a loser and a nagging gnat!”

“Why do you spend all your time running away from losers then, huh?”

“Well, I see there’s no beating the stupid out of you.”

“We seem to be talking at cross purposes. I suggest that...”

“No, I have an offer to make.”

“I bet it’s a handsome one.”

“Won’t you have a bite to eat first?” Javer smiled maliciously.

Niels grabbed a jug of milk and began to swallow in greedy gulps. However, soon he froze and spit out the milk, remembering his barely breathing comrades were, at this

moment, having to make do with their own urine and the blood of their beloved horses.

“Same old Niels Dohr,” the mutant grinned. “Ready to croak for the sake of others!”

“Well, we can’t all be like you.”

“That’s right, you can’t!” huffed Javer, wiping the remnants of his bountiful dinner from his face with some rags. “Take fifty of your men and beat it.”

“So you can finish us off on the way?”

“What would I do that for? They just might replace you with someone who’s actually got some brains in his head.”

Growing dark with anger and bitterness, Niels didn’t know how to respond to the offer. His guilt over his knights’ tragic circumstances made Javer’s words seem the last nail in the coffin:

“What will happen to the rest?”

“That’s irrelevant.”

“Can I take a hundred?” The knight felt desperate. “And what about the oarsmen?”

“You can take fifty of whomever you like. At sunrise. Take him away!” ordered the General to the mutant guards, who immediately picked up the downtrodden knight under the arms and dragged him away in a demonstratively indelicate fashion.

When he returned to the barricaded quarter, Niels assembled a staff of officers from the headquarters’ cellar and presented them with the enemy’s contemptuous offer. Since no one saw the sense, from the mutants’ point of view, in letting some of the surrounded troops go, everyone concluded this was yet another trap devised by the cunning Arogdorian.

By morning, however, their opinions had shifted. The soldiers were already on their last legs and another week would pass before help arrived. It had finally dawned on them they couldn't hold back the enemy much longer. So they decided to do the unthinkable and take advantage of Javer's proposal. This would allow fifty knights at least to try and make it out. Even if the offer were just a lowly trick, some of them would have a small chance of surviving—as opposed to sure death in the next mutant attack on the barricades. As sad coincidence would have it, about fifty soldiers were still able to move, despite their severe exhaustion. Niels had decided to stay and defend the position to the bitter end. Tribute Fein, therefore, would take command of the breakout column.

As soon as the sun began to rise and the birds resumed their carefree songs, the Parthagonians cleared the barricades between the buildings on the west side of the enclave and said their goodbyes.

“Richard, take care of Marguerite and Marie,” Niels uttered listlessly.

“Of course. Are you sure you won't come with us?”

“I'm sure.”

“Well, it's your decision.”

“Give my best to your family.”

“Thank you, I will,” his friend answered with a sad smile, looking out at the hordes of gloating mutants filing down the nearby streets. “It's a shame about Thomas.”

“Be quiet! I'm losing my mind as it is.”

“Oh, Niels. What have we done!”

“Go already, I beg of you!”

Embracing his old friend and shaking his trembling hand, Richard slipped on his helmet and saddled his smoky-gray horse. Then he led the soldiers toward the western road out of Yarta, hoping at least one would be able to break through.

The Arogdorians observing the scene froze. Just as they began slowly reaching for their swords behind their backs and raising their long axes, a swarm of arrows came whistling through the air and with dull thuds pierced the mutants' armored bodies from behind. The wounded monsters' screams drowned in the roar of heavy cavalry: on the western slope hundreds of furious knights rushed out of the forest and drove a steel-clad wedge into the enemy's rear lines. They were piercing several mutants at once on their sharp spears, mercilessly finishing them off with blades that gleamed in the dawn's rays. Horns somewhere in the distance spoke to the rescue offensive being led by none other than Albert III.

Protected by shining armor and covered in bright-blue cloaks fluttering in the morning wind, the warriors of the first cohort swept through the devastated city's once-picturesque streets. The knights began to clear out every courtyard, shredding the mutants who'd been caught unaware. They scattered in all directions, howling desperately. But the warriors easily caught them as they tried to clumsily swim to their giant galleys and stopped them on the approach to the steep rocks where they felt at home. In addition, they blocked all the ways of retreating to the General's headquarters on the eastern road, depriving the mutants of their last shot of escaping. The warriors slashed the mutants' bodies in between their plates of bio-armor, cut their limbs off, spilled their stuffed guts, lopped their dull heads off their shoulders and crushed their skulls with a crunch, exposing

their pale-yellow brains and flooding the earth with fountains of thick blood.

From the red tent on the hill, Javer watched the horror, smiling nervously at first and then signaling for an immediate retreat. The surviving reserves and the ships moored in the roadstead were only too happy to obey. Half an hour later, Yarta was free of mutants and safely secured under the original control of Parthagon.

On his white stallion, Albert III entered the barricaded quarter with his head held high and his ornately bejeweled armor sparkling in the sunlight. His tearful subjects greeted him. They'd been tormented by thirst and crippled by hunger—some still able to walk, some crawling on the ground. Dirty and barely dragging their feet, they'd lost all faith in salvation and said their farewells to life. Now, miraculously drawn out of the netherworld, they rushed to kiss their savior's feet.

* * *

Awfully thin, his face full of stubble, Thomas Young woke on the second day of the return journey, roused by the monotonous clatter of hooves. He soon learned the medical service convoys were driving him and the other wounded men along the beautiful, perennially sunny shore of southern Celesia. On the cart next to him, Niels was in a worn leather jacket, rocking and sunk in thought. A little further away, he spotted Vector, his nose's white bridge painted the dark maroon of clotted blood.

"What's happened?" asked Thomas, raising himself up and immediately gritting his teeth from the pain shooting through his bandaged left shoulder.

"Everything's fine now. Don't move."

“Who saved us?”

“Albert.”

“On his own. Well, I’ll be! Did we last that long?”

“They came on the fourth day. Kalitza figured out what was happening before we even attacked Yarta and sent out reinforcements.” Niels sighed. “We’re lucky at least one person has a head on his shoulders.”

“Why aren’t you with the command staff? Where’s your armor?”

“Armor? Niels Dohr the knight is no more.”

“It can’t be!”

“Someone has to answer for this travesty.”

“Unbelievable,” muttered Thomas, looking into his adoptive father’s tired but remarkably calm eyes. “Then who’s in charge of the army? I’ve a pretty crazy idea.”

“Crazy you say?” Niels laughed and, as was military custom, teasingly patted his son on the wounded shoulder, causing him to whimper and to recognize the price of the glorious path he’d chosen.

Chapter 5. The Adventures of the Forest Brigands



Eight days after their miraculous rescue in Yarta, Thomas, along with the slow-moving support convoys, returned to Parthagon. Met by his overjoyed fiancée, he saw crowds in the city squares celebrating yet another monumental victory over Arogdor. Ecstatic cheers sounded from every direction:

“Long live the king!”

“Long live Parthagon!”

“Long live Albert III!”

However, when hundreds of bodies, many of them dismembered, began to be rolled into the flower-filled city streets, tears and lamentations quickly drowned out the festivities. Over the kingdom's entire history one would be hard-pressed to find another incident this bloody. Almost every resident had lost a relative or loved one in the tragedy.

Thomas was genuinely surprised to witness the effect this horror had on people he'd previously considered intelligent and educated. He'd lived through the ordeal and knew what had happened over the last weeks. But the events not only rallied the Parthagonians but also created clear categorical divisions in their heads—between black and white, good and bad. The glory went to the almost saintly king and chancellor, while the blame was placed on Niels Dohr's stony shoulders. He suddenly found himself accused of every sin under the sun. Many people truly rejoiced to hear of his dismissal, and others went so far as to demand his execution.

Thomas, on the other hand, having first encountered real battle, knew the former legate had done everything right. Or, in any case, he'd acted the only way he could within the system created by the king and chancellor everyone was now busy praising. On many occasions Niels had reported to them the kingdom's vulnerable defenses needed to be improved, but his complaints had fallen on deaf ears.

And yet, the novice knight still retained a true love for the king. So he was willing to entertain the possibility that there were arguments in favor of removing the legate. After all, the great Parthagon had existed for hundreds of years and was a dream made reality, whose current form could only be credited to Albert III's rule and leadership. Could a rescued villager

who'd been taken under this ideal city's wing really purport to know the nitty-gritty of its decision-making processes?

After taking some time to heal, sleep, and eat enough to become his old self, Thomas went to see Richard Fein. The old family friend had unexpectedly—even he hadn't expected it—been promoted the highest rank of legate and was now head of the king's army.

Wearing a long blue jacket, Thomas waited in the dark corridor and when his turn finally came, he went into the new commander-in-chief's office. The office was in the faceless gray Academy building, and covering nearly the entire wall nearest the door was a yellowing map of Celesia. Two wide windows overlooked the Royal Palace, where Princess Elizabeth was hidden away in one of its towers. Behind the legate's back, over his large oak desk, hung a huge portrait of a gloomy Albert III holding a bloodied sword. An old bookcase full of thick tomes containing the secrets of the military arts occupied the far wall. A heavily trampled green carpet covered the floor.

“Now I'll have to plough through all this,” said Richard in displeasure, scanning the huge stack of papers on his desk. A gold token glistened on his jacket's lapel.

Having spotted a few rare titles in the bookcase and checked the water clock—a dripping upside-down cone with marked measurements—on the legate's table to see how much time had passed, Thomas sat down on the shabby chair. “So, how do you like your new job?”

“Better to risk my life every day at the Tower of Complicity than do this!”

“As our mutual acquaintance would say: why don't you ask your adoring wife to help you out?”

“Hmm...you know, now that you mention it, there is a real cozy spot that’s just opened up at the Tower of Complicity. How would you like to fill it?”

“It would be a dream come true!” Thomas laughed. “But seriously, I’ve had an idea. It’s rather unusual and it requires your approval.”

“Shoot.”

“Lately, the mutants have gotten out of hand. And we don’t know why. Doesn’t it bother you?”

“It bothers everyone. There’s no telling what they’ll get up to tomorrow.”

“Then send me on a reconnaissance mission!”

“That’s your brilliant plan! That same mutual acquaintance of ours also likes to say that if you’ve had a bright idea, you can be sure more clever minds have already thought of it.”

“Hmm, why more clever?”

“Because they thought of it before you!”

“You mean, we have spies? Niels said he’d never sent anyone.”

“We had them in the past. But in recent years, Arogdor has gotten pretty good at spotting them, so we don’t send our people there anymore. Trust me, it’s a death sentence.”

“Niels has said as much. But isn’t waiting for them to plough through our towns a death sentence too?”

“They won’t dare touch Parthagon,” Richard replied. He leaned back in his tall chair. “I understand where you’re coming from, but you have to understand our priorities.”

“Yesterday—Yarta. Tomorrow—the capital!”

“Don’t even think about it, pal. Your father would never forgive me.”

“He knows the deal. And you have a man ready to do anything it takes!”

“Just making it to the crater alive will make Yarta seem like child’s play.”

“I can find out what’s going on up there, what’s made them change their tactics. Isn’t that information more valuable than anything?”

Richard sighed, then got up and strolled toward a window to study the Royal Palace. “You’re saying Niels approves of this?”

“I’ve had time to talk him into it.”

“Well, to hell with it then! I give in.”

“Huzzah!” Thomas leapt up.

“Under one condition.”

“Anything—name it!”

“You can go if you find another lunatic to go with you. I won’t let you go alone.”

“That won’t be a problem!”

Thomas gave his older friend a firm hug and shot out of his office like an arrow. He had a journey to undertake in order to talk to the one person who’d agree to go on such a madcap adventure—and enthusiastically at that. Richard Fein may have intended to set an impossible condition, but as far as Thomas was concerned, his request was as good as granted.

The newly knighted Alain Ospe, now a hulking, fiery dark-haired man with enticing black eyes and dark skin, was serving a boring tour of duty at the Tower of Perfection. The battlement protected the northeastern roads into Parthagon and was located a two-day journey from the capital. Its garrison rarely saw any battle—nor would it except in the unlikely event the mutants broke through the defenses of the more northern Tower of Complicity and Tower of Recognition.

After traveling seventy miles on the barely recuperated Vector, Thomas laid eyes on the Tower of Perfection. The tapering structure, which was at least five storeys high, looked like a stone barrel planted on top of a bald hill. The tower's narrow arrow slits began only halfway up, and at its top was an observation deck from which one could see for miles.

The bolstered garrison consisted of a centuria of relatively inexperienced and voracious knights, and a couple dozen service staff, which is why having a sufficiently large fortification in such a strategic place was necessary for the kingdom's safety. Maintaining this position—the effectiveness of which had always been controversial—took a huge amount of provisions and hay. Special convoys making the rounds between the large settlements and all six towers delivered all this.

Bored of being constantly idle and sick of pointless maneuvers, Alain jumped at the chance to undertake the harebrained journey into Arogdor. It was far better, in his eyes, than the slow death of endless formation drills. To make things a little interesting, Thomas even tried to dissuade Alain, describing all the horrible fates met by past spies and the difficulties that might await them on the way to the crater. However, the more colorfully he described torment and torture, the more brightly his friend's eyes sparkled. He'd picked the wrong guy to try to spook!

He'd found a reckless partner and had the legate's go-ahead. Now Thomas had to find the courage to do the most difficult thing: reveal his plan to Marie. He chose a sunny Sunday afternoon, inviting her to take a stroll along the Avenue of Heroes, which stretched like a wide ribbon from the North Gate to the main square before the Royal Palace.

The chestnut-lined avenue was filled with chatter and sonorous laughter, as well as the music and crooning of street artists, which created a carefree atmosphere. Every 100 feet they would pass by fragrant stalls brimming with sweets, nuts, and cheeses, and everywhere merchants were selling flowers, apples and, of course, last year's roasted chestnuts. Left unattended, children ran around yelling, threatening to get under passerby's feet, while lap dogs attempted to escape their ladies' hands. The women, dressed in their Sunday best, had come out in packs to join the hunt. All these people looked on with envy at the beautiful couple, Thomas wearing a bright-blue long coat and Marie wearing a pale-pink dress with puffy shoulders and a long hem that floated elegantly along the pavement.

But the young people had weighty matters on their mind.

"You promised!" Marie, who'd waited so patiently for her beloved's recovery in hopes of a speedy wedding, didn't try to hide her dejection. "I can't bear it time and time again!"

"Come on now, it's not much longer. A couple of months at most. I've been looking forward to it too, believe me." Thomas tried to justify his departure. For a while now, he'd been resigned to there being no other solution than to marry his childhood sweetheart. There were no other suitors. Not only that, but if it hadn't been for the patient and determined Marie, his life would've been devoid of women a long while still, because he was so obsessed with his knightly duties.

To alleviate some of his guilt, Thomas grabbed a bunch of yellow tulips from a merchant's tray, paying with three copper coins. He handed the sweet-smelling gift to his girl and gently kissed the dimple in her pink cheek, naively hoping for instant mercy. "Forgive me, my love!"

“Thank you.” Marie’s heart softened a little, but then she stopped and turned around to face him, looking Thomas firmly in the eye. “Why can’t we do it before your stupid mission?”

“You want to marry a knight or what?”

“You can marry ‘or what’ yourself!”

“Well, there you have it, then! Alain and I have to mutate.”

“What for? Have you lost your minds?”

“They have to take us for their own.”

“Unbelievable! And what are you going to become?”

“You’re better off not knowing—for now at least.” Thomas laughed.

“What if you don’t return?”

“Even more reason not to get married right now. You don’t want to go from new bride to widow in a matter of weeks, do you?” the inexperienced youngster said without thinking.

It took at least an hour to calm down the mournful and angry Marie after that remark.

* * *

And so, having obtained all the necessary permits, Alain returned to Parthagon and with Thomas began their secret preparations. Over the next few months the two had to learn to imitate the mutants’ behavior, memorize the minute details of their mountain lifestyle, and attain an appearance that wouldn’t arouse suspicion. Taking the form of a typical Arogdorian combat monster would take too much time and effort since it would be such a drastic transformation. Growing a second pair of arms alone could take years! The knights didn’t want to lose too much of their bulk and height either, so nor could they pass as ordinary people. They decided, then, to take

the form of Arogdorian forest brigands, nasty creatures the king's men periodically captured near the volcano. They looked much like ordinary humans, but had a particularly repulsive appearance and imposing dimensions, though their bodily proportions lacked harmony.

The first day after receiving permission to start the covert operation, Thomas woke from an afternoon nap feeling inspired and, without moving or opening his eyes, began to run through the techniques of entering the Phase. He tried to see his phantom hands in front of his eyes, tried to achieve rotation around his body's vertical axis, imagined himself swimming in the sea, tried to listen to the noise in his ears and to peer into the void before his eyes. Thomas spent a minute or so alternating these techniques, but they either failed to work or produced very weak sensations. He then acted as if he'd decided to fall asleep again, and the moment he slipped into light oblivion, he saw a coniferous forest. The distinct picture didn't fade even when he examined a knot on a crooked pine. The stability of space had been broken!

Still sensing his body lying in bed, Thomas set to the task at hand. He tried to make himself much shorter—and immediately felt his body shrink by jerky increments, emitting noises that sounded like bubbles bursting. Then as he rose from bed and headed to the mirror in the first-floor's hall, he began to stretch out his canine teeth into sharp tusks, push his expanding jaw forward, inflate his stomach, and sprout abundant hair all over his body, while balding on his head. When he reached the mirror, Thomas saw the typical forest brigand he used to copy out of history textbooks at school. He used his remaining time to retain the sensations of this new mutation for as long as he could. While he did so, he also flew over the volcano's various

gorges and crevices, in order to better understand their topography.

The future secret agents had to repeat this process several times a day to achieve the desired mutations within a few months. In the first weeks of their transformations they could still walk around Parthagon without too much worry. After that, though, they were forced to remain indoors most of the time. When they did occasionally venture out, they had to do so while wearing long hooded robes, which proved a most difficult challenge for Alain. The old school chum had moved into Thomas's room to make sure the two didn't die of boredom spending entire weeks in confinement.

To keep the mission as secret, Richard would visit once a week, bringing them rare books with the information they required and also reporting on the latest rumors about life on the volcano. Niels also participated in the preparations. He was now turning back into an ordinary, albeit very tall, man, which made his jowls seem even sharper and wider. Although the former legate had been discharged from the army, he couldn't put all worries about the kingdom's fragile security aside. Richard kept his friend's involvement a secret from the chancellor and the king, and also listened to his old friend's guidance on military matters. In fact, one might say Niels Dohr secretly continued to marshal the knights of Parthagon, seeing as the newly appointed commander-in-chief was perfectly aware he wasn't up to the task. The responsibility that had fallen on his shoulders burdened Richard. He couldn't quite comprehend how he'd been assigned such an important position.

By the time rainy October rolled around, the two friends had perfected their new mutations, the sight of which made their loved ones giggle sometimes to the point of hysterics. The

evening before their departure into deep enemy territory, Niels decided to give a concluding lecture. They were in the dining room, where they'd gathered ten minutes before dinner. Such punctuality didn't reflect their knightly dutifulness, but their gluttony: the seductive smells of roasted meat had been wafting out of the kitchen for some time now, making their stomachs rumble pitifully. Wearing yet another lilac dress, Marguerite placed large ceramic plates of beef fillet and stewed vegetables before the warriors. She then lit the candles in the two candelabras and, with a barely perceptible grin, turned to her brother at the head of the table. "Just do me a favor: let them keep a scrap of respect for the female sex."

"Not to worry, dear sister," replied Niels, hanging on the back of his chair the dark-brown jacket that had replaced his military uniform.

"They're just children!"

"Today they become real men!"

"Real men, you say?"

Sighing, the redhead looked over the forest brigands with sad eyes, patted them on their pale, bald heads, and went to her room. Left unattended, her wards immediately discarded the superfluous cutlery and tore into the roasted beasts with their bare hands, as if afraid the meat might run away at any moment. To the sounds of loud chewing and heartfelt burping, they emptied the huge platters within seconds, then leaned back and contemplatively picked their teeth and noses.

"You see," Niels said, wiping his hands on the glistening white tablecloth. "Richard really is a smart man, and he's given you plenty of useful insights. But there are some things only I can pass onto you. Yes, that's right, roll your eyes all you want, Thomas. My friend has lost his warrior instincts during his long

years of imprisonment—I mean marriage. And those are precisely the instincts you’re going to have to rely on in Arogdor.”

“Sometimes, I could bet you were their agent. Your own ‘instincts’ seem a little overdeveloped, if you ask me.” The more full-lipped of the forest brigands chuckled arrogantly.

“Why, that would make Marie Lilly’s agent!” added his swarthy friend, receiving a swift kick to the shin. “Come on, Niels, enough stalling. Tell us everything!”

“Well, at least one of you is game,” laughed the disgraced former knight before another loud burp shook the house’s thick walls. “The most important thing to remember is this: if you don’t check out every skirt that comes your way and try to hike it up, you’ll be recognized as Parthagonian spies in a split second.”

“Oh, gods!” Alain raised his hands and eyes up to the ceiling. “Am I dreaming? Are we going to heaven?”

“Hmm, but what about me?”

Scratching his forehead, Thomas only now began to realize his difficult assignment might include a few indelicate details he’d rather avoid so as to not upset his fiancée.

“It’s work,” remarked his companion as seriously as he could. “We’re saving our homeland.”

“And?”

“It requires sacrifice. Some sacrifice their lives, and others...”

“Ok, that’s enough,” interrupted Niels. “All that’s required is that you behave like men. Why do you think I get as much action as the rest of Parthagon combined? The men here have died out, and I’m the only one left. Poor gals!”

Thomas sighed heavily, but Niels was only beginning. The legate poured them all large cups of warm pear compote and

continued with relish. “Funny enough, that’s one thing they don’t have a problem with in Arogdor. The men are men, and the women—women. That’s the culture. What does that mean? It means: do what you want! Women naturally find directness and purposefulness attractive, so all you have to do is follow this rule: it’s better to regret what’s been done than to cry over a missed opportunity. We’ve all become too smart, too educated around here. Our brains are always switched on, whether we need them or not. When all we have to do is follow our desires. But this brain trouble makes life even harder for our ladies. You have one thing on your mind while she’s thinking about marrying you and how to tactfully get rid of you at the same time. Not to mention she’s thinking about how many children you’re going to have, where you’re going to live, what dress she’s going to wear to your funeral, are her legs smooth enough, what kind of weather are we going to have tomorrow, and where did her friend get that stunning purse, the conniving bitch. God knows what else they’ve got in those little heads of theirs! All that in just the first minute of your acquaintance!”

“Marvelous! But where do we start?” By now Alain was almost jumping up and down with excitement.

The lecturer stood, scratched his behind, and then slowly walked around the table, maintaining a suspenseful pause as his tusked pupils waited. “They’ve got mutant women over there that’ll make you start whether you like or not!” he finally uttered. “You pick out the one...the most...the one with the...Well, that part is up to you. Just make it—the one! The one who’s since she woke that morning has had a dozen mama’s boys chirp at her she’s magnificent, she’s the pinnacle of beauty, she’s all that and then some. You tell her you can’t get past because her fat ass is blocking the street. That’s all it takes! If

you're not a complete freak, she'll have to prove to herself she can make you worship her, too. That's a simplified example of course. I wouldn't recommend taking it literally! Got it?"

"What a fool I've been!" Alain grabbed his shiny bald head in his hands.

"It all sounds so stupid," said Thomas. "May I leave?"

"In other words, take control of the situation right away," continued Niels. "But act as if you haven't really decided whether you like her or not. Even if she is a beauty queen, pretend like she's no better than any regular girl. Remember: women aren't interested in immediate intimacy or weaklings groveling at their feet. They want to play around for a while and get used to you. Just follow these simple rules: use intrigue, think on your feet, and make the right moves."

"But what do we do next? That's the hard part."

"What's that, Alain? Is that how your mother raised you? Nothing hard about it. You talk to the girl, take her hand, and lead her someplace nearby."

"What if she doesn't want to go?"

Niels stopped pacing and stared at his pupil before scornfully shaking his head and finishing him off with a look full of contempt. "So you're the kind who asks? Wimp! How many women have you asked then?"

"Maybe ten...but nothing came out of it..."

"Of course it didn't. If you hadn't bothered asking—half of them wouldn't have objected, and the other half would've only pretended to."

"No way! You've got to be kidding me, Niels!"

"I'll tell you a secret: if you see a woman isn't totally nauseated by you, and she's even kind enough to make conversation, it means she's already made up her mind to say

yes. Otherwise, why would she spend time with you while you, donkey-brain that you are, sit around waiting for something?”

“So there’s no need to ask at all?”

“Alain, it’s best not to even broach the subject—as if you’ve got no particular intentions at all—but instead to act confidently at the right moment. Your job consists of nothing more than creating a comfortable situation for your lady.”

It was probably the most useful lecture Alain had ever heard. Thomas, however, was not quite as enthusiastic. In fact, he was pretty fed up with Niels’s amorous escapades. In any case, as morning approached, the two friends said goodbye to their loved ones and, under the cover of darkness, climbed into the military transport’s covered wagon. Accompanied by a special knightly convoy, they headed toward the North Gate, where their dangerous journey to the enemy’s capital was to begin.

* * *

It seemed an eternity of tossing along the bumpy road before the spies reached the foothills of the mountain ridge. On the way they passed through Sallep, the Tower of Perfection, and the stone bridge across the Snake River. The two friends, however, had almost no occasion to admire their native Celestia’s beauty, except when they looked through the cracks of the wagon’s semicircular walls, which were made of worn linen cloth. Given their unusual appearance and their mission’s secrecy, they only left the wagon at night, when camping in the uninhabited forests, and while wearing their long hooded robes.

Having already exhausted every possible subject of conversation, they’d spent the last couple of days in silence, sinking deeper and deeper into their own daydreams. Thomas’s

main hope was to run into Irèn, which is why he'd first come up with this whole mission. Since experiencing the enemy's true might firsthand and realizing the impossibility of overcoming the mutants in the foreseeable future, he saw no other way of finding his sister. Another fantasy the young man enjoyed was that of his peaceful future life with Marie and their offspring—someday when the mutants had finally been wiped off the face of the earth. Alain, on the other hand, saw the spy mission as an opportunity to have a good time and get some new experiences under his belt. As far as he was concerned, he was in for some good old fun, something he'd have been deprived of for at least a year in the putrid Tower of Perfection.

On their journey's eighth day, their limbs and bones painfully sore from lying on the sacks of ammunition and salt, the Parthagonians slowly approached the Tower of Recognition. Its heroic history—as the guardian of all paths coming down from the volcano through the Sixth River gorge—inspired awe in Parthagonians. Like the other five legendary towers, it stood on a low hill, around which all vegetation, except for grass, had been cleared. From this favorable position, the volcano's slopes were visible. Unfortunately, the mutants still occasionally managed to get past it and infiltrate the kingdom, especially on moonless nights.

Finally, the rattling cart drove through the tower's massive iron gate. In the stables the tower's commander met them. The taciturn Centurion Aaron Connell was gray-bearded, had shaggy eyebrows, and appeared to be just over forty. Unbuttoning his worn jacket, whose original blue color had faded to a pale gray, the knight inspected the metropolitan guests with a sullen glance. He then led them to the tower's

dungeon, where the visitors would have their first look at some real forest brigands.

The miscreants sat idle behind thick iron bars, their cell barren aside from the hay strewn about the earthen floor. All four Arogdorians were clad in baggy fur vests and hole-riddled trousers tucked into threadbare boots. With every breath, they exhaled a heady, marshy odor that infected the already stuffy dungeon air. This type of volcano-dweller belonged to one of Celesia's most despised social niches, and they were known to be lacking in intelligence, even compared to their mutant compatriots. They mutated to a limited degree, their only goal being to be as big and as frightening as possible. Any other use of the Phase was too sophisticated for their limited mental capacities. That was why they regularly ventured out of their native crater to seek their fortune, robbing and roughing up anyone unlucky enough to stumble upon them.

The gang was surprised to see two chubby specimens of their own kind—tusked, bald-headed, and heavy-jawed just like them—approaching by the light of flaming torches.

“Holy hell! Brethren!” one bandit yelped hoarsely and threw himself at the iron bars in excitement.

“What gives?” a second one asked with wary surprise. “Got any food?”

“Or drink! Brothers, a drop to wet the old...”

“I don't get it. Why are we here and they're over there?”

“Any smokes maybe, hey?”

“Them's some shady brothers.”

“Yeah, I don't likes the look of them one bit.”

“Hey, brothers, what are we, a dog's dinner?”

“Are you gonna give us something to eat or what, you lousy jackals?”

Still in shock from the stench and the rough dialect they would have to uphold, the spies observed their new tribe-mates quietly and then slouched back toward the stone staircase. The disappointed brigands cursed at them and called them names, all while continuing to beg for food and drink.

“Centurion, don’t they get fed?” Thomas asked as they climbed the stairs.

“Don’t worry about it. Do you have any more use for them?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Get rid of them!” ordered Connell, and at his word three armored knights unsheathed their swords with satisfied grins before rushing down into the dungeon.

They went to the commander’s ascetic office, the furniture consisting of a simple desk and a few chairs. Thomas and Alain were startled by the general feeling of antagonism in the air. They shuddered as they heard desperate screams echoing around the tower.

“Well, to cut a long story short, I don’t know what you’re up to,” grumbled Connell, polishing off one of the fried ribs in a bucket on his desk. “But I’m willing to get you out, as long as you’re no more than a day’s ride away.”

“We’re hoping it won’t come to that, and...”

“Of course it won’t, Yourg. You’ll be dead well before that.”

The spies’ thoughts, which had wandered off into the clouds, came crashing down as they looked at each other in panic. The world-weary commander said, “If by some miracle you don’t bite the dust, your main aim will be to return to the bottom of the gorge. Five days from now I will put troops on patrol there. They’ll await your return within a week. If you don’t make it, that’s your problem.”

“Well, that’s still something. Thank you.”

Demoralized, Thomas could think of nothing else to do but stuff himself with fried meat—unlike Alain, who remained frozen in his chair. The swarthy rogue was thinking the wild ride he'd been looking forward to was going to end badly. And by comparison, a dull year in service at the Tower of Perfection was not such a bad option after all.

After spending the rainy night at the tower and enjoying the sonorous symphony of a whole centuria of knights snoring in unison, the nervous brigands were delivered to the volcano's foothills in the early morning and left there in the pine forest's fog. They were dressed in the same trousers and bloodied fur vests that only yesterday the tower's dungeon prisoners had been wearing. They were armed only with axes and daggers, for their kind ordinarily used nothing else. Glancing at each other, the two friends walked the beaten path along the crystal clear Sixth River. Periodically, they'd stumble upon herds of malnourished livestock and impoverished homesteads. Glimpsing the dangerous guests, the peasants would drop everything and hide in their miserable little houses, or even flee into the forest. To Thomas's and Alain's surprise, life at the foot of the volcano was virtually identical to life within the kingdom's domain: the same simple people, the same indifferent cows and shaggy sheep. Everything was the same except people were noticeably poorer.

On their journey's second day, the gorge became increasingly rocky and steep, and the turbulent river had ever sharper turns and more frequent rapids. When the weather allowed it, they could admire the gorgeous views of Celesia's plains stretching far below, which brought dear memories to the spies' hearts.

"Did you hear that?" Alain stopped abruptly.

"What?"

“That!” His pal turned his bald head every which way. “And that! Someone screaming.”

Thomas could then make out faint screams and laughter from the western slope, somewhere deep in the cedar forest. Taking out his axe, he headed in the sounds’ direction.

“Wait! Where are you going?” exclaimed Alain, grabbing him by the vest.

But Thomas was no longer listening. His frustrated friend had no choice but to follow and risk running into trouble—he’d not yet had a taste of the unrestrained merriment he’d been looking forward to for several months now.

Traveling a little deeper into the forest, through piles of dry twigs and clods of dirt, they saw something they’ve never could’ve imagined running across within Parthagon’s borders. In the middle of a small clearing lay a tormented mansteed with a rumpled black mohawk. Around him bustled a gang of bald bandits all wearing brown bear-fur vests. Two gang members were trying to remove the mansteed’s saddle while the leader—the smallest and brightest of them—was scurrying around the bloody victim, a curved dagger sparkling in his hairy hand:

“Yep, there’ll be plenty of chow around here for a while! Sausages for everyone!”

“Brethren, the saddle alone is worth the hassle!” a second thief huffed while fiddling with the saddle straps. “Five gold ones it’ll fetch. At least!”

“I beg of you: don’t hurt me! You’ve already taken all my money,” moaned the round-cheeked, kind-eyed mansteed as it tried to get up. But he received a blow to the head, which caused another burst of hoots and giggles:

“Ha! This thing has still got some fight left in it!”

“Finish him off already, will ya? I’m sick of his squealing.”

Seeing this, Thomas's face flushed blood red. Try as Alain might to pull him back into the forest's safety, Thomas broke free and walked into the clearing. His friend could only swear under his breath and follow.

"Lookie here!" exclaimed a short-legged brigand, pulling out his dagger. "These lugs are trying to crash the party!"

"You got it backwards, I reckon, eh, brother?" blurted Thomas.

He came closer and kicked the forest brigand who was still trying to remove the saddle. Dumbfounded one of their own would act with such aggression, the bandits jumped up and, hiding behind the mansteed, raised their axes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That's downright impolite that is!"

"How'd you like me to graze you with this thing here, eh?"

"What you lot doing here? This our gorge and our mansteed. Beat it!" yelled Thomas, drilling his new compatriots with his gaze.

Not expecting such arrogance, the bandits found themselves at a loss, looking with trepidation at one another and at their massive uninvited guests. Their bewilderment was mild, however, compared to that the mansteed's face revealed. He was still making vain attempts to prop himself up with his right arm, his elbow broken.

"You know, brother, this has always been our gorge. Ain't that right?" asked the short one apprehensively.

"You know Cockeye?"

"Yeah...still alive is he?"

"Yeah, well go ask him whose gorge this is, brother." The Parthagonian spy had shifted to a friendlier tone. He tucked his

rusty axe under his belt. Alain, still mute with astonishment, followed his example.

“So, everything got switched around again, huh?” the appeased leader replied, and also put away his dagger.

“That’s right, and you go around threatening to spill brethren blood.”

“Well, just don’t say anything to Cockeye, will ya?”

“Seriously, brother to brother: don’t tell him, ok?” two other brigands mumbled in unison.

“Oh yeah? So you’re asking me to lie to a brother, huh? Would you do him a turn like that? Huh?” Thomas directed a steely gaze at the short-stack’s eyes and stepped closer to him.

“Get outta here! We weren’t even...”

“Well, then. Let’s see what happens when Cockeye himself gets here and you feed him your pile of horseshit.”

The brigands exchanged glances again, and at once their furry brown vests scattered in all directions. Their bald heads quickly disappeared in the thicket a little further up the slope, even though the spies could still hear the crunch of dry branches underfoot and their curses as they stumbled over sharp rocks.

“You’re going to hand me over to Cockeye now, aren’t you?” the mansteed inquired pitifully, his naive eyes filling with liquid.

“You know him?”

“No. Why? Thank you!”

“I was hoping you’d introduce us,” Alain said and his loud laughter filled the echoing gorge. Finally, the long-awaited fun could begin!

The confused mansteed thought for half a minute, listening to his mysterious saviors laughing, then started neighing

hysterically—to the point of hiccups—until finally he burst into bitter tears. His name was Bill Elvin. A few days ago he'd come upon the Tower of Recognition's patrolmen while heading out with a senior warrior on a secret errand to the Sunset City province. The four-armed mutant had been killed almost instantly, but Bill, through sheer luck, had managed to escape. The good-hearted mansteed had been trying unsuccessfully to get back to his native crater for three days after he'd broken his hand trying to climb the impenetrable cliffs the knights had driven him to.

A mansteed's greatest fear was that he should be slaughtered for his meat—after all, mansteed sausages and cured meats were a famous delicacy throughout Celesia. So the wounded Arogdorian, for fear of becoming somebody's dinner, thanked everyone he ran into, even if it was only for not making mincemeat out of him. Once he'd realized the unusual brigands had no intention of eating him, Bill was overjoyed. And once the spies had bandaged his broken arm, secured it with a sturdy splint, and even fixed his mohawk, the mansteed became their unconditional friend. As such, he readily agreed to help them bypass all the Arogdorian army's patrols and reach the crater's main entrance—the Gates of Freedom—without any further trouble.

* * *

Indeed, the good-natured Bill showed them how to avoid numerous guard positions and patrol routes, which saved the Parthagonians time. Otherwise they would've not been likely to reach the volcano's top. When they'd made it past these obstacles, the friendly threesome decided to spend their last

night in a cave they'd found. There Alain lit a fire by striking a spark from a piece of flint into a nest of dried sticks. Lounging around the crackling flames, the exhausted travelers ate their last morsels of salted meat, marbled with thick layers of fat. Thomas then decided to ask the question that had been bothering him since he'd learned mansteeds were people too. "Tell me something: what made you choose this mutation?"

"Yeah, why'd you do it?" Alain said. "You get no riches, no respect. People ride you, give you orders. Seems a little modest and lacking ambition, if you ask me."

"Well, that depends how you look at it," announced Bill Elvin, his full cheeks stretching into a self-important grin. "Few people know about the advantages we have. Thank you!"

"Such as?" Thomas said.

"Everyone wants to be happy. Right?"

"Right."

"But what is happiness? It's a life without worries! Happiness is always being able to count on having enough grub and a warm place to sleep, not having any complicated problems to solve, or responsibilities to shoulder, or too much work to do, or..."

"I think we get it," interrupted Alain.

"Well, to cut a long story short, why should I worry about any of those things when everyone else can sort them out for me?" the beaming mansteed practically sang. His round mug almost burst with pride at his ingenious answer.

"You sly bugger!"

"No, seriously. Occasionally they'll take me along on raids into Parthagon, or give me some other task here and there. The rest of the time, they give me food and water, and I can rest

easy. I eat and I sleep—that's my carefree life. And to think some people consider us imbeciles!"

Of course, neither Thomas nor Alain could object to Bill's logic without revealing their true origins, but the Arogdorian's curious answer made them go to bed with slightly different pictures of the world. They'd both been raised to be ambitious, and they'd never even stopped to think that the opposite way of life also had its indisputable advantages.

By their journey's third day, they saw no more forest, and the once mighty river had dwindled into a miserable, frozen stream. Wherever they looked, there were only gray cliffs covered in blinding snow. And in the distance they could glimpse the Gates of Freedom, its mighty iron gates dug into the crater's edge. Mutant foot-soldiers guarded the gates, and they were inspecting and then letting in two lines of wagons and various folks in furs and sheepskin coats.

To avoid suspicion, the heavily breathing spies bid farewell to Bill and, as if nothing at all were unusual about them, took their place in the nearest line. However, forest brigands had few admirers, and everyone around them watched them warily. The lines largely consisted of simple people from the volcano's foothills who carried charcoal, firewood, logs, furs, and a variety of other goods on their rickety carts. Just like Thomas's father, who used to go to Sallep to sell his weekly catch.

A third line next to the gates was moving rather quickly—apparently it was for military personnel. In their line the spies saw quite a few supply vehicles, likely carrying loot pillaged from Parthagonian lands or smuggled from Sunset City. Bill now joined this line and, waving his bandaged hand to his rescuers, he soon disappeared inside the gate.

Finally, after an agonizing wait in the biting cold, as the twilight began to thicken and ice crystals started to fall like fine needles from the clear sky, the spies were at the Gates of Freedom. These massive wooden doors, as tall as three men, were covered in thick iron sheets studded with sharp spikes the size of a man's arm. Filling the frame's entire height was an engraving of a volcano with a four-pointed star shining above it. And yet the gates were covered with loose rust, dangling rivets, and deep cracks.

As they approached, the head guard, with a thick scar on his right cheek, rudely pushed them aside. He clearly did not wish to let the brigands through. His tusked mug and atrocious matted dreads made the blood in Thomas's veins boil. Alain was stupefied—after all, he'd never come this close to one of these four-armed giants.

However, the spies could not simply give up, and so were forced to summon up their friendliest tone to address the senior warrior. They threw up their left arms in greeting: "Hail, Arogdor!"

"What is it, scum?"

"Brother, let us in for a day, eh?" uttered Alain, his knees shaking.

"Beat it, I said!"

"Oh, come on, don't be like that."

"What? I said get out of here!"

"Brother, we's only here to clap eyes on some of those mutant girls you got here," Thomas threw two silver coins at the guard's boots, a sum more than enough for a mind-melting night of entertainment in a local tavern.

“Oh, I see,” drawled the soldier, picking up the bribe and letting the brigands through. “Well, why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

Passing through a rocky tunnel echoing with the sound of tired footsteps, and pinching themselves to make sure this was actually happening, the spies entered sleepy Arogdor, which was spread across the collapsed volcano’s cup-shaped crater. A huge city, maybe twice as large as Parthagon, stretched before their eyes. The two had already noticed the sharp smell of soot as they approached the summit, but now it assaulted their pampered metropolitan noses. They saw snow-covered rooftops and dim lights shining from small windows, as well as hundreds of moon-lit smoke pillars stretching into the starry sky. They had expected to see hell on earth, but they were genuinely interested in the settlement, which had at its center a towering, grand castle, and an obelisk in the form of a giant sword thrust down from the firmament.

At first, Thomas looked at every passerby, hoping to spot Irèn among them. But the Arogdorian women buried their faces deep within their long coats, shaggy pelts, and fur hats with tails, which made studying them difficult, never mind spotting his sister’s features in their midst. Eighteen years had passed and, against all odds, he’d made it through every obstacle to arrive here. But was she even alive? And would he recognize her?

Barely staying upright, the two pals stumbled into the first inn they could find, right across the way from the Gates of Freedom. The two-story stone building had a cramped foyer full of threadbare furniture and an inner courtyard that led to external staircases and terraces if one could make it past the piles of rotting wooden carts. Accustomed to cleanliness, the

Parthagonians were struck by the inexplicable slovenliness of their musty lodgings.

This temporary shelter's only asset was its caretaker, Rita, who possessed mesmerizing icy-blue eyes and blond curls. Having introduced herself, she let in the frozen guests with a wink and treated them to hot sugar-water near the fireplace. The young-looking woman wore a bright-colored woolen dress with a plunging neckline that showed off her attributes. And this instantly drove poor Alain out of his mind. In Parthagon only the most outrageous ladies, particularly those devious cavaliers had recently abandoned, wore such provocative outfits. There they ran the risk of being arrested for promiscuity, but in Arogdor it was such a standard sight that no one bothered to remark upon it. Thomas wondered if they'd accidentally stumbled into a brothel, but recalling the materials he'd memorized, he relaxed.

Despite her appearance, and judging by her conversation, the blonde was clearly no spring chicken, and thanks to her experience she suspected something was amiss. And since Alain was sitting with his mouth open and his eyes displaying a look approaching idiocy, Thomas whispered an indecent remark in Rita's ear and lustily slapped her behind, which wobbled in return. Giggling and blushing coquettishly, the woman was thus convinced of the brigands' trustworthiness and showed them to their miserable closet of a room, which cost five copper coins a night. It was a glum, dingy cell without any windows or amenities and filled entirely by two rickety beds with straw for mattresses. Even though the friends could afford better, they dared not give away that their appearance as impoverished forest idiots was an act. Therefore, exhausted by the three-day

journey uphill, they climbed into their smelly rot-ridden beds and passed out.

* * *

The following day, waking up around lunchtime and finding themselves devoured by bedbugs, fleas, and lice, Thomas and Alain went out for a breath of fresh air. There, they were blinded by the unusually bright sun, which shone down on poorly laid pavement covered in half-melted slush and dirt. It all exuded such a stench of rot and manure the poor brigands vomited the meager contents of their stomachs. Since the city had no sewage system, its residents dumped their trash directly out of their windows and doors, where the beggars, of whom there was no shortage, would ransack it in search of food. As well, a layer of smoldering black soot covered everything around them. This seemed to be of little concern to the numerous street sweepers, who spent their day doing god knows what.

Everywhere they looked, carts and carriages were rattling their way somewhere, harnessed to thin mares or well-fed mansteeds. Tawny-skinned mutants wandered among them, wearing sheepskin coats and fur pelts. And wild dogs, their ribs sticking out from under their skin, scurried about aimlessly. Scrappy little thieves were busy escaping pursuit, stepping on the tails of huge rats that squeaked with arrogance: they considered themselves the volcano's true owners. Only fabulously attractive women dressed in flashy coats and pelts, their heels clicking loudly against the pavement, pleased the eye.

The city's main claim to fame, the principal point that distinguished it from Parthagon, was its residents' freedom to

mutate as they pleased. And so many of the locals had mastered this skill far better than King Albert III's subjects.

The women, in addition to maintaining their youth and beauty, mainly sought three types of appearance: the thin tomboy, the juicy young mademoiselle, and the curvaceous femme-fatale. All enjoyed equal demand from the elite caste of four-armed soldiers, whose attention was what this competition was all about. Some of the Arogdorian women had rather creative approaches to mutation and added their own spin to the traditional stereotypes of attractiveness. Poor Alain more than once stumbled at the sight of a woman with three breasts or even four, which were not necessarily the same size and not necessarily located where one would expect to find them. That's how easily the volcano residents could grow extra organs or even change their sex. All without anyone so much as batting an eyelid!

However, this unbridled freedom came with its own problems. The more the Arogdorians amused themselves with various mutations, the faster they grew bored of their current appearances and the more they wanted to change again. They became addicted to constantly modifying their bodies, and not necessarily for the better. As a result, their mutations were often absurd or grotesque perversions, nor did they ever achieve the satisfaction of possessing ideal bodies. To experience any joy, they always had to improve or add a little something. And thus the vicious cycle continued.

Along with the four-armed warriors and the mansteeds, other popular male mutations abounded on the city streets. Most often these were builders and workers who resembled huge apes with short legs and arms hanging down to their knees. Every now and then, skinny couriers would whizz by on all fours,

bearing a striking resemblance to greyhounds in leather suits. Behind the shop counters, merchants rifled through their goods with long stick-like arms. But most impressive were the rare giants; they had long and matted fur growing over their bodies to protect them from the cold. These hairy mutants, three times the height of an ordinary man, walked slowly along the narrow streets, whistling heavily through their noses and constantly chewing something.

Many of the volcano's residents didn't fit any of these categories, playing with their malleable bodies, according to their personal needs or flights of fancy, as if they were soft clay. It was also not uncommon to see transitory forms of mutations. For example, plenty of young warriors walked around with a small pair of lower arms and barely discernible bio-armor. And many Arogdorians didn't master the Phase in the local schools. They were condemned to live out the boring and extremely short lives of ordinary mortals, occupying the most unenviable social niches.

Arogdor was no less interesting than its inhabitants. Because its narrow streets twisted and turned, lined with monolithic stone houses with tiny windows, with few exceptions the city seemed gray and faceless. Its dominant structure was the granite obelisk of a giant sword erected in the square before the Arogdorian leader's castle. Werner Eisenberg's residence, in turn, resembled the Royal Palace in Parthagon, but had only two towers. This dark-gray castle was surrounded by elegant mansions, as well as barracks and other administrative buildings. There were also several temples with conical roofs in which citizens praised their numerous gods for their rare joys in life, but for some reason didn't blame them for their far more abundant troubles. This same principle governed the

Arogdorians' attitude toward their leader, who could always look to temples' popularity to assess his position's stability.

Arogdor also had huge wooden barns located at its three gates. Resources looted from Parthagon were kept here. Peasants' tributes also replenished these stores. They lived on the volcano's territory, and the almost unrelenting cold preserved the edible provisions throughout most of the year. In any case, Javer's army's excessive gluttony rarely allowed any food to go to waste.

Having studied the city, registered his first impressions, and even become a little used to his surroundings, Alain decided to apply Niels Dohr's recommendations.

"Well, shall we try it?"

"Brother of mine," Thomas tried to dissuade him while staying in character, "we've got plenty to do as it is. Maybe give it a pass for now?"

"What was it you're supposed to say? Remember?"

The swarthy forest brigand had been eyeing a girl walking ahead of them for a block now. She had a short black pelt and a tall fur hat with a wolf's tail. She was strutting in leather trousers that hugged her juicy figure and walked as if beckoning onlookers to get better acquainted with her swiveling hips. For the longest time, the spy could not muster the necessary courage, but then finally summoned all his knightly mettle and, with a loud cough, ventured a romantic greeting. "Hey, you! Tub of lard!"

"What's that?" She turned around.

"I think you're a bit off the mark," Thomas uttered quietly, stepping aside.

"Make way, I said...dirty swine..." The lady killer pursued his strategy, though now doubt crept into his voice.

“The nerve!”

“We decent folk can’t get through...”

“Hey, moron, where’d you get your manners?”

The offended lady turned out to be, first and foremost, not a lady: Alain became green as she turned around in her skintight outfit. Second, the mutant slapped the Parthagonian agent so hard his burgeoning libido went splat, and his ears jangled, and lightning flashed before his eyes. The situation looked so comical that amused passersby laughed.

“Ha, buddy!”

“You’ve been out in the woods for way too long!”

“That’s brigands for ya!”

“They sure know their way around the ladies, huh!”

So even though Alain’s attempt at courtship didn’t quite work out as he’d hoped, the two friends felt they were fitting in. Apparently, similar incidents occurred in the crater all the time. Men would attempt to fondle the women passing by them, and the women would curse the brazen offenders and give them a well-deserved beating. Many beauties didn’t even pay attention to the hundreds of impudent hands trying to grab hold of them. They just went about their business as if nothing were the matter.

Since there were no rules in the city, free love reigned, and a huge, manly mutant warrior could transform into a skinny girl using the Phase or vice versa. This kind of behavior was on display everywhere and elicited no outrage from its residents. In fact, creatures with pronounced characteristics of both sexes flashed before the eyes of dumbfounded agents while other passersby didn’t even glance twice. Squeamish and rather conservative by nature, Thomas preferred to turn a blind eye to

it all, and he ignored his overexcited friend's barrage of lewd jokes.

Having eaten hot flatbreads and explored the castle's surroundings, and still scratching their flea-bitten hides, the Parthagonian spies arrived at one of the city's many markets. To their horror, the wares consisted mostly of rotten and frost-bitten products that lay in uneven piles on the soot-covered earth. Circumventing the stalls and trying to conceal their disgust, the friends bought an issue of the *Star of Arogdor* from an unwashed paperboy. The daily bulletin was one large sheet of crumpled paper covered in clumsy handwritten letters. From it, they learned the latest news, including heroic reports from the border, the wise leader's most recent decrees, and promising achievements in mutation science. According to the reports, some Arogdorians working in a secret lab had been turning into birds, fish, moles, individual objects, and even small buildings with increasing degrees of success. There were also actively experimenting with skin pigmentation, exploring the possibility of making their skin transparent, as well as playing with different shades and colors.

Reading about this previously unimaginable diversity of mutations, Alain became inspired. "Listen, I have a brilliant idea!"

"I'm listening."

"Why don't we grow really big heads? Shall we try it?"

"What for?"

"We'll be the smartest guys around, country bumpkin."

"There are quite a lot of those kinds of brainiacs around here already, I bet. Just like there are in Parthagon."

"And?"

“Where we’re from they either go off into the woods or throw themselves off the Wall.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s not easy being clever. They say we only manage to stay alive because we don’t understand what’s happening around us. You’ll see—you don’t want to live with all that knowledge.”

“Well, that’s a drag,” said Alain, disappointed. Then he perked back up. “What about making our heads smaller?”

“Now there’s an idea, brother!”

Watching the Arogdorians, Thomas was constantly catching himself thinking it wouldn’t hurt to have a few of the simpler mutations he was witnessing—both to gain advantage in the never-ending war and in everyday life. However, the ethics committee forbade any add-ons. And these same rules were what preserved the city’s human appearance.

