

JESUS' PAGANS  
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## CHAPTER 1

The slab of dead meat hung from the rope, swinging like a pendulum to the strumming of the jester's lute. It was a happy melody, the feast to follow to be even more joyous for the royal party in attendance and their guests. "Good fresh meat," King Augustus smiled through his overgrown white beard still reeking of sweat from the battle the day before, and from the conquest of women acquired from such that night. The malshaped monarch proudly stuck out his overgrown belly over his short, stocky, knob-kneed legs. "It has been a long time since my army and people had good fresh meat to feast upon," he proclaimed.

Augustus' men agreed, some of them anyway. They had been walking behind the King's horse for two hard weeks, the last three days of it a forced march through the worst kind of terrain the Northern Woods could provide. Their numbers had been decimated by half during the campaign to rid their land of barbarians, and all of them had been well-versed on the benefits of becoming Christian. It was a strange new religion for Augustus too, but one which suited his New Order, and the serfs who he considered his responsibility. Besides, the King owed Jesus for his defeat of the marauders from the North, and protection from the slanted eyed Asian hordes reported to be on the way from the East. Still, Augustus was as much of a Pagan as his father was, and practical about how to make the day after a bloody battle a bloody great time for those who he could pull out of it.

"Sing, jester, sing!" Augustus smiled at the lute player whose voice was still fresh. "Dance, brave comrades, dance!" he beckoned his soldiers whose feet were still blistered. "Repent!" he grunted at the slab of meat.

All obeyed, except for the slab of dead meat, which was of course dead, all except for the eyes. They were still open, staring back at Augustus with more vitality than any whore he had ever purchased, and more defiance than any rebel prisoner he had ever captured. Then again, there was Jesus up in the sky, or more dangerously, in the minds and imaginations of the army Augustus had converted so that he could more easily command them. Augustus pulled out his knife, staring into the eyes of the corpse, hearing things from his mouth that he knew were only reaching his ears. "Stop that, Johan!" he grunted under a hushed breath. "You're dead, and will never be resurrected. And to be sure, my men will eat your body and drink your rancid traitor blood!"

"The body of Christ," former Pagan Alchemist, now Abbott Bartholomew, asked his former chieftan. "That is what some would say we are eating," he continued, looking behind him at the mob of starving peasants who were rounded up to see what happened to Messiahs who tried to save them.

"That would make us Roman, then," King Augustus said, recalling that his new name was not the one he was born with. "Would the old gods be good with that?"

Bartholomew pondered the matter, stroking the deep wrinkles in his long, ancient face. One which had been that way for as long as the forty-five year old Augustus or any of his contemporaries still alive could remember.

“Well!” Augustus barked at the old man, noticing that there were more angry growls from the peasants than mournful cries. “What do the old gods say about what we’ve done? Will they still protect us?”

“As long as we protect ourselves,” Bartholomew offered with a slight bow.

Meanwhile, Johan the Rebel still stared at Augustus from the other side of that line which no man, or god, had been able to come back from. No matter where King Augustus went, the eyes on the lifeless corpse followed him.

“You know we had to do this,” the new Abbott informed his sovereign in the manner of a mentor, and physician. “Just like you had to have me shave the crown of my head,” he continued, rubbing the top of what was three months ago a completely-hair-bearing scalp. “I will miss having a long horse’s mane on my head almost as much as our people will miss making bargains with the old gods, but this is a new time, for new measures, and Johan---“

“---Would have pulled us back into the savages we were,” Augustus admitted. “Which is why we must tear apart his flesh, and make every man, woman and child in our jurisdiction eat it. And if they refuse, we cut out their tongues.” He turned around to the master cooks below who were collecting whatever vegetables, grains and animal meats that could be pillaged from the villages that had given Johan shelter. “A piece of the Rebel in everyone’s plate!” Augustus declared to the soldiers, who cheered him. And to the peasants who became abruptly silent. Particularly when Augustus carved a portion of flesh from his enemy’s sword arm, and placed it in his mouth, chewing it with a wide, victorious grin. But Augustus’ taste for human flesh was not what it used to be.

“You want some salt with that?” Bartholomew mused as he saw nausea in Augustus’ face.

“Your portion will be spiced with hemlock!” Augustus warned his subordinate.

“For every poison, I do have a remedy, you know,” the old man who knew he had lived too long already noted, sadly. “But to die the way Socrates did, would not be so bad.”

“But, dear Abbott, this is a GOOD day!” Augustus said as he swallowed his portion of ‘Johan’ flesh, making mince meat of the rest of the arm and throwing pieces of it into each of the eating pots, a line of ‘hungry’ peasants now herded in front of each of them. “Today I, King Augustus, invite you to my feast!” he proclaimed to his congregation. “Tomorrow, you will eat well too. Whatever you want! I make a bargain with you! All of you! I allow you to put whatever you wish into your mouths so you

and your children don't starve, and I say what comes out of them! I declare this to be fair, as did the old gods, and now as the New God says as well!"

But the creation of the gods, and the One True God, had something else to say about it. The clear blue sky gave way to black clouds, then thunder, then lightening with a bolt that went straight to King Augustus' royal dagger. It fell out of his hand, onto the ground, brightly shining. All eyes stared at it with terror, and awe, save one.

A girl of twelve years of age, by the best estimates, emerged from the crowd of peasants. Lidya by name, the village idiot by reputation, her mother's accident by birth. Her twig-like legs bent with each step, but stood proudly when she picked up the dagger, felt the ornate carving on the handle, then gazed at its sharp blade with fascination.

The crowd of peasants looked at her with fascination as well, and awe. One by one, they kneeled in homage, followed by the lower ranks of the soldiers, most of them being conscripted peasants themselves. Then the middle ranks, who had been paid with gold rather than bread or the sparing of the life of a close relative.

"Well, do something about this!" King Augustus growled at his new Abbott through gritted teeth and a still confident grin. "You're a magician, aren't you?"

"Not powerful enough for what I want to do, but perhaps what I have to do," Bartholomew smirked. With that he walked through the crowd worshipping the mutant girl who didn't know she was to soon be elected Queen. He placed his hand on the child, on the lower portion of the child's neck, at just the right spot, causing her to faint. As she fell to the ground, he grabbed hold of the dagger before it hit the ground. He threw it back up to Augustus, who caught it by the blade, not letting his subjects see his bleeding palms.

"Rise up, on your feet!" the ancient Alchemist and present-day Abbott commanded the commoners, well aware of who was watching him. "Beware of false gods and goddesses!" he continued, as he allowed himself to once again be seen as a god himself. "And how they turn innocent, kind girls into demons!" He took Lydia into his arms and carried her away. "I will do my best to cure her of this affliction. You must all cure yourself of your own."

Bartholomew took Lydia into the woods, walking deeper and deeper into them until he disappeared from the view of Augustus, the crowd, and even the still-Alive eyes of Johan the Rebel.

All eyes turned to Augustus now, and the manner of feasting. He looked at Johan again, and took everything into consideration. "Alright, you win, for today!" he growled at the corpse. "We feed you to the crows instead of your people!" The restored Monarch turned to his people, some of them bowing to him because they feared him, others because they needed him, and others because they admired him. All three motivations worked.

“Be it known that all who oppose the Goodness of this new kingdom, and the God Above who ordains it, shall suffer in this manner!” he said regarding Johan. With one nod of his shaking and terrified head, the proceedings continued, close enough according to plan.

The jester played his lute. The soldiers sang. The peasant girls danced. The king ordered mutton to be put into the cooking pots. And the crows got to dine on Rebel Stew in the woods. But not without some protests from a fair-skinned young woman whose face was drenched with tears of grief and anger. With all the strength in her thin, mud-caked arms, she throw rocks at the hungry birds while the guards in charge of the corpse pickled what was left of their minds with wine.

“You bastard, how could you do this to me!” Bridgetta screamed at what was left of Johan, the man who she had loved more than life itself, exhausting herself with each stone she threw at him. “You knew it was suicide to fight Augustus. And you did it anyway! Why?”

“Because he had to,” an old woman of Bartholomew’s age but not his current religious ideology pleaded to Bridgetta. She held back Bridgetta’s arm from grabbing hold of another rock with her arms, while giving what she hoped would be considered the ‘evil eye’ to the guards so they would not even think about raping the young widow. “Johan did what he did for us, Bridgetta!” she said. “And our people!”

“What about his family?” Bridgetta growled. “He cares about his people and his reputation in stories around the campfire more than his family?”

“He left you enough gold for you and the children, Bridgetta. More than what most of the villagers have, or ever had.”

“And I’m supposed to share that gold with everyone else now, Ronita?”

“Some of it, perhaps,” the old woman said, choosing her words carefully, gagging the tone of her voice. And hoping that none of the new Christian King’s guards understood, nor recognized, the ancient, and now Royally forbidden, tongue she and her younger ‘Earth Sister’ spoke. “But please, don’t be angry at Johan for sacrificing his life.”

“Throwing it away, charging on his horse and saying ‘victory or death’, against an Army that he knew would kill him!”

“And would see that he was braver than anyone else,” Ronita admonished.

“More cowardly!” Bridgetta blasted back. “He didn’t have the courage to live as a common man, in a common village, with me. He had to be a hero!”

“Some men are not satisfied with the world as it is, and who rules it, my dear, fair and still beautiful young Earth Daughter.”

“Not so beautiful anymore,” Bridgetta blasted back. She pulled out a knife, grabbing hold of her long red hair, and held it to her scalp. The soldiers took notice, motioning for her to do it.

“She will not give you the satisfaction, Sirs,” Ronita informed the guards, respectfully, in the official language which was now to be spoken in Augustus’ new kingdom. “And neither will I,” she continued, pocketing the knife inside her dress, taking a now emotionally-drained Bridgetta out of the woods, leaving her beloved to the mercy and delight of the hungry crows.

The two woman argued amongst themselves, loudly, in their own language. The soldiers paid no mention to it. But a set of eyes peeking out of the bushes did. “You know, both of these two women do have a point. To kill yourself can be an act of courage or cowardess. And no one really knows which is so, except, perhaps the one who has done it. And the One, or ones, who he goes to perhaps doesn’t care which is which. Or so we hope anyway.”

The little girl who Bartholomew was addressing didn’t understand his words, but she trusted his motivations. Such was all he needed for the job at hand.



## CHAPTER 2

Weeks, months, then years passed, and the ten year old girl started to blossom into a woman atop a steep hill most not accustomed to heights called a mountain, sheltered from the elements by thickly branched pine trees, abandoned buildings and the 'big open' sky. Lydia's playmates for three years either walked on four legs or flew with their forelimbs. But there was one friend who suited all of her needs, and wants. Bartholomew, who renamed himself 'Bat' for her purposes, had kept her away from people in her own village, and for that matter, in every village. When Bat was down below on 'Abbott' business, she was officially in charge of "Father Earth Mountain", named such by her new Ward. Indeed she didn't know what a ward was, or what he was supposed to protect her from. The jeers and insults of villagers who feared she was 'touched' by something they called 'evil'? The king's soldiers who kept coming around with sharp spears and drawn swords asking as to her whereabouts? The two mounds of flesh growing out of both sides of her chest which Bart had no clear explanation as to how she should handle them? The identity of the parents who gave life to the distorted body she had three years ago which seemed to be becoming more normal, and strong, as a result of the special herbs from buried pots which Bat had put into her gruel every morning and her broth every night? None of the answers to those and other questions came from Bat or the books he taught her to read. As the Real explanations for that which confused, scared and fascinated her, all he would say 'you will write them in your own book yourself, when it is time.'

That 'time' thing was something which confused Lydia most as she looked at the sundial on yet another day when the clouds did their best to prevent the sun from casting a clear shadow. She had been on Father Earth Mountain for a long time, and she had aged a lot. But as for Bat, he hadn't aged at all. She always remembered him being old, and recalled that he didn't age at all like people in the villages, or within the castle walls. Usually, the greyer and whiter someone's hair got, the weaker their arms and legs became. And when all the hair was gone, the back curled up like a snail, then after a few days of coughing or letting out large amounts of loose material from between their buttocks, the bearer of such fell on the ground, never to get up again. But not so with Bat. As his eyes became more weary and worried, he became stronger, in body, mind and spirit.

A wind blew up from the south side of the mountain, blowing away enough of the clouds so that she could see the village where she was said to be born, the village where she grew up, and the village she was sold to after it was discovered that she was 'special' as well as excessively homely. Beyond it lay the castle, now containing even more buildings and more soldiers and more laborers milling about inside. They seemed well fed, and happy, but not really satisfied with themselves. Not like Bat who seemed satisfied with most everything, despite the fact that he almost never smiled. She thought once more about seeing what the world below the Mountain was like, and walked towards the south slope. She stopped as the Earth disappeared below her feet. She pulled back, seeing what to her was a big cliff below her toes. An eagle landed on a tree which had somehow learned to grow into rather than on top of the mountain.

“Can you take me down there?” she asked the bird. “If you do, I won’t tell Bat about it. It can be our secret. Just like the secret tunnel he must be using to go down the mountain, or to bring people to the bottom of it who look so small from here.”

Aside from Lydia’s fear of heights, there was another issue regarding the eagle. “I know you seem too small for the job, but I can make myself smaller so you can carry me. Though making myself small is something Bat made me promise him that I would never do again.”

The eagle seemed to understand the outer and inner meaning of Lydia’s plea to him. He was just a child growing into an adult himself, after all, and to Lydia, it seemed that all children growing into adults grew largest between the ears, faster than they could even imagine. But growing a mind, and entrusting it to a good friend, brought much loneliness to the girl. She yearned for people, even those below her who had ridiculed her for being feeble in body, defective in speech and slow in thinking. She recalled that it wasn’t so bad at the time, but now those recollections of ‘things that just happened’ were turned into bitter memories which could not be turned sweet, no matter how much sweet fruit Bat put into her porridge.

“So, you do understand then,” Lydia smiled at the self-assured eagle resting on the knarled tree limb shaking in the wind. It cawed something back which felt familiar, but ominous.

“Yes, but I can’t tell you yet,” the winged messenger seemed to say as it flew into the enormity of the sky, leaving Lydia on the mountaintop which had now become her life.

The bell on the roof of the ‘main house’ called her back to her studies. Lydia had no idea how Bat had made it go off at what felt like a regular interval. Three times a day, it summoned her to those books that made her mind think faster, deeper, and at a pace that kept getting faster each day. Where it would lead? Perhaps the one she would write herself, but not today.

## CHAPTER 3

Though Bridgetta's village was where Johan had been fed, loved and secretly married, it was spared from the torch. King Augustus wanted to make an example of it in another way. As Jesus did, he decided to 'forgive them their trespasses' and create a kingdom of his own, where he was Lord and Master. It was simpler than he planned, since all the people really seemed to want was bread to feed their stomachs, a warm body beside them at night after their labors, and one night a week of celebratory mischief so that they would forget about Revolution. Strong wine helped, as did the new concept that all could be forgiven if one confessed one's sins after they were committed, with entry into Heaven for a bit of a tribute to the King's new Church. All of the workers were paid just enough to keep them satiated, with the promise of a private feast with the King for the team who did the best job. It kept everyone busy, as long as no one won more than twice and the feasts were scheduled at three month intervals.

Ronita observed the announcement of another winning 'team' from her abode, which was now well away from the village. The location of such was by the King's proclamation, and her own choice. She tilled the crops in the patch of land now only large enough to keep herself fed, feeling the rain soak deeper through her coat. It was more tattered than intact, but the feel of its leather and the softness of the fur inside it reminded her of better times. Times when religion was about Spirit rather than ritual. She had no idea if the old gods were still listening. The wind said 'yes', but the rain said 'no'. Bridgetta said it didn't matter.

Ronita gazed once again at Bridgetta's grave, which the widow of the Revolutionary hero Johan had entered as her own resting place, by her own hand. It was adorned with a Cross so that the soldiers would pull out her bones, a circle inside a square representing the Four Directions that would keep safe, wherever she was. Suicide was now a crime in the new religion, punishable by either being condemned to hell or to becoming a wandering ghost amidst the land of the living. Ronita found herself believing in that fabrication. Her mind knew it was a fabrication, but her tired soul was running out of explanations to the contrary. Indeed, she was tired of living herself, welcoming anything beyond what 'life' presented now. And not because of the way her bones ached from the time she got up till when she tried to go to sleep at night. Or the way her ears kept hearing things that were not audible to those able to become successes in King Augustus' New and Improved neo-Roman Empire. Or even the way her eyes saw more black fog than bright light, even on the sunniest of days. No, Ronita felt the soul of the Earth dying, an omen of which lay before her feet.

"Please, rise, and celebrate Life! Reach for the Light!" she beckoned the seeds of the carrots, onions and turnups which sprouted weak and unenthusiastic stalks that bowed downward. With the same architecture to their broken backs as the villagers exhibited with King Augustus now.

Ronita felt something around her neck, choking her breath away if she did not attend to it. She grabbed hold of the weather-faded leather strap and the hand-carved

still-shiny boar tooth attached to it. Its design was simple, yet elegant, given to her by a special man who was once young, and now very dead. Its language was ancient, and now forbidden by law to speak, or feel.

“Olif!” she said, addressing the memory of the man Augustus once was when a chieftan more concerned with his own people than the favors of a powerful partner in Rome. “I love you too,” she smiled, reading the inscription. “And want to love you again. And remember the night when we feasted on the boar you slew to honor the gods, and to please me.”

A tear fell down Ronita’s deeply wrinkled face. It burnt her flesh, but warmed her heart. A heart that was broken, but still hoping for the impossible. Such perhaps was the only thing that made her survival as a bannished, infirmed, weak and despised old hag still possible.

## CHAPTER 4

The young monk's penmanship was perfect but his understanding of what the words meant was virtually absent. Such suited his position, and purpose. Brother James dipped his feather pen into the ink well and requested another piece of parchment. "May I draw you a picture this time?" he requested of his supervisor after taking down every word he said exactly as he had said it. "Or perhaps see a copy of the Book of books. The one about the man who tried to change the world, gave his life, then was resurrected from the dead to awaken all souls who are sleeping?"

"I hope you are referring to Jesus and not Johan," the slender-faced Regent from the South grunted. Bishop LeBlanc stroked his freshly shaved chin and trimmed mustache, examining the work of the young calligrapher, who didn't seem to take this new job any more seriously than his religious vows. "Tell me," he said. "If you had a choice of dying of boredom in this monastery, or by a spear on the battlefield, which would you pick?"

"I have already chosen," the young monk said, bowing his head.

"And do you renounce the gods of your fathers?" LeBlanc asked, lifting his chissled chin up.

"Yes, I do," the lad replied with eyes looking downward.

"And the goddesses of your mothers, as if women ever knew how the world works or should?" the Bishop mused.

"Yes, I do," the reply with a civil and obedient chuckle.

"And you accept this version of the story which you wrote as fact. As truth. As the way it was and shall always be remembered from this day forward?" LeBlanc proclaimed.

Brother James remained silent for a moment, which was one moment too long for LeBlanc's patience. He pulled out a whip from under his frock and lashed out at the calligrapher whose art only four years ago honored the gods of the earth rather than the Deities of Rome.

"I accept the story as true," the young man proclaimed, again and again, as his new master's whip beat his flesh raw, exposing raw muscle than glistening bone. "I accept the story as true," he repeated, again and again.

"No you don't!" LeBlanc said as he continued the lesson. "None of you bastard barbarians do."

“They will,” an older man with a soft voice prophesied as he came into the room, the door having been left open. “But only if the story is told in pictures as well as words,” Abbott Bartholomew said as he looked over the freshly written text. He took the whip away from the Bishop, and placed a fresh pen into the hand of the calligrapher. “The only pictures which will be believed will be those made by this man, Your Grace,” he said with a large bow, and eyes turned upward at the Bishop.

“Why should I let this cowardly liar paint anything, much less keep his hands, Abbott Bartholomew?” LaBlanc barked.

“Because God gave you a mind, and a Mission, Your Grace” Bartholomew said. He rubbed a lotion from his pocket onto the young man’s wounds, then messaging the beaten monk’s hands so that the fingers the good Bishop had pushed back could move in more functional directions. “And if you want people to see the rebel Johan as an instrument of evil, you must be seen an instrument of wisdom. Which inevitably becomes an instrument of good, and mercy.”

Bartholomew read over the manuscript. He nodded his head, then made a few philosophical grunts, ‘hmmm’ing’ a lot. He was not pleased.

“The words came out of his mouth!” a very terrified Brother James said, accusingly pointing at the Bishop. “By all that must be holy and truthful, I swear it!”

“The tale of how Johan the Rebel was the...Devil?” Bartholomew said, paraphrasing the three parchment sermon the young monk had written into one sentence of his own.

“The Anti-Christ, actually,” the Bishop smiled. “Who appears as a Savior to those who cannot see who and what he really is.”

Bartholomew looked into the eyes of the Bishop and said nothing. He couldn’t. His Earth Magic was not powerful enough for this new brand of Demon. These well-armed and cleverly-manipulative visitors from the South who came bearing the Cross and the promise of Eternal Life in the next life if one destroyed the inner vitality of one’s own soul, denying the True Light within all beings.

“You were thinking something, Abbott Bartholomew,” the Bishop surmised, as he walked the old healer around the room like a trapped dog. “Yes, you are always thinking instead of feeling. Because what you are feeling is both wrong, and prideful. You are wise enough to be humble to those who have power over you. And as for the name you had before Salvation came to these mountains----“

“---it is forgotten. And will never be spoken within these walls,” the Ancient Magician interjected, his back feeling the coldness of the wall, the sharpness of the rocks from which it was made.

The Bishop held neither spear, nor sword. But behind him was an army neither Bartholomew, nor his alter-persona 'Bat', could defeat, not now anyway. How he wished he had less intelligence than Johan, which perhaps would lead to more courage. Then again, he had a kingdom to save, and an orphaned girl to raise. Perhaps she could set things right. Someone had to. It certainly wouldn't be Brother James, whose colorfully-expressive Native name was as dead as he would soon be.

## CHAPTER 5

Captain Elasandro wore a bigger cross than any of the men under his command, but he knew enough not to take it seriously. The Islamic seal or the Wickin's Pentangle fit just as easily around his stiff, well-muscled neck, the Herclean chest underneath it making him look like the hero of whatever King, god, or Deity he chose to fight for. And though barely twenty-five years of age, he carried himself off like an accomplished one twice his age. Though born a commoner, he never bowed the knee to any king until his purse was well supplied with gold, and until his ever-scheming brain had a plan in mind whereby he could vow allegiance to that king's adversary should anything go wrong in said regent's battleplans.

In that time of transition between faiths, few really knew what they really did believe, except perhaps at the time of dying. Such came early to most of the men in Elasandro's command, but seldom to those above him in rank or economic stature. Bravery in battle came easily to Elarsandro, for reasons which came to him all too easily. He had never experienced fear, horror, shock nor remorse of being on the wrong side of a sharp sword or blood-soaked battleaxe. He also attributed his good fortune in the collective human misfortune of war to tales his grandmother told him about being descended from Alexander the Great. But there was one thing that Elasandro did fear---laughter from a woman. And particularly this one, who stared at him from amongst the most recent group of captured women to be sold to rich or influential men in the a newly-set up outdoor tavern set up to fed Augustus' newly-enlarged Army.

According to the collar locked around her neck, Glendina was a slave, her neck spared from the chopping block at the time of her capture because of the body below it which still remained beautiful in the manner of a vestal virgin no matter men had taken their most passionate pleasures with her.

"What are you laughing at?" Elasandro said as the young woman giggled at him with a girlish laugh, amused at some fault of his own which of which he was not aware. Was it the way he spilled the mutton stew down his face when trying to eat it? The belt of gold which he carried, stuffed with pebbles so as to not let anyone know that his coins had been pick-pocketed by a common beggar while Elasandro was sleeping off a stiff bottle of wine he had stolen from the rag-clad street urchin? Or the penile process between Elasandro's legs which underperformed with Glendina several hours ago, and with three other woman in the last two villages he had 'inspected' for King Augustus? "What are you laughing at!!!" Elasandro growled again, pulling out his sword and pointing it at her throat.

"Life," Glendina replied with warm eyes that melted their way into Elasandro's empty heart, and a tender smile that made him more fearful of the demon, or angel, inside of him. "And death," she continued, her lips turned upward, her face turned away.

Elasandro slipped his sword back into its sheath and continued to eat. It was his right to do so. As it was his right to have Glendina provide him with the kind of



entertainment that he wanted, and needed most. “Sing,” he beckoned her as she set about to put her hut in order, rearranging the broken cot into a proper bed again, as if he was just another visiting uncle, or aunt.

“What shall I sing?” she asked.

“Something from...the old times,” he said.

“The Ancient times, My Lord?” she bowed. “Such songs are now forbidden. According to the King.”

“I am King here, tonight, My Lady,” Elasandro said with a courtly bow. “And I wish you to sing the song you love most,” he said, ordering her with a flick of his blood-stained hand to follow him into an area of the ‘taverna externa’ where only the dogs and crows were dining.