There were some peculiarities of life in the crater Thomas couldn’t approve of. For example, the ubiquitous availability of inebriating beverages and intoxicating herbs, as well as the presence of brothels and gambling establishments. Born in a pristine rural environment and then raised in the prim capital, he considered all this vulgar savagery damaging society’s foundations. Alain, though—who obviously needed such things in his life and saw nothing shameful or reprehensible in them—couldn’t have disagreed more.

The Arogdorian disregard for education also struck Thomas. The Phase was essentially the only subject its denizens ever learned, discounting some basic writing and arithmetic. The children here began their education very young, just as they did in Parthagon, but once they’d turned ten they were released from their stuffy schools, since they actively used the mutation of accelerated growth. This is why the huge four-armed soldiers

in General Javer's army were sometimes quite naive and behaved like teenagers: more often than not, that's what they were.

Overall, people appeared to be living impoverished lives. Despite the possibility of living for centuries, people were constantly perishing in the endless war and in the chaos of the city, where crime flourished, violence was accepted, and—in times of famine—even cannibalism was not off the table. While the elite could easily live for two centuries or more, ordinary people considered themselves very lucky to reach fifty.

There were, however, many exceptional characters here who shone through this intellectual bleakness. For example, the long-standing leader, Werner Eisenberg, maintained the mutation of an ordinary attractive man, was well educated, and ardently supported high culture and science. The same was true of his extraordinary commander-in-chief, who had defected from Parthagon. Because the volcano was so close to the kingdom, subjects who'd turned their backs on Albert III often sought and found refuge here.

People arrived in Arogdor for various reasons. Some were banished from the kingdom, as Javer had been for stepping over permitted boundaries. Some hid out to escape punishment for their crimes. But most came because they thirsted for personal freedom. That was the force that had driven the romantics who'd founded the city about four centuries ago. At first it had thrived peacefully, its civilization developing and advancing like any other urban district of the kingdom, but its growing disagreements with Parthagon led to greater and greater confrontations.

Toward evening, having wandered all day searching for Irèn and the causes behind Arogdor's increased military activity, the

pair went into a tavern hoping to run into at least one drunken warrior with a loose tongue. The one-story building was not far from the leader's castle, and the loud sounds of deep-voiced laughter, female squealing, and general merriment emerging from it could be heard from the other end of the street. The tavern consisted of a large hall furnished with decaying wooden tables and chairs, among which waitresses were scurrying, serving the overexcited customers. Chaos reigned, smelling of sweat and dried vomit. Once drunk, the mutants were prone to amuse themselves with one of two worthy pursuits: pummeling each other's inebriated mugs or groping the giggling ladies.

Sitting down next to a tipsy but lethargic-looking four-armed monster, the spies, for three copper coins, ordered two mugs of beer for themselves and one for their neighbor, not forgetting to slap the apathetic waitress on her ample rump, barely covered by her ripped-up dress. When their order arrived, the salty-bitter taste of the Arogdorians' drink of preference, together with its bouquet of rotten fish, was less pleasant than the friends had hoped. Seeing their grimacing faces, the drunken warrior said, "Not good enough for you, you mangy forest dogs?"

"This stuff tastes like piss, brother," replied Alain, spitting the beverage onto the floor and wiping his tongue on his hairy arms.

"It doesn't taste like piss, it is piss!"

Looking over the bald forest brigands sternly, the mutant burst out laughing, clearly happy to have found someone to talk to. He seemed to have completed the combat portion of his evening judging by the bloody abrasions under his left eye and his sagging leather pants. Sensing this was just the contact they'd been looking for, Alain decided to chat him up. "How's living, brave defender?"

“Splendid! How else could it be in such a wonderful town?”

“Wonderful?”

“Uh huh.”

“But the streets are full of shit...”

“So are people’s heads! And the government—full of it. We are a most harmonious nation!”

“So you wouldn’t change a thing, then?”

“You kidding me? We’re living the good life here!”

“Hmm, even in the service?”

“You bet! Thrashing those ironclad wimps day in, day out. Poor little Albert must be bawling his little eyes out!”

Thomas flushed red with anger and was barely able to restrain himself. Fragments of memories from Yarta flashed before his eyes, recollections of chopping a similar looking mutant into tiny bits.

“Brother, it ain’t the knights’ fault, is it?” continued Alain. “They just doing their job.”

“Well, it’s not our fault either! So how come they’re supposed to be all good and pure over there, while we are seen as some kind of animals? How do you figure that?”

“That’s their king, brother. Brainwashing them.”

“Yeah, like we’re not brainwashed ourselves. That son of a two-bit whore sits up there in his castle and feeds us fairytales! But at least around here we know only it’s half-true—at most. Those nancy boys over there never even think to doubt their darling little king. Whatever he says goes. Hell, they even pray on it. The cretins!”

The mutant banged his fist on the table, while proud Thomas leapt to his feet, unable to bear any more vile insults. By some miracle Alain dragged him back to the table, saying, “That’s the

god's honest truth, brother. My friend here is beside himself, that's how much he hates them."

"Good man!" the warrior said to Thomas, looking at him with clouded eyes. He took a swig of beer and then belched so loud the tavern's windowpanes shook. "Everyone's got it all backwards. They think we're nothing but brainless jackals, even though we know exactly where we stand. It's those damn goody-two-shoes who are as blind as newborn pups! To Arogdor!" he roared raising his tankard.

"To Arogdor! To Arogdor!" came the reply from every corner of the tavern with such gusto that even the spies had to repeat the toast so as not to arouse any suspicion.

"But we'll show them. Soon—another month—and mighty Parthagon will fall!" announced the drunkard proudly and with a great thud fell off his chair in a stupor.

"What will we show them?" Thomas tried asking, lifting the snoring mutant's head by his sticky dreads.

"Drunk bastard," said Alain, deeply disappointed. "What do we do now? Wait for him to come to?"

"How long will that take? An hour? A week?"

"I don't know. Niels didn't cover that part."

The two pals looked at each other, shrugged, and began scouring the tavern for new leads. Off to the side, a very young girl was sitting and innocently blinking her bulging eyes. A checkered school frock, blond braids, and a helpless look completed the maiden's angelic look. The spies could not figure out how this lovely creature found herself at such a late hour in such a place of wickedness.

"Shall we give it a shot?" whispered Alain.

“I’m happy to watch.” Just in case Thomas moved his chair a little further from his pal. Alain didn’t wait long to embark on his adventure:

“Hey, lady!”

“Oh, are you talking to me?”

“You’re quite the treat for a man’s eye!”

“Thank you, handsome.”

“My other eye is pretty happy to see you too.”

The cute Arogdorian sweetly giggled in her thin voice, sizing up the ridiculous-looking forest brigands, and then went up to the astonished Alain and placed herself on his lap. Thomas realized this was his cue to leave, but he couldn’t help taking one last jab at his friend. “Hey, brother, as a parting souvenir, you wouldn’t mind sharing which eye of yours got happy first?”

“Off with you! Back to your flea den!”

“Doesn’t your friend want to stay?” said the disappointed girl, puckering her lips into a perfect pout, which brought Alain to ecstasy and affirmed his belief in the local gods.

“Well, well,” Thomas could only mutter as he headed toward the exit.

Once he returned to the inn, he tried to digest the day’s events. Although the friends had found nothing unusual, they now knew a new offensive was on the way. Moreover, if the drunken warrior’s words could be believed, the mutants were preparing something extraordinary if they were really going to attack the impregnable Parthagon!

At the inn, in the open terrace’s twilight, the fatigued spy bumped into Rita’s replacement. Unable to lift his tired eyes higher than the round-faced brunette’s décolleté, he whispered some sweet nothings into her ear and despondently shuffled off to his lair, where the hungry bedbugs awaited. The young lady

only chuckled contemptuously, sticking her tongue out at his receding back, and then, with dance-like movements, went about her business.

* * *

The next morning, Alain woke in an unfamiliar house, soaked in the smell of saccharine-sweet perfume. The huge, soft bed on which he lay was designed to accommodate mutants of all kinds and was in a bedchamber overlooking both towers of Eisenberg's castle. Everything was either gilded or made of gold: the walls with their wave-shaped stencil pattern, the landscape paintings' thick frames, the candlesticks, the chandelier, the floor lamps, the armchairs, the cupboards, the tables, the high door frames, the carved ceiling, the window frames, and much more. Even the curtains, the countless pillows, the plump duvets, and the fuzzy carpet all sparkled with threads of the yellow metal! The Parthagonian spy had never seen such crazy wealth, not even in Albert III's palace, where he'd had the fortune to attend a royal ball.

Through the persistent ringing in his aching head, he heard the soft rustling of bed sheets and someone smacking their lips behind him. Glancing over, the forest brigand saw yesterday's schoolgirl, at which a tusked smile spread over his face and a sly look lit up his scorching black eyes. The enchanted nymph, wrapped to the waist in a soft blanket, was pleasantly stretching while smiling at him with her wind-chapped lips. "Hi."

"Hey, gorgeous." Alain barely squeezed out a hoarse answer from his parched throat. "Looks like I'm coming down with something. My head is killing me. Where are we?"

“I think you might’ve overdone it a little last night, dear.”

“Oh, yeah? Is it like this every time?”

“Oh, what a foolish youngster I’ve nabbed myself!” the girl said contentedly and hugged her dark-skinned boy toy, greedily feeling his proud and hairy belly. “Used to happen to me too about a century ago, but then I got used to it.”

“How many years ago?” Alain groaned in horror, pushing away the creature who was reaching her skinny arms and plump lips toward his tender regions. “Did you say century?”

“What of it? I was a man back then to boot.”

Spitting and wiping off his body with the sheet, the naked Parthagonian leapt from the bed. “How do I get out of here?”

“Where’d you even come from?” she said, offended and upset.

“You’ve all lost your damn minds around here!” moaned the spy, quickly putting on his clothes and trying to hold back tears as he remembered the good old Tower of Perfection. He cursed Thomas’s name. And it had been such a promising start!

“So you really are a knight?”

“What? Who told you?”

“You did.”

“I said no such thing.”

“Last night you were going to marry me and desert the king!”

“No way!”

“Huh, you don’t remember anything from last night, do you?”

“Is that how it works?”

“How is it possible you don’t know that? I thought you were joking about the knights!” The creature jumped from the bed and started frantically ringing the gilded bell used to summon the servants. “Guards! Guards!”

The unfortunate lover had no other recourse but to break a window using a large candelabra, nimbly jumping down from

the second floor of the mansion and then running as fast as he could, avoiding the main streets and wincing at recollections still bouncing around his head from the previous night.

Meanwhile, Thomas, bitten anew by hordes of bloodthirsty insects, grew tired of waiting for his friend and decided to explore the city on his own. Walking down the stairs and into the vestibule to sip water from a pitcher—always kept full for the poor guests—he again saw the replacement chambermaid from last night. The curvaceous brunette was wearing a woolen dress and an apron, and she was busy raking the ashes from the fireplace, quietly singing a cheerful song and wiggling her behind to its rhythm. Having quenched his thirst, the spy approached her, awkwardly attempting to act like the worldly brigand he was supposed to be: “Hey, lady, a question if I might, eh?”

“Keep it clean this time, will you?”

“I’ll do my best,” chuckled Thomas, looking closely at her strikingly familiar nose with its almost imperceptible bump. “You wouldn’t happen to know a sweet little piglet named Irèn?”

“That’s an uncommon name.”

“Uh huh.”

“And she’s a real piglet?”

“You bet! Her bottom alone—mmm, mmm.”

“You don’t say!”

“So, you know her or what?”

“I do actually. It just so happens—that’s my name! Ha ha ha!” The maid laughed a bell-like laugh, stunning Thomas with her voice and her lively hazel-green eyes. “But I’m certainly not your fat pig.”

“Irèn?”

“Yes.”

“Listen to me. Ignore my appearance—it’s a mutation.”

“Who are you?” said the girl in surprise, looking closely at the brigand.

“It’s me. Thomas.”

Turning pale, the young Arogdorian cried out and, with tears in her eyes, threw herself at her brother, whom she’d lost hope of ever seeing again. The last time they’d been together he’d been sentenced to certain death, but she had still insisted on working at the inn closest to the Gates of Freedom, so as to keep abreast of all the comings and goings of guests arriving in Arogdor from outside the crater. Her heart had always known she would run into someone from her homeland.

“I knew you’d survived. I had faith, Thomas!”

“Me too, Irèn,” he answered, unable to hold back his tears.

A few minutes later, when their emotions had subsided a little, the happy forest brigand led his sister to his room so they could talk in private. There, he briefly told her about his life after her abduction and, of course, explained his current situation.

“So you’re in mortal danger again, brother?”

“Don’t worry. The most important thing is we’re both alive and we’ve finally found each other! No one can separate us now! After all, I’m a royal knight. Can you believe it? I made it!”

“You’re a hero!”

“I just have to find out what Eisenberg is up to, and then you and I...”

The heavy sound of running feet and the next moment, frazzled and exhausted Alain Ospe burst through the rotted door with a crash. “Thomas, look out!” he pointed at the befuddled girl while supporting himself against the wall. “She’s an old geezer!”

For a few long seconds, everyone remained still. Only the wheezing breath of the unlucky lover disturbed the awkward silence until Irèn, scowling, finally gathered the nerve to break it. “Well, then. And who’s this?”

“Alain. My mission partner and friend.”

“And we’re leaving!” his friend remembered his purpose.

“Why? This is my sister.”

Alain gasped, looking over the charming girl. But he quickly gathered his wits. “Then we’re leaving together. Right now!”

“What’s wrong?”

“They’re out looking for us.”

“Come with me,” commanded Irèn, leaving the room with rapid, determined steps.

Grabbing their axes and daggers, the ineffective spies left the inn and headed toward the Gates of Freedom, following the girl. At the tunnel, they came across a bunch of bored-looking mutants sitting on a long log.

“Irèn?” One of the warriors with a scar on his cheek, got up to greet them. “Have you thought about my proposal, kitten?”

Offering an indifferent smile, the girl approached the monster, threw her arms around his neck, and hungrily pressed her lips to his tusked mouth. His friends whistled and immediately began to shower them with vulgar jokes about quivering dreadlocks and extra hands. The guards got so carried away they paid no attention to the forest brigands, who scuttled past them. As Thomas disappeared inside the tunnel, Irèn pushed away her disheveled fiancé and ran after her brother.

“Where are you going?” barked the warrior. “I’m waiting!”

“One minute, dearest!”

She quickly caught up with Thomas on the other side of the gate, where he sat between the huge snow-covered boulders,

waiting for her. He took her by the trembling hand and pulled her after him as he headed downhill, where, through rifts in the whipped-cream clouds, he could see their home—the kingdom of Albert III.

But she escaped his grip.

“I can’t come with you.”

“What? Why? I only just found you!”

“I know, but I can’t.”

“Irèn, it’s me—Thomas. Are you really refusing to leave with me?”

“I’ll explain it later, somehow. Run!”

“I won’t go without you!”

“We will meet again.” The Arogdorian girl burst into tears, pushing her brother in the direction of the gorge. “Now go, quickly!”

Realizing every minute was precious and that his friend was frozen in shock, Alain forcibly dragged him toward the gorge. Coming to his senses, Thomas soon ceased to resist and, waving goodbye to his sister, quickly ran down, periodically looking back with idle hope.

Crying, Irèn slowly went back to the crater, where the frantic warriors were closing the gate. A group of lean couriers leapt out the narrowing opening like a pack of scalded dogs, one after the other, their pointy snouts stretching forward. Wrapped in tight-fitting leather suits, the nimble mutants scattered in all directions, running on all fours.

Through until the following morning, Thomas and Alain continued racing down the mountain, not stopping for rest or food and avoiding the patrols Bill, the gentle mansteed, had pointed out on the way up. Exhausted and almost passing out due to shortness of breath, they began to let down their guard

and make less effort to hide themselves. As bad luck would have it, a member of the last patrol squad noticed the exhausted friends moving through a rocky crevice and gave chase. Cheerful and full of strength, the mutants atop their mansteeds caught up to the failed spies in the blink of an eye and on a rushing mountain river bank knocked them off their feet.

“Rotten scoundrels! We’ve got you now!”

“That’s thirty gold coins well earned, men!”

“Break their shins,” ordered the senior warrior who wore red dreads.

One of the mutants jumped off his mansteed on to Alain’s leg, which crunched and caused the poor knight to scream at the top of his lungs, frightening away the birds from the stocky cedars’ branches. The mutant then turned toward Thomas, enemy axes pinning him to the cold ground, but just as his leg was to suffer the same fate, the familiar whistle of arrows once again saved the former peasant’s hide. Two pierced-through mutants toppled to the ground as the others desperately rushed the Tower of Recognition’s squadron, which was now hurtling toward them under gray-bearded Aaron Connell’s command.

The mutants stood no chance against the Parthagonians, who slit their throats in seconds.

“Well, you do know how to call for help,” joked the centurion, dismounting next to Alain and wiping his blade on the groaning knight’s fur vest. “That’s one thing they still teach you pipsqueaks at the Academy.”

* * *

Back in the safety of the Tower of Recognition, Thomas, without resting or even eating, marched into the commander’s

office and, sitting at his desk, wrote down every detail of their adventures, which took up several sheets of paper. He then sent this long letter with a messenger who promised on his life to deliver it to the commander-in-chief within two days. Thomas hoped that by saving four or even five days of travel, he'd help the capital better prepare for the impending attack. Only then did he pay Alain a visit in the infirmary and, after that, fall into a peaceful sleep.

The next day, when they set out on their journey back home, they had a whole week to consider what had happened while they were being tossed around in a military convoy's covered wagon. Their two short nights in Arogdor had fundamentally changed their outlook on the mutants, their own native kingdom, and life in general. For the younger Alain, who'd suffered more painful encounters, the experience imploded his entire universe. Even though he'd suffered torment and faced adversity, the freedom and permissiveness of life on the volcano astounded and fascinated him—even if it came at the price of deplorable living conditions. To his dismay, he even identified with those people who'd founded the city in the crater and fled from Parthagon's golden cage to it.

Thomas too no longer saw the volcano nation as the epitome of evil, which was what he'd imagined since early childhood. Despite Arogdorian life displaying obvious wretchedness and absurdity, perfectly ordinary people inhabited the city and acted out of perfectly understandable motives. Moreover, in some ways, they were much freer and happier than the Parthagonians. Thomas couldn't wrap his head around how the rivaling states' inhabitants could all be ordinary people who only wanted peace and goodness, but who also jumped at any opportunity to slit one another's throats.

The whole unending conflict seemed to consist of good people with valiant intentions going up against other good people with the same lofty ideals—all of them deceiving, betraying, and killing one another and then rejoicing in the carnage. How could this be? When did it all start? Who'd set in motion this deadly pendulum, which now seemed unstoppable?

For the first time, the former peasant took a sober look at his capital and finally understood what Niels had always maintained: their native kingdom had so tightly constricted itself within its own invented framework of rules that it fell victim to its own limitations. All these regulations helped the city preserve its human face and highly refined civilization. But the war with the fierce adversary was a centuries-long stalemate that led to nothing but pointless bloodshed. And now this unresolved problem had finally become a real threat to Parthagon.

Thomas's biggest shock, however, was his reunion and then abrupt parting from Irèn. He couldn't imagine the reason she'd decided to stay in Arogdor, that smelly fortress of lust and filth. Since he'd been a child, all his naive dreams ended with him saving his sister and happily bringing her back from the volcano to live in Parthagon. Any other turn of events hadn't even occurred to him—provided he found her. But his plan had gone wrong, butting up against cruel reality. What was keeping her there? What could be stronger than their kinship? Had she forgiven Eisenberg and Javer for murdering their parents? Should he have stayed in Arogdor for her sake, abandoning his own familiar world?

His only comfort was knowing she'd survived. Not only survived but flourished into a beautiful and healthy girl who'd managed to hold on to her clear-thinking mind and humanity,

despite the environment she'd grown up in. When all was said and done, he thanked fate for the precious, albeit brief, opportunity to see and hug his long lost sister.

Chapter 6. Sunset City's Betrayal



November 966 came rolling in dreary and gray. Even though Albert III treated the report of a possible attack on the capital with skepticism—understandably hesitating to believe the word of one drunken mutant—rumors of an impending catastrophe spread through Parthagon like wildfire. Unlike the king, the Legate Richard Fein and his secret adviser Niels Dohr, looking back at last spring’s deadly offensive, were ready to believe anything and refused to sit idly by. They thought it wouldn’t be

long before the mutants launched yet another campaign, which was likely to prove even more formidable.

Finally, with permission from the chancellor, Peter Kalitza, the commander-in-chief began covert defense preparations. As the first order of business, he had all external food reserves transported inside the Wall. He also significantly increased the tower garrisons' supplies as they were expected to be hit first, if this were to be a standard attack. He switched the towers' combat detachments and both Parthagonian cohorts' statuses to continuous combat readiness. The small garrisons stationed in large cities were most vulnerable. In case of sudden aggression, which was what had happened in New Albert and in Yarta, they couldn't defend themselves for long—not long enough, at least, for reinforcements to arrive. However, in light of the threat to the capital, such problems had to be overlooked.

Although the two spies hadn't had time to find the cause of the mutants' increased ingenuity, the king, grateful for their courage, rewarded both warriors by promoting them to centurion. They were the only knights in decades who had returned alive and almost unscathed from such a dangerous mission. For the month following their return, the newly minted officers sat locked in their homes, entering the Phase several times a day and gradually restoring their normal appearances. And as he enjoyed this vacation of sorts, Thomas learned to accept his sister's choice to remain in fetid Arogdor. He was more worried about the imminent invasion, actively participating in Neils and Richard's secret meetings, voicing his ideas and proposing solutions.

He did have room for happier concerns. After returning from the volcano and spending the week-long journey in dreary meditations, Thomas proposed to his happy lover. And although

it was not the best moment for festivities, the young people believed they had precious little time for peace and serenity left. So while everyone was dreading the upcoming events, comparing them to the end of the world, Marie was radiant, acting as if nothing were the matter and occupying herself with the pleasant bustle of wedding preparations. She had tireless help from Marguerite, her parents, and her so-called “friends,” whose function in her thoroughly planned life was purely ornamental.

Then, on a rare sunny late-autumn day, the most important and long-awaited morning in Marie’s life finally came. In a charming little park on Parthagon’s outskirts, among the yellow-orange oaks, a generous festive table stood on the grass. The bride’s relatives and Thomas’s loved ones, consisting of the Dohrs and Richard Fein, were all gathered around the white tablecloth. The legate came with his wife—a similarly blonde woman with a calm, even face. Given the groom’s chosen career, the guests consisted largely of burly knights who, instead of their usual jackets, were glistening in shiny cuirasses and blue capes donned for the occasion.

As many curious onlookers watched, the wedding guests sat down at the table. The bride’s father took his daughter by the hand and proudly led her to the grassy clearing before the huddled guests. The recently retired staff knight—tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired—bore an obvious resemblance to Marie, especially in his stubborn gaze and wide-set cheekbones. But she shared even more points of similarity with her charming mother, who, in a pink dress, sat at the table next to the places reserved for the newlyweds. She was almost a copy of her daughter, especially when it came to her attractive curves, youthful face, and the sweet dimples on her rosy cheeks.

The future Marie Young wore a beautiful white dress with a tight bodice and multilayered skirt. Its bottomless neckline revealed a gold necklace—a gift from the groom—which fell between her swaying breasts. Behind her, a semi-translucent train stretched along the grass and fallen leaves. Holding an elegant bouquet of white roses and keeping her eyes lowered in modesty, the girl waited for her husband-to-be to arrive.

But Thomas was nowhere to be seen. The guests were starting to worry and their voices rose as they spoke. The onlookers exchanged more and more bawdy jokes, and some seated at the table couldn't help but join in the merriment. Alain especially, only recently cheered up after his adventures in Arogdor, was seized by a fit of the giggles, as were a few other uncouth knights. Marie, as if to spite all these guffawing fools, continued shifting leg to leg, pensively fiddling with her rose bouquet's fragile petals and the gold rings on her plump fingers. But this was just for show.

Behind this tranquil appearance—and in accordance with yet another theory put forth by Niels Dohr—a storm of fury raged. Marie was fantasizing about ruthlessly quartering Thomas and at the same time was worried something bad might've happened to him. She continued to alternate—in the space of a few instants—between wanting to run away from the gasping audience remaining standing firmly until morning, if that's what it took, cold and wet under the rain and snow. She also worried about the small crease in her expensive dress, which, in fact, no one but she could see. Marie also worried about whether her hairdo was holding its gorgeous shape, and whether all her harlot friends were sufficiently jealous of her beauty. She started imagining she was so ugly the groom, spoiled by

Arogdorian women, had become scared and had run away from Parthagon again, the dirty scoundrel!

Finally, from somewhere behind the neat stone houses surrounding the park, came the sharp beating of hoofs on cobblestones. The bride exhaled with relief, to the disappointment of her single girlfriends, who'd been invited to the wedding either as a gesture of friendship or as a form of sophisticated torture. They'd already begun to rejoice in anticipation of Marie's grandiose disgrace, but now once again grew as somber as thunderclouds.

To the applause of the impatient knights and the misty-eyed women, the dashing groom, accompanied by Niels, came riding out from around the corner. Clad in immaculately polished armor, decorated with a centurion's bronze token, and wrapped in a fresh blue cape, Thomas trotted Vector toward the bride, deftly dismounting at her feet. The soon-to-be married man looked out of breath, and his brown hair, which had grown back to his shoulders, was ruffled. Observing his strange appearance, Marie was afraid the long-awaited wedding would not take place. But Thomas had just overslept because from the crack of dawn Marguerite had been busy with the bride and preparations for the feast. The woman had naively trusted her brother to make sure the groom arrived on time, but Niels could never get out of bed without his sister there to wake him.

"Do you swear eternal and faithful love to my daughter, Marie Lurie?" The bride's father began the ceremony with a trembling voice, directing his steely gaze at the former forest brigand.

Thomas had taken his bride's hand and was gazing into her joyful eyes.

"I swear eternal and faithful love to my wife, Marie Yourg!"

“Do you swear to protect and keep my daughter Marie Lurie from any peril or adversity?”

“I swear to protect and keep from peril my wife, Marie Yourg!”

The retired officer turned to the beaming young woman. “Daughter, will you become the wife of one Thomas Yourg, entrusting him with your life forever and living the rest of your days under his family name?”

“Yes, I accept!” she cried, all aquiver, and threw herself into the mighty arms of her hero, sending a rumble of approval coursing through the guests and onlookers.

To complete the centuries-old tradition, the bride and groom had to ride around the Wall along the outer perimeter. Therefore, the happy newlyweds raced off on the back of brisk Vector through the city toward the North Gate. A new feeling crept into their hearts, raising their relationship to a more committed and profound level. Savoring it, they quietly rode out of the sun-drenched capital and then headed around the Wall, addressing each other as “husband” and “wife” every chance they had. An hour later they returned to the festive table, where the celebrations were already in full swing.

The newlyweds spent their first wedded night on the outskirts of Parthagon in a small house’s modest bedroom. The place had been granted to Thomas for life-long use as part of his promotion to the rank of officer. Although the young people hadn’t lived there before the wedding, Marie had already managed to bring it to a state of cleanliness and order. That being said, the one-story structure had rotting wooden floors that gave off a musty odor, every door and window creaked, it was prone to terrible drafts, and plaster dust was constantly crumbling off the stone walls. Still, it was the young couple’s

first home, of which they were the sole proprietors! So they weren't really bothered by inconveniences and squalor—they were too young to care. Every little nuisance only seemed to add to the bliss of their new life together.

* * *

Waking up around lunchtime the next day, Thomas heard an unusual amount of noise coming through the thin windowpane and, wearing nothing but pantaloons, went into the ordinarily quiet alley to check what the hubbub was about. He found the outside world gripped in panic: frightened people were running in all directions. From their exclamations he learned the mutants, for the first time in recorded history, had successfully attacked the Tower of Recognition and defeated its garrison, which Aaron Connell commanded. There were also contradictory rumors that the enemy was already approaching the Parthagon, which seemed to be Eisenberg's main target.

Thomas couldn't imagine how the mutants could've taken the tower so swiftly and what might be happening there now. But more than that, how quickly the capital's citizen's views and the mood had flipped struck him. Only yesterday most were certain nothing could pose a threat to the peaceful life of powerful Parthagon, and they mocked the doom-preaching skeptics. Lo and behold: these same people suddenly found themselves in an inverted world. Their basic rights to be alive and enjoy their time on this earth were now under a real menace.

Returning to the house, Thomas quickly got dressed and gathered his things, avoiding waking up poor Marie until the last possible moment. Knowing how much she'd been looking forward to their joint future, a subject they'd dreamily discussed

all through the night, he really regretted having to upset her with the news. Had he been an ordinary citizen of Parthagon it perhaps wouldn't have been that bad. But he was a knight, obliged to put himself in the ruthless aggressor's way in order to protect his kingdom.

Hearing the detestable clanging of armor instead of a heavy coat's rustle, Marie woke and understood everything. A second ago, she'd been as happy and carefree as a child, lying naked in her narrow yet cozy bed. It might've been the happiest moment of her life, but how quickly her bright dreams were turning to dry ash. She wanted nothing more than to return to her short-lived happiness, so she crawled back under the warm blanket, closed her eyes, and curled up into the same position she'd been in before she'd known of this trouble.

A few minutes later, having kissed his young wife on her ear, an emotional Thomas went off to the Academy. For a long time after, Marie remained tossing and turning in bed, intermittently crying or moaning, trying to forget herself or go back to sleep. Only when her breathless father came in with a heavy bag of grain did she collect herself and, like all of Parthagon's disheartened inhabitants, begin to prepare for the inevitable encounter with evil.

Her husband, arriving at the Academy, found its dark corridors crowded with knights readying themselves for yet another battle campaign. As he went up to the commander-in-chief's office, he came upon a lively bunch of officers talking loudly over each other. Most were already suited in armor and fiercely arguing before an old map hanging on the wall, pointing fingers at Parthagon's northwestern regions. He then saw the Legate Fein standing pensively at the far window with his hands folded behind his back, ignoring the din around him.

Realizing the legate was best left alone, Thomas tuned in to his comrades' conversations.

"We must move out immediately! Either we try to win back the Tower of Recognition or we go directly to defend the Sunset City," exclaimed one tribune whose shoulders were as wide as a bathtub and who had a heated, freckled face. "There are thousands of lives at stake!"

"That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. First we have to block all ways of approaching the Tower of Perfection, then we can worry about the rest. Parthagon is more important," replied a redheaded warrior in an unbuttoned jacket.

"Nothing's going to happen to Parthagon! They wouldn't dare!"

"They've already annihilated Sunset City." Richard interrupted the argument, his voice grown rougher.

"So we won't try to win it back?"

"By the time we get there, they'll be here."

"Legate, you really think they've set their sights on the capital?"

"Why settle for one city and a tower with that new weapon of theirs?"

Thomas understood what had happened. The mutants had obtained some kind of superior weaponry the spies hadn't found out about on their mission. But where had they gotten their new technology? From the same place they'd gotten their black galleys?

"We will defend the Tower of Perfection and Sallep," continued Richard. "The road to Parthagon must be defended at all costs. Then we'll play it by ear."

The door flung open, and a messenger carrying an urgent missive burst in. The blond legate, quickly skimming the bloodstained note, turned ashen. Cursing, he read the text.

“To Legate Richard Fein,

Having retreated southward, we’re occupying the stone bridge across Snake River. We are holding on by the skin of our teeth. By the time you read these lines, we will have either perished or continued our retreat to the Tower of Perfection. The enemy is using launching weapons we’ve never seen before. They destroy buildings and cause significant damage to troops. The people of Sunset City are deploying them. They started the unexpected attack on the Tower of Recognition, together with hundreds of mutants coming in from the gorge. Clearly, the city has betrayed us in favor of Arogdor.

I beseech your forces to meet the enemy at the Tower of Perfection. It won’t hold out for long.

Commander of the Tower of Recognition, Centurion Aaron Connell.”

When he finished reading, the office exploded with reactions: the knights tore at their hair, spat on the green carpet, evoked every curse word in their vocabularies, and vented their futile regrets.

“How could they?”

“Why didn’t we see it coming?”

“I knew this would happen sooner or later!”

“And we were about to go save them!”

“We’re done for now!”

“We’ve brought this on ourselves, brothers. Now we’re going to have to lie in the bed we made.”

“Silence!” barked Richard. When the room finally quieted, he turned to his lanky adjutant. “The First Cohort will move out in an hour.”

“Consider it done!”

“Report everything to Niels and wait for me at the staff headquarters,” the legate whispered to a young centurion as he briskly exited the office. “I’m off to see Kalitza and Albert.”

Thomas set off across the panic-stricken Parthagon to the Dohr house. Learning about Connell’s letter, Niels turned ruby red with rage and cursed blasted Sunset City, its independent-minded mayor Walter Meisser, and all of his great-great-grandmothers.

Since time immemorial, the kingdom had always found this most northwestern settlement, bordering the volcano’s sea and the foothills, problematic. Despite its vulnerable position, the mutants rarely attacked it, even though its stores were always filled with plentiful resources and reserves. An incredibly beautiful city, with flourishing trade and handicraft industries, it was so rich some considered it a challenger to the capital. It was famous for its architecture: endless rows of white palisades and wondrous palaces with ornate columns, all built in a uniform style, which created a satisfying sense of wholeness. The city’s sophisticated look reflected its citizens’ high social status and education.

Albert, wary of the city’s capricious ways, never provoked its mayors, treating them with indulgences—for example, a thrice-reduced tribute. Everyone knew that, thanks to the crown’s

leniency, Sunset City had always maintained illegal trade with Arogdor, as well as other shady ties. Even during the spring attack, the mutant fleet hadn't attacked its secret ally, despite it being the first city the fleet had sailed by.

It was likely—there were those who'd figured as much six months back—the galleys the mutants used had been built in Sunset City's secret shipyards. The mutinous mayor had sold them to the enemy, who weren't capable of such complex engineering and design. The authorities had tried to avert their eyes from the truth, because imagining the consequences of a full-blown conflict with such a large urban center was difficult. Such a conflict's outcome could potentially change the balance of power throughout Celesia overnight. At the same time, no one in the kingdom could fathom the moral justification for cooperating with the mutants—after all, they represented everything bad in this world; they were evil incarnate. Did Walter Meisser have no other choice?

Now, with the treacherous betrayal out in the open, it had become clear the king's influence over this problematic territory had been lost. The city's human and economic resources now sided with Eisenberg's increasingly powerful army, which was bolstered by fresh vigor and the latest military technology. All in all, disaster was possible for Parthagon, whose power hadn't evolved technically in hundreds of years. In their infinite wisdom, the Royal Council had always maintained it was unnecessary.

* * *

After the spring attack, which had tragically cut short the lives of over 300 of the kingdom's most devoted sons, King

Albert III now had only 1,200 soldiers under his command. Presently, 700 were stationed in external garrisons, while two diminished cohorts remained inside the Wall. Leading the First Cohort to defend the Tower of Perfection, Richard gave an unheard-of order to prepare Parthagon for siege defense. This meant immediately cutting off the numerous approaches to the city and building as many blockades and fortified positions as possible. At the same time, the capital instituted martial law, which made it possible to enlist every able person toward erecting defensive structures. As well the Academy reopened its scientific research lab, which in the past had been deemed redundant and was therefore often closed to economize resources.

The coddled Parthagonians found all this a real shock. Their carefree well-fed lives were replaced by long hours of hard labor building barricades around their hometown and deepening the moat around the Wall—tasks that didn't inspire them with confidence about the future. The Academy also started offering courses in which militiamen were hurriedly trained to handle melee weapons and crossbows.

By evening the next day, the First Cohort was approaching the Tower of Perfection. To achieve this, against all custom, they'd had to travel the long road without stopping, save a short overnight stay in Sallep. In this tower Thomas had once visited his school chum, who'd remained in the capital with the Second Cohort. However, the young officer wasn't destined to enter this barrel-shaped fortification again.

As they approached its vicinity, the soldiers began running into support convoys beating a panicked retreat, not counting on the help of the arriving army. When the cohort approached the tower, gazing from afar at its advantageous position on the hill,

Thomas realized the gravity of the situation that had befallen the kingdom.

The fortification was badly damaged, especially on the north side. Fighting was going on both inside it and out, as hordes of savage mutants circled the battered building. A little further away people in black uniforms operated two dozen catapults—wide wooden structures on rectangular supports with wheels. Their buckets, about one and a half times the size of a grown human, periodically hurled huge boulders in the tower's direction. Whistling and then smashing into the building's thick walls with thundering crashes, they were destroying it with every new launch. Behind them were another set of machines—ballistae. These looked like giant crossbows on tripods and marksmen in light black robes—the uniform of the traitors from Sunset City as it would appear—also controlled them, firing long arrows at the tower defenders from an unreachable distance. The knights were barely able to defend themselves even from the tower's observation deck—after all, by comparison, their crossbows were pitifully tiny.

Richard ordered a centuria to pierce the mutants' perimeter from the south and the knights gladly rushed into the battle as if they hadn't just made a long journey. Thomas's squadron was one of the first to reach the mutants, and he began to shred them furiously, fearful for his comrades lives in the tower.

It didn't take them long to open a breach at the tower gates—and out poured the surviving warriors.

“Brothers, you've finally made it!”

“Let's go, let's get out of here!”

“Hurry!” hoarsely commanded the bloodied Connell, whose gray beard flashed through the passageway. “Grab the wounded, and run for it!”

The tower was rife with enemy warriors who'd crawled in through the ravaged north wall's opening. Suddenly the mutants retreated from the gates and a moment later, sharp stones the size of human heads, as well as huge arrows, whistled through the air above the Parthagonian helmets, glistening in the setting sun's light. Three warriors standing next to Thomas were smashed at once, showering him with hot blood and making the whole centuria scatter in panic. Richard, seeing this, set off to lead an attack on the now moving machines, but an oncoming volley cooled his riders' resolve, causing serious losses.

As if that weren't enough, hundreds of archers dressed in black now emerged from the forest along the left flank and showered the legate's dismayed troops with arrows. He had no choice but to order a retreat. The Tower of Recognition had been relinquished and the Tower of Perfection now too had been lost for the first time in history, leaving the path clear to the capital.

The enemy did not pursue them, so the Parthagonians decided to reach Sallep and try to rebuff the mutants there. Although the provincial town had no defensive structures, this was their last chance to rectify a fatal situation. If they failed, the Arogdorians would reach the Wall in one or two days, which would spell a gory end to the ideal city's long and happy history.

* * *

Around noon the next day, they arrived in Sallep completely exhausted. Richard set up temporary headquarters in the local garrison's barracks. A tense officers' meeting revealed the full scope of the disheartening situation. The First Cohort had lost four dozen fighters, and out of the 200 knights stationed at the

defeated Tower of Recognition and Tower of Perfection, little more than half had survived. Richard only had roughly three centurias of knights at his disposal, many of whom were wounded and barely battle worthy. Knowing this might not be enough to repel a massive offensive, the legate promoted the gray-haired Connell to the rank of tribune, made Thomas his adjunct, and sent them both to fetch reinforcements from the Tower of Self-Expression. In case the support troops didn't make it back to Sallep in time, Connell was to return to the tower and assemble the knights from all other garrisons in order to then send this enormous force to defend Parthagon.

Left without Niels Dohr's pragmatic advice, Richard stayed up late into the night clumsily trying to position his soldiers on Sallep's western approaches in the most advantageous formation. But he lacked experience in such things, and the city itself was unfortunately positioned on the open plane. Without any natural obstacles to protect it, it was easy prey for any invader who came along. And the warriors, exhausted by constant redeployments, were collapsing and falling asleep on whatever patch of ground they happened to stand on.

Throughout the night a dismal rain drizzled over them, and with the first rooster's crow, hundreds of mutants on their well-fed mansteeds, came rushing at them. They were covered from the rear by their sophisticated catapults and ballistae. Proceeding with deadly precision, the enemy systematically drove the helpless knights out of the copses and the wooden houses where they'd hastily constructed defense positions, and then forced them to the city's southern outskirts. Initially, Richard had hoped for reinforcements from the Tower of Self-Expression, but had to accept that even if help did arrive, it would do nothing to change the situation, since the Arogdorians

also had reserves, including Walter Meisser's archers. Reluctantly, after half an hour of battle and having lost another fifty or so comrades, crippled by shame and despair, the legate ordered his men to retreat, this time to their last bastion of hope—Parthagon, from which there was nowhere else to escape.

When Connell and Thomas, with their fresh centuria from the Tower of Self-Expression, arrived on Sallep's eastern outskirts, they found it had long been left to be ravaged, its familiar streets drowning in smoke. As indifferent birds trilled, they watched from the edge of the yellow-and-red autumnal forest as endless Arogdorian resource convoys traveled through the settlement.

"Should we at least wipe these guys out?" asked Thomas. His constant, restless shifting made the tired Vector raise up on his hind legs.

"We will, but not right now," said Connell, pensively stroking his beard. "The capital will be under siege tomorrow, and you want to take on a few carts?"

"I didn't think..."

"The future of Parthagon is now in our hands. Take a dozen of your finest men and go around the city to the south. Your mission: gather up the garrisons of New Albert and Yarta."

"And break through the siege from the south?"

"Wait for my attack signal."

"Consider it done!"

"And no funny business, my friend. We can still save the kingdom, but only if we stop making idiotic mistakes. Damn you, Fein!"

Bidding the taciturn tribune farewell, Thomas selected a dozen warriors and the company dashed toward the capital, taking forest paths and observing, from afar, the mighty river of

mutants' unhurried flow and their encounter with the First Cohort. Aaron Connell, meanwhile, directed his centuria back to the east, where he planned to assemble a powerful army from the remaining towers' garrisons, as well as Star City. For the first time, in order to protect Parthagon, all of its subordinate territories were to be left defenseless.

Late in the evening, the low-spirited soldiers, commanded by the wounded Richard Fein, returned to the North Gate, around which civilians were busy erecting fortifications and barricades. Realistically assessing the balance of power, the legate ordered the citizens back inside the Wall, which to all intents and purposes meant accepting a siege's inevitability.

Richard then headed to dine at the king's palace, where all the most important people in Parthagon had gathered. The room, a long dining hall, was filling with the smell of roasted meat. It was modestly furnished, the only ornate elements being the dining chairs' tall carved backs upholstered in dark-green velvet and the appetizing still-life paintings adorning the dark windowless walls. Albert III, stately in his perennial brown jacket, was seated at the head of the elongated table, which was crowded with tree-like candelabras and silver dishes heaped with food.

"What will you do next?" inquired the king calmly, his gray eyes sizing up the commander-in-chief seated to his right.

"Defend ourselves," the legate answered with resignation, fixing the bloodied bandage covering his forehead. "And wait."

"And what might we be waiting for?" asked Peter Kalitza, shifting his cutlery. He sat across the table from the knight and was dressed in his usual gray caftan. His black hair was, as usual, gathered in a neat braid, and the wide nostrils of his flat nose expanded with every intake of breath.

“We seem to be constantly waiting on something from you, Fein!” said Newdon maliciously. He was behind Richard’s right arm. “And we’ve yet to see results.”

“You best stay out of this altogether!” the knight roared, banging his fist against the table, making the tribunes at the table’s far end exchange bewildered looks. “Who asked your opinion anyway?”

Since Newdon, with his oily hair, black jacket, and insect-like legs, was as universally despised as ever, Albert only glanced contemptuously at the Minister of Education. “Well, then, what are we waiting for and how long?”

“Forgive me, Your Highness. Tribune Aaron Connell is assembling an army from the external garrisons.”

“Tribune?”

“I’ve had to promote him. I hope you’ll second my decision.”

“That ne’er-do-well is still alive?” Newdon asked.

“That’s right,” Richard answered with fury, “and your worthless life is in his hands!”

“Well, then we’re doomed! Do you know how many times he attempted the graduate exam before he finally passed?”

“For God’s sake, Isaac, give it a rest, will you?” Albert jumped up and threw a well-aimed spoon at his old friend.

“How long?” Kalitza repeated the question.

“A few days,” the legate answered. He was now calm, looking attentively at the kingdom’s rulers. He knew full well Connell would take much longer to get there. He simply did not wish to upset the princess, who was sitting at the table’s far end looking bored. A pair of the most immense knights he’d ever seen, their polished armor reflecting glimmers of the playful candlelight, guarded her angelic beauty. Those present took the hint without further explanation and continued to sup until Richard’s

adjutant rushed into the hall and asked the legate to accompany him outside.

Going up onto the moonlit Wall, Richard walked its entire length in just over three hours, checking the patrols' locations. He could already see the torches of the Arogdorian army along the entire perimeter. Never had they come so close to the untouchable Parthagon. Heading down, the legate hurried through the extinguished city's streets to the Dohrs' house, seeking counsel in the hopes of making no more unforgivable mistakes.

In the cool night air under the shelter of his old friend's beloved gazebo, Richard was disappointed to hear Niels repeat the conclusion he and everyone else had already come to: the enemies would use this night to catch their breath and would begin a fierce attack on the Wall or one of the gates' weak points first thing in the morning. From the mutants' point of view, taking the city by siege was not the best idea, because a huge revenge-fueled army was about to assemble and hit them from the rear. Niels and Richard had only to discuss the defense tactics they could employ in order to hold out for a week.

Through the open window in Thomas's old room, Marie overheard the two men talking in the garden. She put on a black robe, went downstairs, crept into the courtyard and hid behind a densely overgrown cherry tree. The Dohrs had been kind enough to take her and her parents into their home in case of a siege, which could lead, if not to an outright enemy invasion, then to riots and disorder as the locked-down city descended into chaos.

Unable to hold back her emotions, the girl shortly decided to reveal herself and walked up to the gazebo with teary eyes. "What's happened to Thomas?"

“He’s fine,” replied Richard.

“Why isn’t he with you?”

“He’s helping out in the rear.”

“Was it his decision or your order?”

“You see...” the legate began, but the knight’s wife’s shattered nerves undid her and she threw herself at him with her fists in the air.

“You bastard! Why?”

“Marie...”

“What for?”

“Calm down for God’s sake,” Niels grabbed the delirious woman and held her close to him.

“You knew what he was in for.” She continued sobbing, realizing her first night with her husband might’ve been her last. “How could you Richard? You of all people!”

“It’s his duty. And he’s not in any more danger there than he would be if he were here.” The old family friend tried to justify his decision, readjusting the bandage on his head.

That night similar dramas played out in many Parthagonian households. The spoiled townspeople were not equipped to handle such pressure and therefore quickly lost all hope, expecting the most terrible fates to befall them come dawn. The news of Sunset City’s betrayal had crushed their hope of returning to the carefree days of the past. Even knowing in the north a liberation army was gathering, few people believed in its ability to make any difference. Everyone had seen how the knights had been forced to give up their positions and crawl back home with their tails between their legs.

The only island of calm within the Wall remained the Royal Palace. Albert had demanded a whole century of knights guard it. He’d also moved Elizabeth from the eastern tower, which

could now be shot at with the enemy's advanced war machines, into the palace dungeon. There, in a dried and dusted cell, he'd tried to recreate her everyday living conditions. The king had also placed more than half the palace guard at her door to ensure her safety even in the most dire of situations. He himself was holding up surprisingly well—was stoic, even—despite the threat to his throne.

“Do you need anything?” the king cooed gently, leaving his daughter in her dark and frighteningly quiet room, full of soft beige furniture.

“You know me: I don't need anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“It's fine.”

“Did you bring your books? Maybe we can get you some flowers and bigger candles?”

“Father, leave me alone, please!”

“All right, all right.”

Albert III felt the familiar sting of being unceremoniously trod on, even if the legs walking all over him were long, elegant, and precious. But having grown used to such treatment over the years, he quickly turned his mind to other matters and, whistling a jolly tune, walked off to solve other pressing issues.

* * *

Aaron Connell, having set up headquarters in the Tower of Self-Expression, sent out messengers to all remaining northern and northeastern garrisons. Their soldiers were to leave their positions and, along with their support vehicles, get to him as quickly as possible. By all calculations, this was supposed to

take four to five days, during which the tribune intended to develop a plan for Parthagon's liberation.

When they received the orders, the towers' commanders doubted their authenticity—the message contradicted everything they'd ever seen or done in their lifetimes of military service. Although the towers had not always been effective in stopping the Arogdorian invaders, they had deterred and successfully deflected most small raiding parties. Now circumstances required they leave the whole frontier unprotected, leaving the door open for any volcano inhabitant to wander in freely.

Meanwhile Centurion Young, as part of his first official mission as a commander, went past the surrounded capital and set up his forest headquarters a few miles from the bridge across the Quiet River on South Gate's side. He planned to wait for the garrisons from New Alberta and Yarta to arrive. The young officer understood this modest army—just over fifty knights—wouldn't be the force to crush the enemy. Nevertheless, he hoped they would play a key role in breaking through the blockade.

For the first time, after a hectic few days, Thomas had the opportunity to sleep off his fatigue without feeling rushed. First he gave his horse a thorough wash in a nearby stream and then took him to graze in the surrounding meadows. Snorting with pleasure, Vector greedily tugged at the crunchy dry grass and periodically lifted his white snout to his owner, as if trying to tell him something kind and affectionate. His big dark eyes, under their long shaggy eyelashes, radiated intelligence, but the animal could only look at Thomas with silent gratitude before lowering his mane back down to the dry grass. Patting his friend on his black-and-white back, the yawning centurion lay

down on a soft carpet of leaves beneath an ash tree and let his heavy eyelids close.

As is often the case in such peaceful conditions, random thoughts began to drift through his mind. Somewhere between one chaotic sequence of reflections and another, Thomas realized that before this nightmare began, he'd become a husband, and that somewhere beyond the Wall, his wife was waiting for and worrying over him. He also recognized he'd left her to face this dangerous situation alone. Yes, he could always count on Niels, but wasn't it his duty to take care of the mother of his future children? Was that not the most important thing in his life now that he knew his beloved sister was safe and sound?

Pondering these sad thoughts, Thomas noticed his distracted consciousness had switched off, and he'd almost fallen asleep. Feeling the moment presented an opportunity to enter the Phase, he began to go through the various Phase-entering techniques. For a long time nothing happened, and he decided to focus on the phantom wiggle, trying to move his right hand up and down without using his muscles, visualizing nothing, and keeping his imagination at bay. Gradually, a weak but palpable sense of real movement started to come through. Thomas intuited that the space around him was beginning to warp, and so he continued to increase the wiggle's amplitude. His hand began to move freely, and a hissing rumble appeared in his ears—there it was again, the magical Phase! Out of habit, the knight tried to get up, which he managed to do quite easily.

With the physical space around him now destabilized, the woodlands' rich autumnal colors became even brighter, and his bodily sensations became deeper and more pronounced. Recreating the knightly physique he'd partially lost during his mission in Arogdor, Thomas now increased his height and girth

as much as he could and, having felt the change within his body's every cell, he took a running start and leapt skywards. Beyond the autumnal trees lay the river with its battered stone bridge, followed by the deep moat and the South Gate. Flying along the Wall, he saw here and there clusters of enemy soldiers eagerly preparing for the attack.

And, indeed, just then, Sunset City's deadly projectile machines began to fire at the Wall near the South Gate—not far from King Albert III's Royal Palace. When the catapults came within range, the knights began to shoot at their operators. However, the warriors in black had thought everything through: soldiers bearing tall iron shields surrounded each machine to protect them. Meanwhile, formidable numbers of mutants and archers lined up behind them, ready to rush in furiously as soon as the Wall had been breached or to aid the vulnerable catapults.

Shot after shot, the huge boulders whistled through the air and smashed against the ancient masonry, chipping blocks or knocking them out altogether. Some machines aimed at the arrow slits where the knights were positioned and some aimed into the city, causing grave casualties and panic among the city dwellers. The ballistae spewed out either giant single arrows or whole barrages of regular flaming arrows and, as a result, Parthagon's quarters were soon engulfed in flames and civilian blood.