The language of the song was in the now forbidden ancient tongue, which was sung low enough to not be heard outside the hut. A harmless enough tune, until Elasandro noted that the name of the hero being sung about was not him, but Johan. A man who he never knew about, but wanted to know more about. Nay, needed to. For reasons he could not tell Glendina, nor admit yet to himself.

## CHAPTER 6

Lydia had become used to finding big pleasure in small things, but a particularly large passion she had was water. When she first was brought to the mountain she thought the ponds and streams on the Mountain to be blessed with something different than any waterholes down below. Their color was deep blue, and they seemed to ‘sing’ to her, inviting her to jump in. At first she dared not, since according to the new religion, too much bathing washed the Purity from your soul. It seemed odd, since everyone who was converted from the old beliefs to the New Faith had to be baptized in a river.

She first learned about water’s more worldly healing powers when she had seen Bat take a bath in the pool underneath the waterfall that ran through the mountain, scrubbing his body very hard with clenched fists, then fingernails that so often cut into his skin. He did it everytime he left King Augustus’ castle, something that puzzled Lydia. But whenever it rained, Bat would hide his face under a patch of leather, a roof or anything else he could.

“Why do you wash every day, when everyone else I know says it is unhealthy?” Lydia asked Bat when he returned from another week of ‘Abbott business’ in the land down below Father Earth’s mountain, drying himself off after another ‘bath’ in the large pond in front of the reading hut, just behind the special medicine cottage which Bat kept locked up. “And why do you scrape your skin so it bleeds so much?” she continued, jumping into the pool with gleeful abandonment while Bat withdrew from it, relieved that his ordeal with the water was over.

Bat wiped off the excess water and clotted blood from his arms, lowered his head, raised his big, bushy eyebrows and looked at her with his usual answer to such questions.

“I know, when I’m older,” she said, her eye distracted by yet another discovery of something wondrous on the floor of the pond. The sun rose high in the sky, causing Bat to squint, opening up Lydia’s eyes to yet another discovery of nature, something which pleased Bat much, as it was a quota for each day that she discover something new about nature, herself of him. The blue water turned crystal clear, giving her a full view of something very shiny on the rocks.

“More ‘special food’ for winged horses that carry the charriots across the sky?” she asked, having just learned the subtle art of sarcasm, and the gentleness with which it could be used if put in quotes.

“‘Special food’? ‘Winged horses’? So you DO look for fact within fantasy,” Bat smiled as Lydia waded deeper into the pond, looking but not touching the rocks that Bat seemed to think was very important, and powerful. She had seen them before, in her inner eye during nighttime fantasy story time, a treat her Old Master, and Friend, had given her after she had accumulated, or been exhausted by, too many facts.

“It looks very shiny, and golden,” she said. “But I never have seen any fish eat it. And those that do, get sick,” she noted.

“As do people who have too much of it,” he said, lamenting something he had done wrong or inaccurately. “Or people who value it too much, even when they don’t have it. Or who value the coins from which it is made.”

“What good is a coin made of something you can’t use, and which other people tell you what it is worth, and which if you eat it, makes you sick?” Lydia found herself asking.

“Do you really understand the question you asked?” Bat inquired.

To Lydia, Brother Bat’s question felt as strange as the ‘fire’ from between Lydia’s ears that prompted today’s ‘Nature Shattering Discovery’. She didn’t understand why she was becoming smarter than she was supposed to be, and felt there to be a demon or angel inside of her. Both worried her on most days, but scared her today. As the wind rose she could hear it talk, and as the sun rose further in the sky she could see it write some kind of message through the shadows that she felt but could not yet understand.

“What is happening to me?” Lydia said, shaking even more than the leaves around her.

Lydia felt Bat’s arms embracing her. But though they were strong and caring, they lacked something she needed. “You are becoming what I could never be,” he said by way of explanation. “Someone who I once was and cannot become.”

“Why can’t I be what I used to be?” Lydia demanded. “Stupid. Happy. And trusting everything everyone tells me as being true.” The last discovery was the one that frightened her most. She looked at Bat, having acquired new eyes as to what was really behind his eyes and within his troubled soul. Her tongue could taste every special herb he had ever put into her food. Her ear could hear every special sound he made with his musical instruments. And her heart knew that it had now been superceded by a mind that was becoming even wiser than his. “I don’t want this!!!” she said, smelling what was ahead. “I want to be simple again!”

“We can talk about this,” Bat said.

“Only after you answer one more question for me!” Lydia demanded.

Bat bowed his head, humbly accepting the medicine his most beloved patient was about to give him. “Who was I?” he smiled, sadly and proudly.

“NO!” Lydia grunted. “WHAT were you?”

Bat pondered the matter carefully. He looked to each of the Four Directions for the answer, and found none. Then to the sky above, that said nothing. Then to his reflection in the water, which said everything. “When we both are older and wiser, and less clever, we will speak of this.”

With that, he put on his robe and walked into the special medicine hut, locking the door behind him. Lydia called out for her friend the eagle, but he had nothing to say either. She jumped into the water to swim with her friends the fish, but she they felt like a different species to her now. The mountain felt smaller, somehow. Her destiny below it felt bigger. Without having had a child herself she had now been promoted to motherhood, nay, Elderhood. But there was one book she still needed to read before writing her own. The book of Johan, the only tale ‘Brother Bat’ had not told her about, in either fable or fact.

## CHAPTER 7

It was a new way of counting, for King Augustus anyway. The symbols for numbers were from a foreign land, nothing like the characters carved on the old Roman monuments to fallen Caesars and temples to gods that had not enabled them to conquer his father's people. In earlier conquests, counting was easy. You won everything, or you lost everything. Either you had, or you didn't have. Such was Warfare in the glory days that the still-standing Augustus yearned for, but could never achieve again. Not without backing from Romans who used these new symbols to tally up their wins, losses and plans for further conquests.

"So, the number one is still the same as it always was?" Augustus asked the Bishop's new adjunct as he put a '1' in the ledger behind very locked doors in the inner sanctum of his new 'castle'.

"Yes, the number of generals we will need for the next campaign against the slant-eyed invaders from the East," the scribe seated behind a desk in one of Augustus' most hidden castle chambers replied.

"And the symbol for two is not two one's put together?" the crusty-faced king asked as he noticed the '2' insignia for 'Colonels' just below that of general. "It looks like half a horse-shoe, with an edge sticking out of it that the blacksmith forgot to cut off," he mused.

"That is certainly one way of looking at it," the dark-skin scribe continued in an accent that sounded exotic, rolling his r's and hashing his h's and inhaling his 'i's in a humorless tone that seemed both condescending and distant.

"And the three's underneath how many men are under each of the Colonels," the king commented, feeling more like a useless commoner. "They look like two horseshoes glued together on a horse that isn't supposed to go anywhere," Augustus pressed on, feeling the need to express some humor, knowing that he once again failed at his attempt to be witty or smart.

The Bishop's most important scribe, whose ancestors were from someplace far more South and East than Augustus had ever been (or ever would go), rolled his eyes and continued writing more numbers next to the ranks, names and assignments of function. The crusty old monarch edged in closer to the sheets of parchment and noticed something else about the writing on them. They were in rows and columns, the calligraphy as admirable as it was indecipherable, at least to Augustus. Not only the numbers which were said to be 'Arabic', but the letters, and words.

The scribe, whose title was 'Treasurer', a title bestowed by the Bishop himself, showed the ledger to the Augustus. "You approve of this, Sire?" he asked.

Augustus let his eyes glance over the scribbles and symbols and did his best to seem informed, critical and literate. He had risen to become a monarch in an age where the sword was more mighty than the pen, but now it was the other way about. He yearned for a 'do over' with regard to one incident in one battle that could have changed things around now. The chance meeting of a Viking axeman who chopped off the head of his son Uligra, the only one of his legitimate offspring who didn't know how to fight, the only one who knew how to read and the only one who he could really trust.

From the corner of his ever-watchful and still intact eye, Augustus felt the dark skinned Treasurer see through him, with the Bishop's eyes. "You are satisfied that all of the accounts are in order, Sire?" the Treasurer inquired more as a superior than an assistant.

"The important question is whether the Bishop is satisfied, and more than that, the Pope, but more than that...is Jesus satisfied?" Augustus shot back. "Assuming that he is satisfied with your belief in Him! And your renunciation of YOUR old gods!"

"God", the scribe said, shamefully, his head bowed.

"What was his name, Master Treasurer.?"

"Allah," he confessed, eyes shut tightly.

"Who you forsook for political advancement, financial fortune or personal salvation?" Augustus pressed, considering his own motivations as those that drove all men.

"For the lives of my children, Sire," his reply, tears streaming down his face.

The king felt the Bishop's puppetstrings loosened off his shoulders and testicles, having turned the tables on his most favored adjunct. Whatever plan the Bishop had for Augustus' kingdom, it was for something other than the Greater Glory of God. Especially the Heavenly Father who spoke to Augustus when no one else was in the room, in tones more demonic than heavenly. That voice spoke again, in echoing tones, after the still-Islamic scribe crossed himself, knelt in front of the cross nailed to the wall and left the room, leaving the ledgers behind.

"What do you want me to do?" Augustus demanded of the voice which called him to power but never gave him instruction as to how to use it. He picked up the book the Treasurer left behind, perhaps by accident or perhaps on purpose. Augustus's hands shook when he held the book, particularly when his coarse fingers touched the soft, hand-carved leather. How he yearned to know what was inside the covers of this book, and all the other books that were written by those with more knowledge than him but, for the moment anyway, less power. He recalled the 'good old days' when strength of sword was valued more than subtlety of mind. The Vikings had never read a book, and conquered most of Europe. And he had heard that the leader of slant-eyed hordes from

the East came from a country where there was no written language at all. Once people learned to read, they could be convinced that what was in them was true. Stories about Jesus raising from the dead were believed as fact. As were tales about the atrocities committed by Johan the Rebel.

Yet, many of Johan's atrocities bore a striking similarity to the miracles of Jesus. Ultimately, someone would know which fables were politically fabricated and which were Faith-based fantasy. And it would not be long until the poor and oppressed would figure out that they had nothing to lose and everything to gain by rising up against the rich. Such happened even in Rome. If not for a clever Roman who bribed the pirates who were supposed to take Spartacus and his army of rebel slaves to foreign shores, there would have been no more Caesars. And no need of a Jesus. Or a Johan. It had been an accident of nature which allowed Augustus to conquer Johan's supporters, another unpredicted intervention of fate that allowed him to make them his loyal subjects.

Augustus looked into the flames of the torches that lit the cloistered and always-locked chamber to calm his restless spirit and inform his troubled mind. Fire had that effect on him, particularly when it converted something solid into smoke. The smoke spoke as well this time, its distinctive odor penetrating into Augustus' nostrils, going straight to his brain, giving him another idea. One so brilliant that even the Bishop would like, and implement it. But before doing anything, he would need the help of someone who had cast out of his kingdom, life and consciousness. The aching in his gut demanded it. Once again, the demons who lived inside of it were sticking their knives into him, showing him no mercy.

## CHAPTER 8

Mother Nature was still the sadistic bitch she had been for the past week. Another day of the clouds hiding the view of the sun from the ground. Another day of freezing mud on that ground rather than snow, which would have kept the wet and the cold confined and made those elements seem pristine rather than punishing. Another day of bone-chilling rain pouring down upon Ronita, soaking the roof of her hut. But the fire inside was still burning, as it was needed by her patients. As for those seeking her help in matters of body, mind and spirit, they were all four-legged now. Those who were too sick to heal, she killed for meat to feed those animal patients who did have a chance to live. Those who died on her doorstep she fed to the crows, and herself. Her favorite creature to treat was cats, perhaps because they were not considered the ‘devil’s minions’, or perhaps because they guarded her against evil spirits far worse than the Bishop could fabricate for masses who needed demons as much as angels to define their own lives.

As for those masses, none of them came to her anymore. There was a time when Ronita was overloaded with human patients, none of which she turned away. No matter how many pus-filled botches they had on their face. Or how foul the stumps of their limb stank. Or how blood and urine-soaked their garments were. “They were hard times, but good ones, Electra,” she said while feeding a three-legged, one-eyed cat who seemed to not know how afflicted she was. Ronita’s shoulder ached as she removed the cover from her cooking pot and picked up another piece of dead goatmeat from the pot, cutting it up for the rest of Electra’s companions in anticipation of their coming in for supper. “It is goat meat,” she said to the only company who came in to converse with her, or so she hoped they were doing anyway. “It would be more effective to feed you human meat, since ‘people’ are now the sickness that roams the Earth. But if I did give you the meat of that inferior being called ‘man’, or ‘woman’, you would get sick. And I suppose I would be called something far more dangerous than the label the villagers and their rulers have for me already.”

Ronita looked into the fire, wondering what it would be like if her flesh were burnt on the stake as had been the case with so many others like her in other villages. It was a blessing to have been spared burning at the stake, but a curse as well. To live out her days with just enough food to live, but not enough purpose to be Alive agonized her to no end. Several times she had devised a way to end it all, but whenever the final concoction of poisons was finalized or the knife was ready to slit her throat, a meow from a cat, a cackle from a bird, a bark from a dog, or a bleat from an orphaned lamb would find her. Still, her hatred of humanity escalated each day she became further exiled from it.

A messenger from that two-legged defective species approached from the thickets below, hobbling through the brush. It wore a brown monk’s robe, stained with blood on the belly. Its face was hidden by a hood. Its feet were clad with boots that jingled each time their bearer stumbled and fell. Yet, the creature kept coming, his final stomps into the Earth bringing him to her door.



Ronita's cats ran away from the intruder, vanishing into the multiple crevases the hut provided them. Her dogs barked, but kept a safe distance. Her lambs became sheep, disappearing into the woods which were said to be 'haunted' by the village Priests as well as the Bishop. "Maybe the woods really are haunted and maybe I really am a 'witch'," Ronita said to herself, about to take that irreversible next step downward from banishment into self-destruction. But such plans were quickly reversed when she saw the mud-caked face of the intruder who seemed himself to be on death's door and grabbed its cloak.

"King Augustus!" she proclaimed, feeling the texture of the cloak, and catching a glimpse of the eyes under the hood. "Is this the new costume for court?" She sniffed a recently-expelled bolus of material soaking its back end. "So, your shit DOES stink," she noted.

"The kingdom needs your help," Augustus said, his chin up, his eyes still 'regal'.

"The Kingdom of Augustus, or Olif?" Ronita inquired.

"I am not Olif anymore!" Augustus protested.

"No," Ronita noted, sadly. "You are not your mother's son anymore. Or the father of my people."

"You have no people anymore, Ronita," Augustus shot back. "They are OUR people now," he said with a 'fatherly' tone, inviting her to be the 'mother' in it all.

"I suppose they have to owned by somebody to feel secure about themselves," Ronita found herself discovering, and saying. True to her intuition about the matter, neither Augustus nor Olif knew what she was talking about. She invited both of them into her hut, closing the door behind her.

Ronita requested the only human patient who dared to visit her in three months to lay down on her table, while she turned around to her shelves of herbs, instruments and still-unburnt forbidden parchments. "How long has it been hurting?" she inquired.

"You didn't ask WHERE it hurts, Nita," Augustus asked.

The Medicine Woman gritted her teeth. "No one calls me Nita, Olif!"

"And no one calls me Olif!" Augustus barked back, holding his aching ribs and belly after exhausting himself of wind.

Collecting herself and her impliments, Ronita looked at and into her patient. Though painful in the abdomen beyond measure, there was something between his ears

even more agonizing. A ‘someone’ according to the way he was muttering to the roof of the thatched hut, which she knew to be free of cats, birds and disembodied spirits.

“You have...headaches?” she asked, trying to work her way into the truth of the matter.

“Daily!” Augustus said between mutters.

“And belly aches?” she continued.

“Nightly,” the King answered.

“And how is it...here?” she asked, laying her fingers on his heart.

“Strong!” the King boasted. “Like a strong buck of twenty years.”

“More like a dying doe of eighty,” she thought, but didn’t say. In part because Augustus pulled out a sword with his good hand, pointing its tip at her own chest. But mostly because he wouldn’t listen anyway. Besides, the pathology that was more important lay elsewhere. And turning that pathology into health, for everyone, was more essential.

“What do the...’headaches’ sound like?” Ronita inquired.

“Things that a King needs to know,” he boasted loudly.

“So he can stay a King?” she offered gently.

“It is Our destiny!” Augustus continued.

It was an interesting choice of words, ‘our’. For a moment, Ronita thought that he was referring to her. The woman who he loved when a struggling Pagan chieftan then abandoned as a Christian King. A woman who, long ago, had loved him enough so that her sterile womb became fertile, for one night anyway. But the matter of that man, that child, and that family was a memory best forgotten. Recalling it would be forbidden in Augustus’ mind and certainly in his kingdom. Revealing any mention of it would certainly bring the torch to not only Ronita’s flesh, but to the animals who had become her only family.

She looked at the color of his still-muttering tongue, assessed the texture of the pulses in his shaking hands, and smelled the sweat running down his aching forehead. She felt his neck and face, trying as hard as she could to be ‘medical’ about it. Indeed there was something toxic in the King that would destroy or corrupt any heart with which it came into contact. But, for the moment, it was not the nature of ‘the devil’ that was of most concern, but what his minions would do.

“I can give you something to help with the pain,” she said. “And make what you have to do, to serve your destiny, and your people, and your new God more effective.”

“That would be..” Augustus said, holding back his words.

“...Ironic?” Ronita offered.

“Necessary,” Augustus asserted. For the moment, the visitors between his ears and the vermin in his gut remained silent. He seemed alright. Healthy, but not cured. Still, some medicinals were highly indicated.

“I think I have something that will help you,” Ronita said, reaching into three pots, taking out a pinch of each and grinding them up into a powder, which she poured into a cup of warm water.

“I haven’t told you what is wrong with me!” Augustus said.

“Your body already has told me,” Ronita said giving her patient the cup. “And your tongue will tell me the rest, you pathetic bastard!” she thought behind a lovingly maternal smile as Augustus drank up the elixir that would firm up his bowels, quiet his head and loosen his tongue.

## CHAPTER 9

“I don’t believe it, Ronita!” Brother Bartholomew said. “And why should I?”

“Because I am still using my real name, and you aren’t, Brother Bartholomew,” Ronita continued, looking up the slope of the mountain which ‘Brother Bat’ kept as his personal private monastery, the location of which was known only to himself and Ronita. “I swear that I saw a young girl’s face up there,” she continued.

“Only in your imaginations, Ronita.”

“Or dreams?” she pressed.

Though there was nothing but clear blue sky behind ‘Bat’, he felt as if pressed to a rock cliff with no escape but to confess the truth to his questioner. But in the meantime, the truthfulness, and relevance, of what Ronita had obtained from Augustus was the matter at hand. And why she thought it most appropriate to tell him about it.

“You do know that I work for King Augustus,” Bartholomew said with an official frown, an arched back, and upwardly placed chin which was now clean shaven.

“You labor under him,” she smiled, shaking her hair, letting the wind blow around her long, unkempt mane. “Just as he labors under the Bishop, who labors under the Pope, who labors under---“

“---Yes, yes, I KNOW all that,” Bartholomew muttered back.

“But do you REALIZE it?” the old ‘witch’ whose blessing and curse was her continued survival blasted into Bartholomew’s tired face. “Do you realize that Augustus, as we speak, is working with the Bishop’s scribe to rewrite all of the accounts of gold, silver and other exchanges to make it look like it was he, as Augustus, who kept the infortunate poor from becoming the starving dead over the last five years? And it was he, as Augustus, along with his nobles, who funded the war against the Vikings that kept the peasants from being massacred---”

“---And baptizable by the Bishop,” Bartholomew interjected. “Who will bring in taxpayers here for the Pope in Rome.”

“So, you knew that our once-trusted Chief Olif is able to convince the Bishop that he is King Augustus, who hears the voice of Jesus between his painful ears, and who has put himself in financial debt for the sake of his people, and the Heavenly Father?”

“Which will make him entitled to collect for himself, from the people, the Pope and whoever is in charge of letting people into Heaven. Yes, I know. And most probably he will use it as an excuse to wage war against the hordes to the East who have no intention of coming this far West. But that is just the way things are now. We have to

accept it, and our limitations to do anything about it,” Bartholomew said with a stone-cold face, watching closely for Ronita’s reaction.

“Who are you?” she asked, tears of grief streaming down her cheek. “What have you become?”

To that question, ‘Bat’ knew the answer. He was not ready to give it, and Ronita wasn’t fully enough informed to understand it. Still, he looked into his old friend’s eyes hoping to convince her that he was doing his best to do the right thing under the most unexpected circumstances. As a gesture of such, he reached into his pocket, retrieving a fistful of gold coins. Enough to buy a village. And to turn it into a castle, if she wanted or needed to do so.

“Please take these,” he said. “I know you will use them far more wisely than anyone else whose hands have.”

Bartholomew’s smile was answered with a wad of sputum, spat out from the now heart-broken Shameness’s mouth. She slithered into the woods, leaving a newly-informed Bartholomew standing very alone. Finally aware of what his King was doing, and going to do. As to what he was going to do about it, he looked up the slope of his mountain, as a now mythical figure walked to the edge of the cliff. Lidya’s eyes still were afraid to jump, the misery behind them not sufficient to make her to it. For now, anyway.

## CHAPTER 10

Captain Elasandro reviewed his new troops from atop his horse, which he rode more like a General than a middle-ranked and still not promoted officer who had more experience and courage than any of his superiors. The men whose heads were three feet below him, all standing at attention, didn't seem to care. They seemed more impressed with their own promotions, not in rank, but in appearance, comfort and body heat. Everyone in the ranks had been provided with fresh uniforms today, the sunlight making whatever lead they were wearing shine like silver, and their dark-yellow coats shimmer like gold. It was the first time their flesh felt new clothing in years, for most of them anyway. They held out their chests bearing the Red Cross of King Augustus with the kind of pride Elasandro had not felt for a long, long time. One recruit reminded the Macedonian mercenary of himself when he was young, proud and not-yet-defeated by life.

That Private's cheeks were as soft and hairless as a young maiden's, but he wore his peach-fuzz mustache like it was a massive handlebar worthy of a Turkish Sultan or a Grecian Bandit. His blue eyes emitted fire and warmth, both at the same time. His arms were strong and firm, the sunbaked flesh over them still unbroken by sword, axe or arrow. Elasandro found himself wondering what would happen to this young Conscript when the impliments of battle did meet his eyes, ears and flesh. Would this lad be the first to attack back, to run away, or to go motionless in paralytic terror. There was no predicting such things, but it was necessary to do so. For the lad, for his comrades in arms and for the families who needed them to come home some day alive, no matter how self-sufficient they had become in their absence.

Knowing the consequences to himself and the lad for letting his glance linger on him too long, Captain Elasandro directed his battle-weary yet still glory-seeking eyes towards the foreheads of the rest of the company. "I am Captain Elasandro!" he proclaimed to the grandfathers in the back of the ranks. "Your commander in the war against the Hordes to the East!" he continued to the fathers in the middle. "In defense of our neighbors, families and way of life!" the, as far as he knew, still-fatherless Macedonian mercenary blasted out to those who has not yet fathered children who wer in the front rows. Such was Elasandro's first impression of the men whose lives depended on his being an effective leader. And the men who had no idea how much their commander was really being paid for being 'one of them'.

King Augustus did do one thing that was very Roman, and Christian, with his new Army. He paid them actual wages, forbidding his soldiers from looting villages and towns they invaded, which had been the only way anyone under the rank of King collected on their services. It was a new idea, amongst so many of the Pagan-turned-Christian King. Such as donating ten percent of everything you had to the Church plus a son or daughter for 'clergical service' in exchange for a life of plenty in Heaven after you died. And never referring to yourself or anyone else by anything except the name given at the time of Baptism. And never speaking the name of Johan the Rebel except if it involved describing his demonic roots, evil deeds and selfish intentions.

Seeing that his men were still at attention in the town square, and that his superiors on the towers of the castle close by were watching, Elasandro did another inspection of the 'Soldiers of Christ.' None of them ever read the Bible, and some had been 'Soldiers of Johan' only a few years ago. Such were the rumors milling about their campground, anyway. And around campfires where Johan's name was spoken with pride, respect and awe in stories reserved only for enlisted men's ears, and when the officers were not listening.

Elasandro recalled one of those tales, which he heard while clad as one of the commoners. According to the spoken legends which would not make it into any printed books. Tales sung in a language which seemed to be understandable only to those who could not read words in books.

Elasandro yearned to be the central hero in such legends, even if it meant dying early. Or living poor for a brief time beforehand. Part of the prophesy had happened. He had less money in his purse than any of his men, using what he could of his part real and part fabricated reputation as an experienced fighter of Pagans, Vikings and Moslems to get what he needed, or wanted. He had made some bad investments, and due to a bad habit of sleeping too soundly, had allowed himself to be robbed by bandits and beggars on more than one occasion. Perhaps some of the them were amongst the men who he now commanded, and who would be holding spears, axes and arrow-carrying bows behind his back in battle. He could smell at least three of them, despite the fact that they had been freshly washed and cleanly clad.

Trumpets blasted from the castle tower, summoning the attention of the soldiers in the square as well as the civilians mulling about doing their daily labours. Several small framed men walked to a position on the tower where they could be seen as being big by those below them. King Augustus pushed his right hand out from under his cloak and held it up beside his head, palms stretched open. The soldiers under Elasandro's command raised their fists in a bold salute and ear-shattering communal grunt. The horse under Elasandro's feet kicked up its back feet, turned its ass towards the king, then let out a large clump of manure.

"What else could go wrong?" Elasandro said to himself while doing his best to quiet the spooked horse which was supposed to be the symbol of fearlessness.

Thankfully, the king and his advisors had other matters on their mind, their attention drawn to a stunning commoner woman in a poorly fitting maiden's gown walking onto the platform, giving flowers to the Monarch on behalf of her people below. Elasandro recognized the woman as Glendina. She snuck in a wink at Elasandro and the royally-odorous deposit his horse had left on the ground. He subtly nodded to her in gratitude, a smile on his face. The latter was clearly seen by the Bishop, who appeared from behind the flower-laden King. He folded his arms, leaned back and aimed an angry stare down at Elasandro. But no arrows came out of the Bishop's pulled bow. For now, anyway.

## CHAPTER 11

It was a bright afternoon, a warm breeze bringing in the aroma of Spring to the snow-covered grass on Father Earth Mountain. The birds flew playfully around the trees, the young eagle singing his love song for an audience of perspective mates who really were listening. The four legged animals below the trees climbed their way out of their hibernation holes and lounged in the warmth of the sun. Fish jump-swam in water miraculously not covered by ice, enjoying the view of the waterless world above them. Mother Nature seemed to dictate that it was a day of pleasure, to be enjoyed by all who had survived harshest portions of that necessary puragitive endeavor called 'winter'. Except for those species who were evolving into something she could neither control, nor care for.

Seated on a hard stool inside the 'reading hut', hiding her skin and eyes from the warm sun coming through the cracks in the walls, a sweat-soaked Lydia was writing a book about life, her pen moving faster than the lightening-speed mind directing it. Feeling a cramp in her fingers, she laid down the writing impliment and laid it next to the biology books about the 'study of life' she had already finished reading in far faster than the time allotted for such. Smoke filled her enlarged nostrils, replacing the scents both in the real world and one she was now living in between her ears. Her sense of smell had strangely improved greatly over the last few months, her ability to enjoy aromas coming into her nose and taste on her tongue diminishing. She opened the window, observed the direction of the wind and calculated the source of the strange-smelling smoke to be the 'chemistry' barn, the window and door to that structure being open today, strangely. Intuiting the need to investigate further, she laid down her books to further investigate, feeling that the pathway to the next ideas in the books she was authoring went through that barn.

The flames emanating from the fire hotter than any flame created by wood. "Why is it so hot?" Lydia asked the Master Alchemist who was nursing it, a thick mask over his nose and mouth.

"You tell me," Bat smiled, keeping her from advancing any further with his large, outstretched hand. Adjusting the funnel taking the majority of the smoke up towards the hole in the roof.

"It could be the way the fire was constructed," she noted, looking over the design of the metal surrounding the flame on all sides. "Or the nature of the metal that is reflecting it upon itself, amplifying it rhythm and tone," she surmised, sensing something about the geometry of the angles, doing the calculations in her head and finding them to not answer the entire riddle either. "Or the nature of the materials that are being burned." A careful sniff confirmed her intuitions on the matter. "Softwood charcoal, saltpeter and sulfer," she said, noting that the flames were being fed by a powder being dripped in slowly, which burst into small bolts of thunder-like bursts when clumps rather than



sprinkles fell in. Lydia observed her body, annoyance that it had become, falling back and protecting itself, knocking over the funnel which had been diverting most of the smoke from the pot upward to the hole in the roof.

“This scares you?” Bat asked as he picked up the funnel, replacing it as quickly as he could above the ‘rock stew’.

“The blasts in the fire just startled me,” Lydia replied, hoping that she could trick Bat into believing her. She waited for another lecture on ‘fear’, the only low brain reflex her rapidly growing higher brain could not yet master. As a matter of fact, some of the fears were escalating. And not only her fear of heights, which still kept her within the boundaries of the valley atop the mountain. Lydia’s terror of ‘humans’, as she now called them, in the valleys below the mountain was escalating, even though she had not been amongst them in those lowlands for 4 years. The more she read about them, the more she was afraid of them. But she was feeling something else about them. Maybe it was pity after having read and been told so much about the harm they inflicted on each other and themselves. Maybe indifference due to her isolation from them. Maybe hatred as a result of her previous experiences with them. Or maybe that complex reflex which some of the books called ‘love’. Bat never spoke that word, but he seemed to feel it. ‘Compassion’ was as close as he got.

When she had asked about such things over the dinner table, all Bat would say would be ‘eat your food, please.’ On days when she obeyed, she got smarter. When she snuck her gruel to the foxes and wolves that had become housedogs, they became smarter, but less sociable with others of their own kind. It was the way Bat said ‘please’ that kept Lydia eating what she was asked to. That, and an unbearable pain in her belly which would only go away when her stomach was filled.

“Please, tell me what you are discovering,” Bat asked Lydia, in the present and real world, as he struggled to fill in gaps the fallen funnel had acquired during the fall and put it back into place. “Ask me some questions and I will do what I can to answer them,” he continued as he checked the filter atop the ‘chimney’, replacing it with another mesh, disposing of what was left on the other one like it was toxic to anything and anyone he held sacred.

Lydia moved closer to the unrepaired funnel, sniffing in the smoke from the rock stew as quickly as she could. A strange odor came into her nostrils which seemed very different than anything made in or by the woods, but which was felt pleasing. Her attempts at another whiff of the odd aroma and a look at what was left behind in the pot after the grounded up rocks had given up their smoke were stopped by a slap on the face, the hand that was holding it pulling her away from the pot and throwing her on the floor.

“I’m sorry,” Bat said, feeling remorse, tears streaming down the wrinkled miniature landscape which had now become his cheeks. “I just needed to...protect you.”

The slap, throw and fall juggled something in Lydia's brain. Some of which to do with Bat himself, a man who never laid a hand on her. As a matter or retrospectively-proven fact, Bat had never even touched her, even at times when he was most hateful or most compassionate. The love-craving man with so much compassion and wisdom seemed as afraid to touch his 'student' as the mountain-marooned student was afraid of heights.

While Bat wiped his face, hiding it in shame, Lydia grabbed hold of a spatula and pulled out what was left of 'rock stew' after it was done cooking. Its texture, color and taste all revealed that it was gold, the most useless of elements to all creatures except man, and perhaps the drivers of the charriots in the sky that Lydia now knew to be fantasy rather than fact. Another painful fact to make badly needed fantasy even less accessible.

But several facts remained. Something about the process of making gold was able to drive people mad, even those who knew about it like Bat. Did it have something to do with the black, pleasant-smelling smoke? Or the smoke-stacked homes below the mountain which still needed that yellow metal to pay rent? Or was it the powder which could enable anyone to create explosions hotter than anyone else had ever done before? Putting ideas which seemed as unrelated to each other together as possible together, to see what was possible, Lydia, former village idiot, found herself asking her liberator, who now had become her jailer, another question.

"Who really was Johan the Rebel, and why haven't you answered ANY of my questions about him in the last six months?" she inquired. She sat on a hay-bail in a student-like manner, back slightly hunched, head downward, eyes looking upward, ears actively poised to listen and allow whatever coming into them to find their most appropriate slots, as was in accordance to her extensive training and, now, natural inclination.

"I told you the fables," the burlap-clothed Professor said, taking off his protective mask, gazing at his student. . "Forbidden fables, according to the King's Law," Bat assured her through a voice that was more paternalistic than fatherly, stroking the soot off the top of his recently shaved 'Abbott' head.

"You told me fibs!" she continued, noting that the skin under the area Bat hated to shave was more cut up skin than shiny scalp. "Or lies," she continued arms folded, eyes looking through rather than up to Bat. "And when I asked you about what you did during his Revolution, all you said was 'it is of no significance', and when I asked you where you were at the time, you always said 'somewhere else, of no significance.'"

Bat turned his head away from her, scratching his hairless chin in a 'mentorly' way. As if there had been a beard with magical powers in it which he utilized in the past and was trying to access now.

"What's the significance of 'no significance'?" Lydia demanded.

“When you are older,” her caretaker, teacher and only contact with the human race smiled, sadly, but firmly. “And when the time is right.” He turned around and proceeded to his alchemic labors.

“That’s what you always say, goddamn it!” Lydia grunted.

“This is very interesting,” Bat said, becoming the all-knowing, self-righteous Socratic Mentor again. “And do you know why?” he continued as he turned around tended to his alchemic labors, pretending to be a humble rock smelter.

“Because I asked it with stronger language!” Lydia shouted, seeing a smart-assed smile on the old fart’s face. “Of someone who says he never lies but who lies all the time, especially to himself!” she continued, as ‘Brother Bat’ broke into a strange laugh, from the belly, for the first time ever. “And...and...” Lydia blasted out, unable to find the words to continue her thoughts, which were merging with emotions that felt strange and dangerous.

“Continue, please,” Bat said, a cough interrupting his echoing laughter, followed by breathing that sounded wheezy. “Continue, please,” he continued, his breath becoming more labored.

For reasons Lydia could not determine, she didn’t find herself caring more about the explanations from Bat’s mouth than the nature of the lungs connected to them. Besides, he had these ‘attacks’ before and always survived them after he had pontificated his point of view and she had conceded, or altered, her own. At least to him. Indeed, noted that she was becoming very good at lying, or was it ‘protecting the truth and the possibilities of its manifestation’, a functional term she had heard once from Bat.

“So, Johan the Rebel,” Lydia pressed on, pacing the floor. “What was he fighting for?” she continued, seeing that with each word, thought, and accusation she got stronger, the old ‘friend’ she was questioning getting weaker. “Who was he, this Rebel, really?” she demanded to know, testing that fabled hypothesis that ‘the truth shall set you and everyone else free’. “If he was so needed by the world, and his people, why did both betray him? And who--- ”

“---When you are older!” Bat screamed into her face, his cheeks white, his legs shaking, his body falling to the ground. “Which will be...very soon,” he said through a mouthful of blood and phlegm in his parched, rancid throat.

Lydia’s training as a physician was, according to Bat anyway, as good as any within a ‘five hundred mountains’ radius. She had been able to bring diseased and injured animals back to life better than he could. But now, there was a member of her own species in front of her, death pulling him to it closer and closer with each rattle-emitting breath. “Whhhatttt dddooo I...dddooo?” she begged of Bat, feeling whatever

intelligence she had acquired over the last 4 years on the mountain vanish into the now cold and foggy winter air.

“Stop stuttering,” Bat whispered, his eyes closed but his heart still beating strongly, for the moment anyway. His face, smiling with contentment Lydia had seen in the young eagle and her other animal companions, but never in her human one. “You are not the village idiot anymore, Lydia. You are, and will be---”

“---Someone who will not let you die!” Lydia pledged as she felt his pulses, assessed his tongue, and inserted needles into the points on the skin dictated by the charts from the East, twirling them with fiery intensity. “There are still things I need to know, and will know,” she continued, running to the shelves and putting the appropriate powders under his tongue, hoping they would be sufficient.

“You know more than you think do,” Bat said, evidence of such being that his white complexion had turned sufficiently pink so that survival was a viable option. But there was something in his eyes, or rather behind them as he opened them.

“Yellow eyes,” she said.

“Liver problems, again,” Bat said. “Like Prometheus had,” he said with a proud voice but one that was still very weak, and a breath with more rattle than air in it.

Lydia flash-recalled the story about Prometheus, the god who defied the other gods to bring fire, knowledge and perhaps wisdom to mortals, in the service of humanity. Overall, it had been a good deed, according to the fable. And as no good deed goes unpunished by the world in some way, Prometheus’ fate was to be tied to a post atop an isolated mountain top and have crows eat away his liver at night, then he would be released at dawn so that the organ could grow back in preparation for the avians to feast upon that organ the next night, ad infinitum. Prometheus always felt too real for Lydia. Perhaps he was one of those drivers of the charriots in the sky pulled by invisible ‘horses’ who were fueled by gold, the byproduct of the alchemy pot in front of Lydia now, in the real world. At which Bat had been working behind usually closed doors, with protective masks.

As for Bat, the causes of his unexpected demise were multiple. Lydia’s intuition led her to think it was something in the explosive powder, or perhaps the smoke emitted from the smelting pot. Such odors had been around and in sick animals who she was able to keep alive for a few days, but never beyond 5 days.

“I’ll stay with you till the end, if this is what is happening,” Lydia told mentor, knowing the prognosis for his improvement was guarded, and knowing very well her limitations. Finding herself hugging the old fart, a gesture he seemed to want to give to her at well.

“No you won’t stay with me!” Bat blasted, pushing her back with shaking limbs that felt infused with defiance anything he had before. “You will get help.”

“Perhaps from the healer woman you talked about. Ronita?” Lydia asked.

“I never told you about her!” Bat said, his mind startled enough to avail some energy from his still-fighting spirit.

“You told someone, in your sleep,” Lydia smiled at Bat as she wiped his forehead with fresh water, a procedure which had no medical value except for affirming her own humanity and his value to humanity, and her.

“I must have said some other things in my sleep then,” Bat muttered, turning away his head in shame and regret.

“We’ll talk about that, and other things when you get older,” Lydia said, feeling her lips go upward even more, and something watery coming down her cheeks.

“It’s called crying,” Bat said, seeming to feel accomplished, but not arrogant. “Sometimes valuable, sometimes not,” He coughed again, clotted blood this time rather than fresh stuff.

“Ronita...Where is she?”

“Down the mountain, the South Slope, across three streams, then a right at the first river. Around but not through the village to three Old Roman columns. Up the hill past the Ancient Graveyard along what your bare feet will tell you is a road. It was one a well traveled one, once. And let NO one see you. There is more at stake than my own life here, or hers. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Lydia said, lying yet again. “But there are two things I need to know.”

“Please, ask,” Bat said with a whisper.

“How do I get down the mountain? And up again?” she asked, turning her head, dealing with yet another question which Bat said he would address ‘when you are older’. “I see you disappear into the woods at 176 degrees from the North axis, then go down what you say is a tunnel, which I’ve never found. Or maybe there’s a charriot there with gold eating horses that---“

Lydia’s expressively-filled geographical question was interrupted by a loud snore, emanated a sleep which Bat fell into. A disease-induced ‘hibernation’ from which she had awoken three animals before. But whatever disease Bat had, it was far more complicated than that.

Lydia collected what she could for what she hoped would be a quick trip down the mountain, to return with the healer woman who Bat seemed to dream about so pleasantly. Though the winter clouds did their best to hide the sun, Lydia was able to find her way to the prescribed location, and was able to see very clearly the course for the journey from the cliffs above. For reasons she could not intuit nor understand, there was less standing timber on the Southern corner of Father Earth Mountain, perhaps because Mother Nature, or perhaps someone more mortal, had chopped down the clump of trees near the cliff. Ahead lay something that looked like a tunnel, that fabled escape route which the Ancients had used for their expeditions up and down the mountain. But upon further examination, it was just a manure-filled badger hole that led to and immovable hard rock. Maybe metal, but if so, there was no way of moving it, even with the explosive powder. A faster and more accessible route down the mountain presented itself before Lydia's now terrified eyes.

"That can't be the only way down!" Lydia said, looking at a rope fashioned into a ladder, hanging over a thick, old pine tree which still had firm roots that Lydia felt to go deep into the mountain. Its length was at least 400 feet, matching the distance to the woods below, straight down. The ONLY way down.

Lydia's favorite eagle landed on the tree and cawed a 'yes'. It turned around, looking downward. As a fable-more-than-fact believing child, Lydia may have believed it to be an offer for transportation, but even then her fear of heights would have kept her from taking the journey.

The eagle cawed again, and waited. It pulled at the rope, loosening it and laying its bottom rung at Lydia's shaking feet. "I know it's stupid, and I know I'm supposed to be 'smart', for some reason I still don't know," she said, examining the rope ladder for flaws and faults. "But I'm still afraid of heights! Even though by all calculations, this ladder can hold a mentally-defective 'wizardess' four times my weight and---"

Lydia looked back up towards the eagle, but he was gone. His potential avian mates circling above him led him forward to his next Ultimate Purpose. Below, lay Lydia's. After being sure the rope was secure above, she threw it down below. A brief look downward assured her it was intact. A look inward revealed that she needed something other than mere calculations to assure her mind that the downward journey was possible. She took her first steps downward, using her feet to feel as her eyes. As for her eyes, they were closed, looking for something not clearly defined in any of the books she had read, or the ones she had written. "If you do exist, please don't let me die. I'll do anything you ask if you get me through this," she found herself offering to the Ancient charriot-driving visitors, the old Pagan gods, the new Christian God, and the One she intuited was the Source of them all.

After what felt like an eternity, Lydia did make it to the bottom, then dared to look up at the top. Indeed she did climb down, and felt confident, for the moment anyway, of being able to climb up again. The tools for such were forty feet to the left and thirty to the right. Long, straight vines containing 90 degree angles, something Nature

never did, went through the bush. Each led to what looked like another ladder to the eye trained by Nature, a snarly bird's nest to those whose consciousness and attention was oriented to the world of man.

Lydia had not seen mountains from below for four years, the duration of which felt like a lifetime. And as life is measured in experiences gone through and insights gained, it had been many dimensions of experience since she had been 'normal'. She found herself remembering things about her past life as a village idiot, responsible for nothing but her own happiness, which was easily obtained. As long as she ignored what people were really saying about her. Doing to her. Or using her for. During those times, she imagined that one day, if she continued at her job of being abused by others so they could feel good about themselves, a white horse would come out of the bushes, whiney at her, and ask her to come on her back. It would be a mare, with a long horn on its forehead, and they would live happily ever after.

Fable became fact when a hooped equine beast emerged from behind the trees. But it was brown, not white. And the only horn coming out of it was a lance held by a soldier, its tip aimed at Lydia's chest. "Who are you?" he asked in an accent that sounded different than any she had heard, or remembered.

"Someone who...is lost," she replied, fast-flashing to Bat's warning about not giving her real name, and unable to convincingly invent a new one. Particularly since the soldier holding the lance seemed to mean business. She looked up towards his face but it was covered with a shadow cast by a projection from his hat which covered his eyes. He held his ground, saying nothing. As did his horse.

Having become a brain carrying a body rather than being a body containing a brain, Lydia felt her cerebral reflexes replace her emotional ones. "Are you going to kill me?" she asked, feeling more interested by death than afraid of it.

"Only if you don't tell me where you are going," the soldier asked.

"To get a doctor, to cure a friend," she said.

"What friend?" he asked, edging the blade closer in, its tip ticking the functionless 'muscles' which had ballooned on either side of her sternum on both sides of her chest.

Sensing something human in the soldier, and having not been sworn to secrecy on the matter, she pointed up the mountain. "He lives up there."

The soldier looked upward. "Very interesting," he said, as if he knew something more than he was supposed to.

"And he's sick!" Lydia continued, putting matters human before those political, or social.

“Interesting,” the mounted soldier who carried himself off more as a knight said. He withdrew his lance, revealing on his lapel removal of a large insignia, replaced with another.

“You are a Lieutenant?” she asked him

“CAPTAIN!” he grunted, pent up with rage and frustration.

“Interesting,” Lydia found herself saying, enjoying what she read about as being a sense of ‘humor’.

“Captain what?” Lidya inquired, showing off the ballooning appendages to her chest which Bat said were a woman’s most powerful weapon.

“Elasandro,” he said proudly, prodding his horse onward towards her. Offering his hand for a lift up.

While accepting his offer, Lydia peaked under the visor for a better look at his face. “I am in a hurry, and have a lot to do,” she said, assessing the vast terrain with her aching feet, realizing the need for rapid transportation more than ever.

“So do I,” he confessed, holding back as much as she was.

The self-re-promoted Captain spurred the horse onward and galloped off down the valley, following Lydia’s directions, for now.



## CHAPTER 12

Officially, Elasandro was on patrol looking for stray ‘Johan’ rebels and slant-eyed Asian hordes. Had it not been for his fabled greatness as a mercenary fighter, he would have been demoted to corpse rather than merely Lieutenant after his horse had accidentally evacuated its bowels in the King and Bishop’s direction. To redeem himself in the eyes of God and man, the Bishop ordered Elasandro to find stray Rebels who still believed in the Johan’s Demonic Cause or invading Mongols. King Augustus offered him the option of finding evidence of such even if it didn’t exist. Failure to do so would result in public castration and slow hanging.

Either way, Elasandro was fucked, eventually. It was only appropriate that he sought that experience from a more pleasurable perspective for what was a short and less-than-glorious life. As for that life, it was true that he was a bolder, braver and smarter soldier than most, but certainly below the standards of the legends about his exploits which he let build around him. But, for the moment, he was CAPTAIN, nay, GENERAL Elasandro, hero who turned around battles from the Normandy Coast to the Russian Steppes, by himself, against impossible odds. Descended from Alexander the Great himself. Always fighting for the Right cause in a very ‘wrong’ world. Such was all the wench he was providing transportation to needed to know.

For the first several miles of the journey to the still name-less wench’s destination, Elasandro related stories about himself, her only responses being ‘interesting’, ‘go on’ or ‘yes, of course’. Elasandro felt that he was being studied more than admired, but he allowed himself to think that she was interested in him. Such was part of the game master played with slave, conquerer with conquered, employer with employee.

In matters of the flesh, Elasandro now compared all women of pleasure, or potential for such, to Glendina. He could feel the breasts of the young woman behind him on his back, and felt them to be a bit smaller than those of his ‘love goddess’, but somehow more ‘communicative’. Her hair was plain brown, rather than brightly red, but when the sun came down, all manes looked the same. Her skin was more tender than Glendina’s, the quality of her voice softer, yet her words were ‘hard’. Such was experienced after four hours of riding through country which bore no evidence of rebels or Mongols, though littered with the remains of those who had unsuccessfully defied King Augustus in the Johan Revolt. They lay in the middle of charred, blackish mud which at one time been a village.

“How did those people die?” the wench asked, her voice soft, the intention behind it intense. This plainly-clad Earth maiden seemed to be anything but ‘the salt of the earth’. The kind of creature who would make you think about something, attack the inner demon THEN make you laugh at the joke you devised, or discovered about the whole thing. Normally it was the other way around. “It is important that we know how they died,” she repeated in an even more humorless tone.

“Painfully,” Elasandro replied, commenting on the nature of the holes in three skulls and the mangled bones from the neck beneath them.

“Temporal bone lesions and strangulated femurs will do that,” she said. “Their phalanges were probably smashed as well. One finger a time,” she continued, her gaze drawn to two more corpses laid out spread eagle style in a manner that Elasandro had only seen in paintings. “Crucifixion,” the wench noted. “The way Jesus is said to have died. Does this mean that these people were Christians?”

“Maybe the way Johan knew Jesus,” Elasandro commented regarding the village where Johan was said to have the most supporters, destroyed by Augustus in the name of the All Merciful Christ on his way to becoming a Christian King. “I don’t know,” Elasandro commented, hating this woman for making him think, and empathize, about the sufferings of men. Something a man of his profession cannot afford.

“Johan!” the wench said, as if reading Elasandro’s mind as she grabbed hold of the reins and pulled his horse to a halt. “Who was he?”

“The Anti-Christ, officially,” Elasandro said, gently taking the wench’s hands off the reins, prodding the horse on to a brisk walk.

“That doesn’t make sense,” she noted, grabbing hold of the reins again, pulling the horse to a halt. “Why should a Christian King crucify rebels who are fighting for the Anti-Christ. And if crucifixion is the road to Heavenly Glory, that king would be giving the Anti-Christ and his minions admission to Eternal Life with the Heavenly Father. At least according to the logic intrinsic to the Book of Jesus.”

“There is no logic to the Book of Jesus,” Elasandro let out from a breath deeply impatient, and disturbed, sensing the presence of King Augustus’ troops lingering in the woods nearby. “But there is a logic to us getting out of here. And for you to stop asking questions about Johan,” he continued in a softened voice.

“Why?” the wench asked, as Elasandro’s eyes confirmed what he thought he saw. He pointed to wench’s attention to the woods.

“Oh, of course,” she said, lowering her voice. And feeling fearful of something. What it was didn’t matter much to Elasandro. A fearful travel companion was always an obedient one. It worked for his men, and it would certainly work for a woman. Particularly because he was the brave, bold and accomplished GENERAL Elasandro. The legend who could get whatever he wanted, the man who never did.

## CHAPTER 13

Ronita knew that everyone who actively stayed away from her had a good reason to. The soldiers would be sent to the stockade for visiting her. Merchants who did business with her would lose their shops. Recently-baptized peasants would be sent to hell after they died for talking to a ‘pagan witch’, punishment doled out to their children in the meantime by the local magistrates. But still, she took it personally. Her punishment for not embracing the New Faith and the social policies of the people administering it evolved into her being deemed ‘useless’.