Two people followed the action more closely than anyone: the wounded, but still armored, Legate Fein, who watched from one of the southern sections of the Wall, and General Javer in his horned helmet, whose red tent was positioned before the key attack point. Both had already done everything they could, and now watched nervously as the critical battle unfolded. Richard's

task was to hold on long enough for Connell's reinforcements to arrive. But the Wall was being destroyed, and it had become clear the invasion would almost certainly take place before help could arrive. The only remaining hope was the defeat would not be final, because the capital was well prepared and could withstand one or two days of internal clashes.

Javer, on the other hand, chose not to use his army's full power. Unlike the desperate legate, he'd left plenty of troops behind to protect all the approaches to Arogdor and his allies in Sunset City, because, despite their advanced weaponry, they were in no position to defend themselves alone. The reason for this was evident: outside the Wall, people weren't uneducated in the art of the Phase, but any mutations were prohibited. Albert I, the current king's grandfather, had invented this system. Before the volcano had revolted, this strategy had allowed Parthagon to always have an advantage over any opponent.

While the commanders contemplated the fruits of their labor from afar, the besieged capital's inhabitants were going through terrible times. Some had lived hundreds of years without seeing anything like this before. Their native city was sinking under the smothering cover of smoke from countless fires. Deadly boulders and arrows might fall on their heads at any moment, making going out into the street impossible. Some people hid in the deepest cellars of the strongest buildings. However, some still needed to help extinguish fires, supply the knights, rebuild the Wall, evacuate the wounded, and bury the bodies.

As is bound to happen in such hard times, cowardly calls for surrender began to sound. They said if the city were to give in without a fight, the noble Arogdorians would spare Parthagonians meaningless bloodshed and would be the city's best chance at survival. However, almost everyone caught

spreading these lousy rumors turned out to be secret agents of Sunset City, who had easily penetrated the capital before Parthagon had discovered their betrayal.

The Dohr cellar, courtesy of Niels and his sister, gave shelter to Marie and her parents, as well as Lilly Fein, the still chipper Alain Ospe, his widowed mother, and a few other neighbors. Even though the cold floor beneath them was far from comfortable, they felt safe in the cellar's dank twilight. Among them, only the unlucky centurion had been wounded when, right at the siege's outset, a fragment of a smashed boulder hit his recently healed leg, breaking it at the knee. But even this unhappy accident was quickly laughed off—after all, he'd suffered much worse during his stay at the volcano:

"I can understand we're not allowed to grow four arms, but they could at least let us grow an extra leg! I'd be at the front right now!"

"What about those who already have three legs." Niels winked at him, trying to distract the worried guests with bawdy knightly humor.

"Yeah, I'd had a run in with one of those. That's enough for me."

"Well, now, that's news to me, Alain! Pray tell."

"All thanks to a certain someone's advice."

"Oh ho! This doesn't have anything to do with why you spent a whole month washing yourself like a man possessed, by any chance? Wore through all the loofahs in the city, you did!"

"Eh, maybe I'd have been better off if that three-legged fellow had killed me after all."

"With that third leg of his?"

"Any port in a storm."

“Yes, these are indeed dark times. When I was young I had different ideas about what it meant to die like a hero!”

The blushing women had managed thus far to pretend they didn't understand what the conversation was about, but now they could hold it in no longer and burst out laughing. However, just as spirits were on the mend, they heard another loud crash outside and the company returned to the pressing issues of survival while silently praying for Connell's army's safe arrival.

* * *

The following week became a nightmare for Parthagon's inhabitants and Richard Fein's army. With precision, the enemy moved their ballistae to sting the besieged city from every side, acting like a relentless insect. And from outside the Wall they'd managed to inflict considerable damage. The capital was already partially burned, and the population had suffered severe casualties. To the legate's frustration, he couldn't send his knights to take care of this problem, because the enemy forces blocking the gates were too large. He tried sending small groups of saboteurs through secret passageways under night's cover, but every time they were thwarted before they could damage either the machines or their operators.

The biggest problem, though, became the slowly but relentlessly expanding gap in the Wall near the South Gate. Although the catapults' relentless onslaught wasn't as effective as both sides had expected it to be, its results, at least in this spot, were evident with every new dawn. And soon the situation became critical. Richard noticed the mutants and archers who had been dozing throughout the week were finally stirring. They slowly drew closer to the hole, which the townspeople were

desperately working to patch from the inside. Preparing for the attack, the Arogdorians didn't even need the specially constructed staircases they'd brought to cross the moat: it was filled up to the top with smashed boulders and fragments of the Wall.

Although Richard was well aware Connell was meant to arrive any day now, he still spent every waking minute preparing the anguished city for the invasion, taking every protective measure. Both the population and the remnants of provisions hid in the surviving buildings' cellars. They were guarded by militiamen—civilians who'd undergone hasty military training. Having spent a lifetime mutating solely to improve their good looks, these ordinary men were no match for the four-armed monsters, but they could give some opposition to Sunset City's traitorous archers.

As evening approached, the long-awaited moment came when the catapults held their fire and battle-hungry mutants, supported by hundreds of archers in black, rushed headlong into the breach. Inside, they were fiercely met by the courageous knights and townspeople. At first, thanks to the narrow passage and Richard's careful preparations, Parthagonian soldiers successfully repelled the attack. They poured boiling oil onto the heads of the screaming mutants, threw huge angular stones at them, fired swarms of arrows, and relentlessly cut them down with swords and axes ground to unparalleled sharpness during the week. However, despite heavy losses, the mutants continued to climb inside without even thinking of retreating, as if it were salvation awaiting them inside rather than certain death.

Through his telescope, Centurion Young observed this heart-wrenching picture, the garrison soldiers from the southern cities already by his side. He was ready to deploy them to any task—

even a hopeless suicide mission—whenever he got the call. But Richard, preoccupied with defending the breach, had no idea his younger friend was awaiting orders at the South Gate. Meanwhile the gray-haired Connell and his liberation army had not yet appeared on the horizon. Thomas could only look on helplessly as the brutal Arogdorians broke into the capital, where all the people most dear to him were barricaded. The young man was hoping they'd not perished in the fires that all week long had been illuminating the night sky over Parthagon.

Watching the mutants breaking through the Wall, Thomas considered rushing at the enemy from the rear despite Connell's strict instructions, but decided this would be of no help. Huge enemy masses would instantly destroy his knights, who would inflict no more harm than an importunate mosquito to a sleeping bear.

"Blistering fistulas! Are we just going to stand here and watch?" burst out the bronze-skinned Centurion Carl Linn, his little eyes sparkling and his potato nose twitching.

Thomas's old school chum was already four years out of the Academy, and had been promoted to head of the Yarta garrison just last summer. The southern city's scorching summer heat had turned him into an adroit curse slinger and forced him to exchange his golden locks for a shiny bald pate.

"There's no point in dying for nothing." Thomas fidgeted, aching to join the battle himself. "Have patience."

"I'd rather kick the bucket right now than watch any more of this! Ungodly dung heap!"

As if their words had been heard, the South Gate slowly opened, and a burbling sea of panicking people spilled out. Apparently, seeing the enemy troops had mostly gone from the gate to the breach, Richard had released the surviving

population so they had at least some chance of saving themselves in the nearby forests. But now no one was left to block the breach in the Wall: the mutants atop their mansteeds and the foot archers were now seeping into the city unopposed, lining up in a long queue.

“Saddle up!” roared Thomas, throwing his telescope aside and leaping on top of Vector. “Follow me!”

The torment of anticipation finally over, the knights donned their shining helmets, spurred their instantly saddled horses, and rushed out after their commander.

“Long live the king!”

“Long live Parthagon!”

“Long live Albert III, that prattling prick!”

At the same moment, heavy cavalry galloping at full speed emerged from the thinning forest north of Parthagon, soon splintering into two steel-blue blades. The first, without slowing down, plunged into Parthagon through the open North Gate, while the second attacked the few remaining enemy troops on the southeast side.

Seeing the stampede of knights coming at them, along with the Tower of Recognition’s legendary and imperturbable commander Aaron Connell leading the charge, the cowardly mutants turned to run. Unyielding, General Javer still tried to command his troops for some time, but when a blood-spattered senior warrior came running out of the city and reported the situation, Javer ordered the headquarters to be packed up and the reserves to leave the vicinity of Parthagon at once. He, to everyone’s surprise, leapt onto the back of a particularly mighty mansteed and, along with a few guards, rushed headlong toward the breach, his bright scarlet cape waving ominously

behind him. He was brandishing a sword and an ax in his upper hands.

At the same time, Thomas desperately galloped over the old bridge, passing by the broken pier with its charred ships, and then, together with his squadron, burst through the South Gate into the capital.

“The king!” cried out the terrified people running toward them. “Save our Albert!”

Amid the senseless crowd, the young centurion hoped to see Marie, or one of his loved ones. But wherever he turned and whomever he encountered, he saw only strangers.

“The palace!” A despondent man in a burned brown jacket and green hood suddenly clutched his pant leg.

“What?”

“The mutants are in the palace!”

“Where is Legate Fein?”

“The mutants are in the palace, centurion!”

Gathering his knights, Thomas galloped toward the tall towers. Along the way, they saw countless Arogdorians going wild with rage and fear. But the unshakable commander ordered his troops not to stop or touch anyone, threatening those who disobeyed with swift execution. So they only watched in passing as the monsters broke into neat little houses and stabbed, beheaded, or strangled helpless people, including women and children. At the distance of a blade’s blow, they saw gangs of filthy monsters attacking wounded knights and tearing them apart with hysterical laughter. But Thomas unceremoniously forced his warriors, who were almost in tears, to keep moving faster toward the palace, at whatever cost.

Once they arrived at the palace gates, the knights easily dispatched half a dozen mutants under the massive arch and

then galloped inside. In the belly of the palace, they ran into small clusters of black-clad archers at almost every step, although they hadn't encountered them on the city streets. The Sunset City soldiers were helpless before the armored giants, who were able, with one sweeping blow of the blade, to dismember two or even three deserters at a time.

Having cleared all the halls and towers of enemy troops, and lost no more than a third of his unit, despite catching a few arrows himself, Thomas heard screams and clanking coming from the dungeon. Jumping off his horse and running down the stone stairs, past the bodies riddled with arrows, he saw a very strange picture. The vast storage cellar, which smelled of damp earth and rotten vegetables, was crowded with barrels, sacks, and jugs of various sizes. The remaining space, illuminated only by sparks coming off the sharp kisses between iron blades, was full of hideous mutants fighting not against knights, but rather a throng of black archers! The floor was littered with the lifeless corpses of both, and screams, pathetic moans, and loud curses were coming from all directions.

"How is this possible?" Thomas said, to which his warriors responded:

"Do they lose their minds underground or something?"

"Hmm, who knows what living in that volcano will do to you?"

"Elizabeth, you brainless donkeys!" shouted Carl Linn.

And indeed, in the cellar's pitch blackness, accompanied by just one heavily wounded knight, a thin figure bundled in blankets was trying to make its way along the far wall. Thomas, having grown accustomed to the darkness, could see her light blond hair and tall silhouette. She emitted quiet yelps as enemies tried to lunge at her—and they would've nabbed her too if it weren't for her guard's faithful sword.

“That’s why they’re at each other’s throats,” the former villager heard someone utter. Feeling his strength doubled, he, like an enraged wolf, threw himself in the direction of the princess, striking down anyone and everyone in his path with his blade’s short and accurate motions. While his brave knights protected from the rear, he reached the helpless girl and pressed her into a corner. Leaving five warriors to guard her, he and his squad then leapt into the melee and started clearing the cellar of both mutants and archers.

“Where is she?” the king howled. He came running down the stairs with a group of knights, illuminating the underground slaughter with their bright torches.

“She’s here,” cried Linn, as he finished off another Arogdorian.

“Elizabeth!” sobbed the bewildered parent as he ran to his daughter. “Are you all right my darling flower? Elizabeth?”

“I’m alive. Against all odds,” the princes hissed.

“My poor girl, how did this happen?”

Thomas cautiously approached Albert and Elizabeth, and, for the third time, under the flames’ orange light, he laid his eyes on the precious princess. She was as flawless as ever, her skin blindingly white and her blue eyes piercing through anyone who happened to encounter their icy gaze.

“It was him. He saved me again.” She pointed her thin finger at Thomas, whose feet almost gave out from under him: she remembered him!

“That’s not important right now, darling.”

“No,” the young woman said as Albert lead her toward the stairs. “It is important, actually.”

“We’ll sort it all out later. Right now we have to get you back to the tower.”

“Is it still standing?”

“Fortunately it is, my love.”

“Shame. I was hoping it would be gone.”

Passing the young centurion, Elizabeth glanced again in his direction, and for one fleeting moment their eyes met. Though she turned away with indifference and walked on, poor Thomas felt struck by lightning, that not only his breath but his heart too had stopped. There was something monstrously frightening and also familiar in the eyes of this beautiful and mysterious person.

“You can exhale now.” Linn nudged his shoulder. Exhausted, they found themselves practically alone in the cellar, with only a few prolonged groans sounding in the dark.

Coming to his senses, Thomas ran out into the street, where desperate screams and loud clanging metal continued to fill the air. However, these were no longer frantic battle sounds, but Connell’s knights finishing off the remaining four-armed monsters and their miserable accomplices. Dissolving his company’s remnants, the royal heir’s savior saddled Vector and hastened to his new house, where he’d so far managed to spend only one night with his beloved wife. When he got there, though, the house was empty. With bad forebodings, he rode even faster over to Niels’s, where, sobbing and covered in blood, Marie threw herself into his arms.

He learned that during the final struggle, three battle-crazed mutants had burst into the Dohr house. Unfortunately, despite Niels’s and Marie’s father’s efforts, they couldn’t save her mother, Marguerite, and two other unfortunate neighbors who’d hoped to wait out the invasion in their basement. Marie’s father had just expired from his terrible wounds and blood loss. The former legate too had received his fair share of injuries, but it

would've been even worse had Richard Fein not arrived to save them.

* * *

The next morning, having laid Marguerite and his wife's parents to rest, grief-stricken Thomas redressed his wounds and, for the first time, headed to the Royal Council—an invitation had been delivered to him at dawn. The closed meeting took place in the palace's northern tower, in a round room whose tall narrow windows with their thick blinds looked out onto the blackened Parthagon. In its center, next to a spiral staircase rising from below, stood a round oak table, as well as hard wooden chairs. An ornate chandelier, to light the room during evening gatherings, hung above the table. The council, led by Albert III, also included Peter Kalitza, Isaac Newdon, Aaron Connell, and several other high-ranking officials and officers.

In spite of Newdon's remonstrations, the Royal Council almost unanimously raised Thomas Young to the rank of tribune, an astonishing position to hold at his very young age. Now he could command a whole cohort, or several centurias. As the next order of business, Aaron Connell was promoted to legate and, to the Council's warm applause, was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Parthagon. Or, rather, what was left of it.

Richard Fein, in absentia, was imputed with erroneously assessing the Tower of Perfection's situation. This blunder resulted in enormous losses of time and manpower, and led to Parthagon being invaded. Having assessed the enemy's strength, he should've immediately summoned the garrisons

rather than trying to repel the offensive himself. Connell, who'd been sent galloping across the kingdom for nothing, could've arrived at the Wall two or three days earlier, and the mutants never would've made it inside the palace. But this was not the worst of it.

At a critical moment, literally minutes before help arrived, he gave the dubious order to open the South Gate and then commandeered some palace guards to save his loved ones. And although these crimes had allowed the young hero, Yourg, to enter the city, their consequences still merited the death penalty. Nevertheless, no one spoke of hanging because his other actions were carried out to defend the besieged city—not without Niels Dohr's help, as everyone knew—and thus deserved mercy. Richard instead was downgraded to the rank of centurion and stationed in one of the towers as a simple garrison commander.

The whole nightmare had taken a heavy toll on the king's army, and the king now had only 800 knights in his service—half what he'd had in the spring. They decided to leave five centurias in the first, and now only, cohort, and to send the rest of the troops out to replenish the empty garrisons outside the Wall, assuming mutants didn't already occupy them.

They didn't yet know how many civilian casualties they had, but knew many years of hard work would be required to restore the city to its former grandeur. The situation wasn't entirely bleak. The Parthagonians had captured all the projectile weapons, which could now be studied and integrated into the army's arsenal. And the events of recent weeks had shown Parthagon to be much more powerful than its enemies had estimated.

The issue that raised the most questions and debate was Walter Meisser's betrayal. He was now a doomed man. Although he'd played a deciding role in the disaster that had befallen the capital, no one knew how to deal with Sunset City. Only the previous morning he'd been on the side of mutants, but by evening his troops had been fighting against them. Thomas remembered the unbeatable Black Knight who'd attempted to kill the young Elizabeth. It now appeared he hadn't been an agent of Arogdor after all. If true, that would mean Meisser had been secretly plotting against Albert for at least five years! But why had he twice gone after not the all-powerful king, but his fragile daughter?

Returning to his adoptive father's home, Thomas found Marie gloomy, seated on one of the two remaining chairs in the otherwise demolished dining room. The painful abrasions all over her body were already beginning to heal, which her husband couldn't help but rejoice over. Niels, whose stomach wound made it impossible for him to stand straight, was stooped over her, his face almost black with bruises. The newly-decorated tribune shared the good news with them, showing off his sparkling silver token.

"Oh, Marguerite would have been so proud. At this rate, you'll get yourself a golden trinket before long." Niels was trying to joke, but his uncertain smile didn't linger for long on his swollen face.

"I don't know if I'd like that."

"What's this nonsense now?"

"Legates don't seem to last very long these days."

"Well, that Connell is a seasoned old wolf—he'll hold onto that token for a while."

"You think?"

“Yes, he’s one steadfast fellow.”

“So let me get this straight,” Marie burst out, having been listening to the men’s conversation in furious silence. “While we were being crushed like stinking insects, you decided to rush off to save that sour-faced bitch?”

“What did you call her?” The young tribune was taken aback.

“That was uncalled for, Marie.” Niels tried to intervene, but it was too late.

“We were dying, and you were running around saving that pasty floozy. My father, my mother, Marguerite—they’re all dead thanks to you!”

“How dare you?”

“If it weren’t for Richard, you’d have never seen me again.” Sobbing, the girl barely managed to stand and was about to go upstairs, but couldn’t restrain herself. “Whose help did he come to, as soon as he could? And whose did you?”

“How can you even think that?” responded Thomas. “I was just doing my duty. I didn’t even know you were in trouble! And I had no choice.”

“Well, Richard knew. And he had a choice!”

Thomas went to put his arms around his incensed wife, but she pushed him away and limped up the staircase.

“You wanted to get married—now bite your tongue,” instructed Niels.

“Meaning? I’m not at fault!”

“That’s not the point. You should never even mention other women to your wife. Never mind this!”

Chapter 7. The Most Romantic Mutant of Them All



For several days, Ivar Javer, covered in filth and wearing nothing but boots and leather pants, had been making his way north across the unguarded territories of Albert III's kingdom. The general's personal guard had been decimated by the knights as he'd escaped from Parthagon. Shortly before that, he had entered the battle, receiving several minor injuries, which were almost healed by now through special mutation techniques.

Yet despite the operation's overall failure and his own rather pitiful, shabby state, Javer was not pessimistic. Whatever the

final outcome, Parthagon had been so badly ravaged imagining how long repairing all the damage inflicted upon it would take—if it were even possible—was difficult. Therefore, the general considered the mission a success as, with his load light and his spirits high, he progressed calmly toward the Fifth River. He had several more days to formulate the most advantageous way to describe these events once in Werner Eisenberg's Royal Palace. Eisenberg would, of course, throw a hysterical fit over the blunder, but he wouldn't do anything serious to his greatest military commander—he was simply too dependent on him.

The mutant spent his nights in the cold forest's depths, so as to avoid being captured by any knights that might've been sent after him. When he woke in the mornings covered with hoarfrost, he continued walking—avoiding large roads but not skirting around small villages and farms. There, he eagerly devoured anything he could lay his hands on and killed any accidental witnesses as if they were cockroaches that had failed to scatter in time. In order to quell his hunger and preserve his precious bulk, he needed to go on at least two rampages per day, doing away with the villagers and filling his stomach until it was ready to burst.

At the end of another day, the indefatigable Javer was at the volcano's base. Hilly fields spread out before his deep-set eyes and in the distance was a gorge, echoing with the gurgling sounds of a mighty river. Before him stood the mighty Tower of Complicity, where he'd served out a jolly traineeship many moons ago, right after graduating from the Knights' Academy. The world had changed so much since then that Javer had to think hard to fully recognize this was his past.

Expecting the tower's garrison was empty, he decided he'd refresh his memories of his stormy youth and go inside. Then an

arrow flew past, and then another. The tower's commander, apparently hoping to return, had been wise enough to leave a guard. Javer ran away briskly, circling the barrel-shaped fortress along a wider perimeter.

Now all he had to do was reach the first Arogdorian patrol squad—and the long, tedious journey would be over. Close now, Javer didn't stop for the night, and in the early morning he came upon his brave men. They were holding position inside a pine cabin with a makeshift chimney that emitted copious amounts of smoke. Javer ordered a senior warrior to set the table, prepare a clean bed in a darkened room, and harness his two most hardy mansteeds.

Having eaten well and taken a nap in the freshness of the log cabin, Javer soon set off again. By twilight, the first of his two mansteeds was begging for respite, so the general switched to the second and, riding through the night, saw the dear old Gates of Freedom the following morning. He couldn't help but turn his attention to the strange girl who sat daydreaming on a snow-covered rock by the road. She was wrapped in a long gray coat with white fur trim around her sleeves and hood, holding her knees close to her chest for warmth. Javer had been hungering for female company for some time now, and couldn't stop looking at this curious being who dared venture outside the crater alone.

Drawing closer to the attractive brunette, he was disappointed to see a warrior with red bands tied around his arms hurrying toward her. The mutant brazenly pinched and fondled the shapely girl, but she clearly didn't enjoy his attentions and tried to escape them. The Arogdorian then grabbed her with his upper arms and lifted her to his eye level, while his lower arms continued exploring the lonesome

daydreamer's writhing body. By now she was screaming. She was desperately trying to kick him, but the aggressor only laughed, showering her with abundant sprays of saliva.

Leaving his barely breathing mansteed under the cliff face and closing his iron fists, Javer directed his quick steps uphill to the contentious couple.

"No, stop it! Let go of me!"

"You know you want it. Just relax." The massive warrior bore a wide scar on his right cheek.

The unyielding beauty saw Javer approaching from behind her unwanted admirer. "Help! Save me!"

"General?"

Turning, the aggressor threw up his lower left hand in salute, but received only a shattering punch to the jaw in response. He let go of his victim and fell with a mighty thud, as if he were a huge sack of rocks. The former noble knight continued to land blow after blow until the senior warrior's body went limp. Throwing the lifeless corpse off the cliff, Javer took Irèn by the hand and led her down the hill. She giggled maliciously, watching the unlucky admirer's body tumbling into the gorge, and then gazed at her savior. "Are you sure he's dead? Are you really the famous general? Thank you so much! If it wasn't for you...but what are you doing here?"

Paying no attention to the young lady with the lively eyes, Javer lifted her into the saddle and bade his poor exhausted mansteed to ride on toward the gates.

"Where's the rest of the army? What's your mansteed's name? I heard that Parthagon managed to resist the attack. Is that true?" The brunette sat in front of the legendary commander, and he held her steady by her delicate shoulders. "I thought you had a staff and a guard and that you were always wearing

armor. Are you sure you're the general? Why do you smell so bad? Don't you have anyone to shave you? By the way, I work at a very nice inn nearby. If ever you, or even the leader himself, have nowhere to spend the night..."

"Gods, woman!" barked Javer, rolling his eyes. "Do you ever shut up? How can Werner have nowhere to spend the night?"

"Sorry, you're right. Sorry!"

"Where is all this insufferable nonsense coming from?"

"Please forgive me!"

"Whoever taught you the gift of speech should be hanged!"

The girl puffed out her cheeks and pursed her plump lips into an indignant pout. The rest of the ride, she maintained a heroic silence, which made her nose twitch with effort. She was constantly on the verge of blurting out some sarcastic remark, but every time he sensed an outburst, the general poked her in the ribs or threatened to throw her off the cliff. Although she'd long grown accustomed to such impolite behavior, she still filled with resentment at each new offense. But all her life Irèn had heard amazing stories about this warrior and therefore couldn't believe she'd just happened to run into him outside the city.

As they approached the crater, Gates of Freedom's guards recognized their commander-in-chief and rushed toward him, clamoring to take their idol under their protection post haste. They went through the massive spiked doors and then, emerging from the dark tunnel, they were back in Arogdor. From snow-covered chimney black tongues of smoke rose to lick the sky. The smoke exuded such a dear and familiar sickening stench. Javer, already preoccupied by new worries, helped his companion to the ground and was about to leave, but something made him cast a parting glance. "Name?"

"Irèn Yourg. Thank you for..."

The girl wanted only to express her gratitude, but the mutant turned away indifferently and, surrounded by an ecstatic crowd, rode into the heart of the city.

* * *

Over eighteen years earlier, a supply convoy had taken the three-year-old village girl away from her native settlement—her parents murdered before her eyes, her beloved brother left behind to die—to Arogdor along with the other captured children. The terrifying city, which Irèn's parents had always threatened to send her to if she didn't put an end to her antics, had made an indelible impression on her. Like most kidnapped children, she'd never seen any place except her native village and the surrounding forest. The mutants' capital had presented her with a completely different, previously unimaginable way of life. She'd felt transported into some world of villains from one of the bizarre fairy tales her old weaver-woman neighbor used to frighten her with.

She'd been sent off to one of six huge schools. She was taught the art of mutation and a sincere love for her new homeland. The love consisted of endlessly repeating a few simple principles: she was now lucky enough to be part of the great Arogdor, home of the freest and happiest people on the island. True patriots knew any negligible problems that arose in the glorious crater—for example, the hopeless poverty and ubiquitous filth underfoot—were, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the machinations of Parthagon. What other reasons could there be? After all, they couldn't hold dear leader responsible, could they? Furthermore, the captured agents and the evil king's provocateurs confirmed their suspicions. They were publicly

executed as traitors in the main square, ruthless torture serving as their trial.

No wonder Arogdorians believed most sincerely in their leader. They not only overlooked the absurdity of life around them and the shameless thieving by the powers that be, but also were ready to lay down their lives if it meant continuing this humiliating carnival. Even if they were all to suddenly die—by Werner Eisenberg's direct fault—they would still find some excuse to claim the master in the gray castle was innocent. Or if a local patriot lost his head and, in searching for the root of his problems, turned his gaze toward those in power, the Arogdorians were ready to eat him alive, never mind involving General Javer's ubiquitous secret service men.

Since the people were tirelessly instructed to believe all the plains' inhabitants were inhuman monsters who'd kill Arogdorians at first opportunity, they aimed all their resources and efforts at defense and survival. To feed themselves, they had no choice but to commit constant raids on the enemy's territory. Using their towers to close off access to fertile lands the Parthagonian kings had forced the mutants to pillage and plunder. Thus, Arogdor's most precious commodity was its army of four-armed monsters. The volcano nation couldn't exist without them, and they couldn't exist without it.

Having undergone such powerful indoctrination, almost all Arogdorian boys dreamed of becoming warriors. However, once they left school at the age of ten, only the children most gifted at mutation were taken into the barracks, so as to produce the strongest and most capable soldiers. There they were assiduously fed and trained, allowing for plenty of sleep and Phase time in order to achieve and maintain their mutations.

Newly minted cadets began to participate in combat operations while they were still naive teenagers.

To ensure the mutant army was regularly replenished with the best quality soldiers—as happened in Parthagon—only military men were allowed to father children. This rule was carefully observed and harshly enforced, meaning plenty of love stories ended at the gallows. Thus, the women of the volcano desired the four-armed mutants, which strongly motivated healthy males to get into the barracks. Even knowing they'd almost certainly have to lay down their lives defending their great homeland didn't deter them.

The evacuated children, as was the proper Arogdorian term, were no more than three or four years old and forgot about their past almost entirely after just a few months. Even before they could count or write, they already ardently supported their new homeland and were ready to sacrifice their lives for their beloved leader. Irèn resisted such propaganda a long time because she vividly remembered what had occurred before she'd been torn from her family. However, even her views gradually changed.

In practical terms, she didn't object to the Arogdorian worldview. For example, she knew the king's subjects really did hate Arogdor because she remembered the horror stories of her childhood. As well, the volcano's inhabitants were not only deprived of fertile land but also cruelly prevented from attempting to procure food. And yet, despite the threat of starvation and the ubiquitous filth, not a single Arogdorian wanted to live in the prim and stuffy Parthagon, whose inhabitants they considered a brainless herd. Conversely, the king's best and brightest subjects did intermittently run off to

enjoy Arogdor's freedoms, proving its advantages over the neighboring state.

Having graduated from school, Irene had begun working while still a child in order to provide herself with some food and a warm bed. By then, she'd long ceased dreaming of escaping the volcano. She had no relatives waiting for her. Nor she did not wish to limit her freedom, especially when it came to choosing her appearance—an important factor for any woman, not to mention many men. And she'd finally become used to the colorful Arogdor and considered it home despite all its obvious shortcomings. After all, home is home! The only thing that made her restless was thinking of her poor brother who might've survived.

While she was still filled with fierce hatred, or—to be more precise—extremely contradictory feelings toward the mutant warriors, Irèn fell in love with ordinary Arogdorians. Their lives were filled with the problems of survival as well as little human joys. These people, albeit outwardly often mutated into the most bizarre creations, were inwardly mostly kind and caring human beings. Many, unlike the king's subjects, realized the leader's position was provisional, although they didn't dare speak this thought aloud, as they didn't wish to disappear off the face of Celesia one dark night. And most important, they all took real pleasure in their lives, living them according to their urges, which made them feel things deeply and vividly. For the right to do so, they were willing to tolerate even the other staples of volcano life: smelly sludge, theft, and miserable poverty.

Returning to her tiny room in the lodging house on the crater's western edge, Irèn happily continued to remember her brief reunion with her brother. She'd been indulging in these memories while seated on the cold rock outside the gate—until

she'd been disturbed by the lecherous warrior. Wiping off her boots and putting them in the corner where she kept all her shoes, she took her gray coat off her unnatural, typically Arogdorian form and climbed under the bear hide on her narrow bed, which occupied most of the little cubbyhole.

The room had only a small window, a table with a neat candlestick and jewelry boxes, and a closet of clothes. Arogdor's women, possessing those most valuable qualities of beauty and eternal youth, had little interest in most items—apart from provocative outfits, of course.

Javer, meanwhile, without even stopping to freshen up after the arduous journey, arrived at Eisenberg's castle for what was surely going to be an unpleasant meeting. Walking past several security cordons, he headed to their master's favorite place—a spacious and warm atrium crossed by cobbled footpaths and full of fragrant greenery. It was under a roof of densely woven steel trusses covered in glass. Everywhere there were endless rows of ferns, cacti, orchids of all shapes and colors, and even low palm trees with spiny trunks. Birdsong and the noisy whirring of cicadas filled this happy paradise, as well as the gurgling of merry brooks.

On a round marble platform, a slender brown-haired man, appearing no more than 30, stood hidden within a black cloak. His soft white hands were gently stroking a lacquered lute, and he focused his peaceful gray eyes on his strumming fingers. This refined, handsome man was picking simple melodies. His curled mustache moved with his music's rhythms.

“A new composition?”

“Oh!” Werner Eisenberg started at the mutant's bass voice. “How many times have I asked you not to do that?”

“Forgive me, Your Excellency, I am tired.” Javer ate an apple from a bowl on the glass table.

“How did it go?” the leader inquired almost indifferently. “The troops have been returning and no news of you. We thought we’d lost our great general.”

“No such luck I’m afraid!”

“Well?”

“It went fine.”

“You’re sure about that? Nothing you’d like to tell me?”

Taking a deep breath, Javer gave a detailed account of all the operation’s stages. As he started describing the events taking place inside the Royal Palace, Eisenberg exploded, his mustache twitching and flaring. “How could you let this happen? This is a catastrophe!”

“No one knew, Werner. They double-crossed us.”

“You couldn’t have figured it out? What am I even paying you for?”

“We’d been allies a long time.”

“And?”

“Meisser had proven his loyalty more than once. There was no reason not to trust him.”

“Do you realize what this could mean for us? Are you aware we’ve received an official warning? Idiot!”

“Yes, that’s right. And a dirty stinking one at that!” From behind the bushes came Nicole Primrose’s high-pitched voice, along with the clicking of her high heels down the cobbled pathway. The extravagant prime minister of Arogdor looked like a skinny light-haired girl with slightly bulging eyes. Her thin silhouette was wrapped in a red fishnet dress, and her high-heeled boots sparkled.

“Hmm, why so cranky? Another spy kick you out of bed?” Javer attempted to strike back even as he steeled himself, anticipating the angry tirades about to come at him from both sides.

* * *

The following week, Irèn was busy working in the inn’s basement laundry room, where she’d spent the day with her sleeves rolled up, washing the guests’ bed linens and dirty clothes. Even though she was wearing wooden clogs, a headscarf, and a multi-layered dress with a spattered apron on top, she still cheerfully danced among the barrels and laundry ropes, belting out silly songs in her squeaky high voice.

The work was getting done at its usual pace when, on one of her many runs back and forth past the narrow basement window, she noticed the inn proprietor talking with a hunched mutant in the courtyard. Hearing her name mentioned, she thought some scoundrel must’ve ratted her out in connection to Parthagonian spies. The former village girl had long suspected this was a possibility and deduced the powers-that-be were out to arrest her.

Having no intention of surrendering peacefully, the girl quickly went to the small window leading on to the street, thinking to escape, but two mutants gleefully grabbed her under her arms.

“We got you now, girlie!”

“You’re not getting away from us, my juicy morsel!”

“A-a-ah! Let go of me, scum! A-a-ah!”

Squealing, Iren knew she was done for. The mutants didn’t stand on ceremony in cases of suspected treason: after a brief

period of interrogation through torture, she'd be killed via the cruelest method they could think of. She burst into tears and, accepting her cruel fate, stopped pummeling the unfeeling monsters with her fists and feet.

"Irèn Yourg?" demanded the hunched warrior with the red armband, who'd hurried over at the sound of the commotion.

"No, that's not me!"

"How's that? The proprietor said you were her."

"He's lying! I'm innocent! Let me go! A-a-ah!"

"So we'll have to take the ball invitation back then?" asked one of the mutants, disappointedly looking at his comrades.

Irèn froze and her jaw dropped as the senior warrior drew a crumpled paper from his leather pants' pocket. Squinting at the writing, he slowly read. "I-rèn You-rg. In-vi-ta-tion. Free...fra...Fri-day ball. Ah!" He grinned contentedly as the younger soldiers marveled at his prowess.

"You sure read fast, you old devil!"

"Wish I your knack."

"Hey, you hairy apes!" the brunette blurted out as if nothing was the matter. "That's meant for me."

"You just said you weren't Irèn Yourg."

"Me? How dare you?" The would-be prisoner, who'd resigned herself to a death sentence just a moment ago, had quickly regained her natural arrogance. "Do you even know the kind of people I'm going to be mingling with tomorrow? They're the ones you'll be answering to for this blatant incompetence!"

"I see. Irèn Yourg?"

"Yes. How many times do I have to say it?"

Spitting, the hunched mutant handed over the invitation and, without saying goodbye, directed his soldiers back to where they'd come from.

“What a day! Have they all lost their minds?”

“If I have to deal with another dame I’m changing into a mansteed. Enough is enough!”

“I was better off giving up the ghost in Yarta!”

Meanwhile, Irèn was already marching down the inn’s hall, shaking the precious invitation at the grim-looking proprietor, demanding to have the day off.

“But the ball is tomorrow night,” mumbled the elderly man with thick black bushes for eyebrows.

“Exactly! That leaves me with less than a day to get ready!”

“Sooner or later you’ll drive me out of business.”

“Thank you, mister proprietor, sir!” The girl loudly kissed his cheek and ran off to commence transforming into a vision of perfection.

She’d always dreamed of attending a socialite ball, but she’d spent her life thus far dealing exclusively with commoners. Why, not even the most romantic among her admirers had ever brought her anywhere fancier than the filthy tavern. Now Irèn suddenly had a chance to be among distinguished guests at Arogdor’s most talked about event. But time was of the essence—after all, the castle would be brimming with competition, and she very much wanted to present a worthy challenge to the extravagantly mutated ladies of high society!

Figuring out who had sent the invitation didn’t take long, which was why she was experiencing very mixed feelings. Remembering her childhood, she sincerely hated military men, despite their many laudable merits, and tried not to have anything to do with them—unlike other Arogdorian women, who considered these ridiculous monsters the pinnacle of male desirability! Irene didn’t have much contact with men in general, and was known to be quite a prude. Nevertheless, she

was not without vanity, and she couldn't help but feel triumphant—after all, she'd managed to draw the attention of Ivar Javer! And she was eager to be introduced to Warner Eisenberg's entourage, not to mention possibly meeting the leader himself, whom she'd only seen several times from afar.

Preparations for the event were going swimmingly, but the girl still lacked the most important thing of all—a suitable outfit. While she already owned a magnificent pair of shoes she'd bought a long time ago—accidentally spending her monthly salary and going hungry for a stretch as a result—the question of the dress required delicate maneuvering. The only way she could imagine obtaining a truly knockout frock was to borrow one from her blonde colleague, Rita Levi, who was 70 and had managed to acquire an enviable collection of top-quality attire. At first, Rita reluctantly agreed to maybe let Irèn borrow a less extravagant item from her closet, but when Irene chose an exquisite dress cut from a rare pomegranate-colored silk smuggled in from Sunset City, the blonde refused to share such an irreplaceable treasure. Thinking on her feet, Irèn managed to convince her by implying the invitation to the ball was extendable to the invitee's best girlfriend, especially if she were young and beautiful. And Rita, of course, fit the bill, a compliment that made her giddy enough to say yes to anything.

So the two mysterious figures, wrapped in white mink stoles, arrived at Eisenberg's castle gates on Friday night. Heads held high, they stepped out of a black lacquered carriage harnessed to two giggling mansteeds, whom the women had hired in a nearby alley for a pittance. Roaring bonfires lit both sides of the front entrance, and the most respectable people of not-so-poor-after-all Arogdor were arriving. Most were rich merchants who'd stopped to shake hands with each other and senior warriors

accompanied by ladies looking particularly haughty in their fur coats.

As Irèn had expected, the guards unceremoniously kicked the gullible blonde into the slush-filled gutter. Irèn, inwardly chuckling, opened her eyes wide and let out a loud gasp, covering her mouth with her hands in their translucent pomegranate-colored gloves. When everyone looked at her, she only shook her head reproachfully, as if she had no idea who this interloper was. Gracefully displaying the shoes that had waited two years to shine, Irèn lifted the hem of her dress, with its multi-layered cascading skirt, and then hurriedly clicked into the castle's interior, taking off her pelt and letting out her wavy chestnut hair as she walked.

"That two-faced snake!" Rita hissed with powerless rage, feeling doubly robbed: of her dress and of her dignity. But all she could do was to pick up her sullied white stole and go drink away her sorrows in the nearest tavern, which noisily beckoned from around the corner.

Inside the castle, one final mutant gave Irèn another once over, then took her outer garments and led the trembling girl toward the rhythmic music, which could be heard out in the street. The abruptly opened door flooded Irèn's radiant face with a thousand candles' light, expensive perfume, rumbling conversation, and hundreds of Arogdorian dignitaries laughing falsely. The long ballroom was tastefully decorated in black and deep ruby red, just the colors to match Irèn's hard-fought-for dress. Musicians in black suits and pointed shoes were playing at one end of the hall, and at the other stood large tables loaded with snacks and drinks. A row of round chandeliers, each one the size of a carriage, illuminated all this.

Sticking her nose high in the air, Irèn soon confirmed to herself she looked certainly no worse than most of the scowling ladies. What set her rivals apart were the thick layers of gold ornaments and precious stones glistening all over their bodies, as if they'd each been dipped in a tub of jewels at the castle's entrance. Seeing all this luxury, the girl became self-conscious of her tiny earrings and thin gold chain. Meanwhile, the society lionesses were scornfully evaluating the fresh blood that had trickled into their circle, where romantic intrigues had long since embarked on their third go-around.

Catching a few penetrating looks from the gentlemen around her, Irèn gathered her wits and, displaying a look of indifference, gracefully went to the sparkling wines. At the table, she exchanged glances with a slightly bug-eyed girl in a child's ball gown. Irèn waited for someone to hand her a drink. A charming brown-haired gentleman in a black suit and sporting a familiar-looking curled mustache finally proffered her a glass. However, the girl coldly rejected his attempt to get acquainted, hoping he'd try to approach her at least twice more before she'd acquiesce. Left again to her own devices, she began to seek out the general.

Scanning the crowd, she finally spotted Javer's thick dreads in the room's farthest corner. He was enthusiastically discussing something with another warrior, while two impressive ladies in blue dresses—their escorts by all appearances—stood by and listened. He wore a white shirt and an elegant black jacket with tight-fitting slacks, which emphasized his massive four-armed body. Only his preposterous lacquered shoes spoiled his appearance.

Grinning, Irèn went toward the general, relieved to see at least one familiar face.

“Ivar?” Irèn said, inclining her head to the side, which immediately made the two mutants’ companions very fidgety.

“Good evening!” Javer smiled, flashing his polished tusks. “Give us a few minutes. I’ll be with you shortly.”

“What?” Irèn grimaced and was about to say something particularly nasty, but then decided against it and moved away from the group, which made its women very happy. Next thing she knew, the first round of dancing had been announced. Using her elbows to make her way through the crowd, the young lady marveled as stunning couples in brilliant outfits began spinning around the ballroom to a rousing waltz. This was a dream come true!

The ingénue in the silk dress wasn’t a great a dancer and therefore had to reject that same handsome fellow from before. He turned white as a sheet and slouched away in defeat. Once she’d done this, the audience began to look askance at her, and no one else dared to approach her. Soon Irèn began to suspect something was amiss and panicked: something must’ve happened to her hair or dress, or perhaps she just wasn’t all that attractive. After a few minutes of self-torment she was ready to burst into tears, and Irèn decided to escape this humiliation and never return here again. She quickly headed for the exit, but just as she was about to leave, Javer’s massive paw caught her hand. “There’s no pleasing you, woman!” he laughed, caressing her with his deep-set intelligent eyes. “I understand your aversion to rapists, but what could you possibly have against our dear leader? I suppose a general is no good to you either?”

“Oh gods, that was Eisenberg?” Irèn nearly fainted with horror.

“The very same. His Excellency is busy weeping for you in his garden and wiping snot off his mustache.”

“How can you speak of him this way?”

“I can speak however I please.” Javer winked and led her to the drinks table. “We’ve got some catching up to do.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Good girl! Neither do I. But we’ll hold a couple of glasses nonetheless to avoid looking suspicious.”

“Well, if it’s like that.”

The experienced mutant knew no woman could hold a glass without eventually bringing it to her lips. Therefore, when the red wine shimmered between her fingers, he could taste the swift victory ahead. “Local or evacuated?”

“I was taken when I was three.”

“So you were ‘taken’ then?” chuckled Javer.

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

“I understand. Sometimes it all seems unpleasant at first, but that’s how it has to be. It’s for the best. The world is a lot more complicated than it seems. I’ll tell you something in secret—even among these numbskulls, a few really know what’s going on.”

“That may be, but...”

“Stop! First of all, woman, tell me what you were doing beyond the gate. Trying to rob someone or something?”

“What?”

“By the way, I should be much less malodorous this evening than when you saw me last.”

The general then began to play on the young woman’s sense of humor, bending down toward her. Colorful stories flowed from his insolent lips, just as wine flowed one glass after another from the girl’s miniature hand to her lips. She didn’t

realize what was happening, was only marveling at her interlocutor's ungainly appearance. He was the only warrior she'd ever met who didn't stink and who turned out to be quite interesting to listen to.

In Arogdor it was almost impossible to find an entertaining companion. So Javer was by far the most interesting person she'd ever met. He had countless stories to tell of his incredibly rich life. He knew pretty much everything about what was happening throughout the realms. He was frequently funny and actually interested in what she thought. And on top of all that, he didn't display the casual vulgarity she'd sadly gotten all too used to! Therefore, as the evening went on, she found his appearance less frightening, and when he stroked her thick hair or accidentally touched her, shivers coursed through her body. Irèn could, with just one carefully placed touch, lose her sense of what's up and what's down and forget about everything else. Therefore, his touching her refined neck, her sensitive elbows, and her elegant ears proved effective, disarming the young woman.

Through the twilight mist clouding her mind, Irèn suddenly became conscious of being led down a dark corridor lined with ornate carpets and marble columns. She came to a halt, in panic, and looked around. Somewhere in the distance she could still hear the rhythmic music playing, but the oil lamps around them lit only her companion's face. Only huge paintings depicting blurry forest landscapes from all sides looked down on her.

"Where are we going?"

The mutant didn't answer, pulling the girl onward.

"General Javer, where are we going?"

"Shhhh! We're almost there."

“Stop!” Irèn was becoming more and more frightened.

“Just around the corner here.”

“No!” She grabbed the handle of the nearest door as sparkling tears rolled down her cheeks. “We’re not going anywhere. Let go of me!”

“You must be confused, woman.”

“Stop calling me that! I’m a girl.”

“You’ve been doing some wishful thinking,” Javer laughed, insolently looking into her eyes. “Set your sights on me, have you?”

“Me? I’m the one doing the wishful thinking?” The unsuspecting victim calmed down.

“Well, I’m certainly not! As if I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Please, you’re the one trying to hit on me. Women these days!” The mutant had lost all sense of decorum, having full confidence in his strategy.

“That’s enough. Let go of me!” Irèn tried to pull free, but the general suddenly stopped smiling. He grabbed the girl by her thin neck with his lower right hand, circling it with his enormous fingers. Roughly pressing her against the wall, while leaning on it with his other arms, he was now towering above her. The victim, paralyzed with fear and barely breathing, could only grab onto the mutant’s wrist wrapped around her throat, although he probably couldn’t even feel her attempts to break free.

Slowly, Javer leaned toward her, his heavy dreads resting on her fragile shoulders. Out of fear, the girl closed her wet eyes, hearing the monster’s steady breathing right by her right ear. In the weighty silence that had descended upon them, he looked her over and sniffed her head from every angle. At times his

nose, his mouth, and even his cold tusks softly touched her trembling face and delicate neck, where her thin gold chain was tangled in his tensed fingers. Meanwhile, her hands, digging into the mutant's wrist, could feel the hard muscles rippling tautly under his bio-armor.

The girl was helpless in the face of uncompromising force and depended on the want and whim of the massive predator. These strange sensations unexpectedly made the girl's hot blood flow below her stomach and go to her already clouded head. Her mouth popped open, her breathing quickened, and her quivering hands fell limp by her sides. Horrified, Irèn realized she was simultaneously experiencing unbearable fright, pain, and...terrible pleasure. Realizing this deepened all these earth-shattering sensations, and the girl involuntarily gasped at the next accidental touch of her ear.

Although Javer didn't do anything more than just caress her face and neck, he felt a change come over her. He continued to press the young Arogdorian's buttons, which, until very recently, she hadn't suspected she had.

His mighty hand on her neck, alternately flexing and relaxing, seemed to rock her female essence along waves which continued to rise, and from which, with every oncoming swell, she plummeted further and further down. As her trembling body, tormented by the mutant's continuous light touches, became covered with goosebumps, and her legs, convulsing, pressed tightly against each other, Irèn stopped resisting. A few torturous moments later, opening her mouth wider and letting out an involuntary scream, she plummeted into an icy abyss and found herself in an unrelenting fire, which was burning up all her feelings, senses, and thoughts. Again and again she found

herself tossed about as if by a whirlwind. Again and again, until it all disappeared, including herself.

Sometime later, she became aware of sensation coming back to her incinerated consciousness, just like rivers flowing down from the volcano to flood the dry riverbeds in spring. At that very moment, Javer opened his scorching fingers. Irèn slid down the wall to the floor, gasping for breath, her blind eyes open wide.

The general's footsteps echoed down the hallway. He was cold-bloodedly leaving Irèn to face this new world on her own, her old life lying dead in the ruins. Left alone in the dark, Irèn became frightened of herself and burst into quiet sobs.

* * *

In the cold January of 967, Ivar Javer's forces totaled almost 2,000 mutants, now more than twice the size of the once undefeatable Parthagonian army. Weighing the pros and cons, Eisenberg commanded his general to concentrate all his might toward finishing off the traitors in Sunset City with one definitive blow.

Scouts reported that the helpless city, and its desperate mayor, Walter Meisser, were in a sad state. King Albert could not pardon him for his betrayal—not to mention the nastiness of years of illegal trade with Arogdor. Thus, the magnificent city stood unarmed, just waiting for the first invader to claim it for himself. Parthagonian forces were too busy rebuilding their own defenses, and had no intention of moving in. Attacking former subjects of the crown, however, didn't benefit the king's reputation and authority. In practical terms, he preferred to wait it out and let Arogdor exact its vengeance upon them.

Having received the order, Javer set about planning an unprecedentedly bloody incursion. While the soldiers injured in the attack on Parthagon were still trying to grow back their lost limbs, he selected 1,000 of his sturdiest mutants, 800 of which he sent down the mountain along the gorge of the Sixth River. With the remaining 200 warriors, he set off along the Eighth River. This northeastern gorge was famous for its steep cliffs, but it came out onto the widest bay in Celesia, which was where his fleet of four two-story galleys waited. A year ago Arogdor had purchased these vessels from Sunset City and the boats were now looking forward to paying their home wharfs a visit.

Two days later, a black river of mutants reached the Tower of Recognition, which was hidden behind a forest of construction beams. Before the impartial garrison's eyes, the mutants coolly marched on toward Sunset City, which lay only 20 miles to the west. Some mutants headed south to block the escape routes of citizens trying to escape their fate. They knew panic seized the citizens and they'd be fleeing in all directions.

Once Javer's fleet was blocking any seaward escape routes for the numerous merchant galleys, the mutants began squeezing the city in their merciless vice. Eisenberg's orders, artistic as he was by nature, were a triumph of creative madness: accept no parlay, annihilate the population, and pillage as many resources as possible—especially Sunset City's advanced technology.

Walter Meisser had only a few hundred archers under his command, two dozen hastily constructed ballistae and catapults, and an almost useless civilian militia made up of the city's able-bodied men. That was the sum of the resistance. Meanwhile an army of 15,000 trained warriors would have a hard time repelling the mutants. Thus, the city, which once rivaled

Parthagon for power and prestige, became the site of the bloodiest slaughter in Celesia's history.

As desperately and valiantly as its denizens tried to resist, the Arogdorians infiltrated every street, and over two days and two nights, eviscerated every person they could find, sparing no woman, child, or elderly person. Thick blood, like runoff after a heavy rain, flooded the city streets, and the surrounding sea turned dark, ruby red. The Arogdorians completely or partially burned and destroyed spectacular white buildings, with their limestone columns. They emptied cellars and stock houses of their goods. And they appropriated the fishing fleet, along with Sunset City's valuable machinery. All the while, the Arogdorian losses turned out to be laughable.

Three days later, Javer notified Werner Eisenberg of the operation's success. Eisenberg now had on his hands the blood of almost 30,000 peaceful inhabitants of the white-stone city—all because of one inexplicable decision their mayor made. And even though Arogdor had lost its secret ally, Parthagon also could no longer rely on its wealthiest province's significant tributes and resources.

As was custom, a celebration was announced to honor Arogdor's crushing victory over an enemy who'd had the audacity to betray its great neighbor. Countless people decked out in fur coats and hats assembled in the central square, right before Eisenberg's castle, to throw up their left hands and shout out the words they cherished most.

“Hail, Arogdor!”

“Hail, Eisenberg!”

“Hail, Javer!”

The captured treasures and curious technological innovations were put on public display, along with piles of household goods,

which were up for grabs. Convoys still kept coming in laden with resources from the now-razed legendary city.