With the exception of the King in beggar’s clothing who had recently ‘graced’ her door, she was so far removed from human contact that on many days she forgot what the sound of a human voice was like. The only other man she had spoken to, or who had spoken to her, was ‘Brother Bartholomew’, who she had known by a different name in a very different time. Both considered her irrelevant now, as did she herself. Several times she contemplated culling herself from the human herd with a slit of her wrist or an overdose of one of the medicinals she still kept around for anyone who may wander in. Perhaps the old gods demanded such a sacrifice to turn things around for herself, and the people who had shunned her whom she still loved. Each day she would come up with another excuse for not ending her ‘life’. Five days ago it was a nest of birds that was abandoned by its mother. Four days ago it was a doe which injured its foot while running away from a wolf. Three days ago it was a wolf who had accidentally said ‘good day’ to a porcupine that responded by shooting a muzzelful of quills into its snout. Two days ago, the roof needed to be mended. A day ago, she was too depressed to actively think about suicide. Today, it was a very military visitor, galloping in on a horse with a lame right front leg, a swollen pastern above the hoofline.

“Slow down!” she shouted as she hobble-ran towards the intruders, waving a stick at them. “You’re killing that horse.”

“He was born that way,” the soldier atop the saddle said as the horse bucked up, throwing him to the ground.

“Serves ya right,” she commented as he struggled to get up. “Both of ya,” she continued as he noticed a young woman under him, dressed in garb that was far more Earthy than his.

Ronita blew into the nostril of the now-riderless steed, looked into his eyes, greeted in the forbidden Ancient tongue, then worked her way down the afflicted leg. She noticed that the ring above the hoof wall was solid.

“He was born that way,” the soldier said. “He’s tired, not lame.” He said some words in a tongue Ronita didn’t recognize and trotted around, as sound as any horse Ronita ever treated. “As I said, he isn’t lame.”

“He would have been if you continued riding him like that,” Ronita speculated as an assertion.

The soldier dusted himself off, limping a bit himself as he got up. The wrinkled-face, arthritic-ridden old healer who only 10 years earlier had been a spry, healthy young woman capable of all functions of such smiled at the young man who pretended to be an accomplished one. “You do know the penalty for visiting me,” she said, noting the empty patches on his uniform where insignias had been. “Far more than another demotion of rank, Lieutenant.”

“Demotion of my fingers, head or balls, I know,” he grunted back. “But I am in command of myself! I have commanded Armies far bigger and better than the one assigned to me now. And I pick my own assignments! My own battles! From beyond where the sun rises in the East to far, far over the horizon where it sets in the west. And I have never lost a battle!”

“Doesn’t look like you really ever won a war, though,” Ronita smirked, finally able to make her own battle against the Army which ultimately enforced Augustus’ and the Bishop’s mandates.

“You don’t know who I really am, do you, old woman!” he blasted out, feeling sincerely justified to do so.

“No, I don’t,” Ronita confessed, realizing that her Mission in life was to heal mentally defective souls rather than to inflict more pain on them. That ‘above all do no harm’ mandate which had never made her victorious in life, but always kept her alive, somehow. “What did you come here for?” she asked in a subservient yet self-respecting tone.

“You,” the young Earth-maiden in the burlap dress and the long, brown hair said. “If you are Ronita,” she said with a voice far older than her coral-green eyes, soft face or recently-bossomed body. It came from a place of intellect and depth, and therefore sadness. But a sadness directed into a Mission of the utmost urgency. “Brother Bat needs your help.”

“I already offered it to him” Ronita bolted out, turning around to repair the hole in the wall of her hut which the wind had opened up, yet again. “Several times,” she ranted as she struggled with her arthritic fingers and weakening arms to convert twine and sticks into something resembling a board.

“He requires your assistance, in a medical capacity!” the young Earth maiden asserted, using words far beyond the station of her attire or age.

“I’m sure King Augustus will hire the best physicians possible, and that they will be effective. They know where the new Monastery is, and the Church. The building that serves no other purpose than to take money from the poor, and struggling, line the

pockets of the people who preach there, and promise riches beyond measure after he dies to any poor peasant who puts everything has in the collection plate, including his balls,” Ronita ranted as she struggled harder and harder to tie the twine between the sticks, feeling a year older and more painful with each knot she defiantly completed. “After all, good medicine is only possible if you have a lot of money to pay for it. And if Abbott Bartholomew can’t afford to pay the Bishop’s physicians enough gold, he can always invent a new chastity belt that unlocks when you say ‘Praise to King Augustus’, or catapult for the Pope that he can use to conquer another country, or a better brand of powder that can make the kind of explosions which you can control and use to vanquish any of the ‘enemies of Christ’”

“Cannon powder?” the young soldier said, a ray of hope flashing into his previously-defeated eyes.

“Powder, yes,” Ronita replied, sensing something very important about to happen, for the better or worse.

“That makes fire hotter than any burnable by wood. With flashes of thunder,” the Earth-maiden said. “A mixture of sulfur and---“

“---Cannon?” Ronita said, holding her hand over the Earth maiden’s mouth, turning to her military escort, whose attention seemed to be more on her breasts than her eyes, or mind. “You know of guns?” Ronita asked the self-proclaimed military crusader, trying to make him think that she was an expert on these things of which she has never heard.

“Long barrels that emit fire from their tips, and balls of lead. IF pushed by the kind of powder that is strong enough to push the lead forward, and controllable enough to not blow up the barrel or take off the hand that’s aiming it,” he related. “There are stories about it being used in China. A place far to the East. I heard about it when I was hired, personally by a Duke in Hungary to fight the Tatars. An impossible fight which, which I was able to make a victorious one after I---“

“---You are the girl who I’ve seen on top of Father Earth Mountain.” Ronita asked the Earth maiden, holding her hand over the perhaps braggart or perhaps accomplished soldier’s mouth. “The one who drowned in the water four years ago when she wandered off from her village,” she continued, recognizing something about her face, and eyes, and peicing together the myths she had heard when the villagers didn’t think she was listening. “Lydia?”

“That is what I used to be called, and I suppose can continue to be,” she said. “People do call us what they need us to be,” she continued, her speech becoming faster, more assertive and more intelligent than any Ronita had ever heard. “The human mind, needing and requiring the operation of a brain, is series of reflexes which according to some seeks self-gratification, the inevitable result of advanced intellect towards that end being that phenomenon called ‘love.’ A word which the Greeks have four different

words to describe, depending on if it be love of body, soul, mind or spirit. Which, interestingly, the new official language which we are required to speak, and are paradoxically speaking right now, has only one word for. 'Love'. Which will become the most misunderstood word in our language, I project, nay, predict, leading to..."

As the burlap-clad Lydia escalated into a fire-fueled discovery-quest about life as it is, or should be, her sharply-dressed Aristocratic companion seemed in awe of her. But not for what was going on between her neck. Lydia's eyes looked to the sky, the ground and the trees, but never to people, Particularly the man who was assessing how womanly her body was. And the old woman who noted how he was seeking pleasure of the flesh rather than feeding of the intellectual passions.

"I didn't get your name, Sir Knight?" Ronita asked the infatuated adventurer-soldier.

"Elasandro," he said, perhaps not realizing that he could be hung for being identified. Or not caring, as he attention was on Lydia's anatomy, attractive to lovers of all persuasions.

"Well, Sir Elasandro, what are your intentions with Lidya? I assume they are honorable."

"Of course," Elasandro replied with a chivalrous voice, an upright arched back, and a projection coming out from between his legs that seemed about to burst open as he continued to gawk with an open jaw at the, most probably, virgin genius maiden.

"You look thirsty, Sir Elasandro," she said as the new infatuation of his life wandered off into the woods, discovering a new kind of mathematics and relating it to social structure of a kingdom that, in theory, could operate at nearly 100 percent efficiency. Then rattling off Bat's medical symptoms, postulating as to the best medical treatments, relating the above to that, and a plethora of things beyond Ronita's experience and what she thought were unrivaled comprehension abilities.

As Lydia ranted off words lots of words, Ronita said few of them. "Come, inside, please. Sit, eat, drink." she said, opening the door for the Officer and perhaps gentleman. As he laid his weary bones down, Ronita looked over the herbs and potions on her shelves. Assessing what would be most appropriate for 'Brother Bat' as well as the handsome hero who had 'accidently' brought in the old fart's new protegee.

## CHAPTER 14

Elasandro was able to fix Ronita's wagon, a fair exchange for her her repairing the swellings around the old breaks in his left arm and right leg which had healed crookedly. And for quenching his thirst. And feeding his belly. And providing a leak-proof tent for him and Lidya to get some badly needed sleep in while she gathered the medicinals necessary to treat Brother Bat, learned wizard of old, on top of the mountain where he was when not Abbott Bartholomew, servant to King Augustus, down below.

"So, did you and your Lady have a restful nap?" Ronita asked Elasandro as he hitched the horse to the wagon which would could handle two people inside of it and all of the supplies she would need to bring Bat back to life, and perhaps figure out what he was doing with his life that could be relevant to hers. "I noticed that she sleeps without clothes on. Like in the Old days. Speaking very inviting language with her body," she continued with a wink and a nod. "I am sure that you did right by her, and rest assured, I didn't watch."

"There was nothing to see," Elasandro grunted, focusing his frustrations on attaching make-shift harness to horse, and horse to wagon, while Lydia was changing into a fresh set of clothes inside the hut.

"You didn't do it, Sir Knight?" Ronita pressed, gently. "I'm impressed. And a little disappointed. If there is love, there is no sin in expressing it. And there can be so much pleasure. I remember when I was young, like her, and you, and the chance to express ourselves happened. It was a sin to NOT express ourselves. In every way possible."

Elasandro remained silent, responding with grunts directed at the tack, then the wood, then himself, focusing his angry gaze on the very flaccid anatomy between his legs.

"I see," Ronita said. "You know, it happens to every man."

"Not to me. And not to my ancestors," he asserted. "What's wrong with me!"

Ronita smiled, holding back what she was really thinking. Lydia walked out of the hut, clad in an a old, brown dress which on her looked like a maidens gown, the beads within the fabric jingling with romantic song with each step the young woman took. The garment that Ronita wore that special night when the then Pagan King Augustus made her his Queen, pledging eternal love to her. By any picture in books, human experience or the imaginations of the gods, Lydia had evolved into the ultimate Vision of beauty. That Vision remained silent, keeping her words and thoughts to herself, communicating to Elasandro with a forgiving yet warm smile.

All Sir Elasandro could do was to act Knightly, bowing to his "Lady" as he escorted her to her seat on the wagon. Throwing Ronita's hundred pound box of

'selected herbs' atop his back and throwing it in the back. Then another bow to 'Madame' Ronita, who fixed his broken back and injured limbs, but neglected to cure his most valued skills.

There was one skill that Elasandro did have left, and he resorted to it. With as gallant leap as he could muster given the inadequacies of his testicular tissue, he pulled himself on top of the horse and spurred it on at a brisk trot.

"So, how did your sleep go, Lydia," the never-married rapidly-aging hag asked her young female companion, feeling more maternal than she had in a long, long time.

"I slept well. But he was restless. Like he wanted to do something, and couldn't. Do you know what that was?" Lydia inquired. "Will I?"

"When you're older," Ronita replied with a wry smile, wondering if she should reveal the medical reason for Elasandro's inability to perform with or engage the 'fairer' sex. "And he's more---"

"---Mature?" Lydia interjected, picking the words right out of her mind. Ronita turned her head and smiled. She nodded, holding back her eyes. She felt genuinely happy that Lydia, formerly the homely village idiot, was not a beauty with brains. But as for those brains, it would only be a matter of time till Lydia could figure out the identity of the libido-draining elixer Ronita had snuck into his wine. And the secrets she was holding inside herself which could get many people killed, or worse, if discovered in the wrong time and place.



## CHAPTER 15

Though some would say it was hard being a peasant under the thumb of a King, to King Augustus it was harder being the King. Keeping the Army strong and always fighting someone. Checking out one spy to see if he was keeping tabs on the other spies. And being sure that no one except he knew how much gold was really in the Treasury and how much was owed to allies who could become enemies if not paid on time. Then there was that issue of appearing to be a King, and a Christian one at that, particularly to his new ally, and major creditor, the Bishop from Rome. And that constantly annoying job of not letting on to ANYone else that the extent of his literacy never went beyond the ability to sign his own name.

But there was one place where the Augustus could be whoever he wanted to be. As a King who still had not chosen a Queen worth to take to the alter, he had his pick of any woman in the kingdom for his pleasure. For this night, it was Glendina, chosen not only because of the long, red hair that flowed down her perfectly shaped back and over her voluptuous buttocks, but because she could not conceive children. Or so she said anyway. If she was lying, mother and child would both be beheaded, of course, another one of those “Kingly” things that Augustus really did dislike doing.

Tonight’s featured after-dinner private supper was roast pig and apple sauce, served on a plate of naked chest. Augustus lapped it up like a dog, insisting that the upgraded commoner who was officially still a captured slave pull the rope tied to the collar around his neck if he was not pleasing her. This night was a three-tugger, the King having had much to learn about pleasuring a woman. He certainly could not gain the attraction of a woman by being who he was. Even by the standards of deformed peasants, Augustus was ugly. More impish than man. More muscular than Herlean, with thick bones that make him look fat no matter how well tailored the cloaks and suits of armour elevated the shoulders and narrowed their way to the hips. The only feature about Augustus that he felt good about was his hair, and of late that was falling out. Maybe it was something in his ancestry. Or something put in his food by spies in the castle or witches from the woods who snuck in after dark. Or too much tugging by women like Glendina. Still, he valued and needed time with such women, as their melodic whispers and moans were the only thing that quieted the voices still lingering in his head. Until now anyway.

“I won’t do it! I can’t do it! You do it if it is so important!” Augustus screamed to the echoing walls while the human ‘plate’ awaited his eating the dinner served on it.

“Is there anything I can do, your Majesty?” Glendina asked.

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“Ask them,” the King replied. “Or HIM!” he continued, referring Glendina’s attention to a commissioned carved likeness of Christ on the cross, Jesus’ face resembling that of Augustus had he been born with bones above his neck which were of the right proportions.

Tonight, Jesus didn't move his lips and the eyes stayed inside his head. Still, he spoke, in echoing voices which were low enough in volume to be ghostlike, but loud enough to not be ignored. "You are the King. Johan was the enemy. You did what you had to do, and what I Commanded you to do, and for that I will punish you."

"Why?" Augustus demanded of the spirit which seemed as illogical as the stories about him spoken, but not read, from the Bishop's pulpit. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," the Jesus ghost said, as others joined in. Each had a different thing to say, the words overlapping so he could not discern their meaning. All of them seemed familiar, but one was clearly identifiable. It sang a tune in the Ancient Pagan tongue which Augustus remembered going to sleep with each night when he was a child. "Stop singing Johan!" the present King commanded, pulling out a sword. Wielding it in a hand that shook with fear, a torso that poured out sweat and a mouth that emanated blood as a result of clenching his teeth too hard. "Your days are over! Mine are here now! And I will be the King! As I was commanded to do so," he said, looking at the Jesus sculpture for verification of such. "Is that not so, my Lord," he said, bowing his head.

Jesus 'shhhd' all the other ghosts, even Johan, then stared Augustus straight in the eye. "Yes," he said in a deep voice resembling Augustus' Pagan father, to the best of the present Monarch's memory anyway. "Yes," the Christ spirit confirmed in the voice of his deceased mother. "No," it said, in the voice of Johan, followed by mocking laughter of the slain Rebel. The other ghosts joined in.

Augustus fell into a fetal position, then noticed that Glendina was watching. "Something is wrong, My Lord?" she asked.

"Not anymore," Augustus asserted, whipping out a battle axe and chopping the Jesus sculpture's head off. Its voice still speaking, he chopped it into pieces, causing the big voice to become little ones. Small enough to gather up in his bloody, sweat-soaked hands and throw out the window.

Perhaps it was the exhaustion, or perhaps why it was exerted, but the voices stopped. Once again, the dead silence of the castle walls was all that entered Augustus' ears or consciousness. Glendina nuzzled up to him and stroked his chest. Then his face. Then his lips. He kissed her fingers, finding sustenance in them. And warmth. And perhaps destiny.

"Does this mean I will be your Queen?" Glendina asked.

"I have heard that you belong to Lieutenant Elasandro," he replied. "He paid good money for you, and I still value him."

"Could you value him to be Captain Elasandro again? Or perhaps Colonel Elasandro?" she asked.

“That depends how much you value me,” Augustus said, stroking her cheek, tenderly. “Or pretending you do. For what I am.”

“WHO you are, you mean, My Lord,” Glendina said. She kissed him on the lips.

“If something were to happen to Elasandro, what would you do?” Augustus asked, knowing that the real rules of Glendina’s profession could never be changed by a King, Pope or even the Jesus Spirit.

Glendina stoked her chin, considering her options. It pleased the King to see her so independent, so he let her be so.

“He was seen by one of my patrols near a village where no one was supposed to see,” Augustus said. “He was supposed to be elsewhere, and he still hasn’t reported back with the evidence I need to...”

Augustus halted his speech, just in time.

“Evidence of what?” Glendina asked.

“Evidence that...” Augustus pondered, once again in full possession of his Kingly demeanor and abilities. “He is doing things he’ll never tell me about, but he will tell you about.”

Glendina smiled an approval for the proposition, then laid down and loaded up her naked chest with pig meat and apple sauce. “Come and get it, you disgustingly magnificent hound!” she barked.

Server and servee dined well, as each would need all their strength for what was on the list of things to do in the illiterate king’s relieved and even more swelled head.

## CHAPTER 16

Lydia was un-accustomed to sit for too long, and most particularly on a wagon. She became well aware of her pelvic anatomy as the bumps in the road made her feel every bone in that region. “I can walk,” she told Elasandro, yet again, as he remained mounted on the steed which was pulling the two-passenger cart. “Or ride the horse,” she said, slipping into another ‘morality experiment’. “You can ride on this comfortable wagon next to Ronita and tell her all of your stories.”

“Let him tell them to his horse,” Ronita interjected. “Who, by the way, is trotting faster than you can walk, or run. Unless, of course, ‘Brother Bat’ has figured out how to make you sprout wings and fly.”

“Actually, he did talk about the possibility of such. When I looked at the birds, I did notice the way they flap their wings, and it is NOT straight up and down. Theoretically, if one could design a pair of wings that swooped downward and forward then backward and up at an angle of...” Lydia’s improvisation of intellect, the only pleasure she had left, was stopped by Ronita’s hand. Raised upward this time instead of placed over her mouth. She pointed to Elasandro as the reason to quench her speech.

“He’s a friend,” Lydia informed the old woman. “I can trust him.”

“Not as long as he’s wearing that uniform, my child,” she whispered.

Lydia flashed on an idea to test her hypothesis, ignoring the reference to ‘my child’ from the gifted healer who above all seemed to want to be just a common mother. “General Elasandro!” Lydia shouted over the clickedy-clack of the horse’s hoof on the washed out mud which had become more rock than soil. “Could you please take off your clothes?”

“You mean it?” he inquired.

“Yes. I do,” she said.

Elasandro did as Lydia bid him. He unbuttoned his tunic, removed it from his muscular arms and let it fly in the wind, tying it to the back of the saddle. “Anything else, Lady Lydia?” he inquired with a proud, optimistic smile.

The sunlight revealed many scars, but they seemed to compliment his physique rather than detract from it. At least to Lydia’s eye, which seemed to notice things male in ways that were most probably female.

“The trousers,” Ronita interjected before Lydia’s mind could figure out what her body was feeling. “Without stopping the horse. We’ve not time to lose, you know.”

“Of course, Lady Ronita,” Elasandro replied with a courtly bow.

The physics of it all didn't seem possible, but somehow Elasandro was able to remove his trousers without becoming dislodged from the saddle, nor losing a single beat in the rapid trot in which he had engaged the steed.

Lydia admired the view of the rider now clad in nothing but a loincloth around his genitals. "You see!" she whispered to Ronita. "He has taken off his uniform, so he can now be trusted."

"Not as long as he has that sword still strapped to his waist," Ronita warned Lydia in a way that felt...familiar. And trustworthy. Though she didn't know why, Lydia felt transported back to a simple time before she was labeled 'simple', or defective. She looked into Ronita's weary, bloodshot eyes and felt something which her soul could connect to, but her mind could not yet define. Such were frustrating experiences, alleviated only by undertaking new intellectual challenges. Or having something from the world that didn't honor intellect challenge her unexpectedly. Such occurred over the hill as the horse came to a dead halt, spooked by something it nor Elasandro didn't seem to be expecting.

"You have been demoted to serf, gladiator, or savoir?" a woman bearing a mane of long, red hair said in an accent foreign to Lydia's ears, her saddle-less horse tied to a tree grazing on the spring grass underneath a thin layer of snow. Around the woman's neck was a metal collar, a marker of her being owned property, though she stood proud and erect, as if a free woman, or one who ruled over other women. Her dress was similar to those worn by those in the Christian court, except that the neckline was just above the breasts rather than up to the chin, the arms exposed with a flair that extended from the elbow and the skirt slit in such a way that it revealed her entire leg when she walked, and on her terms.

"Glendina?" Elasandro said, pulling his horse to a halt, putting his hands over the genital areas, was hiding a bulge which was developing in that area. "What are you doing here?"

"Admiring your new uniform, for the moment anyway," she smiled at Elasandro. "Who's the wench?" she continued, grimacing at Lydia.

"A...friend," he said, as if an apology. "Her name is---"

"---of no concern to you," Ronita interjected. "As are you," she continued, aiming a determined stare at the lone road traveller who seemed to be there for no definable purpose. "We have medical business to take care of," Ronita asserted. "Captain."

Elasandro and the 'road lady' looked at each other for a long, long time. They conversed in lyrical phrases which Lydia's mind didn't understand, but her heart seemed

to comprehend it. Lydia didn't like what she was feeling, but felt compelled to not let it go.

"It's called jealousy, my child," Ronita whispered. "Something to acknowledge but deal with later. As we have other things to do now."

"Yes, we do," Lydia said, remembering the reason why she came down the mountain in the first place. Anticipating Lydia's next thought, Ronita pulled two apples from the back of the wagon and gave it to her. "Aim well, my child," she said.

Lydia planned the trajectory and let the apple go. The first landed in the exact spot she intended. The horse felt a ping on its ass and broke into a gallop, pulling Elasandro back into the saddle and the Mission back on target, to bring Brother Bat back to the land of the living. The second missed its mark, but was close enough to the arrogant yet beautiful road traveler's horse to make it spook and run down the valley, its former rider being offered the opportunity to avail herself of a more humble mode of transportation.

## CHAPTER 17

“So, I heard you lost your horse,” Bishop LaBlanc smirked at the blister-footed whore brought to his private writing chamber.

“And I heard you lost your virginity, Your Excellency,” she volleyed back, a shot of pain blasting through her pre-maturely aging back.

“Such happens to a man of the world before he becomes a man of God,” LaBlanc admitted, as he sat back and comfortably took another sip of wine.

“More sweetly when he loses his virginity to boys,” she offered.

The Bishop dropped his jaw and wine goblet, that ‘found out’ look in his drawn face. “I can have you burnt as a witch, you know!” he screamed. “If you think I can’t, feel around your neck. That slave collar you are wearing still identifies you as someone whose life was spared the axe!”

“So it could be owned by those who wield it,” Glendina replied, sadly. She sat down on the table and gently sampled the wine. “This is good,” she said, smacking her lips. “Good enough for my people to have sacrificed it to the gods. Only the high priests were allowed to drink it, and that was only to taste it to see if was worthy to give to the gods.”

“So then how is it that you know its taste so intimately?” the good Bishop asked.

Feeling found out herself, Glendina turned her face away from the Bishop’s accusing gaze. It was his most powerful weapon, enabling him to make people confess to crimes they not only didn’t commit but couldn’t comprehend. “God is waiting for you answer,” he continued. “And He is quite displeased with you.”

“SHE must be very disappointed with you, then,” Glendina smiled, observing the Bishop grabbing the handle of his whip, prepared to use it this time. “And not because of what you did. But because of what you DIDN’T do. Particularly with that magician who pretends to be an Abbott. And something about the village idiot who was supposed to have died four years ago is involved with that.”

“The one whose hand lightning put Augustus’ sword into, just before she was supposed to have died,” he recalled. “Is she still alive?”

“And quite the beauty, though she doesn’t know it yet. ‘General’ Elasandro seems to value her company. As does Ronita.”

“The witch who Augustus was supposed to have disposed of,” LaBlanc grunted out angrily.

“But didn’t. I’m sure that the old woman I saw was Ronita. And that the young one was Lydia.”

“Sure enough to bet your life on it?”

“Even more...my freedom,” Glendina asserted, putting all of her cards on the table and feeling need to go for it all. “If I am wrong, then I will personally put shackles on my ankles and wrists, serving the Officers in your Army anything they want, at any time.”

“Or, perhaps serving the Church,” the Bishop proposed. “As a Nun. Head shaved. Mouth quiet. Eyes always downward in Sacred obedience.”

Glendina thought about the gamble to which she had just committed. And how sure she was about the faces of the young girl and old hag she had met when she had followed Elasandro and finally found him.

“So, you are as cowardly as you are sinful?” Bishop LaBlanc noted, admittedly correctly. He took back the goblet of wine and drank it down in one gulp. He looked up the ceiling. “And if your gods are so powerful, why do they not strike me down dead?”

Glendina didn’t believe in the old gods any more than she believed in the new One, but there was something she did believe in. That feeling in her gut when she suspected something to be important to someone. And what seemed to be important to the Bishop were the drawings on his desk. Not the ones about new steeples and old scripture, but things that seemed to be penises. Empty penises which, according to the depictions, emitted something from their tips far more potent than ejaculates of sperm.

“They are called cannons, if you must ask. Captured from a Persian warship which hit a sand bar in Sicily,” LaBlanc said, completing her thoughts. “They need one element to make them work. Something that Abbott Bartholomew knows about.”

“Or his favorite student?” Glendina offered.

“Neither of whom will reveal its secrets, at the threat of torture, death or excommunication,” the Bishop said. “According to what Augustus’ most trusted scribe, Brother James, said about them.”

“But who could be convinced by other means,” the slave-whore smiled, seductively dancing around the room like a queen, nay, a Grecian goddess. Stroking her breast. Shaking her long, red mane. Jiggling her hips to the tune of the song which was top on the New Faith’s forbidden list.

The Bishop responded with a raised eyebrow, and elevated penile salute. Assuming that meant a “yes” to whatever plan Glendina suggested, she proposed the terms.



“There is just one thing I want,” she said. “This,” she continued, pulling on the metal collar still locked around her neck, removable only with a key owned by Augustus in a place he never revealed to even the Bishop.

“I will remove it myself,” the Bishop promised.

“And lock it around the neck of ‘General’ Elasandro,” she asserted.

“It will be my pleasure,” the reply, appended with a courtly bow.

Glendina enjoyed being the favored whore of the Bishop. She not only felt that she conquered him, but that she corrupted him, a prelude to his inevitable downfall. As whatever was left of her own country was gone, corrupting and destroying other countries was all she had left. Starting with corrupting and destroying people in those still-undestroyed countries. The first two on that list were Elasandro, and the ‘genius beauty’ who he seemed so intent on helping.

## CHAPTER 18

Brother Bat's body went from being weak, to paralyzed, to going into motions controlled by something other than his brain. His arms shook uncontrollably. He legs fling themselves up in the air then back down, hard, on his straw-covered cot. His bruised appendages didn't bleed, but seemed to want to. To his mind they became larger than that of a bear, then as thin and short as a squerril's. "I suppose it is time for you and I to part ways," he told his body from the part of his brain that was still Alive, but on its way to becoming confused. Diving into a deeper layer of Existence, and Life, he addressed the brain and body from a still safe haven which he called Mind-Soul. "Now, brain and body. You two lads had better behave. You still have work to do." The body obeyed, but the brain didn't, tossing Brother Bat into a realm which he could not control. He could feel a large hand reach under his back and push what was 'him' upward. That 'him' resisted as hard as it could, but had to surrender. Once released from the belly that had swollen up, the eyes which felt painful as well as intensely yellow, and limbs that each danced to a death-tune of their own composition, 'he' found himself to be lighter than he ever did before. Able to see a bright light above, and a dark abyss below. Upward into the light he went, in stages, hearing music which was at first strangely atonal, then as familiar and rhythmic as any he had heard as a child, or sung to the child who he adopted on his own.

"Lydia!" he found himself shouting down his body below, and the visitors who came into the door to attend to the mass of flesh which was on its way to becoming a corpse. "You should see this!" he exclaimed as the light above became a Light 'within'. "This transition is the most frightening pleasure I have ever experienced! And it isn't so bad. No, it really isn't. As long as you are ready for it, and have taken care of all of your affairs in the small, tiny, relatively-lifeless place you still call the world of the living."

Bat recalled his time amongst the 'living' through the third eye above the bridge of nose, an appendage which was as useless in this new 'body' as was air itself. He saw and felt his birth as a naïve boy learning the ways of the world, born with a name he had not told anyone and had even forgotten how to properly pronounce himself.

Meanwhile, down below, Ronita was teaching Lydia everything she knew about restoring breath to lungs that chose to finally stop moving air into and out of them. The student impressed the teacher by offering solutions as to how to revive the heart, and restore blood flow at the right rate and time to liver, kidney and brain. Their assistant was a military commander used to giving orders now had to take them, who more squemish about death than he thought he was.

Pulled back into his inner mind, Bat recalled his next twenty years as a man applying those lessons in the world and adding to them, Ronita very much a part of that wondrous experience. More so than the now old and haggared woman ever did, or could realize. That old woman was more angry at him than pitiful, screaming at the body he had left with commands to come back to life because he still has things AND people to take care of, referring mostly to Lydia, but in ways she didn't imagine resurrectable,

also herself. Something snapped in Ronita, her anger turning into grief. The harder Lydia worked, the louder the old woman chanted, very painfully off key at that.

“You’ll be alright! Both of you!” Bat yelled down to them, hoping they could hear him. But alas, they didn’t, and he was called by the Light into healing that entity beyond body, brain and mind. His soul felt the need to review the last twenty years of his life, the time when he was a teacher. According to calendar, this last stage of his life lasted nearly three times that long, and he had gone through several students. Their faces flashed through his mind at lightening speed. Brother James, now the Bishop’s closest assistant, was amongst them. Several other failures emerged, whose names he had forgotten. Lidya had been the first girl he had taken on, and his most glowing success. His ‘magic’ fit well into her brain, causing it to grow like no other. He smiled with pride as Lydia led the futile, though marvelously ingenious battle to put life back into his dying body. Indeed, he had done his job. Passed on the knowledge, wisdom and warmth to the next generations of scholars, as they would be called in the Universities. Wizards as they would be called in legends. Witches, as they would be labeled if they treated the wrong villagers, or kings. “Yes,” Bat said to the Light above. “It is time for me to leave. I am ready.”

“To go to someplace else!” a voice echoing against the walls said, its face being that of the student, and comrade, Bat had tried to forget. “Johan!” he exclaimed while looking at the ghost whose eyes were still bright and defiant, but whose body had been deformed by the torture chamber. The best instruments available to King Augustus, provided by none other than Bat himself. “I invented the instruments for purposes other than that!” Bat screamed out at his defense against the accusing eyes of Johan, then the Light, which pushed him downward, towards a dark pit below with volcanic ash spewing up from it. “It was Augustus who killed you, and your Revolution, not me!” he continued as the Light pushed him further and further down, into a pit which he knew he deserved to be delivered to, but was not yet ready to accept entry into. On his way into the pit, he saw Lydia’s face, one old but now Ancient, embedded with Purpose and Intellect which did merge into Compassion. He reached his hand out to the young Earth maiden who he loved more any anything, or anyone, but she did not see nor feel him.

“Do what you must to me!” he asserted to the Light. “But please, do Right by her! She is humanity’s only hope now, as well as yours, if you still care about your Creation!”

With that, Augustus closed his eyes and braced for the abyss, wherever it would take him. The destination was something he hardly expected.

“Where am I?” he said, feeling sunlight, above his head. A grip around his left hand that was hard, and firm. Behind it, a blurred face emanating a harsh tone in a very Ancient female voice.

“So, you came back to give me a singing lesson!” Ronita said, tears of joy streaming down her face. “I could see that you, well..” Ronita kissed the old coot on his

cheek, working her way through his stragley, phlegm-soaked beard. It felt tingly. Reminiscent of a time when he was young, and love was something more felt than explained or examined.

He felt someone gently raise up his right hand, its touch not so youthful. “Your pulses are strong, balanced, but still in need of healing,” Lydia noted. Her face looked old, but not for any reason Bat could define, or understand. She seemed to be more mind than heart, more intelligent than feeling, her motivations and Purpose very much between her ears. “Which makes me speculate that if we can find the pathways from where the pulses emerge in the wrists to their origins within the body cavities, we’d discover a system of delivery which would not carry blood, but as yet undiscovered substance which---“

“---We will discourse about later!” Ronita insisted, holding her hand over the young Wizardess’s rapidly moving mouth. The old woman turned to Ronita, her face seeming to be young again, as warm as it was forgiving. “Ulika needs some rest.”

“Ulika,” Lydia noted. “So that’s who you really are,” she pondered, putting together a story which had been incubating in her ever-inquisitive head for a long time.

“Not if we don’t get all of us, and everything in this hut out of her, fast!” the male medical assistant commanded the women, and now resurrected old man. He put the last of Bat’s books, potions, powders and contraptions in the overloaded wagon, strapped up the tunic around his chest, withdrew his sword and gazed down below using the hollow, glass-covered rod Bat had devised to magnify objects that were far away to make them look closer. “I am sure we were followed,” he continued. “Though I did my best to see that we weren’t,” he confessed, looking to Bat for forgiveness.

“I am sure that you did what you could, CAPTAIN Elasandro” Bat said, recognizing his face, acknowledging his pre-demotion rank and reminding him of his new responsibilities. “But we all have to do MORE than what we can.”

“Starting with getting down this mountain,” Elasandro said, drawing Bat’s attention to an Army of the Bishop’s special soldiers coming in towards the South Slope of the mountain, directly towards the ropes and pullies Elasnadro used to get himself, his horse, and the wagon up to the top.

Bat considered his options carefully, knowing there was only one real one left. “There is another way, down, General Elasandro,” Bat said, solemnly. “But once we take it, there is no coming back here. For any of us.” The prospect of never coming back to the mountain laid unexpectedly heavily on Lydia, whose face became white with fear.

“Then I would suggest that we take this other route down the mountain, and fast,” Elasandro volleyed back. The soldier from the ‘world below’ adjusted the lenses in the magnifying glass for another look around the mountain. It was a new invention to him, but he seemed to be a quick study with new contraptions of war...too quick. He grabbed

hold of one of the 'hand cannons' Bat had devised for non-military purposes like a seasoned professional. "You have powder we can use to use this?" he asked.

"Some," Bat said, referring him to the a small supply of cannon-powder, hoping, and praying, that the draw next to it which contained the formula as to how to make it was still unopened. Along with the parchments which described how to turn yellow rocks into gold. Of course, it would only a matter of time till Lydia had figured out the processes as to how to do both of these. And a little more time till Captain Elasandro, who was still wearing the King's uniform, would figure out a way to get Lydia to reveal the secrets of making gunpowder and gold to him, and his Superiors.

But for now, Bat's gut said there was no option than to trust Elasandro. Ronita's eyes agreed, and as Bat's own ocular portholes were still very blurry, he had no choice but to trust the old woman who he had abandoned in his younger days at Wizard Uluka, and betrayed while pretending to be Abbot Bartholomew.

## CHAPTER 19

It was a long, hard ride to the village on the most Northern border of the kingdom, but King Augustus had to take it himself. Under an all-day sun and a bright moon, he rode at a brisk trot, and sometimes hard gallop, faster than news could carry news about his arrival, as the Eastern hordes had always done. The front of the covered-wagon train was filled with Nuns in the front, some secretly rented from the Bishop without bothering their master about the details of the transaction. The rear carts contained recently-converted Earth maidens, along with those paroled from prison by Royal Decree after being convicted of crimes ranging from robbing from the Church treasury chest to corrupting the morals of young boys conscripted as candidates for the priesthood. They had arrived at the village at dawn, each carrying a loaf of bread and a slab of meat, all offered as a gift from the king to villagers who would offer their praises to him and the God he now represented. A handful of gold was given to those who would locate the whereabouts of those whose loyalties were suspect. By noon, the Army arrived. Twenty traitors to the crown and minions of the AntiChrist were fetched from their homes dragged through to the center of the village and tied to posts.

“Johan’s Revolution lives, beyond his death, and ours!” the boldest of them exclaimed. He was an older man, his body only a year or two from death, and therefore had little to lose. The younger men, and three women, seemed more innocent than guilty of waging War against the King, but such mattered little. What did matter was what they WANTED to do so. But for what? King Augustus very little about what Johan was fighting for. Perhaps some of these sympathizers of the now martyred madman could explain it to him.

“I know, I’ll pick the one who has his, or her, head in the clouds,” the troll-like King muttered to the voices inside his head commanding him to do something meaningful. That pledge led Augustus to a lad of around 17 years who whose complexion and demeanor was more like a lass. He had that ‘literate’ look in his eye, and he had been pulled out of a hut containing more material that could be read than could be eaten.

“What is your name, my ‘lad’?” Augustus asked the boy as he stoked his cheek with the edge of his sword, then the tip of his finger.

“Iliokia,” he replied, proudly.

“I mean your CHRISTIAN name!” Augustus barked, appending his attack with a swift and hard slap across the boy’s cheek.

“Luke,” the lad said, head bowed, softly and ashamed.

“And what were you writing in your hut?” Augustus demanded to know, holding the parchments in his hand written by the young man’s hand when he was abducted.

“Memoirs about Johan? His proclamations? His plan as how he SAID he would make the world better for all men?”

“And women,” ‘Luke’ added, looking lovingly at a young woman at the other end of the line of prisoners.

“Who will die a horrible death, if you don’t tell me what was so special about Johan! And why you wrote this story about him!”

“That is not about Johan, it is about---“

“---to be burned!” Augustus threw the papers into the fire, of course without reading them. He pulled a cross out from under his tunic and raised it to the sky. “Under THIS sign, I will give you a better world than Johan ever promised you! What am I to do with all of you after you waged war against me, and Jesus!”

“They did nothing,” the lad asserted. “And most of them are loyal to you.”

“Not according to your fellow villagers,” Augustus said.

“Who surrendered us as traitors to you, and Jesus, because they wanted money, not justice, Sire,” he replied with a humble bow.

Maybe it was true, maybe it wasn’t. Augustus looked at the accused and felt most of them to be cowards, or weaklings. Still, they were turned in by their peers. He looked at those peers, their pockets now filled with gold. But someone else could pay them more than even King Augustus was able to. According to the rumors, his loyal Abbott was smelting gold from rocks found in locations far up in the hills, on a mountain protected by tall rocks, vicious cougars and demons who shot out thunderbolts at any intruder. Balls of rocks which exploded into a thunderbold and flash of light that left destruction in their path.

That Abbott was missing now, absent from his appointed rounds for the last two weeks. Augustus had grown weary of making excuses for him to the Bishop, then ineffective at doing so. Then there was the matter of Lieutenant Elasandro who fancied himself a General, who was also missing. “Well, where are they?” Augustus asked the voices in his head when he thought no one else was seeing where his inner eye was looking.

The voices did not answer. But they did command Augustus as to what he should do to the villagers deemed traitors by their peers. “Burn them!” the voices inside the King’s aching head said. The well paid informers, who probably were hiding secrets themselves, agreed. As did the portrait of Jesus painted on the old tavern now converted into a Church.

The pain in Augustus' gut escalated as he looked over the faces of the condemned, knowing in what was left of his heart that they were innocent of the crimes they had been accused of. The voices had made him King, and as such, he was their servant. But not today.

“To the village who serves this Christian Kingdom go everything these traitors to Goodness own! You deserve their possessions, for your loyalty.” he commanded, as the greedy descended upon the accused huts, shops and persons, converting the rest of the populus into a joy-crazed mob which joined them. Normally peaceful citizens turned into rabid dogs, grabbing everything they could carry on their underfed, labor-broken backs, including ‘Scholar’ Luke’s brothers, one of whom ripped off Luke’s coat, claiming it as his own, another who pulled out a knife and grabbed hold of his beloved’s hair, justifying the scalping he set out to do by labeling her a witch. “But to me goes everything else!” Augustus shouted, his newfound courage turned into action when he saw the terror in the woman’s face.

Pulled back from their actions by Augustus’ soldiers, and to their senses by the Nuns’ pleas for sanity. Aside from being half naked, and partially bruised, the twenty ‘minions’ of the Anti-Christ Johan were fine. The only body that was really hurting was Augustus, whose gut hurt even more. But defying the voices put fire back into it. “These people are naked, which is an offense to Jesus. And cold, which is an offense to me. Cloth them and give them proper lodging!” he commanded loudly enough for all of those in the ‘real’ world to hear him, trying to drowned out the voices that now tried to shout him.

The men were given Army trousers and tunics, the women covered with Nunnery robes and habits. They were escorted to the wagons, the train led ahead by a revived yet newly tortured Augustus who was going to be a King, on his own terms, no matter what the voices, the Bishop, or even Jesus said. After all, they had made him King, and it would be an offense to God the Father, whose Voice was always silent, to not fulfill that mandate.



## CHAPTER 20

Ronita's cart was extended to four wheels, each of them quickly widened and smoothed round on Bat's lave so that the horse could pull the massive loads forward. Breaks of Bat's original design, and Lydia's badly needed improvements to those designs attached to them so that gravity would not pull the cart over the horse and into a crash down the steep hills. Strapped to the rear were four thinner wheels filled with air, which would prove viable on flatter, rockier ground. It was Lydia's design, but it required Bat's hands to build them, as the smarter she got with her head the more inept she became with her hands in terms of both their strength and dexterity.

Bat insisted on walking, claiming that the goods on the cart were more valuable than he was, and more worth of preserving. Ronita insisted on providing the crutch for his left arm, while he defiantly used a walking stick to support his right shoulder. Elasandro led his horse on foot, as the perimeter of Northern portion of the mountain top contained traps designed to trap human and horse feet, most particularly present on the entrance to the tunnels down. Lydia, because of her light weight and knowledge of the 'hydrolics' of the break system, steered the wagon from the driver's seat.

The Northern slope down Father Earth Mountain was the steepest, and descended in two stages. The first was a three hundred foot decline, negotiable via a meandering but flat 'road' with nothing but air on its downslope side. Such was the entry to the a series of hopefully-still passable tunnels leading down the mountain which he had told no one about before, especially Lidya, who was angered beyond measure about such. Until the first view of the road down the mountain was seen. Lydia pulled the reins of the horse to an abrupt halt, then activated the wagon brakes. Her feet froze, her arms shaking with terror. She shut her eyes tightly and started to pray.

"Come on, we have to move on!" Elasandro yelled back at her. "There's an Army of soldiers who rides where the South Slope approach up the mountain is. And by the way they were travelling, led by a hooded 'monk' who walks like no cloistered man of God I ever met, they can see through any camaflouge you used to hide the ladders and pullies. I know I did. And if they aren't snarled by the traps I set for them there, at 'Brother Bat's' instructions, they'll find another way down. Though it would have been easier just to cut the ropes and let them fall to the ground. No matter, we have to move on. And FAST!!!"

"I thought I could, but I can't go on, not again" she said. She jumped off the wagon, crawling back up the mountain in desperation.

"Come on!" Elasandro insisted, grabbing her by the waist. "This is not time to be sentimental," he said, regarding the buildings behind him, the most important of which were ablaze, at Bat's reluctant insistence, burial holes between them well camouflaged with weeds, rocks and manure.

“I’m afraid!” she cried. Desperately she struggled to get back to the widespread flatlands on the top of the mountain lined by enough trees on all sides to hide the view of anything below it. Breathing so heavy that all she could hear was her own terror.

“I’ll protect you!” he claimed. “With this!” he continued, tapping the handle of his sword.

“Which will be as useless as this, my good Captain,” Ronita said, pointing to the junction between her two legs, then his. “You have no weapon or appendage that can be effective against what she is afraid of.”

“Heights,” Bat interjected, head down, remorseful. “Which became worse after she came here. Perhaps made worse by the medicinals and surgical manipulations I did in her sleep that made her...”

“...Smarter?” Ronita said.

“And wiser, with the help of the God beyond ALL of the gods,” Bat continued.

“Who you betrayed, when you became Augustus’ Abbot,” Ronita shot back.

“It was a miscalculation,” Bat asserted, looking directly at Ronita.

“A mistake, amongst many other mistakes,” she admonished, staring right through the man who publically approved her exile, and most probably far more instrumental in Johan’s death than he admitted to anyone, even at the time of dying.

“I can use some help over here!” Elasandro screamed out, his arms around Lydia’s waist, futilely using all of his strength to pull the scrawny young ‘wizardess’ away from a tree which she was hugging for dear life.

Ronita let Bat stew in his guilt. She walked over to Lydia, gently wrapping her hands around the still very young woman’s thin, sweat-soaked wrists, inviting her to take her hand. “Hold on to me. Please,” Ronita said gently, her mind and heart both working together. “We are all in this together now, finally,” she continued, the real meaning of her words hidden behind eyes. Lydia’s scrawny arms grabbed hold of Ronita’s frail body, they seemed to give each other renewed strength, born of evolving Purpose. Throwing Bat a piece of walking stick to support his left arm, Ronita crawled atop the wagon, instructing Lydia to look down at the ground, as she led her up the bunkboard. “You look down at the brakes, I’ll look after the road ahead, and Captain Chastity will look after the horse.”

Though Elasandro didn’t appreciate being ordered around by ‘Major Ronita’, he did feel an appreciation for who she was. In all respects she was ‘mother’. Eyes looking everywhere but for her own welfare. A mind able to think of ten things at once, anticipating disasters which no one else could comprehend possible. And letting others

get the glory of her accomplishments and struggles. The latter was most appreciated when Lydia dared to look upward, in stages. Then nodding 'yes' to moving forward with a flashes of lioness' courage rather than a lamb's fear.

Seeing that Bat would be a slower walker than the horse, Elasandro insisted that the old man ride atop of the mount, while he led the horse forward. But Bat was afraid of horses, Elasandro soon found out. The young 'General' rapidly found his mind pulled to someone in his past. To his mother, who had taught him to not be afraid of the equine beast with a mixture of tender caring and tough love, appended by a pinch of actual knowledge about the beast. The combination had worked, since the horse was now an animal with whom adult Elasandro could not live without.

While gradually instructing Bat as to how to hold onto the mane, grip with his legs, and divert his heavy fear-breathing into song, Elasandro felt his own mother's spirit inside him, in some ways that he welcomed, some he feared, and some he hated.

The expeditionary force of four led itself into exile down the mountain trail, which Elasandro was led to believe was a road, the all-man mercenary felt a feminine presence inside re-educating him. Instructing his heart rather than his mind, in a language which needed no words to be expressed. Either that, or the herbs in the breakfast Ronita had served him had something in it that certainly was never in any pot served up by the cook at an Army encampment. Speculations to the strange feelings his body had acquired after meeting Ronita gave way to recollection of other events when a winter lily came across his gaze. He stopped the horse, paralyzed by the memory it re-awakened.

"Something is wrong?" Bat said, finally seated comfortably on the horse, confident enough after overcoming some of his own equine-based fears to be the arrogant professor again. "Your spirit seems paralyzed by something which should be giving you strength."

How Elasandro yearned to tell the Master Healer about that day. How he desired for the self-made, or divinely-born, Wizard to wave his magic wand and transport him back in time to that horrible day. When those of the Faith which was neither Moslem, nor Christian, nor Pagan were rounded up. Told that they must convert to being servants of Jesus or become flesh for the soldier's dogs. Told by one mother, whose son had hid in the woodshed, that to die for one's convictions is better than to live honoring someone else's. Even if there is no 'heaven' beyond grave. Because what we do in this life, lives on in those who survive us, and who will do even greater things than we do. As did Moses, Solomon and all others who are waiting for the True Messiah, while acknowledging the value of the great teacher Jesus, who was another Instrument of God, but as much as anyone else. The woman sung a Hebrew chant as she died, looking lovingly and confidently at the boy, who would live on to do great things for ALL people, not only those who identified themselves with the Star of David. Her David, descended from Alexander the Great, who would slay the Goliaths, and abusive Alexanders, who stood between all people and their own Messiahs.

“Something is wrong, or becoming right?” Bat said, channeling something prophetic to Elasandro as tried to hide the tears streaming down his face.

“We’re losing time,” Elasandro said, sucking up whatever ‘courage’ he thought was still in him. Pushing his grief yet again into hatred of himself, and hopefully progress for others. Finding himself to be in command of his own army now, headed to a battleground he did not know, fighting and hopefully dying for a Cause which was finally becoming apparent to him now.

“You want to know more about Johan,” Bat said, finding a way into the now-vulnerable mercenary’s thoughts. “The real story behind Johan,” he offered. “And me,” he confessed.

“Just Johan, for now,” Elasandro said, focusing on what felt to be the real reason why the various blunders he had taken led him to Augustus’ kingdom, and army. “Business before redemption,” he continued, pulling the horse forward.

## CHAPTER 21

By the time the horse, cart and everything on top or around it got to the bottom of first slope on the North Side of the mountain, Lydia felt that there was light at the end of the tunnel. Its entrance was visible from only one vantage point, 40 feet in front of it. The door was covered by trees which were covered by moss, which was being used as a home for at least three generations of sparrows.

Muscle power to uncover the faded wooden doors to the tunnel was provided by Elasandro and his horse. Advise as to most effectively get the job done which was sometimes taken, and sometimes not, from Bat, the muscles between his ears now restored which all of those below the neck were now severely weakened.

Lydia thought about helping, but Ronita held her back. “They have a lot of work to do, and most of it has to be done between them, between men.”

“The superior species, of course,” Lydia commented sarcastically, having found that to be the most effective way to communicate her meaning and intentions.

“In matters physical anyway, unless you can design machines which require minimal muscle to move mountains, trees or stuck doors,” Ronita conceded.