Having spent all morning at the shrine, Irèn Yourg came out to the festive square. Like all Arogdorians, she felt immense pride in her country, studying the seized curiosities, which seemed to be lathes and projectile weapons, while swarms of children were climbing all over them. She understood somewhere on the plains below thousands of people just like herself, women and children, had been massacred. But she couldn't help but feel—flowing through her unconsciously—the ferocious, destructive power before which all of Celesia now trembled.

She was part of that force and was, indirectly, partially responsible for its monstrous might. She never saw the blood of the innocent spilt, but she felt the patriotism flowing around the square so thick it could've been scooped up with a ladle, and her heart filled with a strange happiness. Irèn couldn't even say if these emotions were sincere or if she were just being swept up in the general ambiance.

When Javer and Eisenberg came onto the castle's central balcony to greet the elated crowd, Irèn involuntarily shuddered and then blushed deep red remembering that wild night. She'd been trying unsuccessfully to forget what had happened, to banish her foolish thoughts and fantasies ever since.

In the late-night air, dreading and also hoping to see the general again, she, along with other curious onlookers, waited for him at the grand entrance to the leader's castle. Finally, he appeared in the doorway, the scarlet cape worn atop his black coat making him easily recognizable since he was the only person in the entire Arogdorian army who wore normal clothes. The other monsters made do with the standard-issue uniform,

relying on their armor and thick fur for protection against the harsh climate.

However, the brave commander was not alone. An attractive blonde wearing a blindingly white fur coat accompanied him. Even Irèn couldn't help but appreciate her thin long legs and her slightly elongated face's noble features, glimpsing them as she hid among the crowd surrounding the legendary warrior.

Back at her meager lodging house, Irèn spent all night tossing and turning, feeling frantic one moment and depleted the next. Something that had been accumulating within her now brimmed over. To her horror, she realized she wanted to see Javer again. The general was now the talk of the town, making it impossible to erase the arrogant bastard from her memory. And she was feeling jealous of his beautiful companion, whose magnificent looks she didn't want to compete with even if she could.

She didn't know the most ruthless man in Celesia's history had all this time been doing fierce battle with himself. Nor did she have any inkling the general's cruel annihilation of Sunset City, gutting its citizens like hogs at the slaughterhouse, was indirectly her doing. Something in this guileless girl—her sincerity, her sensitive eyes—had deeply imprinted on the fearless warrior's jaded soul. And he now directed all his inner resources toward crushing these emotions, sparing no one along the way, including himself. Planning the attack and swiftly defeating the cowardly traitors did distract him for a while, but once he'd returned to Arogdor, knowing the stubborn and talkative girl was somewhere nearby made him suffer all over again. Attempting to muffle these feelings, which had already cost him everything once before, he took to spending time with the most expensive women around. They seemed to rather

successfully cloud his mind long enough to forget about Irèn. As did the reserves of rather decent wine the mutants had pillaged from the enemy.

* * *

The next morning, Irèn put on her finest black dress under her only gray hooded coat and headed to the main barracks near the leader's castle.

The rest of the day, standing next to the grim three-story building, she had to endure the foul jokes of the guards, who all had a very good idea of why she must've come. It appeared similar occurrences happened rather often, which is why every mutant passing through the doorway, painted in black-and-yellow stripes, blew air kisses in her direction and winked knowingly. Irèn paid no attention to their lewd suggestions and patiently waited for Javer to come out, beating off the persistent suitors with a prudently prepared poker. The day was particularly cold, and her hands and feet felt frozen in the sleeted snow and the howling wind. But she kept waiting, never even considering giving up. She was starving and her legs buckled under her from exhaustion, yet she remained there in spite of everything, in spite of everyone.

And the waiting paid off.

As twilight approached, Javer's huge carriage, accompanied by a detachment of mutants, drove up to the barracks' gate. Getting out, the general noticed Irèn, who by this time was almost snowed over, her nose was running and she sniffled continuously. He knew that after what had happened between them, she would come looking for him. It had only been a matter of time. He knew that when it came to intelligence or experience

with women, no one in Arogdor could measure up to him. No one on the entire island of Celesia, perhaps. Whenever she came into contact with the volcano's base offspring, Irèn compared them to him, and against the backdrop of their dullness, he shone forth like a god. She found herself in a hopeless trap, every such encounter pushing her innocent body into his strong hands, which seemed destined to gain absolute power over her. The problem was Javer himself still didn't know whether this was good or bad as far as his own heart was concerned.

To avoid further humiliating the girl, who must've already endured enough abuse, he said, "Oh, a familiar face!"

"Good evening, General!" said his paralyzed victim, coyly averting her eyes and begging him silently not to ask her why she'd come.

"I think we can use first names, Irèn."

"All right, Ivar."

Javer smiled softly and carefully brushed the snow off her hood and shoulders. The thick layers gave away how long she'd been waiting. The soldiers in his detachment and the barracks guards watched with astonishment as the two continued their conversation. They were familiar with Javer's rough manner and had never seen him be so courteous and calm. Then again, they'd noticed him acting rather odd the last month, and now they were bearing witness to the lovely cause behind the change.

"I think we might have to continue our discussion over dinner," Javer said, gently prying the poker from Irèn's icy gloves.

"I don't know." The girl scowled, as if she hadn't just spent the whole day waiting for him in the cold. "Maybe."

"I'll pick you up tomorrow evening?"

“We’ll see.”

“It’s a date then!” he exclaimed. “Now march on home, you pesky snow woman. My men will give you a ride.”

* * *

Later that evening, tired from the cares of military arrangements, Javer returned to his small but cozy mansion, which looked over the square before Eisenberg’s castle. His luxurious abode was one of the few places in Arogdor where, instead of the nauseating stench of rot and sewage, the air smelled of rose butter. The house was tightly packed with sturdy carved-oak furniture, all lacquered dark amber. There were heavy cast-iron chandeliers, thick shaggy carpets, and mauve-shaded walls. The elegant bathroom was floor-to-ceiling dark red marble crisscrossed by thin white veins. The general dove into the bathtub, filled with almost boiling water beforehand by his prudent servants, and immersed himself in hot bliss and painful thoughts of Irèn. He was annoyed he could not stop thinking about her! What was it about this girl?

Calling for fortified wine, Javer, with a century of pain in his heart, reminisced about Queen Jane Goodnall, Albert III’s fourth wife—the only woman he’d ever truly loved. Back then he’d still been so young, and his heart had been open to the one woman he wasn’t even supposed to lay eyes on. The girl too had responded with the same unrestrained love. And then came the terrible tragedy that had destroyed their lives and broken everything human inside him.

The possible consequences of his heart stirring after being dormant so many years frightened him. And after his fifth bottle of wine he decided never to see Irèn again. In his drunken state

he even considered having her strangled and then hastily buried somewhere deep in the mountains.

Nevertheless, the next evening, a large and comfortable carriage arrived at the dilapidated lodging house to pick up Irèn Young and take her away from that disgusting flophouse. She expected the romantic dinner to take place at the only decent restaurant in Arogdor, or perhaps even in the castle, where she planned to profusely apologize to Eisenberg for the way she'd treated him at the ball. But the team of mansteeds drove the carriage to the general's mansion. Irèn felt unexpectedly relieved, despite the impudence of the dwelling's owner, who met her in a small entryway lined with racks for shoes and outerwear.

Wearing his fitted suit and white button-up shirt, Javer removed her coat, revealing her bare shoulders and a slinky black dress that snaked down her body from its lace collar. He delicately took the girl's hand and led her to the dining room.

"That is one stunning outfit, my lady!"

"Why, thank you!"

"Irèn, as a combat general, I must report that there is nothing more dangerous in the world than a silent or—even worse—hungry woman. Therefore..."

"What nonsense. You just can't help spouting nons..."

"Well, indeed, judging by past experience, nothing short of a cold grave could keep you quiet. I suppose I should still try to prevent you from starving to death though."

"What do you mean 'indeed'?"

"Just making conversation."

"Uh huh, and those bottles are also there to save us from starvation?" She pointed at the small round table.

“Woman, must you spoil everything? I’ve been caught red-handed,” said the mutant, raising all four hands. “You just had to say something.”

“Amazing, not even a minute in and already I’ve spoiled everything.”

“Chicks,” he sighed. “What can you do?”

“Oh really? Is that a sample of your famous gallantry, General?”

“Perhaps I should just send you back home?”

“And why’s that?”

“Keep sin from the door, so to speak.”

“I don’t think so!”

“The carriage is still here.”

“I’m not leaving without having eaten, that’s for sure.”

“Grub, that’s all you women care about.”

“Why do you think I agreed to see you in the first place?”

His guest cheered up, Javer pulled out her chair and then sat at the table’s opposite end. With one sonorous click of his fingers, they were surrounded by servants in white dresses, black bonnets, and aprons. Carrying large dishes, they served the diners a fragrant fish stew, hot off the stove, with fried vegetables and mushrooms in a thick creamy sauce, followed by delicate honey cakes. The meal was accompanied by abundant quantities of red wine, although Javer behaved with restraint. His instinct told him that Irèn would be his by the end of the night whatever he said or did, which made him relaxed enough to enjoy the easy conversation. So much so that the general, feeling particularly attractive and therefore particularly ruthless, decided to play games with the inexperienced creature before him.

After numerous toasts in honor of Irèn and her maddening beauty, after hours of talking about everything from the dangers of war and the boundlessness of the starry sky, after many modest touches and vulgar jokes, furtive looks and secret sighs, after sweet wine and delicious snacks, after stepping into the quicksand of languid hopes and hazy dreams, after feeling tiny nails fingering the bio-armor under his unbuttoned shirt, shameless Javer, said to the girl seated on his knees. “All right, that’s enough. Don’t think you can get me drunk and seduce me just like that!”

“Hmm...I haven’t even started.”

“You’re joking?” He frowned. “We’re just having dinner. You’ve got the wrong idea lady!”

“You have such a pleasing voice,” whispered Irèn.

“Thank you, but now it’s past my bedtime.”

“It’s been past your bedtime for hours,” she said, running her fingers over his muscular arm, which was holding up her rather limp body.

“The guest bedroom has been made up for you.”

“What?” she suddenly sobered up. “What’s been made up?”

“Your bed.”

“My bed. Sure...”

“Great, that’s settled then.” Javer stood the girl on the floor, rose to his feet, and taking her by the hand led her to the guest bedroom, coyly saying, “It was really nice to spend such a magical evening with such a magical conversation partner. Good night, sweet dreams!”

Pecking the dumbfounded girl coldly on the forehead, the mutant turned and went upstairs to his own second-floor bedroom, leaving Irèn silently blinking in the face of the lonely night ahead. The poor girl went to the cold bed on wobbling legs,

racking her brain to figure out where she'd gone wrong. Was it really just another night for him while she had imagined it to be anything other than that? Maybe her dress was too old-fashioned? Or maybe he was just one of those men who really wanted someone to talk to till day's end?

Meanwhile, Javer, whistling a careless melody, went into his mauve-colored bedroom, took his time undressing, lit two candles, and lay down on the immense bed to wait for the milky body soon joining him. Admiring the tournament knight's armor hanging on the wall, he mulled one question: how long would she last?

Irèn stoically held out for a whole quarter of an hour, during which she'd had time to cry, promise herself never to see horrible Javer again, and even decide to become a blonde. But finally, relinquishing her female pride and swearing revenge on all the volcano's mutants, with loud and indignant stomping, she rushed headlong upstairs.

* * *

Just as she'd predicted, Irèn never returned to the flophouse—except once to pick up some choice items from her modest closet. From then on she spent her time at the rose-perfumed mansion. She stopped working at the inn, showing up there on occasion only to visit the good-hearted proprietor with the thick gray eyebrows who'd come to love the girl like a daughter, and to gossip with her friend Rita Levi. Of course, since the blonde had never forgiven Irèn for the nasty trick she'd pulled at the ball, the ex-village girl never missed a chance to taunt her with details of her fabulous new life.

Now that she'd suddenly climbed to the top of the social ladder—becoming the girlfriend of the most respected and desirable man in Arogdor—Irèn was so blissfully happy that she'd grown even prettier than before. And yet her new social status didn't change her simple soul one bit, even though she could, if provoked, give a worthy answer to all her ill-wishers, feeling her own mutant's force backing her up as she did. She was convinced the man by her side was the finest of the species, so perfect it almost seemed she'd imagined him. This certainty gave her confidence, serenity, and peace of mind in anything she did. Even though Javer, like all other mutants, was by no means handsome, he possessed such incredible strength, extraordinary intelligence, and undeniable charm that any weakness of his seemed an asset. Irèn had no chance of withstanding his allure and fine understanding of the female nature, and was soon lost in the flame of burning passion.

At the same time, the once promiscuous Javer was sending shockwaves throughout his circle of male friends and Arogdor as a whole. In a place where fidelity was considered nonsense to be scoffed at, no one could have predicted such a die-hard bachelor as the general would fall into its trap. Multitudes of female hearts had smashed themselves against the granite wall of his singlehood, and yet this plain girl—by the volcano's standards at least—had managed in just a few nights to worm her way into the warrior's frozen heart.

Javer sensed himself changing, felt more mentally balanced, which enabled him to cease engaging in endless self-reproach. For the first time in many years, he'd let another person in without fearing the consequences or restrictions it might impose. In his big head, tranquility and serenity, the existence of which he'd only suspected to this point, now reigned. No

matter what he came up against in his daily life, he was in good mood, knowing somewhere nearby a sweet-smelling, chatty little creature quivered at every word that came from his tusked mug.

The new couple seemed to suit each other in every respect. Within the gray walls of Arogdor, eternally immersed in winter, stench, and smoke, they'd found each other and rejoiced as if to spite the world. Soon, though, Irèn began to notice Javer growing tense as he spent longer hours in the barracks and on the crater's rocky outskirts. She so desperately longed for a quiet and happy life she'd forgotten what her lover actually did for a living.

Her misgivings worsened when she learned Arogdor's entire male population had been conscripted into the militia and forced to strive for more intimidating mutations. Allegedly, these were preparations in case the mad king, capable of anything now the mutants had dared lay siege to his precious Parthagon, decided to attack. But the former village girl had been through enough in her life to remain skeptical. One evening, when Javer came home tired as always, she could stand it no longer and snapped at him when he appeared in the doorway. "What is the meaning of all this?"

"You've got nothing to worry about, Irèn."

"Another war?"

"Another? The last one never ended."

"But what's the point of it this time? Surely we're not out of supplies already?"

"You know what, it's really none of your business."

"Not my business?" The girl crossed her arms.

"As far as we're concerned, there's nothing to worry about. The war cannot touch us."

“Cannot touch us? You’re the one leading the charge. Why are you conscripting civilians all of a sudden?”

“What’s going on here? Werner himself doesn’t ask this many questions.” The general, having lived through many skirmishes, skillfully avoided yet another direct question.

“You’re not moving from this spot until you tell me what you all are up to!”

“Allow me to remind you you’re only slightly larger than my leg, woman!”

“Oh, so you’re planning on raising your hand to me as well? Worse, your leg?”

“I hope you’re using a thimble!”

“What?” Irèn was taken aback.

“Because you’re needling me senseless!”

“Oh, so that’s how it is? How about I sew your mouth shut, big man! If you think you’re so clever!”

“Ok, settle down now.” Javer gave in, realizing this time he wasn’t getting out of the trap. “We are about to finish off Parthagon once and for all. It will be hard and dangerous, but once...”

“Finish off? So none of this has anything to do with defense?”

“This is what has to happen, believe me. Most importantly—you of all people have nothing to fear. Any other questions?”

Perhaps there was some sense in attacking Parthagon, since the omniscient general spoke of it with such confidence. Irèn had already begun to adapt herself to her protector, whom she trusted completely, adopting his views and principles no matter how strange or monstrous they might’ve seemed to an outsider looking in. If he did something, it must be necessary to do. Then again, what about her poor brother? She hadn’t gotten the chance to ask, but surely he too had family and friends.

Moreover, the girl still couldn't quite see why destroying the kingdom of Parthagon was paramount. Was it not enough to get rid of their stupid king? And why had they annihilated Sunset City even though they could've taken their revenge on the rogue mayor alone? Oh, these bloody games men play!

Irèn spent a whole week tormenting herself with guesses and extracting, little by little, valuable details from her beloved about the crushing blow aimed at Arogdor's eternal enemy's capital. But the more she found out, the more she doubted the venture's purpose and justification. She had the impression either she was failing to understand something or Javer was hiding something from her. She had a strong feeling that Werner Eisenberg was not as holy and pure as she'd been brought up to believe. All evidence pointed to him killing people not out of necessity but for his own entertainment. Together with Javer, they seemed to consciously go for the bloodiest options available to them.

Reconciling these harrowing thoughts with the patriotism coursing through her veins since childhood was difficult, and she spent a lot of effort coming up with the wildest variety of possible justifications for this new escalation. After all, the great and noble Arogdor, having suffered so much horror and humiliation at Parthagon's hands, wouldn't exterminate innocent people for no reason, would it?

Finally, these doubts reached a critical point, and after several days of torment Irèn broke down and admitted to herself she couldn't tolerate such excessive cruelty. She might've resigned herself to the carnage, but her brother among the possible victims greatly increased her sense of compassion. Consequently, despite her feelings for Javer, she didn't want to live in the knowledge of innocent Parthagonians being

destroyed—including her poor brother and his family—as it was being planned at her bedside.

* * *

And so the interlocked fate of two nations found themselves in the hands of an impudent brunette with big hazel-green eyes. The situation was particularly delicate since Irèn often had enough trouble dealing with her own petty problems—something she was fully aware of—never mind resolving the grand misfortunes of Celesia. And even though thinking of it made her hands tremble, some iron pillar in her courageous heart filled her with determination and courage.

Having decided to intervene in the fates of Arogdor and Parthagon, Irèn resolved to act without delay. Her mission was simple: warn Albert III of the planned spring incursion. Standing on the crater's edge, she had the impression of almost being able to see the Wall and the Royal Palace, but the illusory closeness didn't simplify the difficulties involved. Initially, the girl wanted to go alone, but realized bypassing the many patrols and the steep ravines by herself was impossible. She could not make it all way to the Parthagonian towers, let alone come back alive. And how would Javer react to her absence?

She thought of hiring a courier, but the slender almost dog-like mutants were so dim as to most likely reveal the message's contents to the first person who asked. Besides, people didn't simply leave the volcano. In the case of couriers, they ventured outside the crater only when military men dispatched them. She also thought of tying a note to a small raft and sending it down one of the rivers on the southern slopes. However, there was more than a passing chance the handmade vessel would get

stuck on the rapids or float by unnoticed even if it did make it to its destination. It also crossed her mind to set up poor, gullible Rita once again, making up some story about a widowed knight who'd been secretly pining for her. But even though her friend would have no trouble believing the feelings of a knight she'd never laid eyes on before, she couldn't be expected to believe Irèn.

Having considered numerous wild and harebrained schemes, the girl then thought of a curious story her brother had told her. He'd mentioned a mansteed who, in return for saving his life, had easily led them around all the patrols unnoticed. There it was, the sought-after solution! All she had to do now was find and convince Bill—who was likely as simpleminded as any other mansteed—to carry the note to the nearest tower.

The problem was thousands of mansteeds lived in Arogdor. Lately the carefree lifestyle that came with this kind of mutation has seen an unprecedented rise in popularity, a trend that aggravated Javer to no end. He reserved his choicest epithets for these lazy compatriots because they were responsible for devouring more than half of Arogdor's food supplies. Nevertheless, having no other viable option, Irèn headed to the gigantic stables just behind the barracks in the town's center.

The elongated wooden structure was giving off steam in the cold air as she entered its dim interior and discovered hundreds of relatively well-kept stalls lining the walls. A chorus of peaceful snoring emanated from the mansteeds' sweaty domiciles, along with the murmur of polite conversation. The grooms, who looked like humongous apes, were constantly running around with buckets of sickly porridge, scrubbing the horse-like mutants, and cleaning their dearly obtained saddles.

The endless thanks of the excessively polite mansteeds accompanied their every move. Irèn approached the nearest stall, in which she found a mansteed with a coquettish, curly hairstyle.

“Hello there!”

“Thank you, thank you, kind sir!” The mansteed whispered to the attendant who was soaping his hide.

“I’m sorry to bother you! Can you tell me where I might find Bill?”

“Oh, Bill? Bill is my best friend,” replied the mansteed. He lovingly batted his long eyelashes turned to his caretaker. “A little lower, please.”

“Want me to scrub your behind again too? The nerve!” the Arogdorian swore in frustration. “It’s already glistening as it is!”

“Oh, that would be great. Thank you!”

“So how would I go about finding your friend?”

“You hear that snoring over there?” the mansteed inclined his round mug toward the middle of the stables. “He also talks a lot in his sleep.”

Thanking the frustrated mutant, Irèn headed to look for Thomas’s savior. She found him sleeping peacefully on his side while passersby wiped the dirt clinging to their shoes onto his white braid, whose thickness and luster would make any woman envious. The girl was beaming with happiness at her quick success when the fragmented phrases the mutant was muttering in his strange sleep put her back on her guard. “We are invincible! Arogdor is the greatest...Yes! Yes! The greatest...Hail, Arogdor! Hail, Eisenberg! We’re the best...Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!”

Imagining this patriotic citizen betraying his native land by bringing suspicious brigands into its heart was hard. When she

asked an attendant whether he knew any other Bills he tried to grope her, but then, hearing the general's name, he got frightened and pointed to a stall in the far corner.

Approaching, Irèn saw an extraordinarily large mansteed with a black mohawk. The good-natured giant with the kind eyes was cheerfully finishing a bucket of what smelled like sewage. He could hardly tear himself away to greet his guest. "Good day, dear lady!"

"Hello! Are you Bill?"

"Yes, Bill Elvin. Thank you!"

"You're welcome..."

"How may I be of service?"

"Do you remember the forest brigands?" Irèn whispered. "You helped them get into Arogdor."

"What? What brigands?"

"You know, the ones who saved you from being slaughtered for sausages?"

"One moment! Yes, I think I remember. Thank you!"

"For what?"

"For not letting me become sausage meat."

"Then what did you thank me for before?"

"For not planning to make sausages out of me."

"Should I have?"

The playful duel of these somewhat compatible minds lasted another few minutes. One might've guessed the girl was gaining experience for her next heart-to-heart with her unfortunate partner. But finally remembering her purpose, Irèn asked Bill to help her. Fearing being found out, she only asked him to deliver a note to any of the border towers.

"Thank you! But it's a dangerous mission. Why should I take the risk?"

“Would you prefer being stuffed into sausage casings?” Irèn hissed.

“What? Me? Oh no! Thank you!”

“What was this thank you for?”

“I don’t know,” Bill said, confused by worry.

“Do you know who my husband is?”

“Who?”

“The general himself.” The girl shot a deadly half-truth at her victim. “Javer.”

“They say he ate his mansteed on his way back from Parthagon.”

“We ate the leftovers for a week at home. Mmm mmmm. Delicious!”

“No way! Why would you say that?”

“Oh, the tender wursts, the succulent roulades.” The girl licked her fingers and smacked her lips.

“Thank you! Thank you! I’ll do anything!”

No longer interested in conversing with the mutant, Irèn stuffed the precious note into his saddle and commanded him to deliver it as quickly as possible. Quivering with fear, Bill promised to complete his task faithfully and without delay.

* * *

Before dawn the next day, a slightly drunk senior warrior took the mansteed with the mohawk from the stables and rode him to the patrols guarding the Fourth River. Circling the positions around the perimeter, Bill deliberately stumbled on a shallow cliff’s slope and threw the mutant onto the frozen ground while he skidded down, desperately calling for his dear mother’s help. Once he was out of view behind the rocks, he

quickly galloped on, hoping his long absence wouldn't rouse too much suspicion. By dusk, he'd reached the Tower of Security and a shower of whistling arrows greeted him. Despite being lightly wounded in the shoulder, the stubborn mansteed ran into the iron gates and implored the knights, who were about to pounce on him, to transfer a note to the commandant.

The strikingly handsome blond officer who read the note immediately sent a messenger off to Parthagon and ordered his exhausted guest be fed. The next morning, Bill was on his way back, rehearsing his story about having spent two days lying unconscious in a narrow ravine.

While Bill had fulfilled his assignment, the full gravity of her betrayal dawned on Irèn, as if a curtain of mist clouding her mind had been lifted. If given the opportunity now, she might've reconsidered and not committed such an extraordinary act! Her treachery yet unknown, she was still feeling like a vile outcast, having stabbed her own nation in the back. She felt even worse when Javer's strong arms were around her, switching off her mind's defenses and letting her sense of wretchedness run loose. Guilt over having betrayed the person she loved hung like a heavy stone around her thin neck.

One evening, when they were falling asleep, while in his firm embrace, she burst into tears. To alleviate her suffering, the naked Irèn told her lover about the spiritual anguish she'd been keeping from him. Of course, the main tragedy plaguing her soul was her parents being murdered and her separation from her beloved brother. She'd been afraid to broach this topic because she knew Javer's tough position on the issue of "evacuation."

As it turned out, not only was he ready to listen, he was quick to console. "Irèn, that's war."

“I know. But I was so hurt and scared.”

“Sometimes it’s better to take the path of certainty.”

“But not like that!” the girl sobbed. “Why so much cruelty?”

“They were killed before your eyes?”

“One moment the cellar door opened, a warrior came down and...”

“Cellar?” something pricked at Javer’s breast.

“Yes, we were hiding in the cellar. Mother was keeping me warm.”

“What was the nearest town to your village? Where was it?”

“Sallep.”

An invisible spear was driven into Ivar Javer’s heart. Growing cold and still, he sat on the edge of the bed by the window and, for the first time in many long years, bitter tears streamed down his cheeks, stunning his companion.

“It was all very long ago. Don’t let it upset you so, my love!” Irèn exclaimed in surprise.

The general tried to retain his composure, but all he could do was to hold Irèn tightly and bury his face in her fragrant hair. He just had to go stupidly and unreservedly falling in love now when everything was turning to dust again. The evil hand of fate had finally caught up with him once more, just as it had many years ago, though he’d transformed himself into the most ruthless mutant in Arogdor to escape it.

They clung to each other until midnight, each submerged in their thoughts. But when Javer fell asleep and then shortly woke up, he started going through the cycle of Phase-entering techniques. He tried to feel as if he were in the house where that fateful night had taken place. He imagined himself touching the table and crawling on the floor, peering into the crevices and picking up crumbs. Nothing happened, so then the

mutant began to imagine he was holding a sword in his right upper hand, squeezing it with his palm. Then he tried out body rotation, but here, too, he found disappointment. He continued to go over these techniques again and again until he felt the sword handle in his hand—the Phase had finally come!

Javer imagined himself inside the farmhouse, and then rolled abruptly to the side. Finally, he was where he wanted to be, viewing the situation from within the body of a swarthy brunette, one of his companions that day. He could hardly remember what she looked like, but immediately felt the sensation of her tight body and her two hands. On the right, he saw himself devouring a pig in the light of an oil lamp. On the left, a senior warrior was also devouring pig. Javer sat across from an unremarkable blonde in a colorful dress, sporting the kind of sharp, upturned little nose that had been fashionable back in those days. He realized his Irèn was hidden beneath his feet.

To remain in the Phase, he touched the table and sniffed the flatbreads, which smelled like the most delicious treat in the world. Nearby were steaming bowls of fried chickens, piglet meat, and pearl barley, and beside them stood buckets of milk and water. Behind the blonde's back, he saw a dark window with a blue tulle curtain, as well as a brick oven and cabinets lining the walls.

“What is that stench?” his double roared all of a sudden, loudly sniffing the air around him.

“I can't stand it either, darling,” the blonde confirmed irritably, which made the real Javer want to kill her.

“Forgive me, General.” The senior warrior began justifying himself. “It must be coming from the cellar under the table.”

“Rotten vegetables! Disgusting!” The blonde carried on complaining, infuriating the general even further.

“Yes, and something else as well.”

The two warriors slowly got up and began to circle the narrow trap door, eyeing it. The general put his hand behind his back to his sword’s handle, while his underling unsheathed the daggers hanging from his belt and bent toward the cellar. “Let’s see, what do we have here...”

With a creak, the heavy door began to lift. The time traveler, unable to hold back, cried out in a female voice, “Wait!”

“What?” The general turned around.

“You’ll let out the terrible smell!”

“And?”

“Can’t we finish eating first?”

“Oh, but she’s right,” muttered the blonde. “Darling, let’s have our dinner first!”

“Damn broads! First it’s one thing, then another. How do you even manage to get through the day?” the general said, returning his sword into its scabbard.

As he and the senior warrior returned to the table, Javer, under the brunette’s guise, exhaled as if he really had saved his future love. Then he tapped his shoe against the table leg a few times, trying to signal his support to the prisoners, after which he got lost in his own thoughts, plunged into darkness, and almost lost the Phase.

When he realized this, he put his arms forward, trying to feel the table, but instead his hands grasped someone’s soft shoulders under freezing cold fabric. His vision instantly returned, and Javer found himself on the cellar’s dirt floor. This time he was in a man’s body. He wore a bloodied shirt, his shoulder hurt, and he was covered in scorching scratches. In the

dim striped light seeping in from above he saw piles of shriveled vegetables and rows of jars, while in the far corner a man and a woman lay huddled, an axe on the ground next to them.

Despite the dampness and stench, he could see a plump young woman with a surprisingly gentle gaze in front of him. The brown-haired woman's face wore a semi-guilty smile as she hugged a shaggy-headed boy wearing a tunic while holding a pillow over a second child's head. Unable to endure her innocent eyes, Javer lifted the pillow and was stunned to see the tiny face of his Irèn. She was snuffling peacefully, biting her thumb, and twitching her tiny nose. Knowing what would happen in the morning, Javer sobbed, running his finger along the little girl's cheek. Then he roared like a wild beast and rushed upstairs to find and kill himself.

Chapter 8. The Secret of the Mysterious Forest



Holding the surprise letter from Arogdor, Richard Fein, the new commander of the Tower of Security, collected all other indirect evidence pointing to the imminent offensive and sent it to Parthagon post haste. Within two days, the important missive reached Aaron Connell. The gray-haired legate rose from the dinner table, leaving his family to finish the meal without him, and went to wake up the king with the request to convene the Royal Council at once. Albert wanted to postpone the event until morning, but the stubborn commander-in-chief,

who knew firsthand the cost of every wasted hour, refused to leave.

An hour later, all of Parthagon's movers and shakers, including Thomas Yourg, gathered around the large round table anticipating another impending disaster. Ordinary citizens, who'd hoped the worst was behind them, were also alarmed when they saw from the northern tower's windows dull light glowing in the middle of the night.

Calmly stroking his long beard, Albert waited for the members of the council to sit down, looking at their tense faces with grim impatience. Once upon a time, he'd had the brilliant idea to put in the meeting rooms wooden chairs decorated with detailed carvings. Although they looked beautiful, one couldn't sit on them for long. This went a long way to quell the ministers and military leaders' desires to hold endless meetings. Albert himself was seated in a leather armchair of such quality and size he could continue sitting there with great comfort for a week.

"So," he opened the meeting, glowering at Connell, "what do we have here? Let's read this note of yours."

"To Thomas Yourg,

My dear brother, our great general, Ivar Javer, intends to attack Parthagon in the spring. He's gathering all available forces, including the civilian population, in order to do away with your ridiculous little King Albert the Tur..."

"What?" burst out the king. "Are we supposed to believe this? The word of some crazy volcano woman?"

Thomas, growing crimson, averted his eyes, trying not to add fuel to the fire while the great and centuries-old leader of Parthagon continued:

“...to do away with your ridiculous little King Albert the Turd and his whole kingdom. I miss you very much. I hope you’re not cross with me for not leaving with you. It’s winter, and it must be quite chilly where you are as well. Do you have a good hat? Men can’t afford to get a head cold. Yesterday I bought myself...”

“You can stop there,” interrupted Connell.

“Is it true that men are particularly susceptible to head colds?” someone asked.

“Hold it! What is this drivel? You call this a report? You call this intelligence?” The usually cool and collected—in public at least—Albert jumped up and began to pace around the table, shaking the letter in the air. “Disgraceful! And this is what we’ve gathered to discuss in the middle of the night? I don’t believe it! There’s no attack coming! Unless it’s an attack of the sniffles!”

“It’s clear from the writing the author is uneducated.” Isaac Newdon couldn’t help but pipe in with his squeaky voice. “This person isn’t one of ours. An Arogdorian hillbilly, nothing more.”

“I beg your pardon!” Thomas leapt up, intending to fulfill his longtime dream of feeding the minister’s detestable head to the pigs.

“What a woman!” said a tribune. “She’s not even here and still she’s managed to cause a riot!”

“Silence!” Albert returned to his armchair and leveled a cold gaze at Thomas. “Is this person really your sister?”

“That’s right, Your Highness! She was kidnapped from our village near Sallep over eighteen years ago.”

“I see. And why should we trust her?”

“I don’t know. She has no reason to lie.”

“No reason to lie to us? A person living in Arogdor? I repeat: in Arogdor! She writes that you might be cross with her. For what?”

“I bumped into her, accidentally, when I was there on a mission.”

“Accidentally you say? And she has no desire to return to her native land, with its ‘ridiculous little king?’”

In his infinite love of the king, which had only grown stronger after the miraculous rescue in Yarta, Thomas could only blush again, words having deserted him. He too had been struck by his sister’s worldview. He would never have suspected such differences in their outlooks. It now became clear why she hadn’t wished to leave with him: to her Parthagon was an alien and hateful place, while free Arogdor was her beloved home.

“Forgive her, Your Highness! Irèn is still very young. Hot blooded, you know.”

“Oh, these young ladies,” sighed Albert.

“That’s it, Your Highness!”

“But that’s not all,” Connell continued, looking severe. “We have other evidence of an upcoming attack. The enemy is preparing for something large scale. Otherwise I wouldn’t have shown you the note.”

“All right. What are we to do?”

Everyone around the table furrowed their brows, their faces falling. The true scope of the imminent threat gradually began

to dawn on them. They were in for another heavy offensive, the most massive in history it seemed, since Eisenberg had never before given his general command of civilian forces. In all likelihood, he expected to finish off his weakened opponent for good.

“I have a suggestion,” Connell began.

“What suggestions could there be?” Albert interrupted him. “We gather the villagers, train them together with the townspeople, and then let them loose on the mutants. What other choice do we have?”

“Forgive me Your Highness, but what if that’s not enough? Are we in for the same fate as Sunset City?”

“Not enough, Aaron? We’re smarter and stronger.”

“You’re suggesting we gather all our able-bodied men and send them to do battle against those Arogdorian apes? Whatever the outcome, we’re doomed.”

“Our dear legate, I am well aware of your loyal service at the Tower of Recognition, but here we have need of more farsighted thinking.”

“And that’s just what I’m proposing.”

“Well?”

“Judging by all the evidence at our disposal, we have anywhere from three months to a couple of weeks. Which means we probably won’t have time to prepare any kind of worthwhile defense.”

“You don’t know that for a fact.”

“I suggest we make a sudden strike on Arogdor. That way at the very least we’ll knock the wind out of them, and possibly put an end to their savagery once and for all.”

“Hmm, you’re suggesting marching on the volcano?”

“That’s right.”

“And you think you’re the first one to think of this genius idea? Niels Dohr has been chewing our ears off about it for years. It’s lunacy!”

“Presently, we have no other realistic choice.”

“In any case, it’s impossible!”

“That’s precisely why it’s to our advantage. They would never anticipate such a bold move. Who’s with me?” Connell looked around the room and his hopeful gaze rested on Kalitza. “Peter, what do you think?”

“It’s difficult to say. But one thing is certain: we have to act fast. Especially since they don’t know we’re on to them, for now.”

“Precisely!”

After a long and furious discussion, they decided to develop a plan for a preemptive strike as quickly as possible. Otherwise, there was a real possibility the king would lose all remnants of credibility among his controlled territories, not to mention losing the territories themselves. Emboldened by Kalitza and Connell’s support, Thomas raised the issue of pardoning Niels Dohr, which the angry king agreed to in light of the council members’ severe lack of military experience.

When everyone had left, Albert went downstairs and then slowly climbed the neighboring tower’s stairs. At the top a special guard greeted him and opened a thick iron door. Proceeding through the antechamber and climbing the spiral staircase, he entered a circular room with narrow curtained windows where his priceless Elizabeth was languishing on a soft sofa. Her thin legs tucked under her, she was reading a dog-eared book by candlelight. Her blond hair was gathered in a broad braid cascading down to her waist, and her slender figure was covered from her neck to her feet in a dark-green dress with

long sleeves. Taking into account the ancient Wall, Parthagon's internal garrison, the palace's brave defenders and her own personal guard, she was the most protected person in all of Celesia.

Her chamber, full of fresh flowers and sturdy trees, was divided into a living room and a bedroom area. On its eastern side stood a dark-brown four-poster bed, rising almost to the ceiling, framed by a wavy canopy. On its western side were expensive sofas, tables, and armchairs in the most delicate shades of beige, which created the feeling of warm comfort.

"Elizabeth?" Albert cautiously stepped into the room's interior. "What are you doing? Reading? We've had a bit of a setback. But a solution has been found."

The reader was a world away and didn't react to anything he said, acting as if she were still alone. As usual, the irritated guest had to rip the book out of her hands to make himself noticed.

"Did you want something, father?"

"Yes, dear. I wanted to ask you something."

"About the fruit? I'm eating plenty, don't worry."

"No. It's something rather unusual."

"Go ahead."

Rising from the sofa and stepping onto the shaggy carpet, she picked up a pitcher of the purest mountain water and turned toward the northernmost window, as far as possible from Albert.

* * *

Inspired by the night's events, Thomas couldn't wait until morning and immediately rushed to give Niels Dohr the good news that the king had agreed to temporarily restore his rank to

tribune. After his sister's tragic death, the former commander-in-chief had had a hard time finding any peace. His knightly mutation was almost completely gone, leaving him only his tall stature and broad shoulders, and his once cozy and luminous house was now mired in dirt and ruin. At one point it had seemed he was heading for a sorry end. But over the past month, Thomas had begun to notice positive changes in Niels' mood and appearance. Moreover, the adopted son, for the first time in his life, noticed the same girl appearing repeatedly in his father's house—frequently enough for him to remember her!

The charming blonde Victoria looked like a short angelic teenager with a tiny nose and a perfectly smooth face. Under these childlike features, she skillfully concealed her age. Thomas, out of tact, was embarrassed to ask, but judging by her conversation, she was at least 50—an age Niels firmly placed in the category of young, naive, green fools. Schoolgirls really. Somehow, this talkative girl with her bright voice had replaced Marguerite, who'd been her complete opposite, and the endless succession of lovers who'd paraded through the house. The old Niels used to forget about those lovers as soon as the door had slammed shut behind them. And by lunchtime he couldn't even remember whether he'd spent the night with someone or in blissful isolation. But all of this was in the past.

“So, off to war we go again?” sighed the gazebo owner, helping his guest to a nice cup of hot milk in the frosty winter twilight.

“Isn't that what you do best?”

“Maybe, but I'm sick of it.”

“Forgive me, but we really can't do without you right now. This might be our last battle against Arogdor.”

“Ha ha! I doubt it.”

“Is Victoria here again?” Thomas said, hearing noises coming from the house.

“What? Where?”

“Niels!”

“Yes. Someone’s in there.”

“Is it Victoria?”

“What’s with the third degree?!”

“Could it be her girlish legs are making you battle weary?” The young tribune goaded his adoptive father. “This reminds me of someone! One of the tower commanders...”

“All right, all right. Cool it. Go home. Tomorrow morning we’ll see what’s what at the Academy.”

“Well, well! Even Richard would’ve found a more dignified way out of this one.”

“Get going. Some lover-boy hero you are!”

“You’ve got something to say to me?”

“The first skirt to pass your way snags you for good.”

“Ouch, that’s hitting below the belt.”

“Can I help but grieve my son has never tasted the joys of life?”

Sharing a few more laughs with Niels, Thomas departed and walked through the streets of the sleeping capital to his home, where his wife awaited him. Marie had recovered from being mortally offended and also had made a sincere effort to understand her husband. As a result she’d forgiven him. Even though she no longer blamed Thomas, she didn’t forget the betrayal. The idea that in danger she might remain defenseless while her husband rushed to save his beloved king and the goddamn princess never left her mind. It seemed that even if 1,000 years went by, this deep resentment would keep bobbing

to the surface, no matter how Thomas tried to atone for his lapse in judgment.

Hearing of another upcoming battle campaign, Marie burst into tears. Her fear of losing her husband was so great she'd been urging him to leave the royal army. She thought the scenario plausible now that he'd had his long-awaited reunion with Irèn and was no longer motivated to risk his life on a daily basis. But Thomas seemed moved by something other than revenge—something unknown not only to her but to him as well. Therefore, he only laughed when she implored him to put his blue jacket aside forever.

Since the siege, everyday life in Parthagon had undergone drastic changes. One out of ten inhabitants had perished during the nightmare autumn siege and furious invasion that had followed. Many had died from wounds and infections while others had fled to the safer volcano or to some remote peasant settlement—now the most peaceful corners of the blood-soaked Celesia.

Other problems existed too. A multitude of Arogdorian agents now easily infiltrated the capital and was recruiting the angry population to their side. Many of the city's beautiful buildings were still in ruins, and there were not enough resources to restore them. Moreover, the tribute collected from the controlled territories had diminished considerably, which caused the townspeople to experience hunger for the first time in their lives. Their hopes of returning to their once carefree lives—nothing to worry about apart from getting enough sleep and practicing the Phase—were all but extinguished.

The king's popularity was in sharp decline, and many joked maliciously they wouldn't mind exchanging Albert for the soulless Eisenberg, or even Javer. But this failed to upset the

king. After all, he really was extraordinary, the creator of what, up until recent times, had been the perfect kingdom. Rumors began to spread, though, that Albert III had grown indifferent to his subjects' lives and deaths because his mentally distressed daughter had driven him mad.

* * *

It wasn't long before the king committed another faux pas. Showing disregard for the kingdom's dire situation, his heralds announced the royal ball, which up until the calamity had happened weekly and enjoyed great popularity, would be held on Saturday. A stranger to such soirées, Thomas was as surprised as anyone, but then the king's personal invitation came in the post, and he found it impossible to decline despite the event's untimeliness. The young tribune detested this type of occasion. He couldn't understand why anyone would organize a ball or spend so much time and money on such frivolous amusements when really they brought joy to no one. His wife, on the other hand, used to dream about attending such exclusive gatherings, but these days she wasn't happy about sharing a dance floor with Elizabeth.

However, there was no way out of it, and the young couple was obliged to arrive at the Royal Palace in time for the festivities. Thomas dazzled in his freshly polished armor and an impeccable blue cloak. Marie, too, though sick with frustration, looked spectacular in her gold wedding necklace, her thick hair braided and hidden beneath a hennin's high cone. Its transparent train hung almost to her waist. A modest black dress with red lining—matching her shoes—emphasized her luscious figure. The dress covered her décolleté, and its long

sleeves created a striking effect—turning a simple outfit into a formidable display of beauty.

Once in the palace's grandiose throne room, the couple found they were not alone in their bewilderment. Most present were gloomy and pensive, except for a few young beauties who'd only miss such an important event at the peril of certain death. The long hall was incredibly large and well-lit by torches and cast-iron chandeliers hanging from the spherical ceiling. Wide marble columns and the towering throne, its back blazing with the tongues of gilded flames, completed the impression of immense power and might.

Albert's tedious welcome speech, delivered with more than a touch of distant indifference, was followed by the orchestra's cheerful roar. They'd waited their turn patiently in the ballroom's corner. But no one showed interest in tapping their toes. Parthagon's high society gathered in small groups about the hall to discuss, in hushed tones, the latest events. The king and his closest allies, Kalitza and Newdon, also retired to a far corner to immerse themselves in an intense discussion—as if they'd had nothing to do with this ill-conceived ball.

Suddenly everyone's attention was drawn to the door opening with a bang. The divine Elizabeth, accompanied by a dozen knights in rattling armor, entered. All those in the ballroom gasped in amazement, while the orchestra lost its place and came to a screeching halt. Even Marie's jaw dropped at the stunning pale-skinned beauty. Tall and elongated, like a doe, the princess wore a white dress with a translucent lace corset. A silver chain adorned her neck, and her unearthly blue eyes scorched with frost. A thin silver diadem with diamonds sparkled over her braid, which cascaded down her bare back.

Wiser from bitter experience, Thomas was the only one who didn't glance at the brilliant Elizabeth. He'd devised not to and therefore, with the most unflappable air he could summon, turned to stare at an empty wall while still trying to make out something from the corner of his eye. Marie, appreciating the placid obedience her faithful spouse displayed, pressed him toward her with affection. Exchanging her severe demeanor for an easy smile, she began to rattle off nonsense she was improvising on the fly, closely following his watering eyes, which tried to look exclusively at her.

"Is this a ball or what?" Elizabeth asked in a loud and clear voice. "Why isn't anyone dancing?"

This woke up the silenced musicians, and the inimitable princess, opening her thin arms wide, began to smoothly spin around the ballroom in solitude as if flirting with marble columns. Gradually, other pairs began to join in. Even Thomas and Marie, having spent the previous evening in painful rehearsals, were about to join the colorful whirlwind of fluttering outfits, but having made it across the hall and back, the princess was now next to the tense young couple. Stunning Thomas and everyone else, she grabbed the young knight's hand and with unexpected force pulled him from his shell-shocked wife's iron grip. Elizabeth laughed haughtily and shot Marie the most annihilating glance Marie had ever received in her life. "If you're not dancing, you're fair game!"

"Whore!" Everyone could read Marie's lips as she cursed under her black hennin. But the king's insouciant daughter, cool and reserved, didn't care at all.

The entire spinning ballroom felt sympathy for the young tribune's humiliated wife, whose hands and knees were trembling. To save the beauty, Niels came over in his comically

oversized armor, his miniature Victoria on his arm. Her little nose had turned as red as her poufy red dress, betraying her barely restrained tears. However, Marie was deaf to their voices. Like a wild cat who'd spotted her victim, she didn't take her steely gaze off the demonstratively joyous Elizabeth.

"This dance—just a small token of gratitude for saving my life," the princess explained, but her partner kept stumbling, having lost his grip on reality. The fair-locked fairy smelled gently of violets, which could drive even the most obtuse man out of his mind. "Thank you for rescuing me and for accepting this gift, Tribune Yourg!"

"You shouldn't have! It was my duty!" the knight shouted, making sure his wife could hear him.

"You're so silly!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

The guests laughed collectively at this ridiculous exchange, and the atmosphere in the hall turned festive. The music grew louder and more boisterous, and in dance the men's multicolored hosen finally became intertwined with the women's high hennins and veils. No one paid any more attention to the king, or his daughter, or the humiliated Marie, who was slowly tearing her hair out of her disheveled braid. She could see Thomas, even though he'd held on to the last, had also forgotten about her, as if lost in some kind of fog.

Drunk on the moment, Thomas once again stumbled clumsily and came tumbling down, his armor crashing, not far from his wife, now as black as her dress, which caused the hall to once again explode in riotous laughter.

"That's what happens when your wife is stiff as a log!" proclaimed Elizabeth as she burst into peals of laughter. Dropping her vigilance even this one instant proved reckless, as

Marie jumped with lightning speed and gave her a deafening slap.

The bewildered princess fell to the floor, her diadem ringing somewhere near the throne, and the band once again fell silent. There were surprised exclamations and the racket of running knights. Thomas desperately tried to prevent them from arresting his poor wife, who was sobbing and reaching her arms out to him, but he was quickly restrained and knocked to the floor. He howled in desolation as his angry comrades buried him under a pile of steel.

* * *

By the end of February, they had completed the preparations for the surprise attack on Arogdor. The Royal Knights, exhausted by training, put on their warmest armor and boldly set out on their most dangerous campaign yet.

Even with the risk of death and the kingdom's possible defeat, the twenty-three-year-old Tribune Thomas Yourg had different worries on his mind. Marie's slap was predictably regarded as an attempt on the life of a royal, which made her a candidate for public execution. However, all legal proceedings had been put on hold until the army returned from the volcano, so the young woman had been temporarily placed in an Academy's prison towers. Given the unusual situation and the girl's close ties with a popular officer, she was still provided with the greatest comfort possible. However, this didn't ease Thomas's mind. He was racked by guilt.

He'd been allowed to see her only once—the day before the army had left Parthagon. Looking thinner and grayer than before, Marie had sharpened cheekbones and sunken eyes. One

moment she was crying bitter tears and begging him to forgive her, the next she was looking away in desolation, unresponsive to anything he said. Exhausted and dirty, constantly coughing and blowing her blue-tinged nose, she'd been left to freeze in her old torn ball gown before Thomas was finally allowed to give her warm clothes. Of course, he didn't blame her for what had happened. He realized any normal red-blooded woman would've done the same. He blamed only himself. He'd experienced so much grief and hardship in his short life, overcome so many obstacles, and repeatedly made the impossible possible. But then he'd found himself helpless before a fragile 18-year-old girl.

However, thinking of the extraordinary Elizabeth, Thomas felt his dire concern for Marie slowly and unforgivably recede into the background. As if there could be anyone more important in his life. He tried to drive away his frenzied fantasies and hopes, or at least to understand the emotions he'd suddenly experienced that night in the palace—to find anything he could compare them to. He needed to understand them, for the miracles hadn't ceased: Elizabeth had given him permission to pay her a visit. When, during that dance, responding to an innocent question about his favorite pastime, he'd told her about his love of reading, she was surprised and kindly invited him to make use of her library—the finest in Celesia. Moreover, she added she'd be interested in discussing with such a clear-minded person some novels that had confounded her. The most terrible thing was the young tribune already knew he'd not refuse such an invitation for anything in the world. It didn't matter what Marie would think, although she was unlikely to be pleased. All he had to do was come back alive, and his wildest dreams would come true!

The plan—its simplicity being its main advantage—was to leave only one centuria of knights behind in Parthagon. A hundred more soldiers continued to serve in the extremely reduced external garrisons. The remaining 800 heroes were marching to the volcano. The outgoing army had been even smaller initially, but an early release of the Academy’s two latest graduating classes saved the day. Most of the 200 young graduates were distributed among the more secure garrisons so as to free up the more experienced defenders for the assault. Unfortunately, all the projectile weapons they’d captured in the autumn had to be left behind, since transporting the slow-moving machines up the steep gorges wasn’t practical.

When they reached the volcano, Aaron Connell—and the First Cohort’s 500 knights, whom he was leading through the Third River’s gorge—would deliver the main blow. Through the Fourth River’s gorge, Richard Fein would lead one centuria into battle. And through the Fifth and Sixth Rivers’ gorges, Thomas Young and Niels Dohr respectively would each bring in another centuria. Thus, one acting and two former commanders-in-chief were leading the attack on Eisenberg’s heretofore impenetrable stronghold, which seemed another advantage of the bold plan.

The troops would rapidly climb the volcano and reach the crater by the dawn of the first day of spring. Javer, clever as he was, would’ve probably learned the campaign’s basic details by then, but he still wouldn’t be able to protect all the southern gorges at once. He was unlikely to have the time to figure out from which of them the main blow would come, since only a few members of the Royal Council knew the plan. Because the real defense of Arogdor would take place in the hard-to-reach gorges, the Parthagonians’ task, once they broke through to the top, would be simple: to penetrate the city by the crater’s edge and

then take the weakly protected castle. Thomas, in his day and a half investigating the enemy's foul den, could imagine this scenario clearly.

On open ground, the might of every dozen knights corresponded to that of about 20 mutants. Given the suddenness of the attack and the concentration of forces, this advantage could be greatly increased. As a result, they believed the overall force to be more than enough to defeat Arogdor, whose main protection was its geographic location.

After traveling for almost five days, Thomas reached the Tower of Complicity. From there he would make the ascent along the Fifth River's gorge. Still faintly hoping the volcano residents didn't suspect anything, the young tribune hid his knights and supply convoys in the sentry position while commandeering its most combat-ready forces. Then he waited two days for his older friends and the commander-in-chief to occupy the neighboring towers.