The men uncovered the door, then used metal bars to pry it open, sometimes working with and sometimes against each other. Ronita seemed to enjoy watching them struggle, particularly when they both refused her assistance. But Lydia was fascinated with something else. The writing on the door seemed Ancient, and she felt familiar with its script. Not that she could read any of it, but looking at it felt familiar, and comforting.

“What does it say?” Ronita asked, sensing something important about it after Lydia did.

Lydia shrugged her shoulders, filing the feeling she got from the calligraphy into an ‘incubation’ vault in her rapidly growing brain, which now acquired headaches every time she thought too intensely. Then again, there was another kind of pain she thought at slower speeds, a misery beyond comprehension if she tried to not think at all. She pondered many things about that door, and what lay beyond it in the tunnel, and beyond that. Maybe it really was the way Ancient airborne charriot drivers in Ancient times came up and down the mountain, using the rocks in it to feed their horses. Rocks that contained gold, which were visible all too well once the door was pryed open. Which pulled in Elasandro’s eye, then complete attention as Bat disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel with a stick in one hand and a carefully carried lit torch in the other.

“This looks like gold,” Elasandro said, finding even more rocks littered with yellow specs. “Very valuable.”

“To horses carrying charriots across the sky, according to legends, all of which have some basis in fact,” Lydia rattled off. “Which can be easily extracted by---“

Lydia felt the shadow of Ronita’s hand, ready to be placed over her mouth. Though the old hag was not necessarily smarter than she, Ronita did know more about the world than Lydia did, and she needed fresh data, so she obeyed. Lydia certainly could not rely on Bat for information about the world below the mountain. He had lied about the existence of the tunnel. Evaded questions about who her real mother and father were. And made up entertaining, yet inaccurate, biological fables about her rapidly evolving female anatomy.

Bat emerged from the tunnel covered with soot, but nodding affirmatively to Ronita. Ignoring Lydia, no doubt with a ‘when you are older’ answer ready to give to any question she would ask. As for questions, there was one he had to answer.

“How much gold is up here on this mountain, and in that tunnel?” Elasandro inquired.

Bat replied with wack of his stick, directed to young soldier’s hand. The rock dropped onto his foot, causing enough pain for him to scream.

“Shhh!” Bat said, placing his stick in front of Elasandro’s mouth. “You said we have to move swiftly and quietly.”

All obeyed Bat as he waved everyone and everything into the tunnel, its caverns having been lit by torches he lit ahead of them. A process he continued as the wagon squeezed into spaces just big enough to handle it, on a floor which was smooth enough to move easily forward when on the level, and dangerously downward on the declining portions.

Lydia had her hands full keeping the breaks on the wagon going, steering the cart and monitoring the inflation level of the air-filled wheels that had been added to it. Ronita guided the horse, speaking to it in her own Ancient tongue to calm its mind about the darkness and possible demons hiding in it. As for those demons, and more definable obstacles to their progress, Elasandro and Bat went ahead of them to scout, then lit more torches, followed by whistling when it was safe to proceed.

During the waiting times, Lydia viewed the sites in this marvel of engineering, its walls containing even more calligraphy, with drawings that seemed like they were envisioned in another world. Then again, the only world she had ever seen through her awakened eyes and brain for the last four years was between the covers of books, most of them written by people who were not as smart as she now had become. But there seemed to be a price for those who lived in, or constructed this tunnel which seemed to be constructed differently than a mine. The bones of several of its previous inhabitants littered every turn, the skeletons with thicker bones being 7 foot from toe to head, those with thinner deformed, and broken appendages no taller than 5 feet.

“Who built this?” Lydia asked Ronita.

“No one I know,” she said as the horse snorted. “Maybe this horse does. He seems more at ease in this place than any of us. Me anyway.”

“Maybe his ancestor came through here?” Lydia commented, noting a painting on the wall resembling Elasandro’s steed. “There is a similarity in the eyes,” she noted. “And horses do seem to be able to talk to each other without saying a word. I’ve read, and remember, stories about putting a saddle on a wild horse. Then putting it into a corral with ones that have been ridden every day. Then taking the wildie out for the next step in its training and discovering that it knows how to be ridden, and how to teach the rider how to use the reins properly,” she rattled off. “And about dogs. They understand up to 30 words in our language, but we don’t know more than three in ‘dog speak’. They have trained us to feed them, shelter them and protect them from predators. So maybe the four legged creatures who taught me so much over the last four years ARE more intelligent than us, and---“

Lydia’s mouth was closed again by Ronita’s hand, this time by the old woman raising it up and pointing it into the stagnant, dank, air, pointing forward into the tunnel, which felt more like a cave. Voices came from it, their volume too low for Lydia to make out but loud enough for Ronita to hear every word. They got closer, and finally stopped, the volume of their voices loud enough to be identified. To aid in hearing what Ronita felt to be information of the most important nature, she handed Lydia an ‘ear amplifier’ which the young genius had devised.

“I adjusted some things in the funnels inside,” Ronita said. “It seemed broken, so I tried to fix it.”

“You improved it,” Lidya said, turning it around to thank Ronita, who shhed her again. Both women listened to the voices ahead of them.

To Lydia’s shock, it wasn’t the Christian devil or Pagan demons. Nor extraterrestrial sky travelers awakened prematurely from hibernation. It was something more dangerous.

“I’m not taking another step until you tell me what I want, and deserve to know, you old coot,” Elasandro protested.

“About Johan.” Bat said, confidently.

“About the gold, gunpowder, and the other things a washed up old man like you is not supposed to know about. Like if this tunnel has another end to it. And IF we make it to the other side, where we’re going!”

“You asked me about Johan. The real story about him and his Revolution is---“

“---Of no concern to me!”

“Ah, but it is, good Captain, who knows less about the King you are fighting for than he knows about you.”

“What do you know about me? What do any of you misfits know about me?”

“That you would rather fight for a losing Cause you believe in than a winning one that you don’t.”

“And Johan was a loser.”

“In the short term, yes, but the long term, no.”

The conversation continued in lower volume. Lydia edged her way in closer, putting the ‘ear amplifier’ on the metallic-like walls of the tunnel. She heard tales of Johan, the man, explained to Elasandro by Bat. Johan the Revolutionary, who had a Vision of a world where everyone was a king but no one was conquered. Where daughters married men chosen by them, and not by their fathers. Or perhaps could marry women if they chose to. Where no man was to be poor enough to starve, and no one rich or powerful enough to be able to make anyone else poor. Where all worked according to his or her abilities and took according to their needs, and perhaps one or two low cost wants. And the relationship with God or any gods or no gods at all is no one else’s business except one’s own. And where kings are elected rather than born, said kings mandates to serve the people rather than themselves. And every man, woman and child is represented in a great hall by an elected delegate who, if they choose to, can depose the King. And the forests between the villages were owned by no one except the animals who lived there.

Bat went on to explain how Johan built and advised several villages in which the people’s bellies were well fed, and their minds infused with as much knowledge as they chose to absorb. Villages that provided volunteer Armies who were to all congregate to stand up to King Augustus in a valley not 30 miles from Father Earth Mountain. Where only one man showed up to do battle against impossible odds, his Army diverted to other place by Johan’s second in Command, who made a deal with the King to let the Revolutionary hero live, as long as he promised to go elsewhere. The second in command, whose role as such was kept a secret, was a friend who underestimated Johan’s determination to die fighting, even if he was the only one left in the Cause. A friend who was once an ally of King Augustus, who underestimated his capacity for betrayal and cruelty.

Elasandro asked about the nature of that close friend. The Judas who was most probably Jesus’ most trusted disciple. Charged with being the initiator of a plot which failed to be carried off as planned, at least according to Judas’ understanding of it.



The conversation got inaudibly softer. Seeing that Ronita's fear of demons lingering in the dark was stronger than her current interest in Johan, or Lydia's education about him, she motioned her young 'Earth Sister' to go ahead. Lydia crawled on the cave floor, then stopped. The conversation ahead had stopped, the long silence afterwards broken by an explosion that blasted into Lydia's ears. Then a bright light from the other side which worked its way to her through a set of mirrors that penetrated into Lydia's eyes.

Two shadowy figures appeared in front of the light, each appearing as giants. They motioned for Lydia to release the brakes and for Ronita to walk the horse forward. They made sounds like goblins, that echoed against the walls, then disappeared into the fog.

"Demons or Angels?" Lydia asked Ronita, finding herself believing in such things.

"Idiots who think they have an intelligent sense of humor," Ronita replied, yelling out to them. "That's not funny, Bat!" she screamed out around the corner. "Your ghost trick is getting very rusty!"

"Ghost trick?" Lydia asked.

"One of his many tricks, which he uses for purposes he always keeps private, or tries to," the old hag said. "But if you love someone, you can somehow discover his secrets long before he's ready to tell them to you."

"That doesn't make sense," Lydia says.

"Nothing about love does, or is supposed to." With that Ronita moved the horse forward at a brisk walk, then slow trot. Lydia held on the reins, brakes and the rest of the questions she had to get answers to, one way or another.

The next two curves were brightly lit by sunlight coming in from above, which made the yellow-tinged rocks even more illuminating. Outside, Elasandro held one that was particularly loaded with the element most prized by the world below, feeling its weight with his hand. "This rock contains enough gold to feed a family of six for two months," picking up more in the collection beneath his feet, he continued. "This one has enough to buy twenty horses. This one, enough to pay for twenty good cavalymen to ride them into battle against King Augustus. This one, enough to pay any village he thinks he owns to turn against him. And this one---"

"---Will stay on the ground, here, with the others," Bat interjected, making his point by pulling out a 'handcannon' from under his robes, aiming it at Elasandro's head.

"Sure, fine," Elasandro said, placing the rock in front of his feet.

“I meant here, on the ground, inside the cave,” Bat insisted. “That rock you just put down, and all the others you pulled out of the tunnel.”

While Elasandro complied with Bat’s request, the old coot, his limbs given vitality by something he had experienced, ingested or felt while going through the tunnel. There was a strange look in the wizard’s eye, one which Lydia had never seen. He motioned for Lydia and Ronita to emerge from the tunnel as quickly as possible.

“Bat’s going to do something very stupid, or very profound,” Ronita commented to Lydia, anticipating her next question. “Something we can’t stop, and probably shouldn’t.”

There felt to be wisdom and practicality in the old woman’s words, so Lydia obeyed. Everything Ronita did seemed to make sense. Not so with Bat, who held the last gold containing rock in his hand and threw it down into the river below.

“This rock and everything in it belongs to Mother Nature now, as it should,” he said by way of explanation.

“And the rocks inside this tunnel?” Elasandro inquired.

“Cave,” Bat replied, pulling a large bag of powder from under his robe, throwing it at a lit torch into the cave, then pulling everyone, including a confused Elasandro, to the ground.

The tunnel imploded from inside, rocks falling down from its roof, filling the entrance and everything within two hundred feet of it into an impenetrable wall of rubble. After the dust had settled, Bat offered his explanation, directing it to Elasandro. “Greed for gold destroyed Johan’s Revolution. It will not get in the way of yours. And yours,” he continued bowing courteously to Ronita. “And yours,” he smiled at Lydia, looking her straight into her bewildered eyes.

“Yours too,” Lydia informed him.

The miraculously revived wizard’s face turned solemn, his quivering mouth silent. He looked downward, hiding his thoughts and feelings, then waved his walking stick up in the air like a magic wand and walked briskly ahead, beckoning his neo-Johan revolutionaries to follow him. Lydia obeyed, yet again, but it would be the last time she would take any man’s word for anything. Or so she promised herself.

## CHAPTER 22

Bishop LaBlanc had just finished serving Mass, with a sermon in the middle of it that focused upon being Christ-centered instead of self-centered. It would achieve multiple objectives as long as the parishioners knew that he was their Ambassador to Christ. He sat at his work table in his private chamber, still wearing the mass frock, as it was cold enough to justify wearing it and it perhaps would provide a Spiritual perspective to the matters at hand outside the Church walls. He kept the door open, as was his habit and obligation after serving Mass on the Sabbath.

His most important Parishioner came into the Bishop's private chambers for an extra helping of 'Soul Food', accompanied by his most trusted attachee, Brother James. He had one question which plagued him regularly, once a week.

"Father," King Augustus asked as his sword clanked against the armour that he had now been accustomed to wearing. He looked up the the ceiling, seeming to be pre-occupied with things beyond the walls, and between his troubled ears. "If you are doing Jesus' work on the Sabbath, is it a sin that you are working on the Sabbath? I asked Brother James and he didn't seem to know if Jesus healed the sick on the Sabbath. And if he did, if it is proper for us to do so."

The Bishop pondered the matter, searching his memory as to which of the Gospels the Church in Rome had deemed the Lord's Word, which were acceptable commentary about such, and which were blasphemy. He had read those texts in the secret vaults in the Vatican Library and committed the most important of each category to memory, particularly the parts which had relevance to the business of Religion, as such was his profession before receiving the Calling to become a Priest. He had been very good at that profession, as cunning as any Jew and as scholarly about it as any Moslem. Sometimes laws helped him to be more cunning, something they hindered him. It was all an interesting game, but one which ultimately could end at anytime if one were at the sharp end of a sword, or the more powerful weapons which were soon to become part of contemporary warfare. Such was Augustus' area of expertise, as he the most furious opponent you could encounter on the battlefield, and sometimes the smartest. Woe to the day if he would become the wisest. Delaying that process was vital for the Bishop to serve the Pope's objective in this backwoods country of crude Germanic barbarians, as well as his own.

"As I recollect," the Bishop said with a scholarly tone, hands apposed to each other in prayer position. "Jesus was a conduit for the Heavenly Father's palative remedies for the pathologies which permeated into the ethers which coagulated into the bipedal emanation of potentials and possibilities we call man, and subsequently into the oft-times pernicious companion he calls woman, a *sino quo non* with regard to man's temporal passions and required vessel for perpetuation of the species. And as pathologies, my good King, owe their subscription to the mandates of Mother Nature, rather than the Heavenly father, and as Creator and creation have enjoined their ventures

in quid quo pro, a priori design to which our ocular sensors are blinded, I would say...hmmm.”

“Would say what, Father?” King Augustus asked, his head and belly aching. “Would say what!!!” He pleaded of the Bishop. “And all of you shut up so I can hear him!” he yelled to the ceiling. He continued, defiantly, in the Pagan language which he himself had outlawed and labeled ‘the devil’s tongue’.

Brother James understood most of the words, and the most salient aspects of the instrumentation used in the poly-syllabic speech used by the Bishop, and all of the one syllable curses in his Native ‘devil’s tongue’ tongue which Augustus was using to battle his own inner demons. Though born a Germanic barbarian to illiterate parents, James was a quick study in the ways of the ‘civilized’ world, and had absorbed six years of knowledge during his three month visit to Rome following his taking vows. If given three years of study in Rome, he could become a force to reckon with. But, for the moment, it served the Bishop, the Church, and King Augustus for Brother James to remain here, with own kind.

“Jesus said that love is more important than Faith, Your Grace” the young Germanic monk informed to the Bishop.

“Paul said that, my Son,” the Bishop relied as he studied his most powerful subject---King Augustus.

“To love others as you love yourself is what Jesus told us to do,” James continued with a bow.

“Which works if you are a not a masochist,” the Bishop smirked, pointing to the pathology which the King was while his Majesty was not looking. He poured a bottle of wine into a gold goblet. “Which is why, He commanded us to above all, love God.”

“Who is within us all, your Grace,” James asserted, head erect, eyes straight ahead. “Even him!” he continued, pointing to his still beloved Monarch. “Who is an Instrument of God as much as anyone else. Who can be a more effective instrument, if he is healed of his afflictions,” he continued, bowing his head. “You have had some medical training, I have heard.”

Bishop LaBlance pretended to know what was going on inside Augustus’ tortured body, having learned that such was the most important part of being a physician. It was the first time he had seen the affliction first hand, having only heard about it through Glendina, who he would soon enough assign to a distantly-located Nunnery or a Dungeon if she refused to honor the vows of obedience. La Blanc knew the limitations of his medical training, and for that matter, any training given to any physician in the civilized, Christian world. But he was pressed for time as the King was beating his hands against the wall to the point of scraping his weather-toughened flesh down to the bone, and Augustus was one rant away from bashing his head against the wall for the final cure.

The Bishop took down the crucifix Augustus was screaming at and wacked him repeatedly in the belly with it, then the back. “Satan be gone!” he shouted. “In the name of Jesus, Satan be gone” The tightness in Augustus’ chest seemed to open up. His pale white complexion became pink again. His eyes looked straight ahead instead of rolling around in the sockets. “Demon out!” the Bishop continued, tempted to believe that he was actually an Agent of God’s healing rather than a lucky physician who had found a patient who was responding to a placebo. But the Core pathology in Augustus remained, beyond the reach of Roman Medicine or Papal Ritual.

“And all you other demons, you leave too!” Brother James added, punching the remaining entities out of the Monarch who trusted him above all other servants, friends or allies. The recently-converted Christian Monk named all of the demons of the Pagan Faith, commanding each to leave. According to the lads perceptions, he seemed to see them depart and vanish into the ethers. Demons who Brother James had said and written many times, were childhood fantasies that never existed.

Augustus begged James to keep hitting him, both chanting in the Pagan tongue for Salvation from gods the Bishop had not heard of, but who seemed to be more powerful than his own. Solidness of voice came to Augustus mouth, the lips of which turned slightly upward, one realization or Pagan ‘Earth’ remedy away from liberating laughter. A medicinal for such lay in the bottom of Brother James’ pocket. A forbidden herb, according to its odor, in a sac which long ago had belonged to the now bannished witch, Ronita, who had refused to change her name or believe.

“The blood of Christ! The TRUE Christ!” LaBlanc exclaimed. He grabbed hold of the goblet of wine, snatched the herbal powder away from Brother James’ hand, and brought the of the goblet up to Augustus’ quivering lips, around a mouth which was still speaking in tongues in a desperate, inaudible whispers.

“Believe in this, and the voices will stop,” LaBlanc said. “I promise you,” he continued, remembering how easily sincerity can be faked, and how it can be converted into Faith in the hands of those giving and receiving it.

Augustus looked angrily at his imagined, disembodied ‘advisors’ around the room, then raised his still shaking right hand. He pointed to the Pagan powder, then to the goblet.

“Whatever works,” James said, in Latin. “All I have given you has a Purpose in glorifying the Holy Spirit,” he continued.

LaBlanc didn’t recall that credo from any Papally-sanctioned text he had read, but then again, Brother James was more widely read than he was. And one of LaBlanc’s most kept secrets was that he was more widely spoken than read. And there was the matter of Augustus, an Instrument of ‘the Lord’s Plan’ who the Bishop still needed to carry out his own.

“The blood of Christ,” LaBlanc said as he lifted the goblet onto Augustus’ parched lips.

“The TRUE Christ. Who is in everyone!” Brother James proclaimed as he poured the Royally-forbidden powder into the Papally-sanctioned wine.

The ailing Monarch took the medicine, feeling some relief, his tongue enjoying its flavor. LaBlanc pulled away the goblet and gave him the sign of the cross. In the middle of blessed by the Bishop, and forgiven his sins, Augustus grabbed hold of the goblet and poured all of its contents down his throat.

“The voices, headaches, and gut pain,” Augustus declared. “They are gone. GONE! Gone! Gone!”

“For now,” Bishop LaBlanc noted with that surity that a well-paid physician or highly-placed Priest required to keep his job. He turned back to the work on his desk, re-evaluating battle plans in his draw written in words that he now knew, thanks to Glendina, the clandestinely-illiterate king could never read. “You are cured, for now,” he continued.

“‘For now’ is enough,” Augustus said, pushing out his overfed belly, tapping it confidently with his stubby, but now non-shaking fingers. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re most welcomed, your Majesty,” LaBlanc said.

“I was talking to him!” Augustus bolted out with a confident tone, hugging Brother James like a brother, Comrade and friend.

“I see,” LaBlanc said, closing the draw and locking it. Just in time for Brother James to sneak a peak at the location of the documents.

LaBlanc stared down Brother James, as a father, teacher and provider. But this most prized student of his had graduated into another school, without permission nor knowledge of his instructor. The Christian Bishop felt like those Pagan wizards of the Old Beliefs whose Etherial magic failed them just prior to their descent from Worldly Power. LaBlanc feared that the tables were turning. And Abbot Bartholomew was no where around to advise him of the solution to such. Perhaps, he considered, because he was part of the problem, and always had been.

“Now, I propose these plans to make my empire even greater than it is,” Augustus said, instructing LaBlanc to pull down a map from the wall. The Bishop did so, with a courtly bow, and listened to the King’s plan as he removed the chess pieces from the Bishop’s board onto the map, playing them out as a game of his own. LaBlanc replied to each of the King’s recommendations as to how to enlist more allies into the kingdom which was well on its way to becoming an Empire. It was interesting that most of

Augustus' plans involved more paying of people to be obedient rather than killing them, using the Church's money or the promise of such. More about the promise of a good life in heaven than the fires of hell with regard to keeping that trust. But what was most disturbing was what Augustus did not ask for. The Monarch normally requested the Bishop's blessing regarding his plans, and this time he didn't seem to want, or need them.

As to the solution for this now empowered and publically Christian King, LaBlanc was at a loss. Losing control of this sector would result in losing his position in Rome, and perhaps the worst of all fates—having to live as a commoner. But there was someone else who shared that fear, Brother James, who seemed to be more interested in the new books that had been sent to the Bishop than the plans or, perhaps welfare, of his beloved, illiterate King.

## CHAPTER 23

Brother Bat led his Army of three into the village armed with neither gold, nor arms, nor food, but with something far more valuable. Though still terrified of the equine between his legs, his own legs and arms would heal faster if they did not have to endure walking, and his appearance would be more appropriate atop such a beast than otherwise. He seemed confident at the prospects of what could be done here. "I know what these people need now," he proclaimed.

"Hope?" Elasandro shot back, sarcastically, a civilian robe over his military uniform, which he still retained for practical and sentimental reasons. He pointed the Wizard commander's attention to the King's arrowheads and the Bishop's lances, then the destruction around them reaped by the men which Elasandro once commanded, and no doubt was being hunted by now. The faces of the woman, children, old men and whatever young men who were still left were as gloomy as the air, made stagnant from dead bodies of people and livestock which lay in shallow graves. Black soot was everywhere, the few houses that were still standing being more sticks than walls.

"Wisdom," Bat asserted, tapping gently on the horse's flank to move it forward, discovering that all it did was move backwards.

"You KICK with the legs and RELEASE with the reins," Elasandro said.

Still terrified of the the horse, and distrustful of the once highly paid Captain who was now demoted to deserter, Bat looked to Ronita for advise, seated on the wagon behind him. Maybe she had an elixir that would turn fear into courage, or at least action. She referred his non-verbal inquiry to Lydia who smiled and nodded 'yes'.

Armed with the best advise available, Bat obeyed Elasandro's suggestion. Two kicks and three rein releases later, he found himself atop a horse moving along at a brisk trot, then a strong lope. Seeing that he was being noticed by the villagers, Bat did his best to make his fear-infused 'woohs' to a confident expression of improved song. Something he advised Lydia to do on many occasions, but had seldom tried himself. Much of what he taught was like that lately.

Lydia watched as teacher was applying his own lesson to himself, then hit the reality about the world outside of the classroom. Villagers descended upon him like locusts rather than butterflies, threatening him with clubs, fists or the stumps of hands that had recently lost fingers.

"He's a friend," Ronita informed the crowd which was on the verge of becoming an angry mob, in the forbidden Pagan tongue that most of the inhabitants still remembered, thankfully. "We came here to help."

"Abbott Bartholomew was supposed to represent our interests to the King, and the Bishop," an Elder whose face resembled Bat's said, quieting the others, pushing back



their hands as they reached in towards the cart to steal away its contents. “Change the ‘system’ from within, he called it. He changed nothing. He abandoned his people. His cause. And his family.”

The man who now clearly was the brother that Brother Bat never spoke much about turned to Ronita. “You are welcomed here, Ronita,” he said. “With our apologies for not making you so for, so many years,” he wept. “We had no choice in the matter.”

“When there is a matter of courage against comfort, there is always a choice!” Elasandro proclaimed as if speaking to soldiers more in need of inspiration than sympathy. But these peasants, recently betrayed by the hand that had fed them, turned their angry fists against Elasandro. They clawed at his robes, finding a sword under it. Then under the sword, the uniform of the King’s Army. Before it could be torn off, as a prelude to being skinned alive, Elasandro whipped out his blade and kept the mob at bay.

“The first one who attacks you dies, right?” the Elder said.

“Or the first ten,” Elasandro asserted. “Who will lose their lives unnecessarily because they have lost their senses.”

“And we have...” Bat’s brother continued as he counted the faces of the committed, or potentially such. “Thirty ‘losers’ who have nothing to lose.”

“I am most probably as much a criminal to the King as you are now” Elasandro said.

“‘Most probably’ Abbott Bartholomew?” the Elder shot back.

“Brother Bat, now, to my new family,” Bat replied, looking lovingly at Lydia. “Still brother to you, my brother by blood.”