In the early morning, he entered the noisy gorge with the plan of reaching its upper reaches by evening. On the way up, the young tribune's centuria encountered only the frightened inhabitants of the nearby territories and a few empty patrol positions. The mood of the tiring knights gradually worsened—at the top death would likely welcome them. Their novice commander was aware of this, but other emotions obscured this fear. He felt an overwhelming desire for revenge and a responsibility for the capital's defenseless villagers and residents. Not to mention his desire to free his cherished Marie and lay eyes on the divine Elizabeth one more time!

Even though the treacherous trembling in his hands grew with every passing hour, Thomas Young did his best to display confidence for the sake of his despairing men. Trying to follow

his example, they spent the night in a cramped cold cave making foolish jokes and laughing hysterically despite the piles of human and animal bones strewn around them. But on the eve of the decisive day, fear overcame even the most experienced warriors among them. It wasn't so long ago they'd considered their service to be relatively easy and safe. Over the past year, however, the situation had changed so drastically that many valiant defenders of the crown found themselves deeply regretting their calling.

At dawn, having barely rested, Thomas woke up his miserably cold warriors and leapt into Vector's saddle. He then briskly drove his brethren uphill, leaving the supply convoys behind in order to try to achieve some element of surprise.

When, with the first rays of the sun, his centuria appeared at the top of the gorge, they were met by a squadron of mutants who greeted the disappointed Parthagonians with a deadly shower of whistling arrows. Thomas let loose his furious knights and then rushed in after them, trying to hold onto the fragile thread of leadership while hoping to see his older comrades join him in the flanks. The young tribune was relieved to see this first line of mutant defense would be easy to defeat. Arogdor's main forces were concentrated elsewhere: either inside the city or in one of the other gorges.

The brave cavalry, sharp spears at the ready and solid shields covering them, drove a wedge into the enemy's formation of mansteed-mounted warriors. The mutants' upper arms wielded small round shields while their lower arms brandished curved swords and long axes. Animal fear and mad despair burned in their eyes, but their cries failed to elicit any compassion from Thomas, whose blood was boiling with rage. To encourage his

soldiers, he spat out curses as he hacked at the enemy's hot flesh with his cold blade.

Before long they'd victoriously completed the first battle, though at the cost of more than half of Thomas's centuria. The impassioned tribune led the surviving heroes toward the crater, the Gates of Freedom coming into view. But another impressive cordon of mutants awaited their arrival. Thomas was losing confidence, since neither Nils, nor Richard, nor the gray-haired legate was anywhere to be seen. And despite his excellent physical condition, he found his strength strangely depleted and was increasingly gasping for air. All his blood-spattered warriors seemed to be having these problems—unlike the mutants, who were hardy and well adapted to the conditions.

It was too late, however, to turn back, and so the tribune marched into the unequal battle and began to suffer significant losses. Overwhelmed, Thomas abandoned all hope of help arriving and just continued to chop at the growling monsters, his mind as empty as if he were already dead. Suddenly, from the west, he could finally hear the cheerful cries and dull stamping of Niels Dohr's cavalry. Driving into the enemy horde from the left, the help arrived just in time to save their remaining brethren, and the rejoicing knights began to pummel the Arogdorians with renewed forces. Soon, Richard's centuria also appeared from the east, bolstering the victorious mood.

Having beaten back the mutants and covered the southern approaches to the crater with steaming red streams of blood, the old friends gathered to decide what to do next, since Connell's cohort still hadn't made it to the crater's eastern edge. At the same time, fresh reserves of mutants were continuously leaping through the Gates of Freedom to prepare for a multi-directional counterattack, which the fatigued knights couldn't fend off.

Niels saw this most clearly, as he struggled for air. Despite losing his knightly mutation, he still participated in the battles rather than issuing commands from the sidelines.

“We’ll wait for a quarter of an hour, then march on the city.”

“Hold on, he’s coming.” Richard still held on to hope, greedily gulping the thin mountain air. “He’s got five centurias under him!”

“Where is he then?”

A wave of deathly premonition swept over Thomas’s soul. The neighing of the tired horses and the mutants’ distant exclamations of malice all vanished, and the tangible presence of death made his intestines shrink with nausea. Indeed, a force as huge as the First Cohort wouldn’t have been delayed this long under regular circumstances. Some unforeseen catastrophe must’ve happened. This meant he and his friends would have to try to take Arogdor with the forces they had, and they’d surely perish in the attempt.

“Maybe he messed up the timing? Maybe he went the wrong way?” Thomas searched for alternative explanations, but Niels wasn’t buying it.

“Connell mess up the timing? Or go the wrong way? The sun is more likely to go the wrong way than he is.”

“Friends, are we really about to enter the crater on our own?” Richard asked, his voice defeated. He was staring at the ground. Since the terrible siege on Parthagon, the once-cheerful knight had become withdrawn. The fear of losing loved his ones had forced him to reconsider his priorities, and with great joy he’d gone to serve as commander of the Tower of Security. The garrison of the fortified position where Richard had been living the last few months with his Lily was protected behind thick

stone walls. Yet now, everything was once again at risk: his life, his beloved wife, and his homeland.

All three commanders were more preoccupied with their home lives than their merciless enemy, who before them was gathering forces for a quick counterattack. Faithful Richard was thinking about Lily, as always. Niels, truly in love for the first time, couldn't stop thinking of Victoria and her wonderfully girlish hands and feet. Thomas was torn between his wife and the princess. Love and passion, mind and heart, reality and dream were all intermingling in bizarre combinations.

Still they were forced to start implementing the worst of all possible plans. Watching the four-armed warriors on their mansteeds advancing toward them, the knights rushed west. They hoped to circumnavigate the crater along its more gently sloping edges and enter the city from its most vulnerable side.

“Head straight for the castle! Don't let them distract you!” shouted Niels, spurring his barely breathing steed. “Once we get Eisenberg, they'll surrender at once!”

“Yes, we can do it!” Thomas encouraged his troops and himself, secretly still hoping Connell would emerge out of the Third River gorge and overwhelm the enemy.

After riding two miles, they found the flattest ridge of the crater's edge and broke through into the city's miasma of smoldering soot and refuse. They swept away whole detachments of stunned mutants who'd been distributed along the natural barrier. No more than 150 wounded and breathless knights, fueled by fury and despair, shredded everyone in their path as they galloped toward the granite obelisk. Arogdorian civilians fled in all directions, not even considering resisting the knights who'd just shown up out of nowhere. They encountered the rare mutant warrior along the way, but the mutants

couldn't stop the cavalry and therefore they could either hide or be slashed by the knights as they flew by.

The ease with which they'd broken into the city and reached its central square inspired the knights who'd been preparing themselves to die. Now they could taste the castle's imminent capture. They could see the castle amid the mansions and surrounding temples' conical domes. With this view, they could imagine peace returning to Celesia.

But Eisenberg's stronghold met them with its high walls and with five giant mutants operating pine battering rams. Behind them hid selected warriors who, with the support of thousands of militiamen, attacked the knights now trapped in the heart of Arogdor. Within minutes, the mutants had blocked off all paths of retreat and swallowed the Parthagonians as they howled with hopelessness and pain. While among the screams and the clashing metal, Thomas couldn't spot a single comrade—only the brutal four-armed monsters, the hideously cackling mansteeds, and the frightened ape-like workers. They, with their distorted and disfigured faces, ground their teeth as they slit Vector's neck and knocked the horse and his young rider to the ground. In the slush of stinking mud and blood gushing from the convulsing horse's neck, they began to pummel the tribune with stones, sticks, and their bare hands, trying to tear him to pieces.

Then from the eastern outskirts 200 knights of the First Cohort broke into the city. But they lacked leadership and so did battle with small groups of Arogdorians scattered in the city streets. They failed to cause any strategically significant harm, and the militia and the mutant army gradually suppressed them. They did kill a great number of civilians, but this killing

filled Arogdorian hearts with even more hatred toward King Albert III and his subjects.

* * *

Warner Eisenberg had found out about the Parthagonian plan the day they'd moved out of Parthagon—right after the Royal Council's last meeting. This meant Javer had had an entire week to prepare Arogdor for defense.

The leader had also learned about a foul traitor among his fellow citizens. To the general's astonishment, Eisenberg had said it was Irèn Yourg, the blood sister, no less, of the tribune Thomas Yourg. The order was to find her and have her tortured to death. Javer had managed to contain himself for fear of an immediate reprisal: a blunder as monstrous as this would not be forgiven, even if it had been committed by someone as commendable and respected as him.

Javer had rushed home, spurred by fury. Bursting into his mansion, he'd tried tackling the traitor—who had been in the bathroom wearing a white terrycloth robe—but she'd deftly dodged his grasp and with a screech had fled to the bedroom on the second floor. Figuring out what had happened, Irèn had locked herself in and had intended to escape through the window, but with one kick Javer had blown the door, along with the lintel, out.

* * *

When Irèn had regained consciousness, the light indicated it was evening. She was bound, in the now purple-black robe, and lying on the dirt floor of a cold basement with barren stone walls

and some tiny windows. Her entire body was steeped in pain; many of her bones seemed to be broken, her joints twisted. Groaning, the prisoner managed to turn over on her side. Then she closed her bruised eyelids and started to go through the methods of entering the Phase. She tried first to flex her brain, then to intensify the slight hum in her head, which was always there if one listened closely. At first the cycle of techniques amounted to nothing, but then, as she once again tried to squeeze her brain, her head was overwhelmed by powerful vibrations and buzzing. The next moment, the palpable buzz spread across her body, making the cold and pain disappear. She had entered the Phase, her only chance at salvation!

Irèn had no time for amusements. Rising to her feet, she found herself transported to a field of blooming sunflowers blinding her with their fire-like petals. She examined her naked body, horrified by its unnatural protrusions and its bluish-purple bruises. She concentrated all her inner strengths and heard the crunch of joints and bones locking into place. Likewise, her skin turned back to its natural smooth white.

To stay in the Phase, she ran through the sunflowers, which gently brushed their soft heads against her sensitive body. At the same time she sent pulsating vibrations through her torso and limbs, enjoying the sensation of her body healing itself and the incredible vividness of her sensory perceptions. Gradually, a powerful force began to flow through Irèn's veins, causing her to glow with inner light, and her consciousness began to drift as she drowned in euphoria. But the girl didn't allow herself to fall asleep; instead she kept running faster and faster through the fragrant green stems and yellow petals, radiating health and absorbing the sun's heat.

Javer still hadn't figured out what to do with his duplicitous lover, so he hid her in his basement. He didn't have the time to deal with her, and it took all his efforts to restrain himself from committing an irreparable mistake, one he could end up regretting for another century. He tried to distract himself with preparations for the city's defense and hoped by the time it was over, he'd have found a way out of this difficult situation. So many knew of his relationship with Irèn, and it wouldn't be long before they decided to turn this information over to the supreme authority.

Within a week, he'd managed to assemble 1,000 of his best mutants—half the entire Arogdorian army—and send them to the mouth of the Third River gorge. Hundreds of other soldiers were distributed along the three southern gorges and at the crater. And in Arogdor additional reserves and militiamen were waiting for the signal for attack. If initially the Parthagonians' bold plan of attack had had some chance of success, now they were heading toward certain doom.

A mighty wave of terrible force crashed down on the First Cohort, as they became trapped in the narrow gorge—impeded by barriers put up several days prior. Watching from above how desperately his former compatriots were fighting to stay alive, Javer recalled how he'd once been a fearless knight and how tragically it all had ended. Seeing the enemy commanders had been eliminated, but the remaining troops were refusing to back down, he gave the unexpected order to let them go. The stunned and barely breathing warriors took advantage of this miraculous respite to climb higher, their horses using their last strength to rush over the crater's edge and into Arogdor.

At this time, Irèn, who'd been gradually recovering while still cloistered in the cold basement, heard wild screams, the clatter

of hooves and the piercing clash of metal coming from the main square. The girl began to weep bitterly as she realized the horror taking place at the castle walls was her own doing. Perhaps Javer had been right to punish her so brutally for what she'd done. When the noise abated, she heard thousands of Arogdorians' voices murmuring, as well as the defeated knights moaning and groaning. If at the massacre's beginning she'd still hoped for the royal army's unexpected success, she now guessed it was all over for them.

* * *

“What am I, a mansteed? How am I supposed to carry this heavy lug?”

“At least you won't be made into sausages when the famine comes.”

“I wish it did come—those buttery briskets are getting a little too cozy in their stables!”

“Ugh, now I'm hungry!”

Thomas woke to casual conversation between mutants who were carelessly dragging him by his feet along a long carpeted corridor. Lamps, marble columns, and paintings of landscapes flashed intermittently above his head. Trying to move, he found himself tied up and he involuntarily cried out as pain shocked his body. His shattered head was buzzing, and he could see nothing out of his right eye. Through the ringing in his ears he heard rustling behind him and, turning his head slightly, saw four-armed monsters dragging two more bodies along the corridor, after which he blacked out.

Soon he heard a bubbling stream and smelled lush greenery. He thought he'd returned to his childhood, to his rural village,

and his sister was playing nearby as his beloved parents encouraged her with words of kindness. Smiling and feeling relief from his physical suffering—the origin of which he couldn't recall—he tried to open his eyes. Only his left eye agreed to crack open. And even then, he couldn't comprehend where he was or what was happening around him.

Even though winter was only just over, he was kneeling on a round granite platform in a forest on what seemed like a stuffy summer night—abuzz with singing cicadas and thick with palm trees. Several floor lamps illuminated the space, as did a sea of candles. And a lonely lute lay to the side. Next to Thomas, also on their knees, were two knights bound and mutilated beyond recognition. As they swayed, a handsome dark-haired man with a mustache, and wearing a floor-length black cape, leaned over them. “Which one is Dohr?”

“That one, the one with the big nose,” suggested a mutant in armor.

The young man looked over Niels with interest. “What a disappointment. I've dreamed of seeing this face for so many years! And all I get is this beat-up hunk of raw meat!”

“Let me look,” said a fair-haired girl in thigh-high boots and a shaggy fur coat hanging provocatively open over her half-naked body. Her delicate face looked familiar, but Thomas couldn't place where and under what circumstances he'd encountered those big eyes.

“In any case, this is a fabulous occasion, Ivar,” the dark-haired man said to the giant mutant. “You've really made my evening!”

“Happy to be of service, Your Excellency.”

“Just don't go overdoing it this time.”

“Cut it out, Nicole!” the young man called to the strange girl as he went to a table where crystal glasses surrounded bottles of red wine.

“Let him have his jollies,” the girl agreed.

“Shall we raise a glass?”

Thomas was beginning to realize these were the leaders of Arogdor, the ones he’d heard so much about during his life, the ones he’d dreamed about strangling. He still couldn’t figure out why the prime minister seemed so familiar. Either way, the two broken shells kneeling next to him were definitely Niels and Richard. Like Thomas, they were in such a pitiful state they couldn’t speak, let alone understand what was happening around them.

Suddenly there was a strange squeaking sound, as if a huge rat had run swiftly by them. It sounded again and again. Thomas had never heard such an unnatural sound and was twisting his head in all directions, trying to find out where it was coming from.

“Right. Game faces on,” ordered Eisenberg, pulling a small sphere of bluish glass from his pocket. Inside it, something green was rotating, and red sparks glowed beneath its surface. He pressed a finger against the sphere, which emitted a light whistling sound followed by a bright flash that blinded Thomas.

“Good evening, gentlemen!” a soft voice announced.

“Good evening! How are you, Father?”

Thomas couldn’t believe his ears. It was impossible, but the familiar voice belonged to none other than Albert III. It appeared the king had come into Arogdor, which seemed to be ruled by his son. But surely that was impossible. Thinking his hearing must be playing tricks on him, the knight bore the pain of forcing his left eye open and was dumbfounded.

Before the dying Parthagonians—and Javer, Primrose, and Eisenberg—was a radiant window the size of a small house. The window was flat, and from it Albert III's huge face was gazing at them. It was as if he'd become a giant and was peering into this strange forest from the Royal Council's tower back in Parthagon!

"Aaaah!" screamed Thomas, making the able-bodied company laugh. "Make it go away!"

"Oh, my. This country bumpkin is still alive?" smiled Albert. "How curious!"

"What is that thing? Make it go away!"

"Shut him up will you?" ordered the leader, and Javer's fist instantly silenced the frightened knight.

The king crinkled his nose in distaste. "We had such plans for him!"

"It's too late now, father."

"Too bad. Why are you showing them to me?"

"I wanted you to take a look at my handiwork."

"Yes, one should always know one's enemies up close and personal." Albert laughed. "What do you plan to do with them?"

"We'll hang them in the square."

"And?"

"And execute them publicly. The crowd will love it."

"Excellent. And then?"

"We'll finish preparing the attack."

"Well, what can I say? Looks like our plans can go ahead after all!"

* * *

A horrible dryness in his throat, an intense cold burning his skin, and a stream of curses caused Thomas to regain consciousness. In regular intervals stones were bouncing off his body and his shoulder joints hurt something fierce. Barely able to open his left eyelid through the crust of dried blood, the knight saw an enormous granite sword and a square crowded with people. He was hanging by the arms between Richard and Niels, who were chatting about something with mystifying calm. Before them raged an infuriated crowd of colorful Arogdorians, held back with some difficulty by soldiers maintaining a perimeter around the scaffold.

“Monsters! Brutes! Kill them!” shouted the crowd, remembering yesterday’s attempted invasion. “You’re no match for the great Arogdor! Drop dead already! Scumbags!”

“Thomas, are you all right?” Niels wheezed over his right shoulder, turning his mutilated face toward him.

“What can I say? I’m alive.”

“That’s not too bad, is it?”

“What else does one need to be happy?” whispered Richard from the other direction. His mouth was empty of teeth, his long hair now a dirty reddish color, half of it torn out—along with pieces of scalp—which revealed patches of his yellow skull covered in streaks of dried blood.

Thomas looked at his adoptive father with hope. “What’s the plan?”

“Plan? There is none.”

“Don’t lie,” muttered Richard.

“Oh, yes. Hope for a miracle.”

“What was that yesterday?” The young knight asked. “Did I dream it?”

“What are you going on about?”

“A window in the forest. Albert looking out from it, congratulating Eisenberg.”

“Likely story. You dreamed it.”

“A fever nightmare—nothing out of the ordinary.” Richard frowned. “Although I also recall some kind of bushes.”

Thomas resigned himself to bidding his life farewell and remembering all he had lost. No miracle would save them, because their valiant army was no more. Soon glorious Parthagon and its king would follow suit. Both long-suffering Marie and enchanting Elizabeth would cease to exist. There would be no more grief, no more suffering. Perhaps it was for the best. As he was thinking this, a heavy stone hit Thomas in the temple.

That very moment, Irèn, still black and blue from her bruises, was looking out of the mansion’s basement window. Moaning from her coughing, she watched the disfigured prisoners hanging on the wooden scaffold and felt guilty. Over this endless week spent in this basement prison, she’d come up with no plans for her future. Whenever one occurred to her, she discarded it as a pipe dream, realizing she was at the mercy of Javer. She held no grudge against him, having forgiven him his outburst, and now she only dreamed of everything returning to the way it was. In fact, she was glad he knew everything: now she could be open with him and not worry about covering up her reckless treachery.

“See anyone you know?” thundered the general’s bass voice.

“What? Who?” she winced.

“The one in the middle.”

“Who is it?”

“Stupid woman. That’s your brother!”

Hearing that precious word—“woman”—Irèn was relieved. Javer would never have taken this rude attitude with her if he hated her. He reserved this scolding but loving tone for people he liked, certainly not ones whom he planned to discard for betraying his trust. This meant he forgave her and someday things could go back to the way they’d been. He’d cooled off and he still loved her, no matter what. Her life had suddenly filled with color and hope! Thanks to a single word!

Then her meandering consciousness finally arrived at the real meaning of what she’d just heard, and she was horrified at herself

“Thomas!” she yelled, throwing herself at the window. “No! No! No!”

Javer grabbed and held the broken girl with all four arms as she hysterically tried to tear herself away and climb through the narrow window. The general had done a lot of thinking over the past week and had arrived at a vision of the future, and a detailed plan of action to obtain it.

When he’d first learned about his beloved’s betrayal, he really did want to kill her, and in the cruelest manner possible—inflicting as much suffering as he could. This reaction came not from the betrayal but because he’d doubted Irèn’s sincerity. He thought she must’ve cleverly arranged everything from the start, from the day he’d rushed to rescue her from that overzealous admirer’s arms. To think he’d been such a fool as to have naively fallen for it all.

But he’d calmed a little and taken another, more sober look at the complicated situation. He remembered how Irèn had suddenly begun to be interested in Arogdor’s secrets and how she’d sobbed for her lost loved ones. Then it turned out her beloved brother was still alive. Not only that, he was the tribune

who'd been the talk of Parthagon for months. What would Javer have done if in her place? Did she really have a choice? She herself must've suffered terribly, been torn by the desperate bind she'd found herself in. Instead of consulting him, the young woman had acted independently and her actions had led to nothing short of disaster. And not just for herself, but for thousands of people. Was this not entirely in line with Irèn's wild and impetuous character, the same character he loved so? Could this really be considered a betrayal? She'd lost her bearings—that was her only fault!

But forgiving his young love was only part of it. Watching the doomed knights of the First Cohort desperately tearing out of the gorge, he remembered how he'd committed the one major mistake of his life: he hadn't done everything he could've when Queen Jane had been caught. The knights, though surrounded and outnumbered, had refused to give up and had fought to the death! Whereas he had surrendered—and it broke him forever. Would he make the same mistake again now?

Soothing the barely breathing Irèn, he took her to the marble bathroom, where, under the cover of thick steam, he carefully undressed her broken body and set her into the hot water infused with fragrant herbs. Then he interrogated her about the last years of her life and the people around her. Having written down all the details on a sheet of paper, he sighed with relief.

“Okay, it will all be okay, my darling.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, there's only one small detail.”

“What's that?”

“From this moment on, silly thing, you are my wife, and your name is Kate Javer.”

“What?” Irèn grimaced through her tears.

“Forget your name and your past. You are Kate Javer. It’s done and can’t be undone. Got it?”

“Yes, got it.”

Ignoring the pain gripping her body, the naked girl lifted herself out of the water and wrapped her trembling hands around the neck of her tusked idol.

“If some creep asks you about your past or your real name, just send him my way. Is that clear?”

“Of course,” the reborn Kate Javer uttered through sobs.

“I’m too important and busy to bother with proposals. So I simply pronounce you my wife. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do!”

“What’s that? Woman!” The mutant laughed, carefully kissing her blue swollen lips.

* * *

The next day, two dozen civilians—including the proprietor of an inn next to the Gates of Freedom along with his entire family—as well as mutants from the courier and security services, were detained and sentenced to death. They were accused of organizing an underground intelligence network and committing treason on behalf of Albert III, acts which abetted the recent Parthagonian invasion. Among those beheaded in the First River’s sparsely populated gorge were an anonymous girl, about twenty, and Irèn Young, a shapely blonde who’d worked at the inn on the town’s outskirts. All this was reported to Werner Eisenberg.

However, Ivar Javer, bent on correcting every past mistake, did not stop there. Realizing his new wife Kate would eventually discover his role in brutally murdering her parents, he began to

compensate for his guilt. He ordered the immediate release of the youth who'd just become his brother-in-law, even though the young man could hardly have imagined this even in his worst nightmare.

Late at night, a senior warrior, on the pretext of an urgent interrogation, took the young tribune, who was on the brink of death, off the scaffold. Two mutants driving a supply cart carried him in a dirty sack through the Gates of Freedom and far away into the Sixth River's gorge. There, in the impenetrable cedar woods, the general met the party who had bypassed the patrols. Thanking them for their priceless service, he ordered them to disarm and then, with a lightning fast blade, slit their throats.

He dragged the unconscious Thomas from the enormous sack. Once done, he gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder and hoisted him onto good old Bill, who'd been waiting. The general strapped the limp knight into the saddle with leather trusses. "Repeat your mission, mansteed."

"Thank you! Deliver package to the Tower of Recognition, bypassing our patrols and settlements. "

"Again!"

"Deliver package alive to the Tower of Recognition, bypassing our patrols and settlements. Thank you!"

"And what will become of you if you fail?"

"Me and all my loved ones will be made into sausages. Thank you!"

"And what will happen if you tell anyone about me?"

"Me and all my loved ones will be made into sausages."

"Where's my thank you?"

"Thank you!"

"Who am I?"

“I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know!”

* * *

The next gray and rainy morning, the crowd who’d gathered in the main square to witness the execution discovered one of the captives was missing! Although Eisenberg immediately publicly censured Javer, the escaped prisoner was of no great concern to Arogdorians, since they still had two former commanders-in-chief of the Royal Knights’ army in their hands. Thousands of contented citizens watched as Niels Dohr and Richard Fein were untied and dragged toward an oak log. A brilliant scarlet cloth bearing the Arogdorian coat of arms fluttered against the castle walls, behind the scaffold. On the scaffold stood the highest-ranking statespeople who’d saved the fatherland from the invaders.

“What are you thinking about?” whispered Niels.

“Lily.”

“If you’d always been this honest...”

“Doesn’t matter now, does it? What are you thinking about?”

“Victoria.”

“What? Who’s that?” exclaimed Richard, momentarily forgetting he was about to die even as a mutant pushed his maimed head toward the executioner’s block. Then he closed his blood-stained eyes and wept softly, remembering his beloved wife and children. An albino mutant with short dreadlocks and a long nose read out a list of the prisoners’ crimes. Then, as the crowd cheered, the ax flashed in the air and ended the blond knight’s suffering. The scaffold was sprayed with viscous blood.

“Hail, Arogdor!”

“Hail, Eisenberg!”

“Hail, Javer!”

Kicking the breathless body to the side, the mutants dragged Niels out, who'd been gazing at his once close friend and mentor, whom he credited for helping him come as far as he had in life. The general, too, returned his gaze, sighing deeply as the glorious days of their Academy adventures flashed through his dull memory. The next ax swing ended these memories, and the general's former comrade's head fell with a thump against the maroon boards, rolling to Javer's feet. Niels's drooping eyes still gazed up at him as the crowd celebrated:

“Hail, Arogdor!”

“Hail, Eisenberg!”

“Hail, Javer!”

At that same moment, midway to the Tower of Recognition, the executed knight's adopted son suddenly came to. Discovering himself on top of sweaty Bill the mansteed, he didn't have the strength to enjoy his salvation or mourn the fate of his elders. He learned the meager details of his very strange kidnapping and bolstered his strength a little with a piece of stale flatbread. Then he fell back asleep, hoping to recover in time to prepare for his return to Parthagon.

Chapter 9. The Order of the Blood Watch



The soldier guarding the recently restored Tower of Recognition sounded the alarm when he saw a mansteed approaching. Since the tower's garrison contained only a dozen prematurely graduated knights, even a single mutant now represented a real threat. Their red-headed commander, who had a baby face and couldn't have been older than twenty, went up to the observation deck and to the newly laid arrow-slits. The path was still littered with dusty boards and shards of masonry stones. Assessing the situation, he widened his eyes in terror

and he ordered his men to take up positions at the northern arrow-slits.

“What if the mutant breaks through?”

“We have ten crossbows. Surely at least one should hit the target.” The commander tried to appease the knight trembling in his training armor, but the young warrior’s fears only quickened with every step the mansteed took in their direction.

“What if they don’t?”

“Maybe he won’t notice us and just go past the tower?”

“No! He’s coming straight this way!”

“Look at him, he’s horrifying.”

“Much nastier than I ever imagined.”

“I’ve never seen one this close!”

“Where could you have possibly seen one before? Liar.”

“Ready? Shoot!” The commander, with quivering lips, shouted the order as soon as the enemy was within range, nearly rendering his entire squad deaf in the process.

Barely alive, Thomas still thought no one in the garrison could ever mistake him for a mutant—even though he was without armor, shaggy like the devil, and riding a mansteed. So he’d directed Bill toward the fortification anticipating a warm bed and some hot food. The barrage of unfriendly arrows quickly quashed this hope as arrows came whistling over his mangled head. Thomas’s face and body looked like one big swollen bruise covered in abrasions. He had a gaping wound cleaving the skin from his right eye to the corner of his mouth and another gash bisecting his forehead. Realizing his mistake, he shot back at the cowering fools, “You blind numbskulls!”

“What?”

“Idiots!”

Clatter sounded from the observation deck and steel helmets flashed through the arrow-slits.

“You talking to us?”

“I didn’t think mutants would stoop to name calling.”

“What should we say in response?”

“Quit your chattering! Keep up the defensive!”

As Thomas got closer to the tower, the arrows began flying too close for comfort.

“What year were you all in before you got sent here? Freshmen all of you?”

“Juniors!”

“Quiet, you nitwit!” hissed the commander, knocking the talkative soldier on his helmet.

“Hey, he asked!”

“So?”

“Hey, pipsqueaks! That I only have two arms doesn’t strike you as odd?”

The red-haired officer looked at the rider more attentively and suddenly realized his mistake, a heavy burden lifting from his shoulders. Six months ago he’d been a carefree sophomore, and now he was charged with defending one of the kingdom’s most strategic positions.

“Who are you and where are you coming from?”

“General Javer. From your mother’s house.”

“Guys, we’re done for!”

“Shut it!” The commander gave his underling another kick. “All joking aside?”

“Tribune Thomas Yourg.”

“But he’s dead!”

“Not quite, but a few hotshot cadets came close to finishing him off.”

“How come you’re riding a mutant?”

“He’s one of ours. Don’t worry about it.”

The future generation of Parthagon’s brave defenders met the army’s single surviving commander with trepidation. He briefly told them the story of his salvation and ordered messengers to all towers to tell the commanding officers to direct any surviving knights returning from the volcano straight to Sallep. Under no circumstances were they to return to Parthagon.

After spending the night in the Tower of Recognition, where his wounds were treated and he was provided with a fresh bed and a hot meal, Thomas resumed his journey the next day. He did this despite the terrible pain he was in and despite the medics’ pleas for him to rest at least another day or two. The tribune also insisted on continuing his journey with Bill. He assumed whoever had saved him from the scaffold would wish to get rid of any unnecessary witnesses, so the unfortunate mansteed had nowhere to go. And having lost his beloved Vector, who’d become a close friend over the years, the young tribune wanted to replace him with someone familiar, and the naive mansteed was suitable for the job. Although such mutations were forbidden in the kingdom, Thomas had come to view the rules, which had once seemed set in stone, with much less respect.

Along the way, he encountered scattered knights, as well as tarrying supply wagons, and he took these under his command. He realized many of the surviving warriors had fled the battlefield or mutilated themselves rather than risk their lives in battle, no matter what they might claim. Thomas had neither the time nor the desire to dig deeper into these murky issues, since every knight was of great value now. By the time he

approached Sallep, he'd amassed a dozen warriors, half of whom were seriously injured.

Thomas's head was a whirlwind of strange thoughts. He was glad to have survived, although he didn't know how nor why his rescue had occurred. He felt his sister must've had a hand in this miracle, but he couldn't imagine how she could've organized such a thing. Although, if she'd orchestrated this bloodbath, who knew? Was there anything she wasn't capable of? Even when they were little she'd harassed him with her antics while he'd practiced stony restraint. And now she was all grown up.

Also losing 1,000 knights, his foster father, Richard Fein, and Aaron Connell had turned Thomas into a bubbling cauldron of rage and hatred. Worst of all, he couldn't figure out whom to turn all this malice against! What was happening in this world? Who benefited from it and how? Even though he'd always had questions, the world had seemed divided into simple categories: white and black, good and evil, Parthagon and Arogdor. But now, all of it was mixed up in one ugly jumble. And it had to be sorted out if he wished to survive and save Celesia's innocent and defenseless population.

All along the grueling path to Sallep, the knights watched with curiosity as their young commander laughed one moment, then cried the next. He seemed lost in his own world and hours could go by during which he was unresponsive to the people around him. Whispering among themselves, they came to believe his mind had been shattered by the horrors he'd experienced in the crater.

In reality, Thomas, orphaned once more, endlessly thought about his most vivid memories of Niels and Richard. Their first encounter, when they'd bravely saved him after the mutants had razed his native village. The time they'd stolen the king's

carriage in order to impress a standoffish lady friend who then still refused Niels' advances. All the times they'd helped him with his school work and, sacrificing so much of their time, carefully prepared him for the tournament. That one week when they'd hidden poor Richard after his wife had found out about his misguided fling with a hideously obese village woman. Their fearless defense of the besieged Yarta and secret collaboration to break the siege on Parthagon. Niels's roguish instructions for their spy mission into Arogdor and handsome Richard's self-consciousness about his loyalty and strict moral character. Now these two cheerful friends remained only in memories. But how would he explain this to Lily and Victoria? How could he possibly console them?

The closer Thomas got to Parthagon, the more he felt a sense of foreboding. An animal fear of something alien and unknown overwhelmed him. Something inexplicable was going on in that damned palace, something that didn't fit into the simple picture of the world he'd known until now. Niels and Richard, as they'd hung on the scaffold, may not have remembered the strange tropical forest, but he did. That bright window, which had appeared out of nowhere to hover in mid-air—surely it was the key to unraveling Celesia's secrets. But what was it? Could it have been magic? At the school they'd been taught to laugh at such notions, but what other explanation could there be for this otherworldly phenomenon? How could he have found himself in a lush green forest if there was no vegetation on the volcano's rocky summit?

Thomas knew for certain, at least, that Albert wasn't who he pretended to be. Not only did he know everything taking place in Arogdor, he just so happened to be the loving father of their lunatic-in-charge! Come to think of it, they even looked alike: if

you added a black beard, as well as some weight and age to Werner Eisenberg's youthful face, he'd be an exact copy of the ubiquitously adored Parthagonian king. All this time they'd been exchanging key information and pitting their weak-willed people against each other in endless war! Why? Was it all just a monstrous game to see who could destroy more innocent lives? And why had it escalated over the past year?

If the collusion between father and son was at least somewhat understandable, other elements didn't make any sense. For instance, what did Sunset City have to do with this whole story? No doubt, the Black Knight who'd made the bizarre assassination attempt on young Elizabeth had hailed from there. And they had desperately pursued her again after the Wall had been breached—a feat accomplished with Arogdor's help.

He could see now the ferocious mutants had been trying to protect Albert's daughter rather than mindlessly fighting to claim her for themselves as everyone had assumed. But why did the four-armed monsters and the black archers band together in the first place—so successfully they'd almost brought down Parthagon? Had Walter Meisser known all about the royal family's shady dealings and could therefore manipulate them? Perhaps all along he'd wanted marble-skinned Elizabeth, and in attempting to get her his entire city had been decimated—at her big brother's command. What was so special about her that Meisser would've taken such a risk?

Thousands of questions rattled around Thomas's mind as he rode back to his native land. The more riddles and contradictions he stumbled on to, the more certain he grew that neither he, nor Niels, nor Richard had ever really understood the actual state of things. They'd all lived comfortably in

someone's make-believe world and played according to its savagely arbitrary rules. That was why his late foster father had always complained about the kingdom's leaky defense system to no avail. That was why the angry tribune now refused to part with Bill, even though every person they encountered was shocked and appalled at seeing the mansteed. To hell with them and to hell with their rules!

* * *

These painful reflections accompanied him to Sallep, where Thomas met another fifty wounded and battered knights, mostly surviving warriors from what had once been the First Cohort. Leaving his minuscule and mostly horseless army in the city, he went to spend the night in his native village with the blacksmith's family. The elderly couple, who'd missed Thomas and were exceedingly happy to see him, dressed again his healing wounds and kindly invited Thomas to a hearty supper. The unpleasant scent coming up from the cellar was stronger than ever, but the family could no longer smell it.

"So what now?" asked Max Lank, squinting and stroking his thinning beard, having just learned the chilling news of the army's defeat at the crater.

"They'll be heading down soon enough," answered Thomas, remembering the guileless boys at the Tower of Recognition. "And we've got no defenses to speak of."

"Marching on Parthagon again? Through Sallep?"

"Through everywhere. But there's something else—something I can't tell you. Hopefully it can all be settled. Or—worst case scenario—we'll mobilize the entire population just as Eisenberg did."

“And how’s Marie? She must be worried sick about you,” the blacksmith’s small wife said. She was wiping tears from her round, wrinkled face.

“She’s Mrs. Yourg now, isn’t she?” clarified Max.

“Yes. She’s fine.”

“You could’ve held the wedding festivities here you know, since we couldn’t come to the city.”

“I hope you didn’t take offense. Is it really that important?”

“Of course it is! We don’t have that many joys in life.”

“Well, I do beg your forgiveness, Max.”

“If you ever need anything, you know me and the old lady are good for it. Don’t let appearances fool you: I might look like an old gray mule, but I haven’t lost any of my smithing talents!”

“Thank you! You two are the closest thing to family I have left.”

“What are you going to do without Niels?”

Thomas emitted a heavy sigh. He was thinking about what awaited him in Parthagon, if he’d even be allowed within its walls. Would the king risk leaving him outside the capital knowing he was armed with such important information? In any case, the young tribune was prepared to be arrested and had no doubt poor Marie would also be dragged into the affair. He didn’t wish to hurt her or add to her suffering, but the thought of meeting with Elizabeth was what spurred him on to Parthagon.

Having finally gotten a good night’s sleep at the Lanks’ home, Thomas led his joyless army out of Sallep early the next morning. And by sunset they could see the North Gate’s cold stone edifice. A line of ballistae, captured during the siege, was aimed at the surviving heroes, and though no one was firing them, the wanderers had clearly been eagerly awaited. After a

long pause, the gate swung open and the crippled warriors entered the city to the applause of men and the weeping of women and children. They all frantically searched for their valiant sons, husbands, and fathers—almost all in vain. The knights who'd remained in the city displayed respect, but they also showed uncharacteristic restraint. Clearly, they'd been forewarned about something but were still infinitely happy to see their surviving comrades—especially the young Tribune Young, who'd once again surprised everyone with his tenacity and courage. In the battered Parthagon, faith in the king's infallibility had been shaken, and the people had begun to look for new idols.

Although mutants were forbidden within the capital, no one said a word to the limping warriors shuffling behind Thomas, who rode the imposing Bill. Lining the street, gawkers stared in shock at the mansteed's rippling muscles, his tanned wide-jawed mug and his luxurious mohawk. The Arogdorian had never felt so important in his life, which was why he cordially thanked anyone who threw even a timid or squeamish glance in his direction. This even as many grown men involuntarily took a step back seeing him. The ladies, those who didn't faint, screamed and fled with their frightened progeny.

"Thomas!" Alain emerged from the crowd in excitement. "Thomas!"

"Is that you, old friend?" His buddy gave him a warm hug.

"What's happened to your face? Did someone use it as a chopping block?"

"That bad, huh? It'll heal."

"How did you make it out of that slaughterhouse?"

"I'll tell you later."

“Where’s Vector? I’d like to give this new horsey a go sometime.”

“I’m not a horsey!” The mansteed became offended. “I’m a person.”

“Alain, it’s our old pal Bill! Don’t you remember him?”

“The same Bill from way back when? The poor lame fellow from the gorge? Well, I’ll be!”

“I’m not lame anymore. Thank you!”

“Well, at least we won’t die of starvation!”

“How dare you? Thank you! I mean, no thank you!”

After talking with his friend, who’d been lucky enough to stay in the internal garrison, Thomas rode a few blocks through the familiar streets and was surprised to catch himself feeling and thinking things he’d never felt and thought before. Although his fate was up in the air, he sensed he was entitled to this city. Not only that—he had the impression the capital, with its suffering people, felt the same way. As he rode by the townspeople he felt a sense of personal responsibility toward each of them. Only he could pull them out of the situation they found themselves in. This situation was not their fault. Like blind kittens, they sat in a rag-filled box in a dark cupboard, seeing nothing and understanding even less. Thomas was their only hope, if only because he understood the bigger picture. Who else in the capital knew? Newdon? Kalitza? However many there were, he seemed to be the only one who wanted to change it and who cared for his ordinary compatriots with all his heart.

His first destination was the honorable Academy. This time he was allowed to visit Marie, still locked in the drafty prison tower. Although she looked emaciated and sickly, she was upbeat, feeling proud of her husband, who’d returned a hero from hell. She’d allowed some forgiveness toward that spoiled

brat Elizabeth to creep into her heart, chalking up her stupid trick to simple eccentricity and her own behavior to baseless jealousy. She vowed to react with more restraint in the future when dealing with the whims of royal people.

He promised his young wife he'd get her released from her unjust imprisonment very soon. Then Thomas made sure Bill, his good-natured companion, was guaranteed the finest care in the Academy stables until they could make a decision about his future. Having been accorded Vector's old stall, the mansteed was perturbed by this humiliating cohabitation with ordinary horses. From all sides they stared at him with frightened eyes. But staying here was clearly better than being sold at the local market as sausage meat. The mansteed couldn't get used to the idea that none of the foul Parthagonians had any intention of killing him. In truth, he would've been disposed of were it not for the surviving tribune's uncertain status.

It was almost night when, with a painful heart, Thomas reluctantly limped to the late Niels' house. He wanted to personally convey the sad news to that amazing woman who'd made Niels forget his debauched bachelor days. But Victoria already knew everything and understood what had happened. Warmly, she met the hero and, without asking any questions, led him to Niels's favorite gazebo. They sat together quietly, occasionally recalling funny anecdotes about Niels. Then tear-stained Lily, who until recently had hoped her Richard would return from the volcano, came running into the house. As he was heading up the Fourth River's gorge, he'd bade her return to Parthagon—as if he already knew he'd never return to the Tower of Security, where, following Richard's scandalous resignation, they'd led such a happy and peaceful existence.

Thomas was prudent enough to conceal the details of the men's last days. The grief-stricken women would at least have the comfort of imagining a quick death on the battlefield rather than the brutal torture Thomas himself had had to endure. Not knowing how to conduct himself in such difficult circumstances, he left the grieving widows alone, preferring to seclude himself in his empty matrimonial abode.

* * *

The next evening the young tribune donned his blue jacket and, under the adoring gazes of passersby—women and children especially—headed to the Royal Council. Thomas had been notified of the council's special meeting in the morning, so he'd had the day to think through the issues he needed to raise. He was most interested to see if Albert could look him in the eye or say anything after everything that had happened. He couldn't shake the terrifying image of the king looking out of that bright window in the strange forest. To find some explanation of this eerie phenomenon was his main hope.

The thinned-out palace guard happily accompanied their new hero to the north tower. However, contrary to council rules, when he arrived in the candle-lit circular room, only Albert was there to greet him. The king behaved with cordiality and did his best to appear as if nothing had happened. He even took off his brown coat and threw it on the table in a casual, friendly manner, revealing a half-open white shirt hanging over his perennial stockings. The wily statesman was so calm Thomas could feel his own fists cracking with tension.

"This is going to be a difficult conversation, Thomas."

"Who betrayed Connell?"

“Now, just a moment!” Albert pulled out a chair so the tribune could sit at the table. “First, I need to say that life can be much more complicated than it appears. I repeat: much more complicated.”

“I asked a simple question.”

“If we keep speaking at cross purposes, we’ll never understand each other.”

The gray-eyed king sat in his comfortable armchair, stroking his beard and curiously looking over the scars on Thomas’s face. The tribune, in turn, was working hard to keep himself in check, genuinely hoping his suspicions were misgiven.

“Your Highness, I’ve always been your loyal servant and hope to hear some reasonable explanations.”

“I understand. Do you know who saved you?”

“I’d be glad to learn that myself.”

“Is that so? I was glad to hear that you’d survived. Let’s begin by...”

“What was that window in the forest? How did you get inside it?”

“What forest? That was no window. It’s a Telelink screen in Werner’s atrium. They made those things for us in Sunset City at some point.”

“Hmm, I can understand how a ballista works, but this...”

“Thomas, you know inventors! It doesn’t matter. The principle of Telelink is this: sitting here in my palace in Parthagon, I can press a button and see Werner on the screen even though he’s at the volcano. It’s like a big telescope you can look through from both ends at the same time.

“So you were actually here?”

“Yes.”

“How is that possible? Is it magic?”

“Of course not!” Albert protested. “I used to be frightened of it, too, at first. But you become accustomed to it.”

“Okay. But who is Eisenberg?”

“You’re approaching the story from the wrong end. Yes, he is my son. I sent him to the volcano when he was still very young. We faked his suicide. Javer is on our side, too, by the way.”

“What?”

Thomas jumped away from the table, blood flowing into his face. The tribune’s muscles tensed, and he was about to attack his sovereign. However, the king quickly rose from the leather chair and grabbed his jacket off the table, taking from an inner pocket an unusual steel object with a short curved handle. It looked like a hammer with an elongated head segmented by rows of horizontal lines and longitudinal grooves.

“Hold it right there! I told you, you’re approaching this all wrong.” Albert tried to pacify the incensed young man. “Hear me out. Then you can do what you want. Deal?”

“What possible explanation could there be? You killed my parents, thousands of people! For what? How can you justify your actions?”

“You think I’m crazy?”

“I do now!”

“I am asking you again: sit down and hear me out,” Albert took on a paternal tone, still keeping his distance from the tribune. “I understand how you feel. I would’ve reacted the same way. But give me a chance to explain. Then you can think what you want. All right?”

Unable to bear any more vague talk, Thomas banged his battered fists against the oak table. The clang of iron doors sounded below, and frightened royal guards flew up the spiral staircase. It took Albert several attempts to escort the wary

knights back out. In their defense, they'd been rightfully alarmed by the king's guest's enraged demeanor: his breathing was almost heavy enough to extinguish the candles trembling in the chandelier above the cracked table.

"So you'll hear me out?"

"Try me!" Thomas promised himself to hold out at least another minute and loudly fell back in his wooden chair. "These chairs are torture devices!"

"Indeed! Aesthetically pleasing and practical." Albert strolled toward the window overlooking Elizabeth's tower, where a dim, lonesome light flickered behind the drawn curtains. "You know the main difficulty in ruling over people? They always need something to strive for. There will always be forces out there wanting something. Always groups of people who aren't pleased with the way things are and who desire change at all costs. At first they'll just argue, but if that doesn't work, they'll start killing each other. And in the end, no matter how ideal a state you create, some out there will be unhappy with their lot. You'll always be the subject of criticism that will always find a receptive audience. And this endless cycle means things will eventually slip out of your hands. You give people freedom, they'll immediately use it to support the one idiot who'll take it away. Then others will rise up to restore justice—and so on and so forth. I've been through it so many times. I've seen it all with my own eyes."

"What's that got to do with anything? How does it explain the senseless killing?"

"Patience! I want you to understand two simple principles. First, people will always want and demand things, no matter how ideal their circumstances. Second, there will always be

opposition. Always! That is our nature! Competition is in our blood and is what makes us human.”

Albert ceased contemplating the eastern tower and sat on a carved chair next to his guest, still holding the strange hammer. It attracted the knight’s curiosity like a magnet.

“I was tired of fighting this, constantly risking not only my position but also the lives of my people. So I decided to make a change. I thought about it long and hard, ran countless experiments. Sometimes they worked; sometimes they didn’t. In the end, to guarantee my people’s well-being, I chose the most stable system, a system in which I created all the problems myself.”

“What?” Thomas shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“It’s very simple: people die; people suffer; people always seek out trouble. If I created the problems, I’d also be in a position to solve them. Otherwise, there’d be no end to trouble and sorrow, and things would get much worse. Infinitely worse.”

“And?”

“By taking complete control of the situation I eliminated the risk of it aggravating. I took chaos into my own hands.”

“So, this endless war...”

“Yes, yes, exactly! It gives people something to think about, something to worry about. Which side will they take? Who’s right and who’s wrong?”

Thomas was beginning to understand Albert and even to believe him. But there was one thing he couldn’t understand. “But why so much bloodshed? Is there really no other way?”

“Thomas, people are always out to kill each other. It’s not even the price one has to pay for peace or stability. It’s just the way things are. That’s why the most important thing is to keep the war going, at any cost.”

“That’s why Javer couldn’t take Parthagon and we failed to take Arogdor?”

“Yes, it’s an endless game.”

“But my parents, they were simple villagers.”

“Believe me: your honorable parents would’ve been the first to support some numbskull with an intelligent and honest face who’d end up massacring other folks. But that’s another topic, your parents.”

“Another topic? Why?” Thomas said, feeling tears of despair welling in his eyes. His whole worthless life had turned out to be the plaything of one man who was possibly a genius and possibly a madman.

“When you’re at the bottom of a system, you’re a pawn: you don’t see or understand anything; all you can do is react to whatever’s being thrown at you from above. When you’re above the system, both you and your family are safe. They’re no longer pawns. Forgive me, but you and your family were pawns. Their death was inevitable. That’s the price you pay for living an easy life by someone else’s rules.”

“But all they did was live out their lives in peace. They’d never done harm to anyone!”

“That’s how it must be, my friend.” Albert, now completely relaxed, looked into Thomas’s bewildered eyes. “A pawn life, when it stands in the way of our mechanism, has no value. That’s why Javer can kill thousands of people—on both sides, mind you—without so much as batting an eye. Did you know he intentionally let part of the First Cohort get through? You did exactly as much damage to Arogdor as was necessary. If you think Werner or Javer lose any sleep over the lives of their people, you’re sorely mistaken. The mechanism has no sides: not white or black, nor right or wrong. There’s only up and down. If

you're down at the bottom then whatever your circumstance—I repeat: whatever your circumstance—you're on the losing side you've been thoroughly brainwashed. In any case, all wars consist of good people fighting against other good people. The enemy is bad—they are always the other, not me. Whatever side you happen to find yourself on, it will always claim it's right while the other side is wrong. You know why? Because they've been brainwashed. In reality, they're nothing but pawns. If you're fixated on notions of 'good' and 'bad,' you're at the bottom. And you'll pay for it either with your livelihood or with your life.”

“And no one's figured it out?”

“Of course not! You've never wondered why our people are all so hopelessly naive? Or why the Arogdorians are even dimmer? You think that's just a mistake of nature we can't bother to correct? We keep them at the intellectual level we need them to be at so they can't ever work things out for themselves. Loving the motherland—that's good and noble. But remaining a blind patriot while engaging in rational thought? That's a tall order, my friend.”

“So the goal of the school isn't to make us smarter, but just the opposite?”

“See, now you're getting it! And take note: the volcano is inhabited exclusively by knuckle draggers and Werner's position is much steadier than mine. Our people get in a huff over one little defeat and a few inconveniences. Life in Arogdor, though, has always been harder, and yet its power structure has always been more stable. The poorer and more ignorant the people are, the more they love you. What's the point of having intelligent subjects? All those years of studying at the school and the

Academy—it's nothing but an imitation of real education. We teach people what we need them to know.”

A tense pause hung in the air. Albert smugly put his jacket back on and hid the steel object in his inner pocket while waiting for Thomas's reaction. But Thomas, his face pale, could only look at him with disgust. “How can you live with it all?”

“I understand how you feel. But now I'm offering you the opportunity to leave the world of the pawns behind and to rise above all this mundane sorrow. It's the only way to guarantee your own safety and the safety of your loved ones. I'll tell you something else: this is the only way humanity can exist, and there's nothing you can do about it. All you can do is choose your role. Choose whether you're at the bottom or at the top.”

Albert looked into Thomas's eyes again, this time with compassion. He placed his soft hand on Thomas's shoulder and continued in a serious voice. “I asked you here today to invite you to join the Order of the Blood Watch. It is the Order, not the Royal Council, that controls all Celesia. And that is just the beginning, believe...”

“What watch?”

“The Blood Watch.”

“This seems like some kind of joke. I have to think.”

“It is all too serious. I will let Marie go right now, and Peter will reward you 100 gold coins. Besides becoming a member of the Order, you will be named legate and promoted to the position of commander-in-chief. You will become a demi-god!”

Taken aback, Thomas rose up from the table and started pacing beside the tall windows, his hands behind his back and his eyes on his feet.

“What about Dohr, Fein, Connell?”

“Ordinary combat men. I need people of Javer's mettle.”

“Ivar Javer? You’re comparing me to that monster, my parents’ killer?”