“Who probably didn’t know how our mother died,” the Elder snarled. “I buried her today.”

“I was told that she died four years ago,” Bat said.

“YOU died, in her heart, when she declared that she you weren’t her son, and disappeared into the woods so you would not find her. Our mother made me and everyone else here in the village where BOTH of us grew up to be sure you knew she was dead, because we all knew you were dead after you became Augustus’ Abbott, and Rome’s puppet. As did brother Johan, whose blood is on your hands.”

No arrow could have penetrated deeper into a heart than that one. Bat hung his head, but not with shame. No, it was something else. The kind of pain that only he could understand, and feel. Lydia knew about such private dilemmas, living in a world of your own because Fate had arranged it so. Because you had the seeds of solution

implanted by something bigger than you were, and the only way for that seed to sprout was to live inside of you and you alone for a while. A long while. Which, for Bat was coming to a close as he opened his mouth and pronounced a pledge to all he held Sacred, or loved. "I bring with me all that we need to resurrect Johan's Revolution. The world as it is may have outlawed such Missions, but the world as it can be demands that we commit our lives to it."

"So we can reap our rewards in Heaven after dying with a cross in our hand?" the Elder mused, his eyes rolling in disgust. "Or maybe Valhalla if that hand is on a sword. Of course it would have to be made of wood, since Augustus has shut down every blacksmith shop he can't control, and mine he doesn't own. But I suppose that with your magic walking stick, brother 'bat', you can call down the thunder of the gods and burn King Augustus and his Roman bosses into cinderblocks."

The mob's anger against Bat turned into ridicule, which was quickly silenced by thunder and lightening. Not from the gods, but someone far more powerful. Lydia had found a handcannon in the cart and shot it at the 'warning notice to rebels' posted on the board in the central square of the village which was now more ash than village. Elasandro gave the lass an encouraging thumbs up. Ronita seemed impressed with her marksmanship using the weapon she fired for the first time. Bat withdrew into himself, sensing something else going wrong in a carefully devised plan which had, yet again, taken a turn for the unexpected.

Lydia found herself as the center of attention. First because of who she had become, then because of who she had been. "I recognize her," a homely looking lad of no more than 18 years remarked. "She used to be ugly, and stupid. I made fun of her a lot."

"And now everyone here makes fun of you," Lydia replied, compassion and forgiveness in her voice. By the looks of the people around him, her intuition on the matter was right. "But you're only stupid if you believe that you are ugly. And as for being stupid, I have some abilities, and many inabilities," she found herself discovering and relating.

"As do all of us!" Elasandro interjected. "But if we work together, fight together, we can live together," he said, looking at Lydia. "Or live apart," he continued. "But the choice will be up to us, and no body else."

"With a demoted Captain from the King's army who is either a deserter or a spy leading us?" the Elder challenged. He turned to Lydia, giving her a condescending look, snatching hold of her handcannon. "Or a girl who got out a lucky shot from a weapon that any man can snatch away from her. A lovely to look at weakling Princess," he commented, showing the crowd her scrawny hands. Then demonstrating the weakness in the arms by throwing a rock at her, which she caught, then could not hold onto.

“A Philosopher-Queen, actually,” Bat said. “Whose muscles are all here!” he declared, pointing at her head.

“Defended with this!” Elasandro added, pointing his sword up the sky. “And this,” he continued, pointing to his heart. “And without this,” he continued, stripping off the military uniform which he once wore so proudly, spitting on it, then throwing it into a fire. “Here I stand, before you, and your people,” he said. “A naked Jew. With no place in Heaven or Valhalla waiting for me. But dedicated to making this world as heavenly as possible for all of you! Such will be my reward! As..just a man.”

“Who I think will be a lot more man tonight with you than previously,” Ronita whispered to Lydia with a wide smile, the real meaning of which baffled the young Philosopher-Queen.

“Yes, indeed,” she felt Bat confirming regarding the soldier who had become a warrior, and the ‘special event’ awaiting the young genius which she was not able to completely comprehend.

Lydia looked towards Ronita to assess the validity of the promotion she hardly expected, and found herself fearing it. The old woman nodded ‘yes’ to her in approval of the proposition, then to the Elder, who nodded to the crowd. Bat smiled, showing his expression to Lydia alone. A wave of silence overtook the villagers as they knelt down to pay homage to her.

“NO!” she blasted out. “Up on your feet! All of you! Backs erect! Eyes and hearts looking forward!” she commanded, until all of her ‘subjects’ obeyed. With that, she got climbed down from her ‘throne’ atop the wagon, let the ground meet her feet, then knelt to the crowd. “I am in your service,” she said, unaware of where that gesture came from. But feeling very much the reason why it had emerged.

## CHAPTER 24

Augustus felt confident in his War Room, not so much because the expeditions outside the window were going well, but because there were fewer adversaries within the walls. The Voices had diminished in volume such that he could ignore them now, and drown them out entirely if music was being played. Today, it was another lute player accompanied by a singer who beat his drum with a quick-paced Oriental beat. The language of the song was totally foreign to the King, but so much the better. It was musical noise that was neither sanctioned nor outlawed. The duo of musicians sent to him as tribute by the Villages to the East that surrendered to him without shooting a single arrow in their defense were far more valuable to him as players than laborers anyway.

An early cold spring turned quickly into a warm one, bringing with it a heat wave that brought claustrophobia of the chest to those with thicker hides and well fed bodies. But no such condition plagued Augustus, as he thumbed through the pile of decrees, petitions and other affairs of State placed on his table for consideration whilst he was away enforcing other decrees from the back of his horse. The very self confident Monarch held his pen with the same grip as he had held onto his sword, most particularly because he felt mighty using either instrument. Of course, other tools were required as well.

“Brother James,” Augustus said as he fained an ocular ailment when presented with it by the mediocre former Blacksmith apprentice now well on his way to becoming a literary scholar. “My eyes are tired from writing all last night. And this handwriting looks like it was written with the feet of a sex-starved rooster.”

Brother James laughed at the King’s joke, then translated the chicken-scratched decree into spoken language. “It says that the bakers who make bread are tired of paying the farmers who grow it the price that they now demand. The farmers say that without grain, there can be no bread. The millers who crush the grain say that without settling this, the only mouths that will eat grain this year will be the crows. The leader of each group requests that the matter be settled equitably. And are willing to pay ten percent of everything they get to the party who set a fair price.”

“A fair price for such a negotiator should be, twenty or thirty percent, I would say,” Augustus replied.

“With an estimated revenue of 50 gold coins a year for each family, and 100 families per villages, and 5 villages in the sectors in question that would require the negotiator to receive...hmmm,” Brother James said, attempting to figure the amount on an abacus, miscalculating the amount three times. “How many gold coins would you say that is, your Majesty?” he asked.

“Forty percent to the negotiator” Augustus proclaimed having lost count at the first of Brother James’ calculations, and needing to sound ‘kingly’. “Such is proper

reward for enforcing an equal distribution of gold and goods to all deserving parties,” he continued, proudly writing the number for ‘forty’ in the new Arabic script into a piece of wood with the tip of his sword. “State it to be so on that parchment, and give it to me,” he commanded.

Brother James put the proclamation onto parchment as quickly and cleanly as possible, then presented the petition, which was now a decree, to Augustus for his signature. The King walked the document to his desk, gazed over the scribble on it, did some ‘hmm’s’ to make James think that he really could read it, then took out his own pen, a large eagle feather which he dipped in ink. He signed his name in bold print, four times bigger than any other in the document. He folded it over upon itself, poured over its edges, then allowed Brother James the honor to stamp the Royal Seal over it. Brother James handed the document to the Arabic scribe at the opposite end of the room, the former treasurer of the Bishop whose new job was to clean the floors. And to tell the Bishop whatever Augustus wanted him to, or the whereabouts of two of his still-unbaptized Islamic children would be revealed. And to deliver messages up and down the steep staircase to the King’s new chamber with lightening speed.

“The next petition!” Augustus proclaimed as he heard the once-arrogant Semitic Treasurer run down one stories of stairs, then roll down the two below it. “I feel like Solomon today!” he announced proudly, perusing the Kingdom below his window that now stretched ten times further than he could see in any direction. Subdued in war by the sword, secured in peace by the threat of such.

Brother James brought in the next parchment. Augustus went into a professorial like ‘Solomon’ walk up and down the room, his arms stubby arms held behind his back in the manner of the Papally-trained Bishop, his pear-shaped head upward and erect as all of the Kings in his family had done for generations. The only surviving member of that lineage, who acquired every powerful attribute except for a body which was appealing to look at, and live within. “Read on,” he commanded Brother James. “I can feel what the commoners are saying if one of them reads their words to me.”

Augustus noticed that the remark about being a ‘commoner’ bothered Brother James, but he figured it was good for the lad. It would make him aspire to be something other than a library monk. Or even the most trusted scribe to a King. Perhaps, if driven to hate his teacher enough, would excel him someday. Perhaps with a Kingdom of his own, in a place, of course, far away, which would be a subservient ally to or within Augustus’ rapidly expanding Empire. Such was Augustus’ training under his own father, and Brother James had become as close to him as any of his now-departed sons were. Perhaps closer. “Read on, lad!” he continued, resisting the temptation of referring to the 19 going on 50 James as ‘boy’.

Brother James collected himself and read the next petition. “My Lord King. Sire. Your Excellency”.

“Who is grateful for bows of tribute, but tired of people kissing his ass. What the hell do the ‘nobles’ want this time?”

“Titles, Your Excellency,” Brother James replied with a bow.

“Do they want money, or men to go with those titles?” Augustus asked.

“It does not appear so,” he said, reading the document. “They request to be referred to as Dukes, Barons, a few as Sir’s.”

“No ‘Lords’?” Augustus asked.

“No, Sire.”

“Any Lordesses? Duchesses? Or Baronesses?” Augustus fumed, his anger taking the better part of his reason. “Woman may rule the kitchen, and the beautiful ones have a right to rule the bedroom, but as for other places, they are...” Augustus ran out of breath. The voices in his head got more intense. He commanded the musicians outside his window to play louder, drum faster, and shout out their sweet songs.

“None of the petitioners here are women,” Brother James said.

“Or men who would be ruled by a woman?”

“Or a girl either, Sire.”

Augustus never told James the full accounts of the ‘Girl Queen’ who had become the source of hope for the villages who still yearned for the Old Ways and the Old Leaders, but this lad had been trustworthy so far with everything else. Rumors about James’ disparaging remarks about his King were unfounded, their source having been people who made a living making up lies about one person and telling them to another. Until their lives were ended by the King’s axe. As for any secrets James was hiding, there were none that Augustus would confirm. None that could be used against him. But there were other things about James that endeared him to Augustus. The way he stuck his tongue out when working on something important, and effectively. The way he tapped his left leg with his right hand when he came up with a solution to the problem. The way he could complete the King’s have spoken sentences, and never did unless requested to. All those ways which Augustus’ favorite son had before he was killed by an arrow shot by one of Johan’s rebels, who asserted to the very end that the arrow was intended for Augustus’ balls rather than his son’s heart. A heart whose spirit perhaps had moved into the body of another father’s boy, then found his way to his original father. A tear of gratitude emerged from the hardened-King’s eyes as the musicians played a tune that bore a striking resemblance to his son’s favorite song.

“There is something wrong, Sire?” James asked Augustus. “King Augustus?”

“Olif,” Augustus smiled back, using his Pagan name for the first time in recent memory, patting the ‘lad’ on both shoulder with affection and pride. “But only between us.”

“Yes, Olif,” James replied.

The next moments were intense, and silent within Augustus’ ears. The voices stopped. The sounds of the musicians diminished within his perception. It was one of those moments which lasted forever between father and son. Perhaps James knew such too. Augustus allowed himself to think so. Indeed it was a magical time, until the door opened, and the Bishop’s Arabic ‘Mathematician’ stumbled up into the room, out of breath. “An urgent message for you immediate attention, Sire,” he said bowing fully to the ground, handing a parchment to the Christian Monarch who held the fate of his Islamic boys in his hands.

Augustus handed the parchment over to James, and kicked the ass-licking Arab out of the room. “Speak to me like a man, and I will treat you like one!” Augustus barked out as his explanation. “And that goes for your snake in the grass boss the Bishop too!”

With a wave of his hand, and a bow of his head, Augustus requested that James read the document. He delayed, moving his head closer to the page, opening his eyes to see if it was real. “The writing is a bit blurred,” he said by way of first impression.

“Did that olive skinned monkey the Bishop sent me spill urine on it while he was pissing in his breaches?” Augustus barked out, reaching for the parchment, opening up his large nostrils for a sniff.

“No,” James said, pulling it back. “I can make out the writing well enough.”

“Well, what does it say?” Augustus said. “In this document which everyone seems to think is so important?” Augustus sat behind his worktable, spreading himself out as if it were a throne. Indeed, every place he sat was a throne now. Aside from the usual nuisances of flushing out scattered, poorly armed rebels led by a rumored Philosopher Queen in a hopeless cause, he had everything he ever wanted, except for a woman he could share it with him, or a son he could pass it on to.

“‘Great King’,” James read.

“Who would like someone to be great with him, or after him,” Augustus moaned.

“‘We are a simple people’,”

“And always will be, I am afraid, but it is your job to be simple, mine to be...great I suppose.”

“It will be your birthday in a week, and want to declare it a holiday. A day where everyone sings songs in your tribute. Songs of thanks for bringing peace to our lands, food to our bellies and a Savior who brings us to heaven after our King does what he can to bring heaven to earth.”

“And has no labor to interfere with such festivities?” Augustus sneared.

“I presume so,” James said.

“And I declare it so!” the short-statured Monarch proclaimed as a Herclean legend. He reached for the parchment with his left hand, and grabbed hold of the pen with his right. “And I declare three days of festivities rather than just one,” he continued as he signed it boldly, then handed it back to James. “And please, because your penmanship is so much better than mine, add to it that all food, drink and entertainment will be paid for by the Bishop. Assuming that he isn’t called back to Rome to answer those questions about the dear, sweet boys with whom he...”

James chuckled at Augustus remark about the Bishop’s extracurricular activities, but the butt of the joke had turned upon the Monarch himself. James opened the door, revealing a very upright Arabic scribe, a very satisfied Bishop behind him. The musicians behind them, playing a death song, remembered by Augustus from the days when he was Olif. The Bishops paid the musicians with gold coins, then bid James to read the Magnamous Birthday Declaration which the Augustus the Great had just signed.

“Be it known to all in this kingdom and every other. I, King Augustus, formerly known as Chief Olif, do abdicate my throne and give all of my possessions to the Church, in the hope that by doing so, the numerous sins I have committed against God and Man will be forgiven,” James read with an impersonal voice, head erect in the matter of the Bishop.

“I can read those crimes to you, if you like,” Bishop LaBlanc said. “The first is---

“---Give me that!” Augustus barked out, grabbing for the document. His arms were quickly held in place by four soldiers. Undisciplined and uneducated Peasants who he Augustus had whipped so they could be turned into effective and, when ordered to be so, thinking soldiers.

“Here, read it,” LaBlanc said softly, holding it up to Augustus’ bulging, red, disbelieving eyes. “Any of the crimes you can read, I will refute. And forgive. Go ahead, read any of it as written, and I will tear it up.”

Augustus grunted at the Seargent in command of what had been his personal guard, now wearing the Papal Army insignia. “Tell me what it says, and I will pay you---”. The leader turned away, as did his subordinate, and his, and then his. As for James, all Augustus could do was to look into his now ice-cold eyes, and spit into his face.



“Take him away,” LaBlanc commanded.

Before Augustus could comprehend the whys or wherefores of it all, he found himself face down in manure-saturated straw, in a dungeon made of ironbars that bore James’ signature as a blacksmith. On the opposite side of the bars lay ‘common’ prisoners, amongst them those imprisoned rather than killed from his last conquest, in defiance of the voices which had commanded Augustus to crucify them. They seemed to be corpses more than people, their flesh whipped to the bone, their bones brittle or broken. One of them looked ominously familiar, pulling himself up on his painfully emaciated and legs, walking upright towards him.

“So, King Augustus, you are one of us now,” the 19 year old ‘Johan scholar’ chuckled, his gentle face now hardened into that of a man intent on revenge. Augustus heard voices again from the behind walls on all sides, some from those being tortured and some from those initiating the pain. “They are real this time,” the once-young man said.

“Luke, I spared your life,” Augustus said, able to remember his name accurately.

“Too bad that your men didn’t spare that of the woman I loved,” he grunted.

“But I didn’t intend on this happening, to you, her or your---”

“---Commoner comrades?” Luke said. “None of us did.”

A guard marched by on his rounds, dousing out the torches which were the only sources of light in the windowless pit. “Sleep well,” the soul-dead villager said as the lights faded out slowly, the shadows in once-young face deepening, the only feature remaining visible to Augustus being his eyes, which seemed to stare at him even when complete darkness enveloped everything.

## CHAPTER 25

Dawn came late, having to penetrate through the morning fog to fully express itself. When it did, its colors were brighter and bolder than they had been for a long time. As was the glow in Elasandro's Philosopher Queen's eyes when she opened them, her thin-skinned body exposed to the morning chill but radiating nothing but warmth.

"You slept well?" he said, wanting to ask her a lot more.

The normally-talkative 'mind machine' gently took his hand and kissed it, letting the feeling in her lips rather than the words behind them answer his question. She seemed content, and perhaps happy. For the first time since Elasandro had laid eyes on her. "Your hands are cold," she said. "And your face seems worried," she continued, looking up at him. "Is anything wrong?" she asked, her mind having woken up after a long-needed slumber.

"With last night, no," Elasandro said with a smile that was half forced, but completely meant. "But as for this morning," he continued, glancing outside of the tent.

Lydia quickly pulled a blanket over her naked chest, and her Philosopher-Queen eyes back into her head. "I thought that there were more people in this village than that," she said of the scant number of recruits milling around the cart, saying goodbye to wives, and disabled husbands, whose duty was to look after the children at home.

"Small as they are in number, they are dedicated," Elasandro replied as he observed Bat modifying their swords, axes and bows so as to make them more effective. "But they could be power if Brother Bat gave them something more potent than a lesson in mechanics."

Elasandro strapped his sword around his waist, then grabbed hold of Lydia's hand-cannon with a tight, angry fist. "No" Lydia said, her small, frail hand over his large, strong fingers. "Bat probably has good a reason for not giving them gunpowder. Or for paying them in gold."

"There is never a good reason for a soldier to die in battle, and never a good reason for his family back home to go hungry," he insisted, pulling his hard fist away from Lydia's gentle touch.

"Come back here, Comrade-General Elasandro! I am your Queen!" she commanded as he stormed over to the wizard turned Supply Sergeant. Expecting him to not listen to reason, or her, Lydia pulled the dress over her shoulders and marched forward towards him. A hand filled with wrinkled, extended arthritic fingers blocked her passage. "Let me go!" she said.

“I want to, but I can’t,” the bearer of the hand said. “I have my orders,” the Elder who had once been Bat’s brother said. Perhaps he was his brother again. But he was her subject.

“I am your Philosopher Queen!” she said.

“And Elasandro is the elected leader of the Army charged with defending you,” he said. “We need what you have between those ears to be protected and preserved.”

“More than I do,” she muttered. “Yes, I’ve heard it before. But---“ She moved forward again, only to be stopped again by Ronita.

“We had an election, yesterday, and Elasandro was voted to be leader in matters of war” the old woman reminded Lydia. “You do remember.”

“Yes, I do,” the young Philosopher Queen conceded, noting Elasandro from the corner of her eye. Seeing all too clearly that he was looking at her like a lover, and over her like a big brother. Both were new to her. As scary as the War with Augustus and his Roman bosses which was inevitable now. Starting with the first battle, unfolding itself in front of her pensive and helpless eyes.

“I say, Comrade,” Elasandro said to a multi-instrumented musician whose flute had been converted into a fluidly-flexible combination knife, spear and axe with the addition of some hardware from the charred ground, forged into solid metal by Bat’s portable ‘oven’. “I know how to convert that horn you have under your belt into something even more powerful than that butterknife.”

“As do I,” Bat insisted as Elasandro requested the new recruit to hand over what seemed to be his most prized instrument, a device made of metal but shaped like a flute, to be played as such. “That horn is to play beautiful music to inspire our Liberation Army citizen-soldiers.”

“Or play dirges at their funeral,” Elasandro barked at Bat. “Which could be yours as well as your children’s,” he continued, staring straight at the musician-turned-soldier.

According to Lydia’s prediction of it all, the musician obeyed his General rather than his Wizard-Philosopher. He handed over the brass flute to Elasandro, who closed one end of it off on Bat’s kilm, inserting a small hole near it. Then retrieved three rocks from the ground and inserted them into its barrel. He wove several strands of straw into a string. Then pushed Bat away from where he was standing, sneaking his hand into the locked powder box which Bat always kept in the most inaccessible places in the cart. He emptied out the powder into the hole, inserted the string into the hole, aimed it at a plump and meaty fox about to attack a chick who had wandered away from the henhouse, then lit the fuse. The explosion, more of a loud thud than a bang, silenced everyone and everything around it.

The wayward chick run back to where its home with his mother. The fox retreated back into the woods. The would-be provider of breakfast for the troops held a mangled piece of metal in his hand. The owner of the instrument which was to be used as a weapon of inspiration rather than destruction looked at his Comrade-Commander with righteous indignation. "I can rebuilt it," Elasandro said. "Or build you a better one," he pledged. "Myself!"

"How?" the musician asked. "Who do you know who can tell you how to build it.

Elasandro looked towards Lydia. She nodded 'yes'.

"And who will do the building?" the recruit inquired, in the manner of a dissatisfied customer. "We all know that whatever skills she has are above her neck, her frail hands and long fingers as useless for strength or building as teats on a boar."

Elasandro looked towards Bat, who pulled out another instrument from another hidden compartment of the cart. "I hope this will do for now. We'll get one a better one later."

The musician was satisfied with his temporary instrument, and the promise of a new one. He joined the rest of his now-better armed Comrades in the area where they were making ready for a long journey, under a flag upon which there was a clenched fist holding the stem of a fragile rose.

"The one Johan rode to his death defending," Elasandro commented to Bat.

"Never seen by anyone until today," Bat said.

"And seeable by NO one else unless you give my soldiers gunpowder!" Elasandro whispered to the old coot while pretending to help him with a cordial 'we're all in this together' smile for his men, and the enlistee women bold or desperate enough to join them.

"It makes too much noise, and is very dangerous to handle. And it sometimes doesn't work," Bat explained to Elasandro in the Macedonian's native tongue as he went on the business of converting another Comrade's plowshare into a spear.

"Especially when you replace the real powder with something else," Elasandro said. "Placed there, no doubt for me to discover it."

Elasandro assessed his options. All he could do now was to make this crudely armed and unpaid group of rebels into an Army. To do such, they would have to take orders. A task made even more difficult because they enlisted so that they would never have to take orders from anyone. As they sparred with each other, the men seemed to become stronger. Particularly when they noticed that the women were watching. Some

of the men were more interested in the women than their weapons, or Comrades. A few of the women who volunteered were more skilled at pleasing men than fighting them. A dilemma Elasandro knew was the Achilles heel of any Army whose men had indulged such passions prior to a battle. The musician played his new instrument, his tune embellishing pleasures of the flesh rather than the rigors of battle.

“Saltpeter. Moves the blood and attention from the groin to the head,” Elasandro heard behind him as the solution to the problem envisioned. Ronita gave him a sacful of such, instructing him to store it in his ‘safe keeping’ place around his waist and under his tunic. Before doing so, he smelt it.

“It does smell familiar,” Elasandro said. “Except for the meal you fed me last night,” he continued.

“In the right dose, it serves many purposes,” she admitted, having been found out. “For the male Comrades the night before the battle. And the ‘instruments’ they will, sooner than later, have to carry into it.” Ronita quickly pointed to the box of de-activated gun powder atop the cart, after Bat had turned his back. “75 Parts of saltpeter to 15 parts of charcoal to 10 parts of sulfur,” she whispered. “And if you are captured and questioned about it.” Ronita slipped Elasandro another tablet.

“Hemlock,” he noted. “Which Socrates used to kill himself when---“

Elasandro’s showing off what he knew of the Classics vanished into the woods, as did Ronita. Her rustling feet were quickly replaced by animal sounds, then dead silence, her only trail being eight footprints inscribed on a piece of birch. “I must leave now, forever. Necessary for all,” it read.

Elasandro’s inner gut felt something ominous about to happen. His inner ears, and eyes sensed something rumble over the Southern horizon. Taking care to confirm suspicions rather than start rumor, he saddled his horse to ‘exercise the stiffness’ out of his limbs, and rode up to the highest vantage point possible, hoping it was not the most exposed. He pulled out the magnifying observation glass which was now his by Johanian ‘law’ and confirmed with his eyes what his gut said was inevitable.

“The Bishop’s soldiers, commanding Augustus’ troops. Who used to be your troops, Lieutenant Elasandro,” a very female voice explained. “Or is it General now?”