“Yes. And he’s in the Order. You, Thomas Yourg, have what it takes to get as far as him, if not further. That’s the reason you’re in this room right now hearing what you’re hearing.”

“Who else?”

“Werner, Primrose, Newdon, and Kalitza. I really do think you’ve got something special in you. You’ve proven it throughout your extraordinarily difficult life,” Albert said.

“Is that it?”

“Not even close! Fame, women, riches—you can have them all, as much as your heart desires! As much as you can carry.”

“Can I keep Bill?”

“The mansteed? Only if he renounces his mutation. Rules, Thomas. The R-U-L-E-S of the G-A-M-E!” Albert laughed, coming over to pat Thomas on the shoulder as Thomas gazed emptily out the dark window. “How about dinner? We’re expected.”

“Why not?” The tribune acquiesced.

Albert led the pale young man into his dimly lit dining room, where blue-green chairs surrounded a large table and still-life paintings hung on walls decorated with an ornate frieze. He peppered the conversation with one vulgar joke after another as they walked. Members of the Order of the Blood Watch—the slick-haired Newdon and gray-clad Kalitza—were already seated. At the table’s far end Elizabeth smiled at him. She was in her favorite dark-green dress. Greeting the company, Thomas was about to sit down near the men.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the princess called, her eyes wide.

“I imagined...”

“There’s no imagining with these old fuddy-duddies.”

“Elizabeth!”

“Father, I’m just telling it like it is. Hey there, old fuddy-duddies!”

“Try not to pay attention,” whispered Newdon. “Or it will be just like last time.”

“And you.” The girl turned to blushing Thomas who was self-consciously trying to fix his tousled hair. “Come sit by me.”

“Are you sure?”

“We too can discuss all kinds of nonsense while putting on intellectual airs. You do know how to pretend to be an intellectual don’t you?”

This kind of talk from the princess took Thomas aback. He thought he must’ve misjudged Elizabeth. Whenever he’d seen her in the past, he’d been convinced she wasn’t very talkative and in general apathetic. Now she appeared one of the more energetic and sociable persons he’d ever met. And she was constantly trying to provoke those around her. It’s possible, he thought, she’d just grown bored of being constantly alone.

Meanwhile, servants dressed in white served a vast array of fragrant meat and fish dishes, as well as roasted vegetables and fruit, and mountains of flatbreads and sweets, as if the dinner party consisted not of a few ordinary people, but of a dozen rapacious knights.

“I feel bad for your friends,” said the princess with a note of indifference Thomas immediately picked up on.

“I must say, I don’t see signs of mourning here.”

“Come now! That’s not what I mean.”

“You don’t mean my dead friends and devastated centurias?” the former villager said insolently, stunning the heavenly creature beside him.

“What? Oh, that’s awful. I understand.”

“That’s okay. Forgive me.”

“What’s happened to your face?”

“The scars? It’s nothing.”

“This nothing is covering half your face! Does it hurt?”

“Don’t worry about me, Elizabeth.”

“What books have you read this week?”

“Books? This week?” Thomas was taken aback and then bitterly laughed, realizing this girl really did live a world apart.

An hour later, having supped to his content, and for the first time having had a close conversation with the charming princess, Thomas went to the Academy. The dirty cage where Marie was being kept was opened without question, and the young woman rushed into her husband’s battered arms. When they returned to their family nest, the handy Marie, having barely washed and put on clean clothes, immediately set to restoring the house’s order and cleanliness. Thomas, seeing all this as unnecessary, enigmatically told her not to get too cozy, because soon their lives might drastically change.

Lying in a clean bed and holding his sleeping wife close to his chest, the tribune brooded. He had warm thoughts about the princess and felt bitter sorrow of losing his friends. His mind also whirled with pie-in-the-sky dreams of days to come. The future seemed so much more promising than he could’ve ever imagined. Was it all really happening to him? Could he really put up any resistance to the way human drama played out on such a high level? Was there any point in remaining a pawn and continuing to pay for other people’s games with his own skin and his loved ones’ well-being?

For almost one tortuous week, poor Thomas couldn't decide. There was the simple and understandable purpose he'd adhered to from childhood: to valiantly destroy the bloodthirsty mutants and avenge his family. But the king was offering him a dizzying career that guaranteed prosperity and security—that is, if the slippery king could be taken at his word. The second option certainly seemed easier, but being on the same side as Javer was a difficult pill to swallow. He couldn't imagine talking to the general, let alone allowing him to tear some other defenseless rural districts to pieces.

The vengeful mutants would come soon, and yet, no preparations seemed underway to attempt to rebuff the enemy. All of Parthagon, along with its controlled territories, was passively waiting for the blow that would deliver irreparable grief. There was still no new commander-in-chief, and Albert, who was losing patience with the young tribune's deliberations, was bearing all the responsibility. The king had hoped to quickly secure his support so he could throw all those pesky questions of security over to Thomas.

Only a few weeks ago, Thomas would've been incensed by the palace's lack of leadership as the kingdom faced imminent disaster. He wouldn't have been able to sleep if he weren't busy preparing for another daring invasion of Arogdor or creating an impenetrable defense of the capital. But now it was all the same to him. The head of the Order of the Blood Watch had been right: if one understood the world order, one could rest easy because disposable pawns were the ones to deal with all those worldly troubles.

“So what now?” asked Alain, as they strolled with Bill under the bare chestnut trees lining the Avenue of Heroes. “What’s the plan of defense?”

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

“Fine? Nothing’s being done!”

“I think you’re blowing this whole thing out of proportion.”

“So you’re just going to wait for those ugly bastards to come knocking at your door?”

“The king will work it all out...”

“I hear there’s talk of putting you in charge.”

“You’re looking to be promoted to tribune?” chuckled Thomas.

“And why not?” Alain retorted with a note of insult. He’d clearly thought of wearing the shiny silver token he’d seen gracing his friend’s chest.

“What will become of me then?” Bill said, taking a break from thanking every passerby, which was starting to drive his friends crazy. “Thank you! Thank you!”

“Nothing for now, Bill. But I’ll make my decision soon.”

“They’ll make mincemeat out of...”

“Just relax, pal.”

“Thank you!”

Centurion Alain Ospe straightened his back, sucked in his already taut stomach, raised his chin, puffed out his chest, and cleared his throat.

“Buddy, maybe let this one go,” Thomas said, sensing trouble. “I beg of you.”

“Oh, gods. Not this again! Thank you!”

But Alain, smiling condescendingly, was already approaching the skinny girl in the brown chapeau and purple woolen dress walking ahead of them.

“Hey there, miss!”

“Oh! What is that?” The thin blonde jumped seeing the mansteed, dropping her basket of turnips and raising her delicate hand over her mouth.

“How about parking your caboose elsewhere, please!” Alain suggested while helping her pick up her produce. “We’ve got very important people here who can’t get through. You’re blocking the whole street.”

“The whole street? Me?” The poor girl examined her protruding joints and then the wide avenue with disappointment. “My apologies.”

“You wouldn’t be chilly by any chance?”

“Yes, I do happen to feel a slight chill.”

“If you’re ever cold, all you have to do is look my way.”

“What?” The girl seemed confused at first, but then laughed. “Oh, you’re joking!”

“Not a bit. I’ll see you tonight? How about taking a ride on my wonder horse here?”

“I’m not a wonder...” Bill was about to object further but something poked him in the ribs. “Ouch!”

“Is that really your horse? It’s very strange looking,” the blushing girl said hesitantly, fixing her thin hair and her dress. “Well, I don’t know. I’m not that kind of girl you know.”

After half a minute of arguing and persuading, the girl agreed to take a stroll around the Wall.

“Bow down to the master!” Thomas exclaimed. “The God of Romance!”

“And I’ll have you know that I’m no wonder horse.”

“Practice makes perfect, losers.” Alain smiled.

“That explains all those times you’ve circled the Wall,” his friend said.

“It’ll be great!”

“What will you tell her when you show up without your wonder horse?”

“I’m not a wonder horse! Thank you!”

“I’ll say he needed his horseshoes changed. I’ve wriggled my way out of worse, old pal,” proudly replied Niels Dohr’s best pupil. “As long as she gave me her real address.”

Considering all this nonsense, Thomas realized his predicament was very different. He had a darling wife. He loved her and felt attached to her. But the king’s incredible daughter also now daily waited in the palace for him with great anticipation. Somehow, it had become habitual for him to meet her, to the point of him feeling there was really nothing extraordinary about it.

Toward evening, as the cool twilight enveloped the city, Thomas was once again contentedly strolling with Elizabeth along the Wall, which had been almost completely restored except for a scaffolding here and there. A light white-hooded coat floated around the princess’s elongated form, and a good quarter of the capital’s garrison crowded behind them. Awestruck onlookers watched them as if they were witnessing deities, shouting greetings, sobbing convulsively, or praying to their idol. As they lost track of time, Thomas and Elizabeth paid no attention to any of this fuss.

“Isn’t that your friend over there?” The princess pointed at a dejected young man on a black steed who shared his saddle with a skinny townswoman. Thomas looked and was surprised to see Alain who, judging by his exhausted-looking face, was on his umpteenth lap around the seemingly endless Wall. Perhaps he’d not successfully internalized all the legendary legate’s lessons. Even if knights were supposed to enjoy undisputed popularity!

“That’s him all right. You can feel sorry for the poor girl.”

“Oh!” Elizabeth pressed up against his thick jacket as a flock of pigeons, disturbed by a guard, suddenly took off just overhead.

Thomas felt he’d been hit with a sledgehammer, as the princess’s fragile body touched his own. The warrior had never seen those thick long eyelashes this close, nor her neat little nose, nor her pale pink lips. She was also embarrassed, blushing and lowering her beautiful eyes, as if unable to meet the officer’s eyes while so close to him.

“Forgive me.” She finally let go of him. “I was startled.”

“With this many knights around? What’s there to be scared of?” Luckily he realized his own imbecility just in time. “Although, now that you mention it, it was rather sudden.”

“By the way, I see your scars have almost healed.”

“I’ve been doing my best, in the Phase.”

“You know, Thomas Yourg, there’s nothing I’d like more than to continue talking with you, but...”

“Me too. But what?”

“How shall I put it? I’m the king’s daughter, and you’re just a tribune.”

“How do you mean?”

“I have an image to maintain. You understand, don’t you?”

It took a few moments for the shock to wear off, but Thomas finally understood what the unhappy Elizabeth was hinting at. The king’s only daughter, the most precious pearl in all of Parthagon—and all of Celesia for that matter—was spending her time with a simple officer, a former villager! For him this friendship was a dazzling goddess’s improbable whim, but he’d never considered how must she feel: descending from her proud heaven into the gutter before everyone’s eyes. How could she

possibly be comfortable with what everyone must say and think of her?

* * *

Late evening Thomas returned home tired. He found Marie in the dining room wearing only her nightgown and looking less than pleased. The modest room contained a couple of rickety chairs, a cabinet stocked with kitchen utensils, a red-brick stove, and a simple table. She sat at the table drinking water from a cup and picking at the wax dripping down the candlestick. Her hair was gathered in a braid and she was acting coldly and with indifference.

Her husband, far from being the most sensitive person—a typical man, in other words—took no note and began preparations for bed and Phase time as if nothing were the matter. Only when he was about to head to the bedroom did he realize Marie was still at the table, looking lost as she stared at the candle's playful flame. The young man remembered Niels' advice to fear nothing more, not even the ferocious mutants of Arogdor, than a silently brooding woman. According to him, even the ruthless Javer would shake at the knees.

"Everything all right, darling?" he whispered cautiously, gently touching her arm.

"Everything's peachy." Her retort was like thunder in the midst of a sunny day, rumbling through the house. Marie withdrew her arm in irritation.

"You sure?" Thomas could sense the oncoming calamity but still hoped his suspicions were wrong.

"Sure!" Another clap of thunder.

The fearless knight realized the futility of his hopes. "Let's go to bed then, my love." He tried a clever tactical retreat, putting more tenderness and care in his voice than a purring tomcat begging its owner for affection.

"Let's." His wife smiled at him.

Thomas sighed with relief and went toward the tiny bedroom. But he paid for naively dropping his guard.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To bed. We were going to bed, weren't we?"

"First I'd like to know where you've been."

"When will you put an end to this nonsense?" the warrior exclaimed, sensing the noose around him tightening and the safety of his warm bed getting further and further away.

"In that case I'll tell you where. On the Wall! With her! For the entire city to see!" The wily woman said to her unfaithful husband. "Do you ever even think about me?"

"Marie..."

"Do you know how people look at me these days?"

"You've got nothing to worry about. We just talk."

"I'm your wife, aren't I?" She rose from the table, looking forebodingly into her husband's eyes.

"You are."

"Then why are you spending all your time with that hussy instead of me?"

"It's work. Part of the job. Don't call her that!"

"What job? Do you realize what you're doing to me, to our family? Must you publicly shame me?"

"Enough!"

"I can't take this humiliation anymore, Thomas!"

"That's enough, I said."

Squeezing her thin fists, Marie started pacing around the room, switching her infuriated gaze from one object to another as if she intended to set them on fire. “I’ve tried to be patient, but you’ve crossed every line. You’ve become brazen about it!”

“Ok. So what do you want from me?”

“You say it’s just talking?”

“Yes, that’s all it is.”

“Since I’m your wife, you have to tell me what you talk about, and where, and how it all happens.”

“Why?”

“Because you have to! In detail, mind you.”

“Have you lost your mind? Tell you everything?”

“Every single thing.”

“Marie, this is insanity!”

“Do you love me?”

“Of course.”

“Do you want to keep me?”

“I don’t even know how to live without you!”

“Then you have to tell me everything,” Marie shot back, sighing with relief and sitting back down on the creaking chair.

Caught red-handed, Thomas had to report everything in meticulous military-style detail, divulging every trivial element he thought meaningless, but which Marie took great interest in. He told his wife about where he’d been with the princess and what they’d talked about. His wife, in turn, asked about Elizabeth’s clothes, her actions, facial expressions, even the gestures of her hands.

“Oh, that insidious little brat!” she said as her interrogation of her clueless husband concluded.

“What are you talking about?”

“You are a blind country bumpkin, Thomas! You’ve always been one.”

“I’ll have you know I’m this close to being commander-in-...”

“What of it? You might win a war, but lose everything to the first woman who comes along, provided she has the slightest lick of sense. You have no understanding of women whatsoever.”

“What am I not getting here?”

“You’re being used!”

“By whom? For what?”

“Did you actually think she was interested in you?”

“Interested in me?”

“Oh, yes. This clever girl has got you, numbskull that you are, wrapped around her finger. She’s so clumsily obvious about it, I’m amazed even you haven’t figured it out! Have you been blindfolded? Where is your common sense, Thomas? You think they’re going to make you commander-in-chief? You’re nothing but a fool!”

With such harsh conclusions, Marie finally rendered her husband speechless with anger, but worries about the future replaced her gnawing jealousies. If they’d sent the precious princess, who’d always been treated as if she were made of glass, after her Thomas, what kind of dangerous game were they playing with him?

And although, she was still upset about her spouse’s feelings toward Elizabeth, Marie now felt more at peace. Despite her anguish, she was somewhat pleased to know her only rival was not some ugly harlot who hadn’t even mastered the Phase but the virtually holy daughter of the king, the princess of Parthagon herself! She really was very beautiful, so she didn’t blame a healthy red-blooded male for wanting to glimpse this shining miracle of a girl and entertain a forbidden fantasy. If

Marie were a man, she'd have long ceased to think of anything else! In fact, steady old Thomas should be commended for how long and how well he'd held out! Even women caught themselves experiencing a strange feeling of enchantment when looking at Elizabeth, eyeing her tender body and impeccably refined face. What could one expect from helpless and thick-headed men?

Besides, Marie was intelligent enough to know there was really nothing to worry about. As much as Thomas might be attracted to the girl, she clearly had no reciprocal feelings for him. She was simply using him for some unknown purpose, and she didn't care about his heart. Sooner or later, Thomas would be bitterly rejected—which meant no one was trying to steal him from her after all! This soothing thought made Marie regain faith in her well-deserved happiness, which she'd toiled diligently many years to obtain and which she'd thought was about to slip from her grasp.

* * *

Ironically, Marie's insulting insinuations were what made Thomas finally come to his decision. In all fairness, his mind had been made up, but some internal obstacle had prevented him from admitting it. He concluded his traumatized wife was speaking out of jealousy in the hopes of sowing discord between him and Elizabeth and reigniting his fading interest in her. Thinking about the princess's pure and innocent blue eyes, so full of sincerity and sensitivity, he couldn't accept the possibility of deception. He knew she was tough. He knew she had no compassion. However, that applied only to those stupid pawns underfoot, which her father and brother exchanged

indiscriminately. And besides, she was too young to have the necessary cunning to dupe the worldly Thomas Yourg, who was already all of twenty-four-years old.

The day after his unpleasant quarrel with Marie, he went to the palace intending to swear loyalty to the Order so he could begin his brilliant career according to its rules. He still hadn't figured out how he'd find it within himself to order the deaths of innocents, but it was a positive step for him personally—and the only step he could really take. He believed the morality would sort itself out, because everything was now so ambiguous anyway. The main thing: he would reach the highest peaks of success a knight could reach, and his loved ones would no longer be at risk from any trouble or unpleasantness—which he could do nothing to stop anyway.

Albert was not expecting him, so the tribune was asked to stroll in the inner garden, where he'd already spent many hours waiting for Elizabeth. Four walls cloistered the space, with beautiful carved shutters on the windows and gentle murmuring fountains. Low cypresses created a fanciful labyrinth among the flower beds, miniature apple trees, tiny ponds, and cozy pavilions. Sitting on a wooden bench near a miniature crystal-clear lake, the young man watched the red carp—as big as his elbow—swim, forgetting himself and his purpose. They swam under a tiny bridge, moving first one way, then the other, as if trying to find a way out of this paradise.

“My dear friend,” somebody called from behind him.

Turning around, Thomas saw Peter Kalitza who, dressed as always in his gray caftan, seemed to have crept up on him from another part of the garden.

“Are you avoiding me?”

“Me? God forbid, honorable chancellor!”

“Call me Peter.”

“Thank you. Have you been here a while?”

“Yes. You must’ve failed to notice me, again.”

“Again?”

“I come here often and have had the chance to observe you a few times,” Kalitza said with a grin, scratching his flat nose and glancing at a moss-covered hillock.

Thomas blushed as he recalled how the last time he’d been here he’d made a clumsy attempt to catch one of the slippery fish but had only ended up breaking a small statue of Albert I standing at the water’s edge. To hide his crime he’d hidden the remains under a patch of moss, hoping and praying no one would know about it until the end of his days.

“I didn’t see anything of interest, if that’s what you were wondering.” Kalitza winked at him.

“Thank you, Peter.” Thomas sighed with relief.

“However, I do regret to say I have sad news.”

“Something’s happened?”

“Indeed.”

“What?” The knight shuddered and his heartbeat quickened.

“Your sister. Her name was Irèn I believe?”

“No, it can’t be...”

“The day after the attack on Arogdor...”

“I don’t believe it, Peter!” Thomas grabbed him by the chest. “You’re lying!”

“She was executed along with two dozen other traitors.”

“Irèn,” whispered the villager as he dropped to his knees, not trying to hold back his tears. “How could it be?”

“You have to understand: we didn’t know you’d become one of us. Forgive us.” Looking sad, Kalitza quickly left the sweet-smelling garden.

Thomas was too devastated to comprehend the chancellor's last words, his desolate sobs blocking out the world around him. He thought of their carefree childhood and bright moments from their short meeting in Arogdor. Once again he'd lost his sweet little prankster, whom he'd always tried so diligently to guard from trouble and adversity. She was no longer out there, at the top of that cold volcano. She was nowhere now. Fierce anger and hatred filled Thomas's heart as he felt wounded in his weakest spot. Suddenly he could clearly see everything that only minutes ago had been clouded by an opaque veil. And as a fresh wave of illumination swept through his clarified mind, it cast aside all his delusions, revealing his true feelings and desires.

He craved revenge. He'd not forgive the merciless killing of his parents and Irèn's execution, no matter what it cost him. That need was—and had always been—at the core of his being. This was who he—Thomas Yourg—was! And now he knew all the vile criminals who deserved punishment. Moreover, it was his duty to avenge his unfortunate friends and all those hundreds of thousands of innocent victims whom somebody had deemed pawns in an insane game of artificial wars.

He also realized the despicable Albert had lied once again. Too many ridiculous discrepancies and wild absurdities existed in his tales. How could Thomas swear allegiance to the Order of the Blood Watch if he still didn't know what they actually did? There was some higher level he still didn't understand because the crafty king was playing some complex and mysterious game.

At the crux of his puzzlement: the tragic and obscure fate of Sunset City. And there were other puzzle pieces that didn't fit into the king's sick picture of the world. Why had the clashes between Arogdor and Parthagon become so intense? Over the last crazy year tensions had reached a colossal level! Instead of

the promised stability and endless prosperity, as the “infallible” Albert had so eloquently put it, the world seemed to be heading toward total self-annihilation.

The king’s explanations had been vague—such as his discussion of how that horrible Telelink device worked—or contradictory. The terrible news of his sister’s death had shaken Thomas awake, and Thomas now had no reason to trust Albert’s offer, even if it came with power and glory. Would he not remain a weak-willed pawn in someone else’s sickening game? Or perhaps it was nothing but a foul, albeit ingenious, trap?

Yet what incensed Thomas the most was how they’d used the princess to entice him into this devilishly strange business. Sending in a beautiful woman to seduce him was the most common trick in the book. And he felt like a fool for having been so easily duped by her violet fragrance and innocent gaze. Perhaps his wife had been right: the soulless Elizabeth had only been clumsily doing someone else’s dirty work and wasn’t at all interested in him. And she’d implied he urgently needed to raise his status. How had he not figured it out sooner?

Other things also remained unclear to Thomas, who was by now shaking with anger. Why were they making so much effort to lure him into their circle when they could’ve easily killed him as soon as he’d come back? Who was the mysterious guardian angel who’d saved his hide back in Arogdor? Why was soft-hearted Bill still refusing to reveal this person’s identity, even when threatened with a butcher shop’s open door?

He knew now he could never enter into such a criminal and barbaric conspiracy. They’d been seducing him, trying to get him to join the Order voluntarily, whereas the real choice was simple: enter the Order or be erased off the face of the earth. Odds were that he’d be executed as soon as he said “no”—after

all, he'd learned far too much about this crazy world in recent weeks. For that merciless gang of psychopaths, keeping him alive would be a mistake.

Thomas jumped up, realizing any minute now Albert would come into the garden expecting some kind of answer. He needed to find a solution to his dilemma. The brave knight began pacing around the garden energetically, as if the answer were hidden somewhere within it, like the broken statue's remains beneath a patch of moss.

He could hear the king's personal guard's heavy footsteps. Leaving his escort at the filigreed gates, Albert went into the garden alone and approached the befuddled tribune.

"Such a dear, if unexpected, guest! Apologies for the delay."

"Good day, Your Highness."

"I assume you have an answer for me?"

"Yes. That's why I'm here."

"Ha ha, took you long enough!" Albert exclaimed joyfully and embraced his visitor, looking intently into his eyes.

"One cannot weigh these matters too carefully."

"And what is your decision?"

"It's an obvious one: I accept your proposal," Thomas said. He enunciated each syllable with military-like clarity.

* * *

The next day, the universally beloved King of Parthagon woke, as usual, close to lunchtime. His bedchamber's maroon-velour trimmed and gilded furniture surrounded him. Above his head, was an ornately carved canopy supported by spiral columns. And a soft lambrequin and transparent tulle hid his bed from view. Distant noise wafted in from the street but did

nothing to disturb Albert's tranquil thoughts. He felt he was experiencing one of those rare moments in life when there was nothing to worry about. The state of things appeared so good he could, for a long while, forget about any pressure from above. Injecting new blood into the Order was about to solve all his remaining problems, which made him wonder what he'd do to occupy himself in the coming years. Well, at least the kingdom had no shortage of young ladies! One of them, who currently lay spread-eagle on the royal bed like some ginger starfish, was occasionally poking him in the back with her knee. Perhaps she was trying on yet another gift in her dreams.

Lounging in relaxed bliss, Albert began closing and opening both his palms without tensing his muscles. But there was no progress, no matter what he did. Then the king listened to the inside of his head and heard a hissing sound. After a while, this took over his perceptions. The sound grew louder and louder until it turned into a furious roar. Simultaneously, light vibrations started pricking his body, and a barely tolerable pain appeared in his ears. The physical stability of the space around him had been shattered and he was in the Phase!

The plump bearded man jumped up naked from the bed with the agility of a child and, skipping gaily, rushed to the mirror hanging by the door. With a wink at his contented reflection, Albert dove into the golden frame like a fish.

After whirling in hot darkness, he found himself hovering above the tops of snow-covered trees, and he fell with a squeal into a snowdrift, the sharp branches scratching him. Although piercing cold and a blinding-white wilderness enveloped the king, he felt exceptionally good. He spotted a crystal pedestal, on top of which an emerald pill lay sparkling. Albert eagerly swallowed the magic capsule, which made his thoughts clearer

and transported his body back to his childhood. Feeling incredibly light and mobile, the naked boy with the good-natured gray eyes rushed down the slope, laughing as he knocked snow off pine branches. A pack of white foxes chased him, howling and begging for affection. As he played with the wild beasts and enjoyed the incredible sensation of the snow against his skin, Albert felt old age and stagnation leave him with every exhale, while every inhalation brought back youth and vitality. And he carried on with this miraculous ritual for as long as his expertise would allow.

Eventually, however, he had to return to the palace. And so, stretching, his joints cracking, he yawned loudly, his naked plump body slowly rising from his huge bed. Turning around, the ruler of Celesia gently kissed his redheaded mistress on her shoulder, taking a moment to admire her snub-nosed face. Then, bowing in their direction, he greeted his ancestors, whose portraits, hanging in massive frames, lined his bedchamber's walls.

Albert realized all this time he'd been hearing a strange noise, which he had gotten so used to he'd stopped noticing it. He determined the unusual sound was coming from behind the narrow window facing the park. But as he hesitantly pulled open the thick yellow curtains, the color drained from his face.

A little to the side, in the sun-drenched square usually used for ceremonial events, a crowd of angry people was gradually flooding all the space around the palace like a slowly crashing wave. Trembling with fear, the king opened the heavy window and listened.

“We won't let Albert's son take Parthagon!”

“We won't give in to Javer!”

“Down with the king!”

“Down with his unnatural bestiality!”

“Down with hermaphrodites!”

“What?” Albert squealed, waking up his startled friend.
“What’s going on down there?”

“Piggy, is that you disturbing my nappy nap?” The freckled-faced girl, pouted and wagged her little white index finger at the almighty king, as he tried to concentrate once more on the street noise.

“Shut up, you brainless tart!”

Ignoring the sobbing girl, who was now throwing well-aimed cushions at him, Albert began to frantically pull on his stockings, his sharp movements almost tearing the fabric, and look for his jacket under the armchairs. His hands were shaking as his venerable ancestors looked down upon him from their huge canvases, indifferently grinning. He was racking his brain to figure out just what had happened, and what he should do about it, when the massive door swung open and a disheveled and slightly battered Isaac Newdon crawled into the room. He scrambled across the carpet, wearing nothing but black stockings, while behind him the king’s guards exchanged perplexed glances among themselves. Uttering calf-like mooring sounds, the convulsively hiccupping minister passed a tatty piece of paper smelling of fresh ink into Albert’s hand:

“Brothers and sisters!

Your husbands’ and fathers’ deaths at the volcano are the result of foul treason committed by King Albert III. Now he is about to hand over Parthagon to his son, Werner Eisenberg, and his hermaphroditic prime minister, Nicole Primrose. Our women and children

will be raped and beheaded by mutants. The poor imprisoned mansteed is being forced, upon threat of death, to submit to the perverted desires of the king and his lover, Isaac Newdon.

*Down with the king! We won't give in to Javer!
Down with hermaphroditism and bestiality! We must
restore our safety and prosperity! Down with Albert!
Long live Parthagon!"*

Albert stared at the opposite wall as the accursed note fell from his stiff fingers and floated down lightly to land on the carpet. His whole successful and well-planned life had become dramatically more complicated, as if he'd been a pawn. What the baffled king did not suspect was that Thomas, after their celebratory dinner, hadn't gone home to peacefully relish his new appointment but had instead gone to see Alain and tell him everything he knew. When the swarthy knight had finally come around to understanding the situation, despite the pain it caused his heart, the two pals had become busy concocting an ingenious plan.

First they'd carefully written the text of that scandalous leaflet, to which Alain had added little touches of colorful slander for those who would doubt its veracity. Then they'd woken up the printer and his son, compelling them to produce as many leaflets as they could. Although at first the printer had been incensed by such demands at such an ungodly hour, as soon as he'd read the outrageous message, he called in all his relatives. Together these townspeople, who'd been exasperated by recent events, had stayed up all night working with great enthusiasm to produce several thousand copies.

While the leaflets were being printed at a dazzling rate, Thomas had tracked down several dozen knights who'd survived the raid on the volcano. He'd shown them the papers, bearing Albert's own fresh signature, that appointed him Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Knights' Army and awarded him the highest rank of legate—a fact confirmed by the gold token on his jacket. He'd then ordered them to summon militiamen and had circled a few blocks in the vicinity of the South Gate, letting no one in or out of the blockade. The warriors were intelligent enough to realize the perimeter included Albert's Palace, but not one had uttered a word about it.

With the sun's first rays, they'd scattered the leaflets around the city, along its busiest arteries, and by noon the whole capital had been abuzz, angrily discussing the incredible news and the salacious details of the king's personal life. Only Albert, his mistress, his innocent daughter, and their personal guard had remained ignorant of the scandal.

Thomas and Alain's plan had been simple. After undergoing so much pain, suffering, and humiliation, the Parthagonians had been living in constant tension the last few months, tension that weighed more heavily on their souls with every passing day. To add to that, the upcoming attack of the mighty Arogdor, which meant they'd all die, had made them incapable of sober thought. Reading this nearly accurate information, the destitute people had believed it all—although it was presented without evidence—because it had given them some explanation of what had been going on and made them hopeful they might survive. The added juicy slander had delivered the final blow to the king's reputation. Of course, not everyone believed the leaflets, but the new legate needed only an angry mob of the capital's hottest hotheads to achieve his goal.

“To the basement! There’s no time!” the king shouted to Newdon. He took the elongated steel instrument from his coat pocket. “Arm the guards with blasters and join me in Elizabeth’s tower as quickly as possible! Got it?”

“I’m on it!”

“Hurry, Isaac!”

Albert headed to the princess’s room, taking every remaining guard with him, but by the time he’d reached the throne room, the infuriated crowd had already broken in and trapped him in between the marble columns. Still, the king had no intention of giving in. He began firing at the crowd with his exotic weapon, astonishing the rioters, as well as his own puzzled soldiers. The miniature blaster, making an unnatural muffled noise, shot out thin blue beams, which lasted only an instant and burned through everything in their path, including armor-clad bodies. Seeing this, the frightened crowd fled screaming from the accursed Palace. However, someone brave managed to throw a well-aimed spear at the magic blaster, which almost ripped off the king’s chubby fingers.

Albert howled in pain, and the frenzied masses lunged once again toward him. Panicking, he abandoned his plan and, under the protection of his surviving guards, ran for the dark palace basement.

“It’s a dead end!” squealed Newdon as he ran toward them, huffing and puffing and still wearing nothing but his ripped-up stockings.

“What? It’s impossible!”

“There’s no getting through, they’ve blocked it off!”

“Are you sure?”

“They nearly finished me off!”

“This is a total nightmare, Isaac! Everybody retreat!” Albert ordered bitterly, growing red in the face. It took all his remaining strength to avoid all the stones, arrows, and punches being flung and shot his way, but finally he ran back into his bedroom, where he’d left his red-haired companion. “Lock the door bolt! Move the bed!”

The guards slammed the thick door and, once they’d pushed the girl from the snow-white sheets, moved the bed, exposing a trap door leading into a tunnel. Weaving through the palace, the tunnel descended deep underground and then wound back up, leading out into the nearest forest behind the Wall. As people pounded on the bedroom door, swearing, Albert Stein and Isaac Newton and a dozen loyal knights left Parthagon.

“That impudent upstart!” A voice echoed in the tunnel’s depths. “What will become of Elizabeth now? Couldn’t he have settled for legate? At his age? What are we to do, Isaac? How can we save her?”

Meanwhile, Thomas Yourg, dressed in gleaming gold-plated armor, rode up to the palace on his graceful mansteed as an enthusiastic crowd joyfully chanted his name. The people informed him that Albert had unfortunately escaped, at which point the young legate insisted everyone go home until an important announcement was made.

The rebellion’s instigator then ordered to increase the protection around Elizabeth as much as possible. Next he headed toward the northern tower where Peter Kalitza met him in the council’s meeting room.

“Have a seat,” he said, pointing to a comfortable armchair at the table, barely hiding his radiant smile.

Only now did Thomas realize the magnitude of what had happened. His aching head began spinning and his sleep-

deprived eyes grew dark. Barely containing the tremors in his legs, he walked past the courteous chancellor and very slowly lowered himself into the royal seat, making sure to savor and remember this moment.

“Oh, that old devil,” he said, his eyes rolling back with pleasure.

“Something the matter?”

“I can see now why he gave everyone else torture devices for chairs!”

“A clear thought is a quick thought.”

“This is so comfortable! I could sleep here for a day or two.”

“I agree: it is a very comfortable chair.”

“Really? How would you know?”

“Forgive me. I have tried it before, for curiosity’s sake.”

“Why haven’t you fled, honorable chancellor?”

“I had no such intention.” Kalitza grinned. “You know, you really should consult me before making such risky moves. If I hadn’t placed a blockade in time, you would no longer be counted among the living.”

* * *

The next day—even clearer and sunnier than the day before—the long-suffering population of the once-ideal city gathered on its main square. Blue flags bearing the ring emblem adorned the perimeter and all four towers of the Royal Palace. Expecting the coronation of the new young ruler, the excited crowd chanted his name. Although not everyone supported Thomas’s coronation, everyone hoped the new king would return Parthagon to its former glory, or at least achieve

stability and security, since the mutants were about to attack any day now.

Finally, all the most senior and respected people left in the kingdom, including the pensive-looking Thomas, climbed on to a podium lined with blue silk. Only this morning had he fully grasped the enormous responsibility that would presently fall on his shoulders. He already regretted the coup he'd orchestrated—after all, living by other people's rules, whatever they were, was much simpler and less stressful than creating the rules. Next to him, wearing a strict black dress and a horned hennin, Marie stood beaming, although she did cast malignant looks at Elizabeth's tower from time to time. She knew the skinny girl must be in shock as she watched the proceedings through one of her windows.

"Great people of Parthagon!" Peter Kalitza went to the podium, causing the city to fall silent. "After many years of betrayal and suffering, our kingdom has once again found hope for a brighter future. Do you agree to consider the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Knights' Army, Thomas Young, your king and be his loyal subjects until the last drop of blood has left your bodies?"

The crowd's elated cries were deafening, as flowers, capes, wide-brimmed hats, chapeaux, and even steel helmets, glistening in the sun, flew upwards. Among these joyful exclamations, one could clearly hear some disgruntled hissing, whistling and curses, but this changed nothing. Thomas, doing his best to contain his nerves, approached Kalitza, as an officer handed Kalitza an unadorned gold crown.

"I now pronounce Legate Thomas Young, knight and hero, king of the magnificent Parthagon!" the chancellor cried, placing

the heavy crown on the former villager's head. His words could barely be heard over the roar of the crowd.

“Long live the king!”

“Long live Parthagon!”

“Long live Thomas Yourg!”

The young man turned toward his people and, with tears in his eyes, pronounced the royal oath: “I swear to honestly serve great Parthagon and to support, protect, and defend all its citizens and territories to the full extent of my abilities.”

“Long live the king!”

“Long live Parthagon!”

“Long live Thomas Yourg!”

The king, flushed with excitement, accompanied by his radiant wife, proceeded through the carved arch into the Palace, where he went into the majestic throne room. There, among the wide marble columns and huge chandeliers, servants waited, along with tables creaking under the great array of festive delicacies. Still trembling, Thomas climbed the steps to the throne. Its huge gilded back was carved into a raging flame and, after a moment's hesitation, he sat on its leather seat.

Chapter 10. Blue Lightning to the Rescue



The first few days of the young king's reign went by in a thick fog. If before Thomas's simple life had been relatively carefree, now his days from early morning until late at night were taken up solving the most unusual problems, the existence of which he'd never previously suspected. For example, he'd had no idea that over a quarter of Parthagon's food stores ended up either rotting or scarfed down by rats. And though the chancellor continued to monitor most issues, since he'd kept his post, the most fundamental problems required the king to intervene. And as he was still a novice with a feeble grasp of all the

mechanisms at hand, every step required great effort and a lot of time. Finding a common language with the various officials was especially difficult. Their ossified brains instinctively opposed any change or innovation.

When things settled down a little, Thomas summoned Kalitza so he could explain in more detail what had been happening in Celesia prior to Thomas's coronation. In the afternoon, they met in the Royal Council's round meeting room, where the young master of Parthagon, still wearing a simple knight's jacket, was occupying his rightful place.

"Peter, can you be frank with me?"

"I don't see the point in hiding anything, Your Highness," Kalitza murmured. His polite smile made his flat nose spread over almost half his face.

"Was Albert really exterminating the population for no reason?"

"When?"

"In the past year."

"It's not as simple as that, Your Highness."

"So it is true?" Thomas jumped. "Have they lost their minds? It's a travesty!"

"You see..."

"Can there really be an explanation?"

"It's a difficult subject."

"Peter, there's no possible justification for any of it! There can't be!"

"I agree. But it is all more complicated than you think."

"Well?"

"Your Highness, this conversation will get us nowhere. What purpose is there in talking about the past when we might not have a future?"

“Oh, these constant riddles!”

“You are the king. The rest doesn’t matter for now.”

“Then why did you agree to this meeting?”

“Elizabeth.”

“I haven’t the slightest clue what to do with her.”

“I know.”

“And? So?” Thomas was unpleasantly surprised to discover the wily chancellor’s logic escaped him, and he wasn’t abreast of everything happening in his kingdom.

“We must reinforce her guard and guarantee her survival in any situation.”

“You’re afraid of Marie?”

The king giggled at his own joke, but the chancellor’s stony face showed no trace of amusement. If anything, it grew even more severe, and rare notes of insistence appeared in his usually polite voice. “You don’t know it, yet, but Elizabeth is the most precious thing we have.”

“What fresh nonsense is this?”

“As soon as we beat back Arogdor, I promise to tell you everything. But for now you must understand that Elizabeth’s survival is our sole purpose. She is always in danger.”

“The survival of the dethroned king’s daughter is my sole purpose? That beats everything.” Thomas sighed. “What are you all up to?”

He heard a familiar high pitched sound. The king jumped out of his armchair, feeling the hairs on his body stand on end.

“It’s all right, Your Highness!” Kalitza smiled. “It’s only a Telelink request coming through.”

“And?”

“Looks like Albert has made it to the volcano and wishes to greet us.”

“He’s in Arogdor, and we’re here?”

“Yes.”

“How will he greet us? I don’t want him to.”

“Your fear is understandable, but you have to get used to it.”

“Why do I have to get used to this horrible thing?”

“It will come in handy.”

The high-pitched whirring continued, making Thomas’s fear grow with every second, until he began dashing around the room, trying to find something to hide behind.

“There!” Kalitza finally produced a transparent blue sphere from an obstinate drawer. The sphere reflected the same flashes of red light and the turnings of some unknown green machinery. “You put your finger here and...”

With a barely perceptible whistle, a bright screen formed over the width of the room, showing Eisenberg’s atrium. There was a puzzled-looking Albert with a bandaged right hand, while crowded behind him were Eisenberg, Newdon, Javer, and Primrose, whose fragile body was barely covered with thin scarlet rags held together by strings. Thomas, stupefied, hid behind his chair.

“Imagine that it’s a kind of mirror,” whispered Kalitza, trying to save the new king’s honor. “But instead of your own reflection, you see...”

“Albert?” Thomas finished his sentence.

“Hmm, well, right now, yes.”

“Are you enjoying your little conversation there?” the fugitive said. “And you, Peter, I see you’re with him now? I’m surprised! I’ve always considered you a friend.”

“What do you want?” yelled Thomas, peeking from behind the chair.

“Me? You’re asking me what I want? You haven’t even begun to fathom the kind of catastrophe you’ve caused!”

“All I did was put an end to this nightmare.”

“You don’t even know what you’re talking about!”

“Take this window away, Peter!”

“Of course,” Kalitza approached the blue ball.

“Wait! Thomas, it’s true I didn’t tell you everything. I had no authority to do so.” Albert’s face was changing colors. “But after the stunt you pulled, there’s no turning back. I will never forgive you!”

“Take it away!” ordered Thomas with severity.

“You’ve never even seen an actual war, you pipsqueak. But soon you’ll understand what real pain feels like. You’re done for! And don’t even think of laying a finger on...”

A sharp click sounded and daylight was restored in the round room. The magic screen had disappeared, and the trembling hairs on the knight’s tense body slowly settled back down.

* * *

Time flew by, and only two weeks after the coronation, Thomas had found his footing and was feeling at home in the palace, which exceeded his personal needs by a hundredfold. Marie and he decided not to use his predecessor’s bedroom until all its furniture and décor was replaced. For the time being, they moved into one of the best guest wings, which still seemed immense compared to their shabby house.

The novice queen had undergone a radical change over such a short period of time. She’d stopped dressing in simple floral dresses, preferring now to wear the newest and most fashionable garments. She’d gone from being a consumptive

prisoner into the all-powerful First Lady of Parthagon almost overnight. Marie considered this meteoric rise as just reward for everything she'd gone through, and from the outset she'd felt like the rightful mistress of the capital. Without asking permission, she interfered in all royal affairs. But her concerns never coincided with Thomas or Kalitza's. For a long while she was under the impression they only pretended to work. As opposed to her—she was busy supervising the landscape design of Celesia's parks.

Not surprisingly, Alain Ospe was thrilled with this new era. For his help in overthrowing the old regime, he was awarded the silver token of a tribune. And as the king's best friend, he was granted access to almost the entire Palace, where he could entertain himself to his heart's content. He jumped at the chance to take Albert Stein's empty bedchamber, feeling entitled to the former king's personal possessions and doing everything he could to delay the repairs.

A sparkling clean stall had been prepared for Bill in the well-maintained royal stable. For his unique merits and services rendered to the new king, the relieved mansteed was allowed to preserve his Arogdorian mutation. In fact, the scandalous leaflets that had provoked the coup, had turned Bill into a celebrity. This made him finally confident he'd never be butchered for sausage meat, although he still hadn't lost the habit of thanking everyone for it.

The festive euphoria that had washed over the sun-drenched capital was soon cut short by the new king's latest decree. Thomas, realizing he'd not be able to protect the kingdom's wide borders from the imminent attack, made the difficult decision to temporarily evacuate all residents from Parthagon's subject territories and transport them inside the Wall. For centuries,

the educated Parthagonians and the simple rural folk had lived in separate worlds, very different in both mind and appearance. Now they'd be forced to get along under one roof, so to speak.

This step shocked the villagers. To leave their farms in the springtime seemed like a harsh blow to the exhausted districts, as well as the kingdom's entire shattered economy. Many disapproved of Thomas's actions, but he was trying to save the lives of those who were criticizing him. He already knew how easily one could get the wrong impression of things, even if at the top of the ladder.

Their feet held to criticism's fire, Thomas and Kalitza tried to pacify the people with promises this disruption would not last long, although they only hoped this was the case. In just a few days, the capital's population had more than doubled and, with the new influx of people, the available food supplies would last for two months at best.

All the incoming adult men were immediately drafted into the militia, where they were taught all the military skills necessary to withstand the siege. The strongest and most dexterous among them were trained to handle a crossbow, as well as steel weapons and the projectile machines from Sunset City. The rest would have to patch up the Wall and try to prevent incendiary arrows from burning the city.

Although only about 250 full-fledged knights were left in Parthagon, counting all the garrisons who'd been recalled, the king and the chancellor believed they had a real chance of not just withstanding a new siege but also of defeating the enemy. And that was considering Arogdor was expected to dispatch 1,500 four-armed monsters and thousands of well-trained militiamen in their direction!

One evening, Kalitza led the young king down to one of the palace's little-known underground corridors, which paralleled the food storeroom. There, in the royal dwelling's depths, by the light of one wall-mounted oil lamp, they could see an unremarkable, slightly rusted door. A dozen massive knights guarded it, loudly chewing and stuffing their bellies as they sat on a long wooden bench along the Wall.

"Aren't the best guards watching Elizabeth?" asked Thomas, surprised.

"They are two sides of the same coin, Your Highness."

Seeing their guests, the warriors tossed their chicken and boiled eggs on the dirty floor and, with a loud clatter of armor, lined up along the damp wall. Still chewing on bits of green onion stuck in their teeth, they hastily wiped their greasy hands on their trousers and then welcomed their commander-in-chief.

"Long live the king!"

"Long live Parthagon," their guests and their four guards exclaimed.

"Long live Thomas Yourg!"

Sifting through a bunch of keys of all shapes and sizes, Kalitza unlocked the numerous locks and thick bolts and finally pushed open the heavily creaking door. The company entered a clean, dry room with rectangular dark-green boxes stacked atop one another, as well as coin-filled treasury sacks piled along the walls.

Lighting the torches in the room's corners, the chancellor looked proud, which made his wide nostrils flare like the hood of a cobra.

"There, Your Highness!"

"This is what you've been telling me about? How is that going to be of any help?"

“One moment.”

Thomas had hoped to see some new kind of machinery or perhaps some catapults. But these boxes wouldn't be big enough to fit even a conventional crossbow. Kalitza, almost dancing with anticipation, opened a box and looked at the king with a glint in his eye.

Inside, surrounded by black foam, was a glittering object the size of a large axe, but strangely bulging in various places and equipped with colorful glassware, with hooks and delicate depressions. Thomas had seen Albert wield something similar, but this object was much larger.

“This is a blaster, isn't it?”

“That's right!”

“From Sunset City no doubt.” Thomas grew nervous, feeling a chill creep up his spine.

“They did have some brilliant ideas!”

“Where's that terrible beam? I can't see anything.”

The radiant Kalitza carefully picked up the weapon with both hands and walked into the long corridor.

“See that rat over there?” He nodded at a far corner, then raised one end of the metallic blaster toward his face, fixing his eye on the scope at its top.

“By the way, looks like we're having an infesta...”

A sudden and unnaturally muted sound, accompanied by a bright blue flash, made Thomas drop to the floor and then run into the room with the boxes. The warriors followed him.

“Peter! What was that?”

“Your Highness, come have a look.”

“Only if you promise to put down that blister!”

“Blaster.”

“Whatever!”

“All right, come and see.”

Exchanging glances with the knights, who were hiding with their swords at the ready, the pale young man cautiously returned to the corridor. He approached the enthusiastic Kalitza, who was pointing at the rat:

“Look, Your Highness!”

“There’s nothing there.”

“Come closer.”

Thomas, accompanied by a shaking guard, walked down the cold corridor. Instead of the unfortunate rat, he saw the remainder of its head and a pile of smoking ash.

“Smells like burnt skin, doesn’t it?” the chancellor called out.

“And grilled meat. What happened?”

“One of you, leave your helmet there and come back.”

On Kalitza’s command, a guard removed his helmet, placed it on the ground, and came back as the chancellor once again raised the blaster up. “Keep your eyes on the helmet.”

“Whoa!” Thomas flinched at the sustained sound. “What is this dark magic everywhere you look!”

This time he’d noticed a beam of blue light coming out of the weapon’s thin muzzle. As the beam hit the helmet, the helmet turned red, then cracked. Running up to it, the king was astonished to see a hole in the steel helmet, as if a scorching hot peach had melted through it.

“How many of these blisters have we got?”

“Blasters, Your Highness. Twelve.”

“Why didn’t Albert ever use them?” Thomas asked, as he walked back to the storeroom. These miraculous weapons could benefit him so greatly. Proof was in the open mouths and amazed eyes of the knights around him. A couple of minutes ago the knights had seemed like an indestructible force.

“They are to be used only in an extreme emergency. They can’t just be deployed whenever.”

“How is it I’m king and yet I still don’t understand anything?”

“That’s not the point right now. You have to learn how to use the smallest sized blaster, like the one Albert used to carry. It must always be on your person.”

Thomas, still in awe, entered the room and caressed the green boxes, a fire lighting up his eyes.

“You realize this means we have a real chance, Peter!”

“Why do you think I brought you here?”

“A shooter armed with one of these is worth how many knights?”

“A dozen, half a centuria, maybe even more.”

“Incredible! And there’s no magic in it?”

“Of course not!”

“How did they make it?”

“There’s no one left to ask.”

“Hold on a minute. Did the mutants fight the archers for these weapons? I thought they were trying to get Elizabeth!”

“This place must be guarded very tightly, as you can see.”

The next day, a tournament was announced to find the finest and most accurate crossbowmen in the land, open to all who wished to participate. It took place on the square before the palace in front of a large crowd. And by the end of it, Thomas had found 30 of the best shots in the kingdom, most of whom turned out to be hunters. The day following they began training to use the frightening new weapons. They practiced on a wide field beside the North Gate, which had become a training ground for handling all types of weapons, as well as intensive militia drills. Onlookers watched with delight as their young king, his faithful knights, and the puny—by comparison—

hunters took turns shooting deadly rays at various targets, burning through them or turning them into ash. The object was to train more than enough capable men to shoot the blasters so they might swiftly cool the enemy's heels during the upcoming siege. Also, this spectacle on the training grounds was meant to accustom the population to these strange weapons, which would surely send the dimwitted mutants scattering in fear.

For the first time since Albert's cowardly escape, the tired people were feeling things might get better. Moreover, the rumor Albert Stein was hiding out in Eisenberg's castle had spread far and wide among the embittered households of Parthagon. Even the coup's most ardent opponents began to shift their support to the young king.

* * *

After another heartening day, the king's intimate circle of friends and loved ones gathered around an ample dinner. This had become a nightly tradition. The king enjoyed the loudly chewing company of Peter Kalitza, Alain Ospe, Max Lank, Carl Linn—now the commander of the Yarta garrison—and a number of other officers. At the table's end, Queen Marie's stern eyes sparkled above her strict black outfit. She was surrounded by her ladies in waiting, including a few unhappy friends, the blacksmith's wife, and the knights' brides, among others. All were digging into this evening's delicacies with pleasure and discussing recent events.

"They'll run away as soon as they see them," Alain was arguing, hardly managing to shovel food into his mouth between words. "I almost ran away from those blister things myself!"

“To the toilet, no doubt?” the gray-bearded Max made the guests giggle.

“That’s the beauty of it! Those mothers are so frightening, no one would call you a coward if you did run straight for the toilet.”

“I don’t know if beauty is the word,” Thomas exclaimed with mock seriousness. “I wouldn’t go into that toilet after you. I remember when we were bald forest brigands on our way to Arogdor...”

“Your Highness, please!”

“Well, long story short, we had a day’s journey still ahead of us, and this boob goes and eats a bunch of berries. I told him it was a bad idea.”

“Your Highness,” Alain pleaded, blushing and still hoping to avert disaster. “Thomas, I beg of you.”

“I’ll spare you the details, wouldn’t want to ruin your appetite. Let’s just say I wouldn’t go down that gorge on the way back even if a hundred frenzied mutants were after me!” Thomas was met with more raucous laughter. As a rule, the new king was not one for joking around, but over the last few days, his mood had significantly improved.

“That son of a harpy, Albert, certainly wouldn’t like it if he knew who was rolling around in his bedchamber!” Carl Linn said, his bald pate shining in the light of countless candles.

“Now we know why he wants to win back Parthagon. He’s worried about his privy!” The old blacksmith hammered the last nail into the coffin of the tribune’s reputation, while the other officers gladly continued developing the theme.

“Perhaps we should just give up the capital willingly?”

“No, better put up a defense. Albert’s too old to withstand such horrors.”

“It’s one thing to put a new king on his throne, but putting Alain on his favorite chamber pot?” Linn lamented.

“Maybe Alain is a mutant?”

“They’ve got four arms, and he’s got two bu...”

“No way! That kind of perverted mutation is strictly forbidden in our beloved Parthagon. This isn’t Arogdor you know!”

“But we won’t go so far as to check.”

“You won’t check? Then I’ll show you myself!” Alain jumped up onto his chair’s green upholstery and turning his backside to the table made as if he were going to pull down his trousers. He’d picked up such elegant habits during his time at the Tower of Perfection.

“No! Help!” The friends seated next to him yelled. “Have mercy on us all!”

“That’s enough! Thomas, men, simmer down please.” Marie’s patience could take no more. She was feeling embarrassed by this gathering of Parthagon’s high society before her giggling friends. “There are ladies present!”

“Forgive us, darling. By the way, Alain, how did you know Primrose was a hermaphrodite?”

“That does it.” Linn got up from the table. “Would someone explain to me, once and for all, what that is?”

“I don’t know either!”

“Let Alain speak, lads!”

“Right!” roared the queen, shaking a silver spoon. “We’ve been working hard all day, taking care of important things, and you’re turning this palace into a bawdy roadside inn! You should be ashamed of yourselves!”

While everyone tried to look serious and squirmed in their efforts to quash their fits of laughter—including Kalitza, who

was unaccustomed to such common horseplay—the commander-in-chief’s aid entered the room and whispered something to Thomas, handing him a sealed scroll. The young king, not even trying to conceal his nerves, broke the seal with trembling hands and silently read:

“To Thomas Yourg, King of Parthagon.

My heartfelt congratulations, Your Highness! I sincerely hope you will remain on the throne and live a long and happy life. It is likely you are not yet aware that the only way to stop the war and the senseless killing of innocents is to eliminate Elizabeth. Kill her and you will save Parthagon, as well as thousands of other blameless lives all across Celesia. The life of one person cannot come at so dear a cost. I trust you will act swiftly. This will be my only warning.

Walter Meisser”

Turning pale, Thomas, got up from the table and left the dining room. Along with his personal guard, he went to the eastern tower where Elizabeth remained locked up.

The former princess’s reinforced guard dispersed, and the young king flung open the iron door. He flew up the spiral staircase and into her beige room. Startled from sleep, Elizabeth tried to make out the unexpected visitor, who was barely illuminated by the lantern he held. She’d been sleeping peacefully, lying on the carpet under the northern windows, her emaciated hands clasping her bony knees.

Thomas approached with fury and pulled her up by her silken hair, staring into her sleepy blue eyes. She cried out softly, and he saw her delicate mouth twist and round tears well in her eyes. Her small nose sniffled, and she was about to embrace her tormentor, but he pushed her trembling body away, still holding her by the hair and making her head tip backward. Out of fear, Elizabeth stopped crying and she kept her wide-open eyes on the new King of Parthagon, who was towering over her. She tried to break free, but he was too strong. Then Thomas, dropping the lamp, wrapped his hand around her bare neck and began strangling her. The poor girl began to grunt and wheeze.

Like a wild beast, Thomas howled and released the barely breathing girl with bitter rancor. Devastated, he fell down beside her and leaned his back against the wall. Kalitza burst into the room, huffing and puffing, his flaring nostrils looking unusually aggressive. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said quietly.

"Are you sure?"

Fidgeting and considering the two young people with suspicion, the chancellor finally headed back down the stairs. As soon as they were alone, Thomas became agitated again, grabbing the girl by the hair. "What? What is it about you?"

"I don't understand..."

"What do they all want from you?"

"I honestly don't know," Elizabeth whispered.

"That's impossible!"

"I don't know anything." Diamond-like tears began once again to fall from her eyes. Thomas could almost hear them as they hit the soft carpet.

"They've been killing everyone over you?"

“Thomas, I have no idea what you’re talking about. I swear! Where is my father?”

“In Arogdor, with your brother.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“That’s for me to decide. You used me.”

“He asked me to.”

“So it’s true!”

“Forgive me, I beg of you!”

“You foul creature!”

“Please!” Elizabeth began to sob even harder, but he only threw her down roughly onto the floor and left the room, slamming the door below.

Half an hour later she heard footsteps and animated conversations in her tower. She didn’t suspect her already impressive protection had doubled. Almost all the palace guards became directly or indirectly responsible for the former princess’s safety.

In actuality, no matter how much Marie reveled in Elizabeth’s fall from grace, Elizabeth didn’t find imprisonment that difficult to bear. Apart from vague memories of her childhood, she had lived in isolation all her adult life. Being the ruler of Celesia’s most valuable treasure, she became the most disenfranchised person among all his subjects. Every year, with increasing fervor, she was protected and hidden from prying eyes. And gradually the eastern tower became her whole world. She had almost no real-life experiences—no idea how the world worked or what ordinary people got out of it.

She drew all her meager notions about life beyond the palace from books. They were her only window into reality, but they distorted it. She thought of the heroes of novels and stories as her only true and faithful friends—as if they were real people

who might occupy her mind day and night. She was the only person in Celesia who'd read every book there was—whether it was poetic or purely technical, such as a manual on construction or metal smelting. She reread the most interesting novels—about brave heroes, crazy queens, and brilliant balls—many times a year, for there were very few new publications to dig into.

Thus, the princess inhabited three separate realities: the prison that was her tower, the fantastical world of books, and the magic Phase. Only after breaking the stability of space could she fly beyond the stone walls and flutter like a young swallow over the sea waves, fly through the forest's lush, rustling foliage and down the mountains' steep slopes. Inside the Phase she roamed all over the kingdom that, although it belonged to her father, she didn't know outside of the Phase. She wandered through its poor villages, bathed in its cold lakes, and even visited the summit of the dreaded volcano. Whereas the capital residents used the Phase mostly to modify their appearance and age, or for meaningless entertainment, Elizabeth used it to gain a taste of freedom.

Albert, who was not without compassion for his daughter, realized he was depriving his pearl of life's joys and tried to compensate with excessive love and unnecessary indulgences. Placing her in a golden cage above such a bright and lively city, like some precious singing bird, he always showered her with excessive affection. He fed, clothed, and idolized her, yielded to her every little caprice, but he never let her go anywhere. He found the thought unbearable. It's no wonder, then, that Elizabeth, lost in her fantasies, grew to hate her own father more every day, even though she continued to love him. She hated him for her constant suffering and endless imprisonment.

She loved him because he was the only man she could love—she had no one else. After all those mysterious attempts on her life, even loyal old servants were forbidden to approach or talk to her.

She often turned her overdeveloped imagination to fantasies of her mother, who'd died during childbirth, the one figure who might've stood up for her and perhaps brightened her boring life. But the girl knew little about her, because her father had told her practically nothing. Albert was always extremely reluctant to mention her mother and tended to walk away from the conversation at the mention of her mother's name.

Even when some select people were admitted to see Elizabeth, or she had the opportunity to mingle at important events, nobody looked at her as if she were a normal person anyway. Just as her over-affectionate father did, everyone worshipped her, considering it a joyful miracle to contemplate her divine face. They could not comfortably converse with her, and she—who'd grown up in a world of books—also had no practice in this art. Also, she didn't want anything to do with those reptilian sycophants surrounding her father. All she wanted was to have a simple conversation on some interesting, or simple, or even pointless topic! Just like in books. Instead, everyone fell to their knees, speechless before her, and she had no idea why she deserved such attention. So she gradually lost faith in the real world and its people.

As she grew up, she'd begun to see something was off about her father as well. And it was not only a matter of his excessive affection and extreme possessiveness. By collecting accidentally dropped crumbs of information here and there, she pieced together that all of Parthagon's endless problems were the work of the king. Her allegedly long-dead brother turned out to be the

leader of Arogdor, and the two decided where and how the bloodthirsty mutants would invade and how many innocent civilian lives they would destroy.

She saw how contemptuously her relatives treated ordinary people, deeming their lives worthless. This monstrous spectacle was so different from the ideal world she'd created in her head that she gradually turned away from reality altogether. And since Elizabeth saw no example to the contrary, the lives of real people ceased to have any meaning for her as well. Everyone saw her as an untouchable deity and she, in turn, as a real goddess might, began to see them as vessels of decay and emptiness.

And then, out of the blue, it all changed. When her father had realized a new player was making rapid advances into his rarefied circle, he'd asked her to get a little closer to this young upstart, Thomas Yourg. He'd wanted to find out what Thomas wanted out of life, what his weaknesses were, in order to make him easier to work with in the future. Moreover, he'd hoped this stubborn youth would turn a blind eye to the brutal order of life in the kingdom if goddess-like Elizabeth obscured it. At the same time, Albert had been happy to provide his imprisoned daughter some entertainment because, he could sense, she was gradually losing her mind.

She'd agreed to the intrigue with great enthusiasm, as she'd long since learned all the necessary skills from her precious books. Playing this devious game with the naive knight became her most memorable and fun adventure. Thomas, for her, had been something akin to a living doll—just as he'd been a nameless pawn to her father. This successful and courageous warrior had still been no more than empty noise—similar to all the others who'd groveled before her. Moreover, she'd hated him

with all her heart every time she recalled those foolish attempts on her life. If she'd been killed, nothing would've changed in this hopeless world. It would only contain one less sufferer. But this country bumpkin had just had to come along and spoil everything!

And then the royal ball had happened. Elizabeth's main target had been the knight's wife, whom Elizabeth had no ill feeling toward. On the contrary, she'd even pitied her a little. This had been followed by that dinner when she'd made Thomas sit beside her so as to better, seemingly accidentally, push against his ridiculous morals, which she knew had no place in this world. In fact, the world had no place for anything at all except futile worries useless people invented. True loyal feelings, deep friendships, and sincere affection existed only in her novels' rustling pages.

But their existence had then been pressed upon her. In her continued toying with Thomas, she'd caught herself thinking increasingly she was doing it not so much to be entertained or from necessity, but to spend time with him. She'd begun to look forward to seeing this odd-looking officer every day. Moreover, he was one of the few people in this broken world who also read books and who lived by the same lofty ideals she'd imbibed from them. But where she felt these ideals existed only in the imagination, he believed they were real, which truly amazed her. For the first time she'd felt as if she'd found a real kindred spirit. Never before had anyone understood her so naturally. Never before had she been able to share the philosophical musings that kept her up at night, though they often were quite ludicrous. She found all other topics more difficult to discuss, for what did she know of ordinary existence and its daily concerns?

The situation had escalated such that Elizabeth found herself forcing fantasies from her mind. But at other points she gave herself over to them with voluptuous pleasure. In her imagination he was holding her tightly by the waist and gently kissing her trembling lips. On a moonlit night, they'd escape from the accursed palace on a white horse, its hooves stomping all obstacles and conventions into dust as they left Parthagon behind forever. Just the way it occurred in her favorite books! In her fantasies, they'd live in bliss somewhere in the picturesque mountains near the sea. They'd live a perfect world where you understand and are understood, where you love and are loved in return, where you accept a person for who they are and no one requires you to be anything you are not.

But these dreams had been short-lived. One morning, loud screams coming from the street had woken the princess, and then she'd heard a terrible noise within the palace, but no one had bothered to inform her of anything. Only the next day had she realized what had happened, as she watched her naive knight crowned king. Since then Elizabeth had humbly waited for her fate to be decided. She'd lost count of the days until the distraught Thomas had burst into her room. As she'd expected, he'd intuited he'd been toyed with and used. What would he do now? Perhaps she'd be executed? And what would happen to her father and brother? Would they try to save her, and would she even want that?

Regardless of the outcome, she'd not get the chance to explain her feelings to Thomas. And even if she did, he'd never believe she was really interested in him—it would strike him as a desperate attempt to get out of her situation.

Thinking of her bleak future, Elizabeth fell asleep again, right where Thomas had left her in his anger. Perhaps it was

madness setting in, or perhaps it was unbearable anguish, but she'd begun falling asleep in odd places—anywhere but her large and comfortable bed. She found it more interesting to fall asleep on the couch, in the armchair, under the window, under the table, and in general wherever she could lie down. It became her one form of entertainment, a way to experience something new.

After sleeping deeply through the night, she suddenly realized she was awake. The next moment, without moving or opening her eyes, Elizabeth pictured herself in that blue fishing boat she'd often seen from her window bobbing on the Quiet River. She concentrated on feeling as if she were sitting in it. A few seconds later she realized all her senses were in this wooden boat. This meant that space had been disturbed and the palace captive was free again!

Feeling and examining her incredibly well-defined hands, her white dress with the pink-flower print, the boat's wooden bottom, and the oars, Elizabeth jumped up and squealed with delight. She threw herself onto the port side and fearlessly turned the boat over. Once she was in the clear, freezing cold water, she swam to its rocky bottom, scaring away rare fish and hollering with unbridled emotions, causing air bubbles to swirl in her ears. Briskly swimming along the bottom between the rocks and the seaweed, she then jumped out of the water like a dolphin and landed on a sun-drenched beach. Then she began to sprint until soon she was soaring skyward.

She rose higher and higher toward the sun until she was so high up all of beautiful Celesia was spread out below her. Then, emitting a scream of fear, she hurled herself headfirst toward the round lake so as to hit the surface painfully hard and break through to the muddy pitch-dark bottom, then fly up again. This

she would repeat over and over until the Phase was over and the reestablished confines of physical space locked her within the accursed tower once more.

* * *

That day, on the other end of Celesia, Kate was seeing her husband General Javer off on yet another battle campaign. As she stood at their mansion's door, her chestnut hair was blowing in the piercing wind.

"You're not to leave here until I come back, woman."

"I got it, Ivar. You don't have to keep repeating it."

"If anyone recognizes you, we're done for."

"I won't leave the mansion until you get back. I promise!"

"Just think who the new King of Parthagon is and who's residing at the castle 100 feet from our house. Unbelievable!"

"Hee-hee, and it's all my doing!" Kate smiled, but then her face grew serious again.

"Don't go worrying your head off, okay?"

"It's like some kind of nightmare, Ivar!" she suddenly sobbed. "You always know what to do. Think of something! You're going to massacre them all."

"It's a tricky situation. For the first time, we're not in control."

"How's that?"

"It doesn't matter, but I'll do everything I can to come back. And I will come back. And we'll do something about Thomas, too."

"You promise?"

Hugging his wife, the General then climbed onto his mansteed and, together with his guard, headed to join his

command unit, which awaited him by the rotting Gates of Freedom. While he was away, the mansion would be guarded day and night by a cordon of his best mutants.

Soon almost five hundred mutants marched down the Eighth River's gorge toward the bay where the Arogdorian fleet was docked. Once again they were going to attack peaceful New Albert and from there advance on Parthagon from the south. Simultaneously, 300 four-armed monsters began descending along the well-trodden gorges of the Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth rivers, accompanied by dark streams of thousands of militiamen. They were in charge of carrying the siege weapons captured in Sunset City. This mobilization was accompanied by countless support and resource-collection vehicles, which soon would be loaded up with looted riches.

Javer received repeated reports about civilians and garrison formations being evacuated from all Yourg's kingdom's territories. However, he could no longer trust this intelligence, so he ordered all armies to proceed to the Wall in a state of constant battle readiness. They intended to circle the city, forming an impenetrable ring and then breaking through the Wall to get the priceless Princess Elizabeth. Once she'd been saved, the entire city—along with its inhabitants—would be razed to the ground. If she were found dead or missing, they would retreat with maximum caution, trying not to move a pebble out of place. It was also paramount to capture the new king dead or alive. Thus, for the first time, General Javer had been tasked with a real combat mission.

If there were a sudden counterattack, several hundred soldiers remained on the volcano, as well as a few thousand trained militiamen. The Arogdorians relished taking final revenge on their heartless enemy—as payback for the recent

attack on their homeland and for all the humiliations they'd had to endure over centuries. They were, however, increasingly concerned about the rumors concerning Albert III, who was allegedly hiding in Eisenberg's castle. On the streets, people claimed their magnificent leader was the son of this unexpected guest! Anyone caught spreading such shocking news was arrested and secretly executed.

This situation became uncomfortable not only for the patriotic Arogdorians but also for the dark-gray castle's inhabitants. The mustachioed Eisenberg nervously paced along the marble platform in his atrium, studying his feet, his arms folded behind his back. His father was nearby, swaying serenely in a hammock between the palms, trying at least briefly to forget his troubles by listening to birds chirping and cicadas buzzing.

"Everything is going to be fine, Werner. Quit fretting!"

"Even the mansteeds are freaking out!"

"Please let's change the subject, I beg of you."

"Mind you, none of this is my fault. Everything was working perfectly fine on my end."

"I'm sure she's alive and we'll have it all sorted out soon enough."

"What if she's dead? What if they beat us off using the blasters?"

"Why do you think Javer's had hundreds of shields made? And he plans to deploy a smokescreen, as well as projectile weapons. And don't forget about our enormous army. It's never been this huge!"

"But what if? How many times did I ask you to get me at least a couple of those things?"

The banished King of Parthagon slowly sat up in his hammock, raised his hands to his aching head, and sighed. "It's not a toy, Werner."

"That sniveling snot-nosed weasel. He should've died. I still don't understand how he escaped from the scaffold!"

"Yes, he's a right ruffian, that one. It's a shame he's not on our side."

"What?" exclaimed Eisenberg, his moustache bristling with irritation. "You're not the same, father! I don't know what's come over you. How could you just let that village idiot take everything from you? Centuries of remarkable work down the drain!"

* * *

One afternoon, Thomas was walking along the Wall in the company of his chancellor. Followed by an impressive guard, they were monitoring the building of fortifications and new battle positions.

They were particularly interested in the construction of 10 rotating sniper towers, each the size of a large carriage. They were covered with iron sheeting and inside they were outfitted with positions for shooters equipped with blasters. These towers allowed snipers to hit targets both outside the Wall and within the city if the brutal mutants should break through. At the same time, one could only enter them through a trap door that locked from the inside, thus avoiding letting such a valuable position be captured. Parthagon's defense strategy relied on these towers, so most of the manpower would be designated to protecting them.

Thomas now believed the Arogdorians would suffer defeat and mighty Parthagon would prevail once more. What he'd do after that, he didn't know. Certainly Walter Meisser's note was cause for worry. This man, who'd twice tried to assassinate the princess, had not only survived but was still hell-bent on this all-consuming goal. How had he managed to stay alive this long? Where was he hiding? What was he trying to accomplish?

Thomas wished to stop the senseless bloodshed, but he felt the war could be ended in a more traditional way—and not by sacrificing the blond beauty, as Meisser had insisted. He was still constantly thinking of her, recalling the evenings they'd spent together, which made him tingle with emotion. But after such a humiliating betrayal, he'd lost all trust in her. He just didn't know what to do with her. Execute her? Send her back to Albert?

She couldn't sit in her tower forever. And, anyway, that would be a nightmare for Marie. This unresolved issue was perhaps the only obstacle preventing the queen from fully enjoying her new life. She felt the former princess was guarded more carefully than the capital itself. He made sure Marie was never allowed to see her. Because if this were to happen even once, Walter Meisser's next message might be one of congratulations.

"We should expand the garrison," Kalitza said, brushing a splinter off his jacket.

"What?"

"I still don't think three soldiers per tower is enough."

"We should add one more guard?"

"Why not? So much depends on these blisters. We can't play it too safe."

"Blasters, Peter. Won't it be tight in there?"

“Am I making the same mistakes as you now? What is the world coming to?” The chancellor shook his head. “Yes, it will be tight. We should’ve made them bigger to begin with.”

“At the cost of maneuverability.”

“But they’d be better protected.”

“Your Highness! Your Highness!” A breathless messenger tried to break through the king’s guard.

Thomas and Kalitza exchanged a glance, realizing the mutant attack Irèn had informed them of was finally underway. This invasion’s objectives were clearly different than those originally planned by Albert’s crazy family. For the first time in centuries, a real and ruthless battle was about to take place.

Taking the two crumpled scrolls from the barely upright messenger, Thomas read the gloomy reports. The mutants’ black galleys had landed yesterday in the empty city of New Albert. And Javer’s slow, but huge, army was about to approach the Towers of Perfection and Self-Expression. It would take them no more than two or three days to close a tight ring around Parthagon, which was protected only by two and a half centurias of knights and a frail militia. But even upon reading this hair-raising news, Thomas felt a new surge of strength and self-confidence. Were it not for his drastic decision to evacuate the inhabitants—a decision that had been so unpopular among his own people—by this time, rivers of blood would have been flooding Celesia. He had been right to trust his own judgment, and he’d continue to do so, no matter what!

In the evening, after they’d come back from dinner to their temporary bedchamber, feeling terribly tired and overly full, Thomas embraced Marie and the two pulled off their clothes and fell onto the broad bed. Both still felt uncomfortable in this huge room, decorated in red mahogany and looking out onto an

inner garden with a gurgling fountain. Perhaps this discomfort mirrored their relationship, because only in here could they talk directly with each other. The cares of the kingdom rested on their shoulders, and the spouses saw each other less and less, which concerned them. The young couple could do nothing but hope the estrangement between them would end as soon as Parthagon was safe.

“Marie, you have to be realistic.”

“What are you talking about, my love?”

“We’ll be surrounded in two days.”

“Of course! I know that. It’s horrible.”

“Then why did you ask Peter for workmen and 200 gold coins? For a new fountain?”

“It will be the biggest fountain in the kingdom. With statues of us! During the siege, people will come to draw water from it.”

“And it has to be built now?”

“Does that snake tell you everything?”

“You shouldn’t talk that way about Peter. We couldn’t have managed anything without him. I trust him.”

There was a quiet, quick knock on the door. Followed by another. Then the door creaked open, and a frightened personal guard appeared. “Your Highness, it’s urgent,” he whispered.

“What’s the matter?”

“Just a moment of your time,” the knight continued in a whisper, thinking the queen was asleep. “It’s urgent.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Peter Kalitza, Your Highness.”

“Well, well!” Marie jumped up on the bed, which made the warrior vanish behind the door. “Is he getting in bed with us, too? You two really are close!”

“Cut it out!”

“Why? Have you ever seen him with a woman? Even one?”

But Thomas was no longer listening to his wife, assuming, General Javer had prepared another surprise for him. Quickly putting on his robe, he went into the corridor, where a pale Kalitza stood trembling. His hair was disheveled, and he was dressed in a battered caftan. The diminutive chancellor was surrounded by knights, their tense faces lit up by torches’ yellow flames.

“There.” Kalitza shoved a small hand-written note into his hand. “They’re everywhere! All over town! Thousands of them! Tomorrow all is lost. All of it!”

Thomas had never seen the Chancellor of Parthagon in such a state. He read the note.

“Peace is within reach, Parthagon!”

The ruthless war began on the 18th birthday of the horrid witch Elizabeth, who is still being kept in the eastern tower of the Royal Palace. Peace will return to Celesia as soon as she has drawn her last breath. The mutants are approaching. It is up to us to decide: do we save the life of the witch or the lives of our children?

Peace is within reach, Parthagon!”

Having read through the note twice, Thomas sighed with relief. The chancellor’s words and flared nostrils had made him believe the mutants were already within the city walls, but this was much more benign.

“Tomorrow, Your Highness.” Kalitza continued trembling, his face a mask of fear. “Tomorrow they will come for her!”

“Well, I see someone approves of our methods. We might even know who. But how? Is Meisser in Parthagon?”

“Forget about that! We have to think of a solution right now. Elizabeth must be saved at whatever the cost!” jabbered the chancellor. “Now she’s got both the mutants and the city dwellers after her! How can we possibly fight them all off?”

“Perhaps we can give her back to her father—let him deal with her?”

“That’s one way to make sure we’re really done for!”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are already riots in the city! And most people are still asleep! I sent out people to burn the fliers but it’s too late: a mob is going to tear this Palace apart tomorrow morning. They’ll rip her to shreds!”

Thomas had spent the last two days thinking hard about whether he could execute the fair-haired maiden if doing so would bring peace. He probably could, but he needed a clear reason for such a decision. Maybe she really was a witch? The population’s extermination had begun shortly before her coming of age. But what was the connection?

But right now the young king had other things on his mind. He had the unpleasant thought he was still playing by someone else’s rules. There were painfully suspicious patterns of behavior evident throughout his life and throughout the relations between Parthagon and Arogdor. As if someone had mapped out the same outlines in everyone’s minds. As if there were no other ways of responding to constantly recurring events.

Glancing once again at Kalitza's trembling hands and chuckling—to everyone's great surprise—Thomas walked off to the quarters of the blacksmith Max Lank.

* * *

With the first rays of the dawning sun, two dozen knights came rumbling out of the North Gate, their proud stallions snorting steam in billowing clouds. The king led them. He was dressed in gold-plated armor, riding atop the armored and mohawked Bill the mansteed. In his saddle sat the former king's daughter. She was tightly wrapped in a warm fur, unbridled enthusiasm animating her face. The soldiers didn't seem remarkable, at first glance. However, almost half of them, including the palace's young occupant, wore steel tournament-armor gloves, which covered their left arms up to the elbow or shoulder. Oblong blasters were affixed to these steel appendages. If they aimed their arms and squeezed their fingers in a specific way, a beam would burn everything in their paths.

"Let's make a break for it, Thomas," whispered the girl. "We can run away and never see these stupid people again!"

"Where would we go?"

"Anywhere. Any place that's quiet and where no people are around. And picturesque, too."

"Just sit still and be quiet."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to Arogdor. You're going into hiding."

"Will you come back for me?"

"I have no choice, unfortunately."

"But you know..."

"Silence. We have nothing else to discuss."

Thomas was yet again directing his steps toward the volcano's crater as the mutants prepared to destroy his kingdom. He was returning to a place he'd barely escaped alive—and only thanks to a mysterious rescue. He took with him only two dozen knights, even though close to a thousand knights had perished there the last time. He was leaving his subjects defenseless, depriving them of the one weapon that could save them. He was risking everything he had, including his own life, on an insane plan of attack.

After journeying one day and one night, traveling the least traveled roads and wild forests, the Parthagonians came up a low hill and saw General Javer's huge army slowly and clumsily moving toward Sallep.

Two days later, near the bridge across Snake River, Thomas hid Elizabeth in his distant relative's home—the man who'd trained him in crossbow archery all those years ago. Half a dozen knights, led by Tribune Alain Ospe and armed with traditional weapons, remained with her while Thomas bid her a taciturn goodbye.

Three days later, the mighty Arogdorian army enclosed Parthagon in a tight ring. All escape routes were sealed off and the besieged city was preparing to fight to the death. But just as the mutants had wheeled their unwieldy weapons into position and the mutant horde was set to attack, their furry giants, who had already begun to batter the gates and climb onto the moss-covered Wall, received the order to halt. To the shock of the capital's citizens, the Arogdorians reluctantly waited. Meanwhile, their commander was urgently riding north, accompanied by 100 faithful four-armed mutants and 200 mansteeds.

Four days later, the king was passing the volcano's lower territories, somewhere in the vicinity of the Fifth River, when he defeated all enemy patrols and rear support units. He did this within minutes, burning them with blue blaster beams. This occurred as the terrible ring around Parthagon still stood motionless as General Ivar Javer desperately rode to the bridge across the Snake River.

Five days after they left the North Gate, the Royal Knights reached the Fifth River gorge's upper mouth. The tired Arogdorian commander had already entered the same gorge from below, as the hordes of mutants surrounding Parthagon still waited for the order to attack.

Six days later, at sunrise, Thomas led his haggard squadron to the crater's western ridge. Caught by surprise, the mutants rushed to meet the brazen knights, but their efforts were futile. The young king sped his soldiers through the fetid streets. They defeated all mutants who crossed their paths, riddling them with sizzling holes or slicing their bodies in half. Blue flashes and rays illuminated one area after another as they approached the granite obelisk and the dark-gray castle, whose guards were not yet aware of the invasion. Cutting through the soot-covered city like a hot knife through butter, the knights broke into the castle without suffering a single casualty, and they instantly incinerated its astonished guards.

They dismounted and began to move deeper into the castle. The magnificent corridors were lined with marble columns and landscape paintings. Though within these passages their weapons were less effective. They fired blasters with their left hands as they fought off four-armed monsters with swords brandished in their right. The mutants seemed to be climbing out of every crack, getting closer and closer to the knights. The

sickening stench of burnt hair and charred flesh, the infernal cries, and the ringing of metal all inexorably arrived within the atrium. There, Eisenberg, his father, squeaky Newdon, and Prime Minister Primrose were rushing amid the bushes and palms in a mad panic, with Newdon somehow once again wearing nothing but stockings and Primrose limped, wearing broken heels and short shorts, screaming in the voice of a burly peasant.

The corridors were littered with corpses, and only five exhausted and wounded knights, headed by the king and Carl Linn, entered the atrium. The bald centurion fired at the Arogdorian gang. Albert's body collapsed on the floor, while his head, with its beard and frightened eyes, rolled into the bushes.

"What have you done?" Thomas exclaimed, but the knight couldn't hear him over the roar of his frenzied blood.

"Everyone into the center!"

Barraged by arrows and barely moving, the soldiers, leaving a bloody trail behind them, came together on the marble platform. They formed a circle with their backs turned to each other. Then they began to spin, shooting back the endless enemy hordes and screaming as they doled out terror from their deadly merry-go-round. Four-armed mutants and Arogdorian militiamen, armed with axes and daggers, were rushing, jumping, and coming at them from every opening, including the atrium's broken glass roof.

Javer had finally reached the castle, wrung out by the colossal effort. He ordered all his soldiers, stunned by the carnage they'd seen on their way, to climb onto the glass roof, their bows at the ready.

Just when his warriors had taken up their position, Javer shouted, “Don’t shoot!” This even though the mutants could’ve easily buried the now vulnerable knights under a hail of arrows.

“General, what are we waiting for?” demanded one warrior. The rest of the outraged mutants were quick to support him.

“Those bastards are going to wipe us out!”

“What’s going on?”

“I said don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!”

Javer looked down to the mutilated remains of Werner, Albert, and Nicole. They were buried under growing piles of Arogdorian bodies, even as more mutants continued to pour out of every crevice, coming for the desperately spinning knights. The stench of scorched flesh and blue-tinged smoke billowing out of the broken castle roof were spreading all across the crater.

“General, what do we do here?”

“I can’t take it anymore, goddammit it!”

“Everybody down to the square! On the double!” Javer commanded the astonished mutants. “Down I said!”

Having waited for everyone to leave, he was the last to come down from the roof, ordering everyone to stop their attempts to take back the castle.

“Traitor!” yelled one of the furious warriors. “You stinking rat!”

“Eisenberg is dead, you idiot!”

“And?”

“The head of Albert III is on the floor next to him.”

“What?” the mutant howled, as did his brethren.

“Oh, gods, so it is true!”

“How can we live with this?”

“I am taking the reins of Arogdor into my own hands. Gather everyone in the square. Everyone! You have half an hour,” ordered Javer.

He gazed grimly at his compatriots, then headed into the castle. Around him, wounded soldiers groaned. Passing through the long corridors strewn with burnt bodies, Javer entered the smoky atrium and peered around the corner. There, amid the charred trunks of palm trees and mountains of corpses, three breathless knights were trying to help their two dying comrades.

“Your Highness!” Javer called to them.

“What? Who is it?”

“It’s Ivar Javer.”

“Come here, you monster!” howled Thomas, his face covered with bloody scrapes, shards of broken arrows sticking out of his battered armor.

“Coming,” the general replied calmly, throwing his axe and sword on the ground.

“I’ve been waiting for you for almost 20 years. Hurry up! Let me look you in the eye, you filthy beast!”

“It’s all over. I’m giving Arogdor to you.”

“Sure you are. Get over here!”

As soon as Javer came out, a blue beam scorched his right leg. But though he involuntarily growled with pain, he continued hobbling over the mountains of smoking corpses to the platform, staring into the eyes of the mad King of Parthagon.

“You’ve drawn your last breath, Javer!”

“Kill him, Thomas!” shouted Linn.

“A few minutes ago I was standing over your heads with hundreds of archers.”

The knights exchanged puzzled glances. They realized what had happened, but couldn't comprehend why the enemy commander would do such a thing.

"So you've betrayed your own people now!" Thomas said. He approached the defeated Javer and roughly pushed him onto his knees, then pressed the blaster against his thick dreads, preparing to do what he'd wanted to do since childhood. "Look into my eyes, you blood-thirsty villain!"

"Don't be hasty, Your Highness! This isn't the first time I've saved your life. And I'm surrendering Arogdor. What else do you need?"

"Finish him," Linn screamed, aiming at the general's head. "Send him to meet his maker!"

"Goodbye, demon!" said the warrior in the gilded armor, refusing to believe the repulsive mutant. But just as he was about to pull the trigger, a familiar voice stopped him.

"Thomas, stop!"

He couldn't quite grasp what was going on as he heard the girl clumsily making her way to him through the slippery carcasses, sobbing and constantly stumbling.

"Don't do it, brother!"

"It can't be!"

"Have you forgotten me?"

"Irèn!" Thomas threw himself at her, weeping, to the surprise of his friends, who were still aiming their blasters at Javer's head.

The general realized his young wife was about to find out his secret and no longer worried about having his head blasted off—as poor old Albert had. His noggin was staring at him from below a bush.

A few minutes earlier Kate had woken up to strange shouting in the square. Looking out her bedroom window, she saw her husband crossing over piles of dead bodies to go into the castle, from which rose great clouds of smoke and flashes of blue lightning. With the ominous feeling, the girl escaped the heavily guarded mansion by climbing out of the second-floor window. She sprained her foot, but she still broke past the startled guards to find her husband in the nick of time.

“I thought you’d been executed, Irèn!”

“It had to be this way. Just don’t kill him, Thomas!”

“What are you saying?”

“He’s my husband. My name is Kate Javer now, and I love him more than life itself!” She rushed to embrace her wounded spouse. “Are you very hurt, darling?”

“Have you lost your mind?” This was the only thing her brother could say.

“No. He saved me from execution. He saved you from the scaffold. You can’t kill him!”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Linn exclaimed, lowering his blaster.

“Irèn, this is some kind of sick joke! It simply cannot be!”

“But it’s all true! Tell him, Ivar.”

“I already did,” the general replied in a forlorn voice.

Thomas approached him again and with fury looked into his deep-set eyes, barely holding himself back. “You knew who she was? Who I was?”

“Not at first.”

“What are you talking about?” Kate asked, confused.

“This is—it was all for him. Everything I ever...” Thomas struggled more and more to draw breath and finally found himself speechless, switching his gaze between the devastated Javer and his sobbing sister.

There he was kneeling before him, the lousy mutant who'd ordered his parents brutally killed and who'd kidnapped little Irèn. This man had senselessly destroyed thousands of innocent villagers and—more than anyone else—personified everything evil in this world. But his sister idolized him. And, as it turned out, he'd already twice saved Thomas's life. The King of Parthagon couldn't settle this fierce internal battle within him.

"You can rot in the prison tower until we decide what to do with you." This was the only solution he could think of.

"I'll take it."

"Thomas, please! Is there no other way?" Kate burst out crying.

"My dear sister, I'll tell you everything later."

The surrendered commander explained the steps to take in order to bring about Arogdor's capitulation without further blood loss. Then they carried the wounded knights under their arms and slowly advanced toward the square before the conquered castle. In the corridors, silent mutants parted before them. Now that the news concerning Albert had been confirmed, none of them knew what to do next—who to consider their enemy and who their new leader.

The shuffling knights, accompanied by the limping Javer, came out into the vast square, which was full of frantic Arogdorians in coats and fur hats. They slowly climbed onto the wooden platform, and the patriots of Arogdor met them with curses and boos. They dragged with them the dead Eisenberg, the head of Albert III, and the top half of Nicole Primrose, who was still convulsing and foaming at the mouth.

The general glanced at the knights. In return, they simultaneously lifted their steel gloves, armed with blasters, and blue lightning lit up the overcast sky.

Saluting, Javer was the one to break the silence that had come over the crowd. “Hail, Arogdor!”

“Hail Eisen...” the crowd started and then stopped in confusion.

“Citizens of mighty Arogdor, I salute you! And, as your humble general, regret to inform you that Werner Eisenberg turned out to be the son of Albert Stein.”

“For shame! It can’t be!” The crater exploded with cries. “This is a catastrophe!”

“They are both dead. We have been fighting because of the enmity between them. Now this war is over. There is no one left to fight. As the highest ranking official in this land, I hand the command of Arogdor over to our new king—the brave and worthy, the young and brilliant Thomas Yourg, who from this day forth is the King of Parthagon and Arogdor.”

“He’s lost his mind! What an ass! They’re going to kill us,” the crowd roared, shaking the platform. “This is a travesty! They’re monsters! Brutes!”

The knights raised their blasters once more and deadly rays illuminated the sky, calming the frantic crowd. And now Thomas came to the front of the stage. “Citizens of this great city, lend me your ears! I, Thomas Yourg, King of Parthagon and Arogdor hereby declare the end of the centuries-old war between our brethren. From now on, you can forget about oppression and persecution.”

* * *

Four days later, the former peasant was halfway to Parthagon. Dragging their feet under the gentle sun, 200 sworn-in mutants formed the bulk of his entourage, and for the first

time he traveled the rocky road down the gorge in style thanks to Werner Eisenberg's luxurious scarlet coach. Comfort and free time gave the new ruler of Celesia the opportunity to think many things over and order his discombobulated mind.

Behind him, clattering and clanging all the way, a black carriage transported the chained-up Ivar Javer, who was under the persistent care of his darling Kate. The general was heading to the Knights Academy's dank prison cell. The same Academy where he'd once learned the things that made him a talented warlord. Thomas had decided to keep Javer's wife's past and her connection to the new king in strict confidence. Their kinship could be regarded as another betrayal. And that would be inopportune, to say the least!

Just after midday, the procession arrived at the dilapidated mill between the Snake River and the Tower of Perfection. Thomas gave the order to turn onto a bumpy dirt road. After riding deeper into the dark forest, he got out of the plush coach, mounted Bill, and galloped to Elizabeth's hiding place, which was a short distance away. Since Thomas had refused to communicate with the princess as they'd traveled from Parthagon, the talkative mansteed had become close friends with the girl in the two days they'd spent together. And Bill was looking forward to the reunion. The surviving knights, led by Carl Linn, had a tough time getting their horses to keep up with the ecstatic Arogdorian.

Soon, Thomas spotted the hunter's cabin among the trees, and his comrades, who still had no idea what had happened, peacefully rested on the grass. All this time they'd been forced to listen to Alain's grandiose theories and ideas, which were amplified in number and scope by his boredom. Even now, he was walking around with an erudite air among the giggling

warriors, trying to prove something or other based on his authority as a seasoned tribune.

A more tanned Elizabeth was in a white airy dress, gathering wildflowers. Hearing the swiftly approaching hooves, she dropped the bouquet and lifted her eyes to witness Bill, his tongue hanging out of his mouth for joy, and Thomas, bouncing wildly in the saddle. The beaming girl rushed to meet them, her dazzling blond hair floating on the warm spring breeze. “Hello! I see you’re not in sausage casings yet!”

“No, indeed I’m not. Thank you!” The mansteed helped Thomas down. Then Bill jumped up and down like a mad colt. “Guess what? Guess what?”

“What?” Elizabeth asked with confusion, glancing at the blushing knight.

“Thomas Yourg is now King of Arogdor and Parthagon!”

“What?”

“Parthagon and Arogdor,” Thomas corrected the mansteed.

“Thank you! Thank you!”

“So everything worked out, Thomas? We’re saved?” Elizabeth’s brilliant blue eyes widened until they were almost perfectly round.

“No one said you could speak yet.”

“Just so you know, no one talks to princesses that way in any of the books I’ve read.” She approached him carefully, brushed a lock of chestnut hair off his face, and wrapped her arms tightly around his mighty neck.

“You’ve just been reading the wrong books—damn romance novels.”

“As if!”

“Well, then how are you supposed to address princesses?”

“Don’t you remember? You know, those scenes just before they kiss?” the girl whispered languidly, blushing and reaching up on her tippy toes.

“Hmm, I always skip all that boring stuff.”

“I can tell...”

Thomas finally leaned down. The young people hesitantly brushed each other with their hot lips, then dared to merge into a tender kiss, greedily grasping each other as if afraid some part of them might slip away. The whole world around them disappeared, and all its problems ceased to mean anything. So much so that even the slow-witted mansteed concluded he’d be better off joining the knights, who were enjoying the reunion with their long-gone comrades at some distance.

“Wow, I’m out of here. Thank you! Hail, Arogdor and Parthagon!”

Chapter 11. The Perfect Society's Dream



Thomas was about to enter the majestic North Gate. Almost every time he passed through it, he felt as if it were not a passage into the city but a magical portal to a new life. But in his twenty-four years, he'd achieved so much that even these enchanted doors could offer him nothing further. He'd defeated his internal and external enemies. He'd nobly saved thousands of ordinary people's lives and restored long-lost peace to embattled Celesia. He'd become the adored king of the great Parthagon and the legendary Arogdor, which meant the whole world belonged to him alone.

Even though the mutants had abandoned the trampled and soiled area around the besieged city, the gate was still locked. According to Kalitza, this remained a precaution, since the Arogdorian people could still, at any moment, revolt and return to sack the capital—reasoning Thomas couldn't argue with. Despite this, the city greeted its savior with great enthusiasm. The threat of annihilation had been lifted. And the situation had been resolved without one casualty, discounting the minor losses suffered in skirmishes with drunken mutants who'd, during the siege, brazenly strutted around the Wall. One man had achieved this—their new ruler, who also had subjugated their enemy in the process. The king was also brave, young, and handsome, and he gave people hope they were going to return to the carefree peace and prosperity they'd known in the past. It was this task which he'd set his mind to during the journey back from the volcano.

He returned to his rightful home with a new maturity, feeling everything looked simpler and clearer. His beloved Elizabeth was also now by his side, making it easier to have a cheerful outlook and expect only good to come. During the time they'd spent together on the road, the smitten young man had discovered a new girl. If before she'd driven him crazy with her divine appearance alone, now he was amazed to feel he'd met his kindred spirit.

Revenge had held Thomas hostage his whole life. And now, with great difficulty and at great risk, he'd freed himself from its bondage. Similarly, Elizabeth, too, had been the prisoner of her father's love and her tower all her life. And now she was rid of both. The couple had only had a few days of freedom, and no one could understand them better than they did each other. Both had grown up reading the same books, instilling in them

similar views on life and imbuing them with overly idealized expectations.

As soon as the procession rode into the sun-drenched city, the king's elated subjects greeted them.

“Long live the king!”

“Long live Parthagon!”

“Long live Thomas Yourg!”

Once the crowd saw the foul-smelling mutants on mansteeds, the crowd stopped cheering. The dumbfounded women and children ran away, while the men clumsily tried to disguise their fear at seeing the bio-armor and sticky dreadlocks. The Arogdorian warriors also felt apprehension as they studied the streets of the undefeated city, which they'd been forbidden from entering for so long and which they'd hated so much.

The king's formidable company soon split into two, with one group taking Javer to the Academy. When the stunned Parthagonians and the newly arrived villagers found out who was being transported in the huge black carriage, they began to attack it, throwing stones and shouting terrible curses.

The second group continued along the Avenue of Heroes to the palace, which was covered in festive blue ribbons and fresh flowers. At the front entrance, under the arch, the ever-neat chancellor and Marie Lurie, clad in a black dress with a gold necklace around her high collar, waited to greet the guests. The queen, whose hair was twisted into two buns on the sides of her head, smiled reticently, keeping her hands folded across her stomach. But when the scarlet coach, glistening in the sun, arrived at the palace gates, Elizabeth, dressed in a simple sheath dress, followed Thomas from the coach, her head lowered in shy submission.

The king's wife was not the only one shocked and infuriated—the astonished crowd began shouting.

“Who is that?”

“Is that her?”

“She's back? Impossible!”

“Is it all going to start again? What a nightmare!”

“Are you crazy?” The queen, scarlet with rage, roared at the king, forgetting about the crowd. “What am I to make of this? Have you lost your mind?”

“It's nice to see you too, Marie.”

Thomas tried to peck her on the cheek, but she pushed him away, her gaze throwing daggers at the former princess, who only lowered her sky-blue eyes. Indifferent to the general outrage, Thomas nodded to his chancellor, who looked visibly relieved. And he took the embarrassed Elizabeth by the hand and into the palace, leaving his wife at the door.

“What's going on here? Peter, I demand an explanation!” Marie turned to the chancellor in desperation.

“Excuse me, but I must go.” Kalitza curtly apologized and followed the new couple into the palace.

“Stop! I order you to stop! Seize him!”

Hearing the order, the guards scratched their heads and questioningly looked at the chancellor as he passed by them.

“How dare you? I am the Queen of Parthagon! Well, if you don't do it, I guess I'll have to.”

Marie tried to grab the diminutive man by his braid, but the warriors grabbed her and held her back until Kalitza disappeared. All that time, she continued to shower him with threats of retribution. At this unprecedented disgrace, the gawkers giggled.

Before arriving in Parthagon, Thomas had sent messengers with an order to rearrange the royal bedchamber so he might take up residence with the one who was his heart's true choice. A hundred carpenters and builders had worked day and night under the chancellor's supervision—and despite the protests of the now homeless Alain. The vast room had been decorated in the beige tones Elizabeth was accustomed to and also made more secure. Now the iron doors could shield them even from the beam of a blaster. The massive shutters outside every window also protected them.

Leaving the orphaned girl to grieve and catch up on much-needed sleep in her new bedchamber, Thomas headed to the tower of the Royal Council with the enthusiastic Kalitza.

"The first day was a nightmare!" The chancellor began his tale while still climbing the stairs. "An angry mob broke into the palace and turned the place upside down. No one could believe you'd really taken her with you, along with the weapons."

"And then what?"

"Then there was a panic. The witch had escaped, the king had betrayed them, the mutants were approaching, and they no longer had blisters to protect them!"

"Blasters, Peter."

"Again? I must be losing my mind!"

"Shall I give the order to have their name changed?"

"No, no need, Your Highness. Well, I came out to the square to tell them the king hadn't abandoned them and everything would be all right. They threw eggs at me. And threatened to burn me alive," Kalitza continued, huffing and puffing as he climbed the stairs. "Then the mutants came and surrounded us. The citizens—to their credit—decided to defend their homes to their last breaths, even without our help. But then—a miracle!

They couldn't figure out how you'd managed to stop the invasion, but everyone knew the city had been saved thanks to the king. I barely made it through, Your Highness!"

"I'm sorry, Peter. I didn't see any other way."

"Of course, I understand. It was a brilliant move! By the way, I wish to apologize about the false news concerning your sister."

"Nobody knew. You've got nothing to apologize for."

"All right. And now, most importantly..."

"Yes?"

"It's time for you to meet someone."

"Meet someone? Who, Meisser?"

"You'll see."

Entering the round room, Thomas sat in the royal armchair and prepared to welcome some important guest, but instead Kalitza placed the blue translucent sphere before him. "I trust you remember how to use it?"

"I was hoping we wouldn't need to use this damn thing again."

"Everything will become clear in a moment," the chancellor replied in his calm and quiet voice. Looking around furtively, he left the room.

Since nothing seemed to be happening, Thomas got to thinking. For the first time, his head wasn't clogged up with urgent tasks. There wasn't anyone who required killing. He even wondered if he had any further need for his knightly mutation, which was inconvenient in everyday life and required a lot of effort to maintain. After all, cunning old Albert and his son had looked like ordinary people. They'd used the Phase only to moderate their age and perhaps to improve their looks. Maybe it was time for the new king to finally relax?

Through the window, he could see the neighboring tower, where his Elizabeth had spent so much time hidden from the world. Everyone had gone crazy because of this one girl, but now this absurdity had thankfully come to an end. Free of worries or care, Thomas reflected again on how he'd return Parthagon to its previous beauty and wealth. He had a poor understanding of economics, but he trusted his diligent chancellor would take care of such matters while he occupied himself with the nation's security.

The familiar squeak sounded and the blue ball began to glow with red flashes. Shuddering, Thomas presumed he'd be connected to distant Arogdor, where—on Javer's advice—he'd left a local warrior as temporary commander. Mayors of other cities might also want to get in touch with the king. Who knew who else crazy old Albert had given these strange spheres to?

Still feeling that same primal fear, Thomas touched his finger to the glass—just as Kalitza had shown him—and a bright screen once again filled the room.

“Hello, Thomas!” said a gravelly voice.

An effeminate young man with short blond hair and an even face was looking curiously at the young king and smiling with some condescension. He wore a tight black robe without buckles, and he seemed to be seated at a table, but only his top half was visible. At first, Thomas thought the stranger must be somewhere on a low hill, since behind him was a dense forest growing on steep cliffs. But then the former peasant realized these weren't mountains, but huge strange-looking buildings whose walls were covered in trees. Behind the green-eyed blond man rose a wall of glass, which reflected these buildings and seemed to protect him from some oak branches raging in the

wind. Thomas tried to think where in Celesia one could witness such a thing.

“Who are you and where are you speaking from?”

“Call me the Procurator.”

“What’s that? I, the King of Parthagon and Arogdor, am supposed to call you the Procurator?”

“Yes, Thomas.”

“That’s ‘Your Highness’ to you!”

“Oh, good grief. Let me quickly explain something to you.”

“Where is all this? Yarta?”

The ill-mannered blond turned to the right and nodded to someone. Then he turned to face the screen again and addressed Thomas. “Don’t move, please.”

“Why’s that? Show some respe...”

A blue beam, similar to those the blasters emitted, came in through a window and began burning the wooden table around Thomas’s palm. He felt frozen as the mysterious beam seared an outline of his hand. The beam then disappeared, leaving behind only the smell of burned wood and singed hair.

“What was that? Another gadget from Sunset City?”

“Of course not.”

“Where are you?”

“I don’t even know where to begin.”

“The volcano! You must be on the north side.”

“Much farther than that.”

“But beyond that there’s only the sea.”

“And is there nothing else in the sea?”

“Ha ha! Of course not.” Thomas laughed, puzzled by the blond man’s ignorance.

“The next time you decide to laugh, look down at your hand’s outline and remember I can annihilate you and everyone else on

your little island with one nod. You could think of me as a god, but call me the Procurator.”

“Island? What is this?” Thomas jumped up.

“You’re not convinced?”

“I repeat: who are you?”

“Look outside.”

The blond once again nodded at someone off screen as Thomas, trying to quell the tremors in his knees, approached the window. He saw the sun-drenched square, full of strolling couples and peddlers with trays of merchandise.

“Well?”

“Keep looking.”

Despite the cloudless sky, the street began to grow dark, causing people to peer up in consternation. What was happening resembled an eclipse, but the pale moon was still visible in the sky. And then, as the city plunged into twilight, Thomas saw a strange object the size of a heavenly body blocking the sun. This bizarre blond man on the screen was controlling it, and screen’s brightness blinded Thomas.

Stumbling backward, the King of Parthagon and Arogdor returned to his soft armchair, lowered himself slowly into it, and said, “I’m ready to listen, Procurator.”

* * *

Late in the evening, a pale Thomas finally joined his festively dressed guests in the dining room, where even the still life paintings were jealous of the table’s abundance. Dismissing the various greetings with a wave of his hand, the young king took his place and methodically ate everything the servants put before him. Surrounding him at the table were Kalitza,

Elizabeth, Kate, Alain, Max, the newly appointed tribune Carl Linn, as well as other Parthagonian officers and all the knights who'd survived the latest campaign. All were engrossed in lively conversation.

At the table's far end, Marie occupied her usual place, though she remained pale and silent. She knew her life would never return to the way it had been, and there was no point in waiting for her husband to return to her bed. As she turned the situation over in her head, she could find no better solution than to pretend nothing was wrong. Even her ladies in waiting, stunned by the queen's personal tragedy, weren't giggling at the endless jokes.

Those who were cheerful, their forks and knives clanging, were animatedly discussing Celesia's bright future, as well as the unusual solar eclipse, which was surely an omen to mark a new beginning. Thomas couldn't care less about the eclipse, however—or Marie, or anyone else for that matter.

Except Elizabeth.

Although he didn't fully understand its every detail, a complete picture of the world, the way it really was, buzzed in his head. And it shocked him. Just this morning he'd woken up feeling so radiant and carefree—considering himself almost as powerful as a deity—but now he saw he was nothing but a cog in somebody's grandiose machine. A machine that held meaning. A terrible and great meaning.

The unfortunate Albert had been honest to a fault when he'd explained to Thomas the general rules of life. He'd told Thomas those who found themselves on opposing sides always lost, and a higher level existed where life followed other rules and there were no sides. But Albert didn't explain just how different these levels were! Only the Procurator could usher him into this circle

of the selected elite. And even then, the Order of the Blood Watch was only one level among many, with each level acting as a pawn in a higher level's hands. Even the green-eyed blond man, who looked like a girl with a short boyish haircut, wasn't at the top level.

As far as Thomas understood, the world was much bigger than he'd ever imagined. The Procurator had said even if traveling on the fastest horses one could not circle it in a year, and this wasn't considering the expanses of the seemingly inhabited sky. Celesia, with all its joys and sorrows, was only an island in this vast world of continents. However, it wasn't just any island.

Once upon a time, in the distant past, the world had faced a paradoxical problem. As human society had reached a state of perfection—with Telelink becoming as ubiquitous and trivial as spurs were to Thomas—people had learned about the Phase and its possibilities. Or, rather, they'd always known about the Phase in some way: many eccentrics had practiced it aimlessly, to entertain themselves or achieve phony enlightenment, while the rest either hadn't believed them or hadn't seen the Phase's potential. How could it have been otherwise, with those quacks discrediting the Phase—claiming it as a magical world or calling it ridiculous names?

A group of young scientists had corrected this misunderstanding. They'd accidentally discovered that through the Phase one could perform highly complex calculations and, most importantly, influence the human body. With its help one could change appearance at will, as well as manipulate age. Theoretically, this opened up the prospect of immortality and even eternal youth, which was what humanity needed to evolve into an Absolute Society.

But not all Perfect Society members were able to enter the Phase, and even those who could still do it, did it with great difficulty. To change their bodies, they had to apply so much effort, which made the idea inapplicable on a general scale. At first scientists had hoped practice from an early age would fix this. But learning the Phase in school only slightly improved the situation. The amazing ability had either only just begun appearing in mankind's fundamental building blocks—genes, as the Procurator called them—or the ability was already becoming extinct. Either way, the Phase proved impossible to harness for civilization's advancement.

Humanity could resolve this issue with genetic engineering. But this was the Perfect Society! Such intervention in nature was unethical and unthinkable. Evolution had to take its own slow course or humans might create an ecological imbalance. Even after endless discussions and careful research, the best scientific minds hadn't dared modify key genes. Such an intervention carried too much unpredictability and long-term risk. Nobody knew for sure what such manipulations could lead to in the future: one small mistake could set off a chain of events that would eventually bring about mankind's extinction. They'd use genetics to perfect rabbits, for example, but were too afraid to apply the science to themselves, for their own good.

They had only one tool: natural selection, wherein generations of people genetically improved through the endless chain of life and death. But how long would it take for the genes that made the Phase easily accessible to manifest in everyone if people lived for hundreds of years and didn't create space for new generations? And was this even possible, if mastering the Phase provided no obvious advantages for the individual's survival?

The Perfect Society was dealing with another problem: it was degenerating. Any of its members could pass on their genes, even if they didn't have what it took to survive in the wild, and thus flawed hereditary lines continued. People were becoming weaker and sicklier. And although medical progress was managing to keep up with the degradation, this progress concealed the real picture: such an abundance of accumulated genetic errors existed in the gene pool that one could eventually expect the species to die out.

No one was to blame for this state of affairs except the ideal living conditions everyone enjoyed. At a certain stage these conditions became mankind's main enemy. From nature's perspective, life without death is doomed to extinction. The most brilliant rule is just the grandiose succession of death and birth—the reward for which is improvement and, consequentially, survival. The Perfect Society had almost halted this entire mechanism and had, thus, jeopardized its own existence. The society had also jeopardized evolution and developing the Phase, both necessary to achieving an Absolute Society. Everyone understood this problem needed to be resolved. But the only solution was death—the basis of all natural systems. And death could only be allowed if the Perfect Society was not responsible for it.

After a long and contentious search, a viable solution was found in Project Celesia. This involved reaching several internal compromises, changing a few laws, investing a huge amount of resources, and creating an isolated island in the ocean, which was then populated by volunteers of those best at the Phase. By keeping the island constantly at war and suppressing technological development, they'd created an enclave of quasi-natural life in which mankind could genetically improve. In fact,

they'd managed to kill two birds with one stone: the genes on the island would be passed down not just by the healthiest people but those most easily able to enter the Phase.

The lives of those in the experiment were worthless because, according to the Perfect Society's laws, those lives were considered artificial. That's to say: none of Celesia's inhabitants had any human rights. They were biomaterial—the Procurator's term—which merited no compassion. Any Perfect Society member could grieve bitterly for an unfortunate squirrel run over crossing the road and yet observe with disinterest the public statistics announcing the deaths of thousands of Celesia's innocent women and children. Their deaths brought the project closer to its goal.

Maintaining a civilization on the island wherein people would be intelligent but not dangerously so became important. After all, they needed to be easily managed. That was why the Telelink and blasters had frightened Thomas. That was why Albert had vehemently resisted all scientific research and why obtaining knowledge through the Phase was forbidden. Celesians could develop no technology without special permission. Nor could its people become too smart for their own good.

For these reasons, the Procurator forbade Thomas from using blasters ever again unless for self-defense or in situations critical for the project's continuation. Weapons assistance was the only legal way for the Perfect Society to influence the processes taking place on the island. This was why Procurators always needed strong and smart leaders on the ground, whom they could advise or set goals for—but otherwise leave to their own devices—so the experiment could remain as pure as possible.

This cruel system turned out to be incredibly successful in speeding up evolution, so eventually it would produce the Absolute Society's founding member. And this member's descendants would populate the entire world. Indeed, with each new generation on the island, more people managed to enter the Phase and use this skill in everyday life. And although the results remained far from the desired objective, with every century this success accelerated. The genetic mutations among the population were becoming increasingly diverse, allowing the Perfect Society to hope for a sharp evolutionary leap.

And so, in the 946th year of the island's existence, that hope materialized in the priceless Elizabeth, the future mother of the Absolute Society, who entered the Phase effortlessly and could therefore retain eternal youth.

Without realizing it, Elizabeth was the result of almost a thousand years of experimentation, the return on the enormous amount of resources and time the Perfect Society had invested in Celesia. She was more valuable than all the people who'd ever lived on Celesia combined. The most perfect human being who'd ever existed in this world. Elizabeth—the hope of mankind, entrusted into the hands of Albert III.

Almost 19 years ago, an unusual two-year-old girl, corresponding to the target criteria of “selection”—how the Procurator referred to selecting the fittest individuals—had been identified in an Arogdorian school. Her father was an older mutant warrior and her mother was a simple washerwoman. The gifted girl had been removed from the dangerous crater and secretly delivered to the Royal Palace, where the happy king passed her off as his newborn daughter. Since no one in Parthagon had seen the baby for a long time, the discrepancy in age went unnoticed. Albert had become so attached to Elizabeth

and his concern for her had been so great, he'd considered her his daughter almost instantly, because it had been thanks to his efforts she'd been born.

Albert had carried out his assigned tasks with great success, managing two cities with unique selection factors. The deadly competition between them had significantly accelerated progress. And he would've continued his brilliant work if Thomas hadn't appeared and spoiled everything! Not for nothing had he been dubbed a country bumpkin since childhood! Only that morning he'd thought himself the savior of the world, but now he realized the most complicated project in mankind's history had come under threat of failure because of him. What for one—or even thousands—could spell happiness, for myriad others would be a catastrophe.

Albert, Javer, Eisenberg, and even Primrose: they were not just the good guys in this story—they were mankind's hope! These heroes, despite the cruelty they'd been forced to enact and the difficulties involved, had done their work to correct the Perfect Society's global error and bring it closer to its dream. Even the nasty Isaac Newdon now seemed like a first-degree genius. He'd monitored direct selection in the schools, the Academy and the barracks. He'd directed that rumbling river of humanity along the right channel so eventually it could flow to Elizabeth.

But then why hadn't this powerful outside world put a stop to Thomas's madness? Even though the Procurator couldn't have legally intervened directly, he could've influenced the various internal parties. What had prevented him?

When Albert had invited Thomas to join the Order of the Blood Watch, he simply couldn't tell him everything at once. Thomas had been shocked to hear even those general and

simple things Albert had first told him about the world as it really was. Moreover, the king's goal had been to prepare the youngster to meet with the Procurator. The Procurator could've then explained the Celesia project.

At first, everything had gone according to plan—after all, everyone had been sure untold riches and a legate's golden armor would pacify the peasant. But no one had imagined this wouldn't be enough for him—that he'd be so determined he'd not leave enough time to learn the whole truth. No one had predicted this impudent youngster would attempt to solve all the island's problems at once, becoming not just the King of Parthagon, but of Celesia! Had he remained patient for just one more day, he would've learned about the outside civilization and never done any of it.

Finding himself in a bind, the ousted king had asked the Perfect Society for help, but the society had refused him. Albert had recently made too many mistakes, and so the Procurator preferred to wait and see who'd prevail in the battle for the throne. Moreover, Peter Kalitza had long been advising the Procurator to pay attention to this unusual knight. The chancellor had been the one to provoke the palace coup, reporting Irèn's death the moment Thomas had been about to consent to Albert. Kalitza had resorted to such a bold move because he'd been longing for change. But he couldn't lay claim to the title himself because of his age.

The strongest and most resolute person had emerged Celesia's leader. Albert had fulfilled his task, but he'd ceased to meet further goals and couldn't keep up with more stringent requirements. He'd been too weak, not decisive enough, not cruel enough. He'd become too gentle and humane, enjoyed being the beloved king too much, when he should've been

efficiently accomplishing the tasks at hand. Thomas, in whom the Perfect Society had placed their hopes, now needed to correct this trend.

And thus he was faced with a terrible truth: if he were to maintain the peace he'd just fought so hard to achieve, the island would lose its purpose. Whatever the cost, the new king had to reignite the war. Not only that, it had to be even bloodier than before, as project Celesia needed to transition into a new stage of evolution.

When Albert had discovered Elizabeth, he'd immediately cleansed Celesia of all unnecessary biomaterial so as to gradually populate its territories with more perfect people, his foster daughter's descendants. The tragedy in Sallep, when Thomas had first heard of the princess and subsequently lost his family, had been part of that cleansing. After that, there'd been an almost 18-year break, since the Order, at the Procurator's request, had decided to wait for at least one more unique child to emerge from the existing system. However, in the following years neither Elizabeth's parents nor other residents of Arogdor and Parthagon had given birth to perfect individuals with the hoped-for genes. So the Procurator had decided to resume purging the island, which was why so many calamitous events had happened in the past year.

But the Procurator had been dissatisfied with the speed of progress and thus allowed Thomas to replace the softhearted Albert. And now Thomas faced three highly difficult problems.

First, he had to destroy a large percentage of the island's human biomass to prevent the project from stalling further. This bloody act would serve as a test for the new head of Celesia. Through this show of cruelty he'd prove his trustworthiness.

Second, Thomas had to eliminate Walter Meisser, who was fighting for his own brand of justice. Someone had told the Mayor of Sunset City that life on Celesia would once again have value if the princess were beheaded. Therefore he considered her a witch. Indeed: if she were eliminated, the Procurator might have to wait centuries for a second Elizabeth to come along, and he'd still need the old-selection system. This view of things was simplified, however. The Perfect Society could easily close down the expensive project, destroying the wasted biomaterial and settling on evacuating the children who already had improved genetics.

And third, Thomas had to change the selection rules so new generations would come from Elizabeth alone—the mother of mankind's future. He must become the first father, but then she'd be required to continuously give birth for hundreds of years to children fathered by different men, and without necessarily having any intimacy with them. When a big enough population with exclusively targeted genes existed on Celesia, the Perfect Society would begin to resettle all newborn children off the island. They'd renew their gene pool and transform into what they'd so long dreamed of becoming—the immortal Absolute Society.

This was all clear to Thomas, but he couldn't see his way past killing innocent people. The Procurator had been adamant, though, and had ruled out other options. For example, they couldn't evacuate people to other places because of the project's draconian laws. And if they were simply isolated somewhere on Celesia, this colony would pose a potential threat to the project. The king's subjects were only used-up assets, which the Procurator wished to get rid of as soon as possible. He also was wary of unwarranted risks. After all, the masses could easily get

out of control. Meisser had already proved this many times, and he still remained a major threat to the project.

Thomas was most frightened about having to become even more ruthless than Albert, and more bloodthirsty than Javer, had ever been. This was the condition under which he'd been allowed to ascend the throne. And only two people were abreast of the situation: the general and the chancellor. No one else—not his subjects, nor his friends, nor his loved ones—would be able to understand the atrocities their new king was about to commit. And when it came down to it, he had no idea if he had the stomach for it.

* * *

Over the next few days, the celebrations in Parthagon died down and in their place, an atmosphere of unease settled over the city. Both the visiting villagers and the citizens could not understand why the North and South Gates remained locked. All the while, the wise Kalitza made public announcements urging the populace to respect the need for caution. According to him, they had yet to know how Arogdor would react in the wake of its defeat, and therefore continuing to stick together was necessary. So far people had tolerated these inconveniences rather stoically, but two hundred four-armed mutant soldiers and their mansteeds aggravated the situation. After all, the Parthagonians had long felt intense hatred for mutants, and now they were forced to see them constantly in their hometown. The mutants, too, feeling the wariness surrounding them, were growing irritated and finding it harder and harder to conceal their resentment. Indeed, imagining how they could all coexist peacefully was difficult.

During this time, Thomas allowed almost no one to see him. He concentrated his efforts on finding a compromising solution so as to avoid more deaths of innocents—though now he could no longer call their deaths meaningless. For long-suffering Celesia, the situation was a catastrophe. For the rest of mankind their deaths were necessary, although he still didn't understand why the Perfect Society had such ruthless laws with respect to Celesia. Thomas also had his own family troubles to resolve, since he could no longer share the palace with Marie.

One late evening, he ran into his ever dynamic wife in the grand throne room. She was getting on with preparations for the royal ball on the occasion of the momentous peace agreement. She was bustling about in an attempt to distract herself rather than to organize the festive event. The poor girl simply couldn't find peace of mind, feeling rejected and cast out as if she were yesterday's trash.

"Marie, we need to talk." Thomas took her hand and led her from the throne room and toward the palace's interior garden, hoping to have a calm discussion among the gurgling fountains. "I see you're preparing for a celebration?"

"The war is over—people expect festivities."

"I see. I've been thinking..."

"And?" She halted in the dark corridor, her eyes quickly filling with tears.

"We have to split up."

"Why?"

"I love Elizabeth."

"What nonsense!"

"Believe me, this is a decision I've thought about."

"You bastard! Monster! Villain!" Marie began shouting, throwing herself at her unfaithful spouse with fists flailing, but

Thomas grabbed her by the shoulders and held her tightly against his chest.

“Everything will be all right. Calm down.”

“How could you? After everything we’ve gone through? Thomas, you can’t...”

“It’s my fault, I know. I should’ve drawn a line in our relationship right after we finished school. But you’re not blameless in all this, either.”

“Me? What have I possibly done wrong? Thomas...”

“You always pushed me toward your own ambitions when my mind was preoccupied with other things. You never stopped to think about what I wanted.”

“Didn’t you ever love me?”

“I didn’t know what love was. I thought I did each time I found out our relationship had advanced to the next stage.”

“But I thought we were happy.”

“We were! I’ve been thinking about this for a long time.” Thomas sighed heavily, embracing the sobbing girl and gently kissing her salty face. “And I finally figured out what happened.”

“Well, what?”

“Think about my sister. I’d spent the first years of my life with her. And just when she’d been taken from me, I met you. You were so alike in so many ways. You were even the same age! Forgive me, but you became a replacement sister to me, Marie.”

“Thomas, that’s not true!”

“You’ll be taken care of financially and in any other way you require for the rest of your life. But now you must leave the palace, Marie.”

“You brute!”

“I hope one day soon you’ll understand. I’ll always care about you and never forget everything you’ve done for me. I hope we can remain friends and...”

“Shut up! Shut up and leave! Just leave me alone!”

Marie dropped to the green-carpeted floor and began pounding it with her fists. Thomas tried to pick her up, but she socked him hard in the face, and he walked away. The cries and the noise drew the attention of palace guards and servants, who rushed in to try to pacify Marie.

Thomas returned to his new beloved with a heavy heart. Knowing how badly Marie was hurting right now, he wanted to rush back to her and soothe her. But he knew sometimes choosing between two evils was necessary, and so he restrained his impulse to take it all back and return everything to the way it had been.

Entering the beige bedchamber, he found Elizabeth in bed with a thick book. She wore silk pajama shorts and a delicate white blouse. Since his talk with the Procurator, Thomas had consciously tried not to change his attitude toward his beloved. He remembered how it had ended for Albert. With his constant fawning and cowering, he’d stomped out any respect the girl had had for him, and he’d lost his rapport with her entirely. Therefore, Thomas tried to keep his distance from the mother of the Absolute Society, training his hands to keep still every time he touched her.

“Good evening, darling!” She smiled at him, putting her book on her bedside table and stretching toward the candle with the intention of blowing it out.

“Philosophy again?”

“Yes. It’s ever so interesting!”

“You must be joking. How do you even sleep after reading that stuff?”

“I can always sleep. Believe me.”

Thomas took off his clothes in the darkness and gingerly lay down next to Elizabeth, whose outspread hair took over half the bed. Unlike the energetic and resourceful Marie, she was in many ways shy and modest. She had little skill in communicating with people and lacked experience with men. Sometimes, something would rise from within her, and she'd then become unnaturally determined, but more often than not she was gentle and affable, but no more.

And so, every evening, the girl lay down on the cool bed, kissed Thomas tenderly goodnight, confessed her love to him, and then moved away as far as possible. If there were not enough room between them, she'd use a blunt weapon—in the shape of a weighty tome—which she always kept at hand and read only before bedtime. A couple of deft blows on the sturdy royal cranium were very effective in disabusing the ruler of Celesia of his imagined omnipotence.

But having settled the painful score with his former wife, and feeling spiritually released, Thomas decided to take matters into his own hands. It was time to start working on the third and last task set by the Procurator! The girl was supposed to have started begetting progeny long ago, but Albert hadn't been able to bear letting any man near her.

“Good night, my love!” Elizabeth gently touched her lips to his, then turned over, and tried to hide at the other side of the ample bed.

“Where are you going?”

“To sleep. It's late.”

“Well, well!”

Bolstered by his own expectations, Thomas, as if venturing on a dangerous reconnaissance mission, started kissing her long violet-perfumed neck. He then began touching her body. She responded to his touch with barely noticeable shudders and slow writhing.

“Thomas!”

“What?”

“Stop.”

“Why?”

“Because it tickles!” Elizabeth answered categorically, throwing a warning glance toward the heavy philosophy book. But Thomas, having seen worse in his days on the volcano, continued to caress her with more and more impudence.

“Maybe it just feels good?”

However, Elizabeth only pushed his sweating hands and face away. Frustrated, Thomas was forced to admit that women didn’t care about knightly merit and royal regalia. But, being the brave hero that he was, he refused to surrender that easily. Despite her protests, Thomas easily turned Elizabeth onto her back, pressed her hands against the bed and rushed at her headlong, eagerly kissing her tender neck and graceful shoulders.

“Thomas, stop!” Elizabeth exclaimed with real fear, her eyes open wide. “Enough!”

“What is it?”

“Go to sleep. Nothing’s going to happen.”

“And why’s that?”

“I’m not ready, that’s why. How hard is that to understand?” With sadness and hope she looked at the book, her savior, just within reach.

“Did I skip over some important pages again?”

“You didn’t even read it!”

“Elizabeth, you don’t understand,” said Thomas, not knowing how to explain himself. “We’re supposed to be saving the world here.”

“Oh, dear, you’ve been reading all the wrong books, then!”

“I’m serious. It’s up to us to continue the human race. Everything depends on you and me. Right now! I can’t tell you all the details, but it’s true. We have to get started right away, and I’ll explain everything later.”

“That’s what you men always say!”

“Is it?” Thomas said with sincere surprise. “Well, I’m telling the truth. Honest!”

“No. Go to sleep.”

“Then when?”

“Someday.”

“Elizabeth, everyone is counting on us. I mean it. The world cannot wait!”

“And by the way, I’m not even your wife.”

“You mean, you want to get married first?”

“Of course! That’s the way it happens in the books.”

“Where do you get these books of yours? I’ll have whoever’s peddling this drivel burned at the stake! And cut off the hands of the saps who write them!”

“Good night!”

“Good night,” mumbled the injured King of Parthagon and Arogdor, brave conqueror of all Celesia. He reluctantly let go of Elizabeth’s cold hands and collapsed on his back. The tasks the cunning Procurator had set were much trickier than he might have imagined. Saving the future of mankind was going to be no walk in the park, if its path lay through such a tough nut. Or was he perhaps doing something wrong?

Elizabeth, while pretending to be asleep, was also trying to get to the bottom of her thoughts and action. Her heart was still beating fast, and she was simultaneously cursing herself and feeling relieved nothing had happened. She knew she wanted to take the relationship further, but it was not a matter of will—she was paralyzed with fear. She needed love as much as any other normal warm-blooded person, but Thomas didn't understand that intimacy for her was no ordinary event, but a serious step into a new life. Up until now, she'd viewed herself as an innocent child—after all, her isolation from the adult world had significantly prolonged her childhood. She wanted to become a full-fledged woman, but the prospect of it—its meaning—frightened her. She wasn't scared of Thomas but of entering a new life, with new perspectives and new landmarks.

Elizabeth understood she had to resolve this internal issue, but she felt incapable of making up her mind. Every morning she felt brave and ready for the great event to happen. After all, she'd amassed her own stash of secret fantasies and desires. But as soon as twilight started to thicken in the sky, all that morning's courage was lost to trepidation. All she could do was feel sorry for Thomas and hate herself more with every passing day.

Elizabeth suddenly felt her tired mind fall into a light oblivion, a gauzy half-sleep, and then neatly surface. Coming to from this mini-blackout, she tried to stand without straining her muscles and felt a fluid movement, a quiet hum in her ears and slight vibrations in her body. When the girl finally rose from the bed, the hissing sounds and vibrations disappeared as sharp sensations washed over her. She was once again in the Phase and free to do anything!

Lately she'd been grieving for her ignominiously slaughtered father. And now, at last, she had the courage to see him. While he'd been alive, she mocked him and scorned his excessive care for reasons still beyond her. Now she was ashamed of her behavior. Focusing on the target, Elizabeth headed for the iron door, concentrating on picturing her father standing behind it. Coming closer, she felt he really was standing on the door's other side, waiting for her, and this made her terribly uneasy.

But she overcame her dread and, opening the heavy door, came face to face with Albert. The chilling other-worldly fear she'd been experiencing dissolved in a warm bath of love. He stood off to the side and was wearing his favorite brown coat. His coy smile seemed to apologize for no longer being able to bother her with his never-ending worry and tenderness. Bitter tears streamed from Elizabeth's eyes, and she rushed into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around her, pressing her to him, and the orphaned girl was immersed in that spicy and slightly bitter aroma she'd known since earliest childhood. As she breathed it in, she nestled against his silky beard, which had always brought her such comfort and peace. Looking at his face, she could see his gray irises' surprisingly intricate patterns and his skin's thin lines between its tiny pores. Everything was so sharp even in the oil lamps' dim light. She'd never noticed such details when he'd been alive! Albert was still smiling his bashful smile, although his eyes were filling with moisture:

"So, how are you doing without me?" he murmured, wiping his daughter's wet cheeks.

"Daddy..."

* * *

Time didn't march or saunter—it flew. But Thomas, lacking clarity and obsessively rationalizing, couldn't make up his mind. Too much hung on his decision. How could he kill an innocent person? Let alone thousands or hundreds of thousands of them? It was also possible the Perfect Society was made up or a cunning ploy. But just as refusing to join the Order of the Blood Watch hadn't really been an option, choice in this scenario wasn't something Thomas had. Most likely, the Procurator and Kalitza were waiting for him to come to what they deemed the right decision and start carrying out their plans. Otherwise, they'd compel him either by force or coercion. And if force and coercion didn't work, they'd arrange for his timely demise. Where was the choice in that?

Kalitza was beginning to lose his patience and kept arranging unexpected meetings with Thomas, who tried to avoid them by any means possible. The chancellor's worry was understandable: with the city still on lockdown, they had an excellent opportunity to greatly diminish the island's population. However, if Thomas didn't act, general panic threatened to overwhelm everything, and then no one would be able to control how things played out, placing the Celesia project in jeopardy.

Desperate villagers posed the main threat. Having already organized multiple demonstrations and attempted escapes, they were inching closer to a full-blown revolt. They'd even begun to form an underground resistance. They knew if they didn't return to their farms by mid-spring, by the end of summer there'd be a famine. And by next spring, few among them would survive. To some extent everyone knew this, but no one in the Palace took any action. The situation was at a standstill, and the tension was rising with every day.

Even the usually cheerful dinner at the Palace had turned morose. People sat in silence, stupefied by the king's state of dejection. Also not improving the general atmosphere: rumors that the mutants, having received complete freedom, were now busy shamelessly taking over good lands and farms that belonged to the villagers locked within the Parthagon. Who had defeated whom? And perhaps recently returned Elizabeth—the witch—was causing these problems?

One evening, Marie Lurie, looking lonely and lost, was walking back to the small house where she'd once lived with young Thomas Yourg. She'd persuaded her former spouse to let her live out a lifelong dream and finish organizing the royal ball. Bidding farewell to her life in the palace had been difficult, and such pleasant hassles had helped distract her by letting her do the things she enjoyed most. She had nothing and no one else left, except the blacksmith's wife, who'd become a kind of surrogate mother to her.

Approaching her home on the outskirts of Parthagon, she noticed a burning candle in the window. The downhearted former queen assumed this was yet another gloating girlfriend come to give her a dose of feigned comfort. However, handsome tribune Alain Ospe greeted her on her dilapidated front porch. Her old friend led her into the dining room, where a tall, composed dark-haired man, at least sixty, was sitting with some difficulty on a rickety, creaking chair. He was an outsider, for native Parthagonians rarely allowed themselves to look this rough, even if they lived to be two hundred years old. The man wore a gray-hooded robe, and his proud face seemed somehow familiar to her. She'd seen this jet-black hair and aquiline nose somewhere before.

“Good evening, Marie!”

“Hello.”

She was trying to remember where she'd seen these distinct features, but couldn't figure it out. A questioning glance at the downcast Alain only elicited a shrug and an innocent smile.

The mysterious stranger said, “We've never met.”

“But your face...”

“You may be confusing me with my son.”

“Your son?”

“He was once thwarted by your husband.”

“That description fits so many people. Unless...” Startled, Marie thought of the scar on Thomas's waist. “You...your son must be...the Black Knight!”

“Yes. My name is Walter Meisser. And I'm here to finish what my son started. I think you'll like where this is going.”

“I don't believe it! Alain?”

Marie stared wide-eyed at her ex-husband's best friend, but he just blushed and lowered his brown eyes. He was feeling uneasy. He grabbed a jug of water from the table and greedily sipped it.

“I met Walter by accident,” Alain said, wiping his chin. “And he answered all the questions Thomas couldn't.”

* * *

The newly minted head of Celesia was in the Academy prison tower where Ivar Javer was being held. Javer, in thick iron chains, knelt before him. In the corner, the buckets of muddy liquid and nauseating slop were the only nourishment the prisoner had been receiving. He looked emaciated, and the wound in his right leg was festering. The malodorous cell was so small and dank the general, dressed in nothing but hole-riddled

trousers, couldn't even lie down, and his black dreadlocks had acquired a wet sheen and moldy smell.

Forbidden from going out into the city, Kate had been stalking the palace from morning till night in a continuous lament. Her nose twitching pitifully, she begged her brother, who'd been doing his best to avoid her, to let her beloved Javer go free. The woman's heart was so blinded by love she no longer gave a thought to who her beloved really was. Thomas, in turn, had been tempted many times to put an end to it by explaining the role this shameless monster had played in their childhood. However, he increasingly felt even this would change nothing. If anything, he risked fanning the flames of her irrational love by making her imagine the torturous guilt her poor monster must've felt about his past deeds.

But that day, things had taken a turn for Thomas. His weeping sister had suddenly revealed she was pregnant. She'd known for over a week, but had been afraid to tell anyone, thinking no one would believe her since she was constantly conjuring schemes to see her husband let out of his prison cell. Javer was not only his sister's beloved but the father of his future nephew. Also, Thomas could now see that Kate's life, too, depended on the mutant. She'd become so morbidly attached to the damned brute. Who knew what this desperate and reckless woman was capable of?

His sister's anguish, as well as his own pangs of conscience, finally made the young king visit the most feared man in Celesia. "Why did you surrender? Why didn't you kill me?"

"I understood the Procurator's plan."

"Is that all?"

"Kate. I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself."

“You? You want to tell me, after all this time, you have a conscience?”

“Haven’t you had your chat with the Procurator yet?” the four-armed monster said sarcastically. “What’s conscience got to do with it? I was only fulfilling the tasks I’d been given. Not for myself. Not for the leader. Not for the king.”

“For your own personal pleasure then?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

“I just want to understand how you got yourself do it.”

“So you’re still undecided then? Well, you’ve got no choice.”

“And what if the Procurator’s lying?”

“He’s not. And even if he were, you still don’t have a choice.”

“It’s just I can’t see myself giving those kinds of orders.”

“It’ll be hell the first time. After that, it’ll be as easy as taking a piss.”

“So you mean to say that chopping off Niels’s head was as easy as taking a piss?” With a hearty kick Thomas laid the general flat on the muddy floor. “You know who he was to me, you piece of filth!”

“Apologies,” Javer replied nonchalantly as blood dripped from his nose. He tried to get up, but abandoned the effort. “It’s part of the job.”

“Bullshit!”

“Sorry, but it is.”

Silence settled over the grim prison cell. As is often the case with men, sooner or later they come to respect those opponents they fear the most. Perhaps that was the case for Thomas. In his brief, albeit eventful, life there were no other examples of someone this terrifying and dangerous who’d managed to stay alive. The Javer dilemma could be solved with one sweep of the

sword, but the thought of causing his sister suffering held him back.

“What happened when you found out about her parents?”

“I wanted to kill myself.”

“And what if she found out?”

“Eh...” Javer sighed.

“She’s pregnant you know.”

“What?” Javer sat up as if struck by lightning.

“That’s right. It’s the reason I’m here.”

Slumping back down into the mud, the huge mutant was seized by shaking sobs, as if unable to absorb this latest blow. His preposterous life seemed bent on repeating itself: a passionate love affair, an inevitable catastrophe, a fine line between life and death, and now a child from his beloved, whom he’d never get to see.

“I don’t know, Ivar, how all this will end. But I’ll not break her heart,” Thomas said, observing his defeated foe’s pitiful state. “She has suffered enough already. She’ll never learn the truth about our parents—you can trust me on that. But I can’t make any guarantees when it comes to your life.”

“Take care of them, I beg of you!”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

“Thank you!”

“But before I go, I have a few more questions you may be able to help me with...”

* * *

According to General Javer, only two surefire methods existed of pulling an unhappy woman out of a prolonged bout of misery and dark thoughts, and simultaneously melting her

emotional and physical iciness. The first—which he swore was the simplest and most effective—consisted of chaining her up in some dark, windowless basement and treating her to a two- or three-day cure of periodical beatings and torture. But Thomas was too young and sensitive for such extreme measures and so he chose the second, albeit less effective, method.

The young king had decided to devote the following day to preparations for mankind's salvation. In the morning, under strict secrecy, Thomas and Elizabeth, disguised in simple tunics so Peter Kalitza wouldn't try to stop them, rode jolly old Bill out of Parthagon, accompanied by the king's best knights, to go on a rabbit hunt. Then followed a relaxing boat ride along the Quiet River. They traveled to a small river island where a picnic had been arranged for them. On the advice of a certain experienced person, half their provisions consisted of hearty meats, while the other consisted of every sweet under the sun, all loaded with as much sugar and honey as possible. Having eaten their fill and amused themselves by shooting the crossbow, caressed by the spring sun and lulled by the water's serene murmur, the couple lay down for a peaceful nap. Thomas claimed to be a great expert in palmistry, and his charming companion's gentle palms spoke volumes about her unhappy past and brilliant future.

On the way back, the young people listened to Carl Linn's and Bill's heart-wrenching tales of how they'd followed Thomas into Arogdor and, having lost almost all their brave friends, fought to the bitter end. Elizabeth now and then opened her delicate mouth in amazement, softly gasping and hugging her hero as if he were receiving painful injuries while his suspiciously emotional friends told their stories.

In the evening, the lovebirds strolled along the ancient Wall, taking turns smelling a bouquet of wine-red roses. Thomas wore a spectacular officer's jacket, while Elizabeth sparkled in a restrained turquoise dress with a warm shawl thrown over her shoulders. Stumbling over a strange package, they discovered a contraband bottle of very sweet and very strong wine. Cursing the darned profiteers and scofflaws who'd smuggle such things into the city, they decided to try this muck that seemed so popular in Arogdor. The former princess seemed to enjoy the muck. Inexperienced as she was, she emptied every glass with gusto, as if it were a berry compote.

When it grew dark, Thomas became an expert about the night sky. Pointing at random to the sky, he talked about distant constellations, focusing on the ones with the saddest names: Fallen Angel, Nameless Love, Broken Hearts, the Monarch's Cold Bed. Lucky for him, tipsy Elizabeth didn't see through the charade, even though earlier in the day she'd known the celestial map like the back of her hand.

After all that stargazing, Thomas felt terribly hungry and asked if any of the guards had anything to eat. They produced a bucket of hot lamb ribs and a huge tankard of honey. The young people decided to eat in the fashion of the commoners, dangling their feet from the Wall and hurling gnawed bones at the hedgehogs scurrying below. It soon became evident the lovers had hit on a trail of smugglers: they discovered one more bottle of fortified wine in a crevasse where swallows had made their nest. The lady decided to destroy all the traitors' stocks so they'd not fall into innocent women and children's hands. She also sent an urgent message to the Chancellor about the criminal activity that seemed to be running amok in their fair city.

Thomas wanted Elizabeth to believe he'd just spent time with his bride. His mind was far from indecent thoughts. To prove this, he made sure, throughout the day, not to touch her in any ambiguous way. He did touch her, but with such subtlety no one could've accused him of anything. Moreover, no indecent insinuations had escaped his honest and noble lips. He acted as if women had ceased to interest him, as if some serious wound he'd received in the crater had made him a romantic, but nothing more.

Having spent her time walking back to the palace making up vulgar limericks, Elizabeth threw off her shoes and ran barefoot into the bedchamber, dragging Thomas along with her, despite his valiant efforts to resist. Slamming the iron door behind him, the clanging of which woke all the servants, and jumping on the bed like a rabid doe, she tackled her groom and threw him onto the bed.

"Hey, what are you doing?" the King of Parthagon exclaimed.

"We must save humankind! Or at least one tiny little human."

"Wait a minute, this is out of the question! You're all giddy, and I have an early meeting with Peter..."

"Take off my dress!" she ordered. "Now!"

"Oh, I see. Is that how they do it in the books?"

"To hell with those blasted doorstops!"

Elizabeth reached for the thick tome and threw it at the wall. The book's ancient spine shattered and disjointed pages flew all over the room.

* * *

The next day, Thomas was in soaring spirits, as if he'd grown wings overnight, feeling light on his feet and sharp in his thought. Although he still had to make this terrible decision, life no longer seemed tedious and horrible. He held on to a faint hope the unpleasantness with the Procurator could be resolved painlessly. After all, he'd faced so many hopeless situations throughout his life, and he'd always managed to find a way through them!

That evening was the royal ball, over which Marie had labored for so long. To Thomas's relief, she no longer sobbed every time they met and behaved almost the same as before, if somewhat coolly. He continued to love her as a devoted friend, seeing she was no longer suffered was important to him.

Since the large gathering presented many possible threats, Thomas, who'd grown rather paranoid, forbade Elizabeth to attend. Also her presence could cause great distress to Marie, who'd just recovered from the heartbreak.

The brilliant throne room was strewn with rose petals and flooded with the light of thousands of candles. No one had ever seen it so elegantly decorated. Colorful ribbons coiled around marble columns, cascading fabrics hung on the walls, and bouquets of fresh wildflowers were displayed everywhere. There were two orchestras, acrobats and dancers, and the servants in dazzling white livery. They delighted the knights and their ladies with cool drinks and refined appetizers!

Modest by nature, Thomas became a little uncomfortable watching this feast from his throne. People could still remark on the king's simplicity; he wore an unassuming knight's jacket with a glittering gold token pinned on the heart. But so much effort and so many resources had been frivolously spent on this

occasion. And this at a time when thousands were struggling to survive and famine was on its way.

Still, two hundred guests were immersing themselves in the atmosphere of days gone by and twirling about the dance floor to the merry music of the orchestra. Thomas couldn't help himself at times, laughing at the horned hennins, the men's long pointy shoes, and their ridiculous multicolored stockings. He felt he were still a young boy who'd just arrived in the big city. Marie, on the other hand, playing the considerate hostess, spent the evening rushing about. She wore a flashy blue dress with the long train. She didn't dance with anyone, only seeing to their needs, making sure to speak a little with all of them. Although the young king hardly knew even a quarter of those present, he rejoiced at such a splendid turnout for his first ever ball. It was one of the best in Parthagon's history.

The celebration was so skillfully organized that Thomas remarked on it to Alain, who, along with Kalitza, was guarding the throne.

"Perhaps this is what she should do with her life."

"Throw royal balls?"

"And other similar events. I really think she could pull it off."

"I couldn't agree more! She's clearly got a knack for such things." Alain smiled. "By the way, where is Elizabeth?"

"Have you got it in for Marie for some reason?" Thomas laughed. "It'd be too dangerous. And unnecessary at the present moment."

"I'd consider some other occupation for the former queen, Your Highness." Kalitza softly entered the conversation. "Women are unpredictable creatures. She'll never forget her grievance. Sooner or later, it will come out. All it takes is a slight shift in mood."

“You think so, Peter?”

“I’ve lived a long life. I stand behind my words.”

“Alain, I keep forgetting to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever tried to seduce a girl by telling her the future of humankind depends on her going to bed with you?”

“Of course. That’s what I always tell them,” replied Niels Dohr’s most faithful student.

“Really? You’re serious?”

“Is there any other way?”

Marie joined the two friends, looking happy and content to be in her element. For the first time in a long while she radiated confidence, freshness, and high spirits.

“But where is Elizabeth? Didn’t you invite her to the ball, Your Highness?”

“I didn’t think it was a good idea. We were just...”

“Oh, please! Get that poor skinny girl down here,” Marie said mellifluously. She exchanged a glance with Alain. “She’s spent her whole life locked up and here you are keeping her away from society again!”

Something churned within Thomas, and apprehension began to gnaw at his heart. Why were they so interested in her all of a sudden? Were they up to something? At any rate, he was exceedingly glad his priceless other half had stayed within the bedchamber’s safety.

Then time almost stopped as the door swung open and the divine Elizabeth sailed into the throne room. She wore, as she had at the last ball, the same gorgeous dress with the translucent lace corset, only now it was blindingly scarlet. Ecstatically happy, with a fire in her eyes, she swirled, basking in the universal attention and admiration, blonde ringlets

streaming from under her gold diadem, her thin neck and wrists adorned with shining, delicate chains.

And her guard was nowhere to be seen.

Thomas's vision blurred. He rose and began to approach her, so as to quickly get himself in the position to protect her. Then his insides dropped to the floor.

When Elizabeth approached an elderly man in a black coat, with a familiar proud face, he threw his dance partner aside and whipped a fiercely curved dagger from her multilayered yellow dress. The sharp and merciless blade flashed in the air before Thomas could get his blaster out of its hidden holster and burn a hole through the heartless stranger's chest, killing a young couple who'd been in the blue beam's path.

Crimson blood filled the dance floor around Elizabeth. She fell onto the rose petals. General panic ensued. People were shouting and fleeing, but ashen Thomas could only see the surprised eyes of his beloved, who was choking and looking at her bloody hands and chest in bewilderment. He ran to her, wanting to hold her, but instead he received a sharp jab to the jaw and fell dumbfounded beside her. "Don't touch her!" yelled Kalitza with fury.

"What? You?"

"Moron! She needs help!"

The chancellor pressed the scarlet dress's hem to Elizabeth's wounded neck and chest to stem the bleeding. She seemed to be falling asleep in his arms. Gritting his teeth, Thomas could only watch this horror and think how his oversight had doomed not only the love of his life but the future of mankind.

Then came the urgent call to the Procurator, who, in a fit of rage, almost climbed out of the screen to strangle the dazed king. Because of earlier unusual circumstances, the Perfect

Society had decided, in the event of Elizabeth's death, project Celesia would be immediately shut down and all the adult inhabitants of the island exterminated. To prevent this, Elizabeth had to be walled off from any danger—chief among them: the people.

* * *

Two weeks went by. Late one night, in a dark forest on Parthagon's outskirts, the dusty earth was shaken, and the roused birds rushed into the pit of dark sky, foretelling a grand disaster. And indeed, the tramping of hoofs accompanied by evil growls grew closer to the moss-covered Wall. The new leader of Arogdor led this army. He had a fluttering scarlet cape and donned a horned helmet and impenetrable armor.

A week earlier, General Ivar Javer had reached his brethren, bringing them the devastating news. The duplicitous king had betrayed them and was preparing to annihilate the conquered city on the volcano. Having discovered the king's base plan, the hero of Arogdor had miraculously escaped his prison cell. However, he did lose 200 soldiers who'd been living peacefully in the enemy capital. They'd been lured into the food stores, locked up in there, and then burned alive. The angry Arogdorians jumped at the chance to avenge their dead comrades and repay the enemy for their humiliating defeat. They gladly embarked on yet another bloody campaign for their beloved general's sake. His beautiful young wife was expecting an heir in the dark-gray castle at the crater's center.

And now a sea of mutants was moving faster and faster toward Parthagon from the north and south, cutting off any possibility of escape. The unguarded gates creaked open,

allowing a path to the capital's heart. The infuriated monsters broke into the city without resistance, blades and swords, axes and daggers flashing in all their hands. The city was filled with screaming, groaning, grinding, pummeling, pleading, and crackling fires.

Great Parthagon's streets would overflow with blood and be littered with innards and severed limbs. But the city would not drown in the carnage—it would prevail! The Arogdorian command had made some errors, and almost all the mutants locked within the city would have their throats slit just as they were about to celebrate an easy victory. And then the king's subjects, hungry for vengeance, would in turn march on Arogdor. And so on, and so forth.

* * *

One hot, sunny day in May, Thomas sat in an armchair in the northern tower. He was chatting with the Procurator, who was wearing his characteristic black turtleneck. A breeze stirred a pile of papers on the table. The young king periodically glanced at the neighboring tower where Elizabeth had once resided like a bird in a gilded cage. She was on her way to a swift recovery and had even resumed reading high-minded novels.

There was a sad undertone to their love story. Thomas had realized they'd not live out the rest of their days together—as much as he might love her and as happy as they might be. Eventually, he'd grow old and shuffle off this mortal coil, while she'd live on, as young and beautiful as she was now. A few centuries later, Thomas would become but a pale memory in her long and eventful life. However, that was the distant future, and

there was too much living to be done in the meantime. Every time he thought of his beloved, a warm smile came to his lips.

Thomas had recently realized he had no more enemies. Not that he'd destroyed them all, but no one fitted that description. He tried to think of one person he hated. Until recently, he couldn't stand the entire north-dwelling half of Celesia's population and a good number of Parthagonians to boot: old Newdon, Javer, countless four-handed mutants. And now? He could identify with all of them. Especially Marie and Alain, who were rotting away in prison, awaiting public execution. Could he blame them for thinking Elizabeth was a witch? He could even understand the brave Carl Linn, who'd been already beheaded for trying to organize another coup. Everyone had their own role to play and was the protagonist of their own life—acting for their own good or even selflessly to save others.

Did the former villager fail to think of any villains because he'd become the epitome of evil? Or had he finally transcended to that level Albert had once described to him, wherein everyone understood the game's rules and were just trading pawns?

"Thomas!" the Procurator's hoarse voice interrupted his reveries. Behind his back, on the screen, he glimpsed patches of clear blue sky and skyscrapers covered in lush greenery. "Are you listening to me?"

"My sincere apologies, Procurator!"

"So, how did your selection process work before?"

"Those children more gifted at Phasing would be separated. Only they would be allowed to enter the army and have offspring, who would then attend the same school—starting another cycle of selection. Our job was to guarantee a high mortality rate among the knights and the mutants while getting them into the habit of promiscuity. We also promoted complex

mutations among women, especially in Arogdor, so only those most successful at it would catch the warrior class's eye. And thus, every new generation came closer to producing Elizabeth."

"Brilliant! It's a shame you had to lop off his head!"

"Albert's? Yes, well."

"We would've had to wait a million years to get the same result."

"There is an even quicker way to go about it."

"Do tell?"

"First, I have another question. Would I be right to assume that villagers are naturally unable to enter the Phase, and not because they don't attend school?"

"Either they can't do it at all, or they can only enter it with great difficulty, as I can."

"Thank you." Thomas smiled.

The young king was thinking of his mother and her mysterious past. It would stand to reason she'd been part of the selection program, but had had to leave Parthagon for unknown reasons. Only that would explain how her children had inherited the ability to enter the Phase, albeit not as easily as many of the two capitals' indigenous residents.

"Daydreaming again? Now repeat back to me what the next stage will involve."

"Forgive me. Elizabeth's descendants, those who inherit her target characteristics, will form a separate caste. When this caste becomes large enough to avoid close kinship, only members of this group will be allowed to have children. Among these carriers of the target genes, we'll cultivate a large number of progenies, and all others will gradually die out. This until all of Celesia's population will carry the necessary genes. Then you

will gradually use them to repopulate your own ranks. Is that it?"

"Did it take you long to memorize?"

"One day."

"Wow, you're fast!"

"And a week for Kalitza to explain what it all means."

"Thank you for your honesty, Your Highness." The blond man winked.

Thomas found it eerie to imagine that Procurators had been talking to his predecessors in just this way for centuries. And now, in this crucial transitional moment, fate had entrusted him with mankind's future.

"But how does Elizabeth's Phase differ from mine? In what sense is it easier for her?" On the table, Thomas traced the singed outline of his palm. "I'm afraid to ask her directly, in case she gets suspicious."

"Yes, it's best if she's kept in the dark about all this." The Procurator put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "But as for you, aren't you sick of making all that effort every time to get into the Phase?"

"I guess it's become pretty tiresome after twenty years."

"How about a few hundred years?"

"I'm already abandoning my mutation."

"But, Thomas, you will still have to watch your age."

"Well, I might decide one day to just get old and die."

"Exactly! Whereas she has to do practically nothing. It's that easy for her."

"But how? That's what I don't understand."

"The Phase comes over her practically every time she goes to bed or wakes up. All she has to do is take advantage of those moments for her benefit and pleasure."

“So—just use the Phase.”

“You have to struggle every time to get into the Phase, and so you can’t use its possibilities to the fullest. For Elizabeth the Phase occurs for her naturally while falling asleep, waking up, or dreaming. Just think—she needs only a few seconds in the morning to find herself in the Phase! And even in her dreams, she’s aware she’s dreaming, almost every night. Without using any techniques. Have you ever had anything like that happen to you?”

“It’s hard to even imagine.”

“That’s what I’m saying!”

“Wait a minute.” Thomas frowned. “How are we to recognize a person who has the target set of genes? I didn’t notice this in Elizabeth the whole time I’ve known her.”

The Procurator swiveled in his chair and stared out the glass wall to some point in the distance.

“It’s easy. First: the superior humans of the future will sometimes realize they’re asleep while dreaming—without having to do anything. Second: when falling asleep or waking up, they will periodically feel like they’re falling, floating, or being pulled somewhere involuntarily. Third: they will sometimes vividly feel as if they’ve woken up, and they’ll go about their daily business only to actually wake up later. Four: as they’re falling asleep or waking up, they may find themselves feeling paralyzed. There are other signs too. Lots of them. But those are the main four.”

Thomas jotted down the Procurator’s words and lifted his eyes back toward the screen. “Do they all have to coincide?”

“Even one is enough, but they usually go together. It all depends on their lifestyles and their levels of education in childhood.”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“Kalitza will help you out.”

“So we won’t have to teach them the Phase?”

“We all have the ability of speech, don’t we? But if no one teaches you how to speak when you’re an infant, you’ll be capable of nothing more than vaguely expressive bleating when you grow up. It’s the same thing: the Phase will be an inborn ability for them, but they’ll still have to learn how to use it. And the sooner they start learning, the better—with every year that goes by, the techniques become harder to master. A grown man couldn’t learn to talk if he hadn’t been exposed to speech during his infancy. The same goes for the Phase—to a lesser degree, perhaps. That’s why kids begin learning it at the school from the tender age of two. You understand?”

“What can I say?” Thomas sighed mournfully. “I guess we’ll have to find a new Newdon.”

“Sometimes new things boggle our minds, but when you consider their meaning and potential, you realize there’s nothing there but empty noise.” The Procurator jumped up from the chair and began pacing. “And sometimes you discover something seemingly insignificant, but when you examine its potential, your brain explodes. That’s what’s happened here! It seems as if Elizabeth simply has a natural ability to easily access the Phase—no big deal! But she represents a new stage of humanity, a being who can achieve so much more than us—and even you.”

“So she can mutate more easily?”

“She can do everything more easily, Thomas. For us, the Phase is a complex skill hardly accessible and only to rare individuals. For you, it’s not completely natural, but it’s an ability you’ve been able to master. But for Elizabeth it’s an

innate gift that comes over her many times a day whether she wants it or not. We have reached considerable heights, but her descendants will go so much further. These healthy and happy people will live forever young in the immortal Absolute Society. They'll have reached the summit of evolution. What greater dream can there be? We can only envy them.”

Thomas grew pensive. He realized some things were beyond his understanding. “When do you expect to get the necessary results and start extracting children?”

“Hundreds of years. A millennium perhaps. That will depend on how well you and I, and our successors, do our jobs. But we'll always try to do everything in our power to speed up the process. Then we'll think about other goals, on other orders of complexity. Either way, project Celesia is something akin to the cradle of civilization. Someday all people will see the trace of Elizabeth in their genes. Perhaps they'll give her a different name: Evita, Evelyn, Hava. You understand?”

“Barely.” The country-bumpkin-turned-king shrugged.

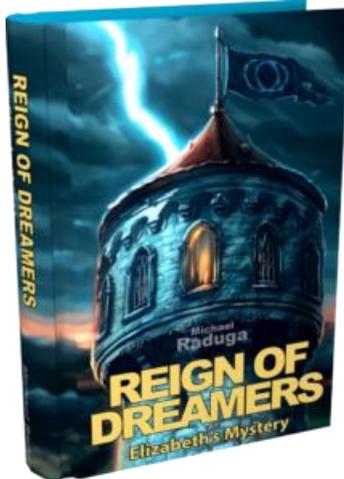
The Procurator stopped pacing. He put his hands on the table and his perfect face grew to the size of the gigantic screen in Thomas's council room:

“Listen carefully. I'll tell you something else.” He filled his lungs with air. “Eventually, Elizabeth's progeny will inherit the earth. These superior beings who will be far more perfect than you and me. But the most important thing is that they be aware of the gifts they possess. You understand?”

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