“‘Comrade’ will suffice, Glendina,” he said, looking down at her. Her long hair was still very red, as was the fresh blood on the head she was holding and the axe under her belt. In her other hand, a bow. Elasandro could hardly recognize the maiden turned huntress, who still bore a slave’s collar around her neck. But he did recognize her slaughtered prey. “Major Marcus,” he noted. “My previous superior in rank, but not in any ability other than in acting superior.”

“He demoted you to Leutenant, then deserter. I thought I would demote him to...” She looked at the head, assessing her options. “Breakfast.” She said. “You have some hungry troops, so I’ve heard.”

Elasandro felt demoted from Crusader to an idiot, not because he had let Glendina sneak up on him, again. But because he hadn’t posted a perimeter around the village after it became a liberation Army camp. Any one of the liberated villagers could have informed the Bishop, Augustus or Glendina about their new Mission. Perhaps even one that returned under cover of night to be part of the Mission.

“I lost my horse on the way here. He got scared of something in the woods and ran away. But I didn’t. I’ve come to join you,” Glendina explained, proclaimed, the pleaded, laying down her weapons.

“Why?” Elasandro asked, drawing his sword and pointing it at her chest.

Glendina seemed terrified, an emotion which he had never seen in her. Bowing her head downward, she displayed another emotion which shocked him even more. Shame. The woman who was always in control of her own emotions, and every man with whom she was with, lowered her head, undoing the hooks on her dress. Beneath it lay red flesh, freshly bruised and battered, the bulk of it below her stomach, which was branded as ‘witch’ with Bishop’s sacred seal under it. “They...exceeded their liberties with me,” Glendina said with tears of hurt streaming down her cheeks. The kind of hurt that Elasandro knew would never go away, but perhaps could be lessened by revenge. But revenge is best obtained by putting thinking over feeling. And it was vital for Glendina to convert her shame in herself for hatred of those who offended her, for her and her potential use to the Cause.

“How many of them are there?” Elsandro dismounted, climbing to higher ground, trying to assess how many riders were behind or within the cloud of dust approaching rapidly from the Southern valley. “Tell me, please,” he continued, ripping off another portion of his tunic to use as a bandage Glendina’s wounds, gently approaching her with it.

“Too many if you meet them head on,” Glendina she said, turning her head, buttoning up her brown dress, made red by opening up of the wounds on her violated body which she showed Elasandro but would let him touch. “Head on”, she mused, laughing madly at the head that used to be connected to the body of Major Marcus.

Elasandro decided it was best to not ask Glendina how she had decapitated one of the best guarded men in Augustus’ Army, or how it came to pass that she was carrying his head, or how it came to pass that she lost her horse. The ‘why’s’ were reason enough to trust her at her word now. And even if not so, the ‘when’s’ said that action had to be taken now.

With that, Elasandro walked his horse over to Glendina and invited her to climb atop its saddle. He asked her permission to put himself in the driver's seat. It was granted, with a subservience which he yearned for ever since he met the unconquerable love-slave. It was an irrelevant victory now, a more universal Mission having taken over for everyone.

## CHAPTER 26

Bishop LaBlanc hurt in an area he had never experienced before. A place which no grown man, or woman, had ever seen. One that was very private, and confidential.

“We can rest, your Grace,” Brother James said to him.

“The Lord’s Work never rests,” LaBlanc replied with gritted teeth and agonizing ass, said area of his unconditioned flesh having felt every bounce the horse had put him through on the full-paced expedition of which he was now in command. Most of it at a lope on a horse which had been trained by and for man who could not be any different than him in stature and perspective. “Luna’s” energy-efficient short-strided gallop enabled Augustus to run for 10 miles at a time without her getting winded, the impish rider atop of her seated as comfortably as on a cushioned chair looking as Regal as he felt. But neither her physique nor temperament nor name suited the perfectly-proportioned Bishop.

While trying to keep his breakfast inside his stomach, LaBlanc looked towards his new protegee, and now second in Command. “You are sure that Johan’s rebels are ahead of us, and heading further North.”

“That’s what Major Marcus told us,” Brother James proclaimed in a confident voice lacking any of the self-doubt or self examination which had been his previous trademark. He sat comfortably seated on his galloping horse as the grasses under its feet became thinner, the gentle slope up the mountain pass a bit steeper. Clad in an Abbott’s robe now, with military insignia on the shoulders, he seemed very kinglike as well, admired by his Germanic-born troops as well as Augustus ever was. He turned around to those ever-loyal, proud and well armed ‘lads’ behind him. “I think I saw the good Major--“

“---Disappear into the woods after we broke camp?” LaBlanc noted with an eyeroll that reminded him just how inexperienced in the world outside the library his new Abbott, and potentially puppet Monarch, really was. “Over an hour ago,” he continued, raising his hand up to stop the troops. He checked the validity of his measurement of time with a sanddial attached to his saddle. “Two hours ago, at least,” he said, knowing the limitations of that time keeping device and knowing fully well that his former Abbott and new protegee most probably had developed a more accurate way to ascertain the passing of time.

The Bishop slipped off Luna before she could buck him off, quietly cursing the headstrong mare in every Latin phrase he knew. He perched himself atop a rock, assessing the terrain ahead of the expedition for himself. His legs ached, his back in agony.



“We can ALL use a rest, your Grace” LaBlanc’s new Abbott said, more like a Brother than a king. “And perhaps some food,” he continued, taking matters into his own hands, motioning for the cook to distribute a handful of fresh meat to each of the soldiers.

LaBlanc was grateful for the chance to feel his legs again, and let his new protegee flex his administrative muscles. Hopefully he would lose that lingering quality of sympathy which would make him unusable for the Bishop’s grand plan for this ‘last frontier’ in Europe.

LaBlanc looked over the vast terrain of still-uncut forests, meadows which had never known a plow, and hills where there were still animals who had never seen the two legged beast called ‘man’. Eventually, all of that would change. It was God’s plan, after all. And what better service to give to God than to make it happen earlier rather than later, under the Bishop’s watchful eye.

LaBlanc wished for a closer look at the land which would be his to rule over, but such was denied. He had heard about the cone which one can look through and see objects far away as if they were close up. As he had heard about machines which could enable men to fly over them. And powder which could be lit with a torch to create explosions below that would force any two or four legged foe to obey said flier. And a man who knew how to tap into those secrets. A mortal who could teach men how to be gods, who would be guided by a young Philosopher Queen. A once-obedient, very Christian Abbott who had disappeared without warning, or notice. Whose real secrets were not known to his former ally Augustus. Or his former ‘playmate’ Glendina. Or ‘Pagan Healer’ Ronita, who had revealed nothing useful, even when subjected to the worst kind of torture and the most powerful truth-freeing elixirs.

“I will find you, Abbott Bartholomew,” the noble-born, aristocratically-raised, marooned-in-the-hinterlands Bishop pledged. “And you will pay for all of your transgressions this time. By God I swear it!” Though LaBlanc believed in his own sense of entitlement more than God, both were merged into the same Obsession now.

## CHAPTER 27

Time lost all manner of measure for Augustus, as his current accommodations presented no indication of day or night. The former was dimly lit by torches, the latter pitch black, the cycles of such at the whims of guards who were told to keep them irregular.

The imprisoned and, by his own signature, self-deposed Monarch measured days according to 'Meals', if they could be called such. Two rock-hard fists of breads were a day, two bowls of grain-flavored vermin gruel a week. As for conversation, there was very little. The voices inside his head still spoke to him, but he became too tired to answer them. Besides, every time he did respond back, voices from the cell next to him from people who still DID have bodies screamed at him to shut up, or ridiculed him for his affliction. On several occasions those emaciated prisoners threatened to pull out his tongue, choke his throat and feed themselves on the remains. On this night, or day, the commoners with nothing to lose but their suffering feasted themselves with threats and ridicule directed at the Monarch they had feared, admired or envied. Those able to stand ducked in and out of the shadows, and snarling out ghost-like insults as if in a carnival. Others huddled at the far end of the cell, the South side to Augustus' best recollection, their back turned to him, clanking away at the ground in pursuit of what looked like fresh rat meat. Placing himself in the middle of it all, and still alive, their self-appointed ambassador.

"You are lucky these bars keep us away from you, your Highness," Luke quietly advised Augustus regarding the iron grid that separated former Monarch from the other prisoner. "But at the time of dying, we all will go to the same place," he continued, another one of his teeth falling out of his scurvy-infested mouth. He placed his finger over his bleeding gums, reflected on the whys and wherefors of it all and proceeded to paint his forehead and cheeks with it, in the manner of the Ancient Ways, with a pattern forbidden now, and then.

"Those was how I painted my face," Augustus said. "When I was Chief Olif."

"Well," Luke laughed. "It looks like I'm Chief Olif now." He sang the a tune that Augustus recognized from long ago in the Pagan tongue. The one which he had sung for his father, and his subjects had sung for him, when they went to War against the marauding Norsemen. The ones who had settled into their own villages, far away from their Chief in Sweden anyway.

"Do you know the words to that song?" Augustus asked the young boy about the epic tale that predated him by at least twenty years. "Do you know who it is about?" he desperately pressed on about the saga about the Olifs, embellished by poet-musicians both captured AND liberated by them.

Luke continued to sing, pointing to himself. He smiled madly, the wrinkles his face deepening around the streaks of blood painted over them. Luke was particularly

mad on this 'visit' with Augustus. He seemed to be in a world of his own, perhaps on the way to the other world, and seemed neglectful of his duties. One of his duties, Augustus thought, may have been to keep him busy, and unaware of what was going on over in the South corner of the cell. They had good reason to do so. On several occasions, rat hunting was good there, assuming one could outwit or overpower the rodent and the hunter bit the rat before it struck first. The price of victory, if caught by the guards, was amputation of a finger. A policy that Augustus had proposed but the Bishop now implemented. Still, feeding one's stomach made more sense than keeping one's fingers, for reasons that baffled Augustus. Even with eight, six or three fingers, these prisoners seemed to be clinging to life for some reason. He could not figure it out, till now, when something entered his dried out, pus-filled nostrils. It seemed to be coming from the South wall, causing a private celebration for the 'huddlers'.

"Luke!" Augustus cried out, stretching his hand out to him.

"Olif!" the scholarly-lad turned madman insisted.

"That pit you discovered under the floor," Augustus said. "It isn't a tunnel. It's a pit, with barbs on the bottom loaded with toxin."

"And you are the master tunnel digger?" Luke mused.

"The designer," Augustus said, noticing a circle with a triangle imposed on it carved on the West Wall of the adjacent cell. For reasons he could not intuit, the dung on the wall was gone now, a torch making its shape as clear as day. "There is a way out of here," said, hope in his heart for the first time since his incarceration. "You'll be better off digging your tunnel on the wall next to where you've been doing it."

"The rocks are harder there," Luke said.

"Which is why there is an escape tunnel under it, I think. Olif!"

Augustus felt Luke's suspicious eyes penetrate through them. "I swear to..." he said, raising his arm up in a solemn pledge. "...whoever is kind enough to listen," he continued, letting his once strong arm fall to his side, then to the rock hard dirt floor which would, in a few more 'meals', be his deathbed.

Luke seemed distrustful, which was his right. He laughed at the old man and retreated into the shadows, as Olif. "Maybe dying as someone else is easier than dying as yourself," Augustus thought to himself. The guards decided it was time for 'night'. They blew air and threw water through the ducts above onto the torches lighting the underground 'Inn'.

One of the torches decided to resurrect itself, shining upon Augustus' face. The voices decided to take the night off, but not the prisoners in the adjoining cells. The 'rat hunting' moves to the West Wall. Augustus could hear small rocks being scattered

about, then big ones moving. But Augustus could hear something else too. His breath had become a rattle. His limbs becoming cold, feeling like they belonged to someone else. His body oscillated between feeling light and heavy, small and big.

“Yes,” he said to the torch which he pretended was the Light. “I am ready to die, and perhaps because I, or we, were able to do something noble before my passing.”

Before he could address the Deity with whom he was negotiating, a hand grabbed hold of him from the other direction. “Hey!” it said in a deep voice, pulling him down, and away from the light which had become Light.

Though Augustus said he loved God, he knew that he feared the devil even more. Even more than the demons from Pagan times. “I’m not going with you!” he screamed out.

“Yes, you are!” the voice continued. The bars around Augustus fell down with a loud thump. Tied to blood-drenched ropes. Held by their leader’s minions.

“You are coming with us, Olif,” Luke continued. “And if you decide to turn us in, or if this is a trick,” he warned, pulling out a knife which had been retrieved from the underground pit leading to a tunnel.

A grateful Augustus let his former subjects escort him to the escape tunnel. What awaited them at the other side was as elusive as the reasons why their getaway was possible.

## CHAPTER 28

Elasandro was used to fighting battles in which you saw the faces of your enemy before you killed him, as was the case with his alleged ancestor, Alexander the Great. Such was how Johan had engaged Augustus' troops, even when he and his small guerilla bands took them by surprise. Where possible, Elasandro used small pouches of gunpowder which he secretly made without Bat's knowledge. And with the help of Bat's brother, he was able to arm the most important men in his raiding parties with cannon-sticks that shot out enough of a bang to scare off the superstitious, and enough shratnel to disable those adversaries who were not.

Glendina recommended ending the lives of those enemies when they weren't looking, adopting the same 'take no prisoners' approach which had been unleashed on her own, now vanished, country. Such did not sit well with Elasandro, nor his ancient Macedonian predecessor.

But Glendina's recommendations as to where to strike always resulted in successes. With each raid on the Imperial Army, Elasandro's guerilla band became larger and better equipped. Like Johan, he insisted on capturing the enemy rather than killing them, which yielded far more new recruits than he imagined possible. Enemies became allies, then friends until most of the Northern sector of Augustus' Empire had come under Elasandro's command. One of his commands was to keep his troops, and new country, on the move, keeping Lydia and Bat safely behind the lines. Such was understood as necessary by Lydia, and considered insulting by Bat.

"I can fight as well as any liberated man, or scorned woman!" the former Abbott grunted at Elansandro as he led in prisoners into camp, prizing their horses as much as than their former riders. "I'm going into battle next time with you!" he asserted.

"Philosopher-Queen's orders that you don't," the Macedonian-raised liberator smiled as he leaped off his horse, grateful that it was his own flesh that had been cut into during the morning's skirmish rather than the steed. "But if you can get Ronita's permission, you can ride atop any horse here. Even my own."

The remark regarding Ronita shut Bat's firey mouth. "She is still missing?" he asked.

"In a place of her own choosing," Elsanandro said. "As is, so all of the prisoners we interrogated, King Augustus."

"There are more effective ways of interrogating them that you don't," Bat fumed. "The rack. The bucket. The hot pit. The---"

"---easiest way we will discourage desertions from their Army and addition to ours is to be as cruel as our enemy is," Elasandro interjected, directing Bat's brother to feed the prisoners as soon as they had been disarmed.

“Philosopher-Queens orders?” Bat barked back.

“And mine,” Elsandro said.

“Or maybe hers?” the Prime Minister of the new kingdom said to its Military Commander regarding Glendina, who was escorting a recently disarmed captured officer of the Imperial Army into her tent for a private ‘chat’. “She’s going to pleasure the truth out of him.”

“Yes,” Elsandro replied. “You would be amazed at how a fighting man gives up all of his secrets to a woman with her charms who can disarm him in ways that, well...”

“...you surrendered to at one time as well?” Bat said accusingly, his bushy eyebrows up, his eyes wide open, staring down into Elsandro’s soul.

“She suffered as much by the Imperial Army’s hand as anyone else,” he said by way of explanation. “She lost her country, and nearly the parts of her anatomy which make her, well...”

“Useful?” Bat shot back sarcastically.

“Interestingly useful,” Elsandro asserted. Glendina snuck a warm smile and thumbs up his way as she closed the tent flap behind her and her new ‘client-prisoner’. One which he accepted, for the moment, as one professional to another.

“She still is wearing that slave collar around her neck,” Bat pointed out. “And as I recall, you were one of her previous owners.”

“Protectors!” Elsandro insisted regarding the freest woman in camp who still insisted on keeping the metal collar which signified bondage around her vulptuous, strong and always upright neck. “Like I am your protector. And the protector of every man in this camp! And woman!”

“I certainly pray so,” Bat said, looking fondly yet angrily at Lydia, seated next to the creek, thinking, pondering, the world of her focus on the pages of parchment she was filling with innovations beyond his, Elasnadro’s, Glendina’s and even the departed Johan’s imaginations. Doomed to become even more detached from the world as it is, yet essential for its well being. “I wish Ronita didn’t abandon us,” Bat said regarding the only person he knew who was capable of really understanding what was going on in Lydia’s soul, and heart.

“So do I,” Elsandro replied, wondering as to the whereabouts of the old hag who had made his life ‘interesting’, hiding the real truth about her suspected whereabouts to himself.

## CHAPTER 29

Ronita woke up to a morning that was just like the one before it, and seemed to be like all of those that were to come. Spring had given way to summer. The stark trees around her new isolatory hut were now adored with large, fragrant green leaves. It kept the world out, and her in. Something she had become all too familiar with, for some good reasons, and some not so.

It had been weeks since she left Bat's camp, after having armed Elasandro with the knowledge about gunpowder that would make him as powerful as any wizard, until of course another mortal got hold of it. A squirrel with a gimped hindlimb and two eyes made white by cataracts reminded her of the old man. It sniffed its way out along a long, thick branch that narrowed its way out into a no more than a twig. There was no clear reason for it to do, though there was also no reason why it should have survived to this age and infirmed condition. There were safer routes down the tree to the acorns covering the ground, yet the squirrel did not take them. Perhaps he was well fed. Or feared a creature on the ground far more than the prospect of hunger. Said creature walked up the trunk of the tree, took note of the defiant yet frail rodent, and shook the branch.

The squirrel fell, directly into Ronita's outstretched arms. This time, anyway. She turned to the predator, staring it straight into its vicious eyes, and dared it to attack her. This time, it did, with a slap across the face that landed her onto the ground, with a bone crushing fall that nearly crushed the squirrel.

"Next time you come out of your tent without permission, it will be your eyes that I beat senseless, Pagan witch," Bishop LaBlanc grunted at the old woman. He instructed his assistant, Abbott James to take care of the matter of the squirrel with his bow.

This time, James missed. "I could have killed that four legged demon if I had a thunderstick," he said as the rodent disappeared into the brush, hobbling its way to what Ronita hoped was safety.

"Thundersticks are a figment of your troops' imaginations. Like witches. Devils. Or maybe they are real, a warning to you from our Ancient gods. Like new ideas based on ancient truths. Such as the idea that these chains around my feet will keep me from running away," she blasted back, pulling yet again at the metallic rope chaining her to the post in the middle of the hut in which she was allowed to take shelter at night.

"What will you do?" LaBlanc said. "Cut your leg off?"

"That squirrel did, after you tried to trap it," she blasted back. "And still can't!" she smirked at James as he went after the three-legged squirrel who had taunted him daily, and stole food from him nightly.

“So then, my dear Earth Sister, you’ll have to cut your arm off too,” the Bishop added. “Though it is rumored that witches can grow back an arm or a leg.”

“What do you want!!!” Ronita begged, tugging the chains around her arm, the skin underneath it worn down nearly to the bone. “Gold? Power? Salvation?”

“That, and more,” LaBlanc smirked. He turned around, instructing his men to disrobe Ronita. Having no magic potions left to disable their beastly arms, and no magic words to turn the beasts into conscience-bearing men, all she could do was to hold onto her reason. And whatever knowledge she had gathered about the Bishop’s weaknesses as he looked down below at the two thousand-strong Army at his disposal.

“If you take advantage of me, God will not forgive you,” she said as her naked flesh felt the wind penetrating through it. “You will burn in hell. Just like you will burn in a place far worse for writing that note in my handwriting in which I said goodbye to the people I trusted, and loved, like no others, leaving it on the tree behind me as I was kidnapped”

“Jesus forgives all sins of those who ask Him for it,” the Bishop said, crossing himself, unbuttoning his tunic.

“Your men will think you to be a coward!” she continued.

“They are paid very well to not think at all,” the multilingual ‘ambassador of Rome’ replied with a smirk, in the Pagan tongue which only he and Ronita understood, removing his belt and messaging the weapon he would use to silence the insolent witch once and for all.

“And your family will consider you a disgrace!” she continued, in that tongue which seemed to be understood only by herself and him. “Particularly when you go home victorious behind your shield, and diseased between your legs with the kind of ailment that no physician or witch can fix.”

LaBlanc withdrew his hand from under his trousers, stroking his chin. Still not facing the woman who had put a mirror into his face, he dismissed his men. He seemed caught, particularly when his gaze caught a group of Nuns in the encampment below fetching water for the troops. One smiled back at him with the kind of affection which was normally reserved for courtesans, mistresses and wives, the face boyish and very masculine. LaBlanc felt obliged to smile back, his reason held captive by his feelings.

“He seems to have a deep affection for you,” she said regarding the Nun. “I knew that he was a different kind of boy than most others. And more loyal to his own gods than the one you inflicted on him,” Ronita smirked.

LaBlanc stared back at her with fiery eyes. The beast in him was unleashed, and she had no idea what he would do after being blackmailed. It was the first time Ronita



had invented such a lie, and it was a dangerous one, for her and the ‘Nun’, who perhaps was a not even a boy. Perhaps it would have been easier after her capture to tell LaBlanc that she hated Brother Bat as much as she feared him, but some lies violated the inner truth too much to be convincing.

“Well,” she said with an upright head and shaking hands. “What are we going to do about all of this, God or gods help us?”

LaBlanc said nothing, as he did the last time such a confrontation occurred. He normally walked away, but this time he pulled out a knife. He grabbed hold of Ronita’s long mane of auburn hair, adorned as always with beads and dried flowers which had become entwined into it as its trademark. He placed the blade in front of her eyes. She kept them open, staring him down. Watching him squirm, struggle then finally use the blade with a decisive stroke. Ronita felt her hair being lifted from her head, into the Bishop’s shaking hands.

“A witch weaves spells with things other than her hair,” said by way of explanation.

“Until her Earth Sister’s spider web is presented to Brother Bat’s plate, as evidence of her belonging to us!” he said. “Which we will present at the time of OUR choosing, not yours, Bat’s or that village idiot who he thinks he is turning into a genius.”

With that, LaBlanc stormed away, leaving Ronita with a hairless head for the first time in her adult life. Wondering why she was still alive, and why up till this time, her whereabouts had not been told to Bat, who hated himself almost as much as she loved him. She looked around her, seeking ways to end her own life before it could be used as a bargaining chip. But this time, the Bishop countered with a remark he said as walking down the hill to his troops.

“There are plenty of old hags who I can make look like you...from a distance when we finally find Brother Bat and his Army” he said. “I will get what I want by getting who I want,” he concluded.

Ronita was grateful for one thing. Up till now, he had not asked her about the formula for gunpowder, as she was a dumb, female witch rather than a clever, male Warlock. She silently thanked the gods, and Jesus, for that. For now, anyway.

## CHAPTER 30

Lydia slept late again, as it had been a restless night, and a lonely one. Elasandro slumbered in his own tent now, alone, most every night, informing Lydia that the reason for it was that a man going off the war well satisfied in the morning is one who will not come home to his beloved at end of the day.

“He is right about that,” Glendina informed Lydia as they lined up for breakfast, a concoction of oats, berries and lard that was sweet to the tongue and fullfilling to the body. The disgrunted bodyguard who Elasandro assigned the most important job in the Army continued. “A happy man rapidly becomes less of an angry one, and then a dead one. Particularly when it comes to battle. And even in times of peace, men enjoy being effective in battle more than being loved back home,” the lioness who yearned for blood in battle herself continued.

It was one of those contradictions that didn’t make sense to Lydia, the young philosopher queen with the god-sized brain who could intuit the ‘inner biology’ of humanity, but still had difficulty applying it to people. Particularly people who she had feelings for. One of them lay ahead of her, serving up the morning meal to mostly women, and other men who were too infirmed or injured to join Elasandro in the ongoing endeavor of eating away at the Imperial Army in small pieces rather than all at once. Bat hated being a cook more than the infirmaties which had deemed him unable to fight. Over the last few months, his run had become a trot, then a limpy walk. Then a hobble, requiring crutches. Maybe it had something to do with leaving Father Earth Mountain, a place where he always arrived ‘tired’ and left rejuvenated. Or something at the smelting pot which was eating away at the muscles and nerves in his body in ways that even Wizardess Lydia could not see, nor banish from his body. Each scooping of gruel with his left arm, the muscles on which were now a third smaller than his right, was an effort, and an accomplishment. And his face was developing wrinkles that deepened, aging a week for every day. Aside from seeing Johan’s Revolution completed, he seemed to want only one thing. “He wants to be alone,” Lydia said.

“Which is why the women who are widows, and those who secretly wish they were, want him more than ever want to be with him,” Glendina said as the line moved up, moved along by yet another woman who wanted nothing more than to ease his pain, and bring him his due measure of happiness. The now grouchy old fart glanced longingly at them after they turned away from him.

“He’s hoping Ronita comes back,” Lydia speculated.

“He’s praying she’ll stay away!” Glendina laughed, taking the opportunity to feed the caged birds who had been captured from the last two groups of Imperial guards, more useful to her as companions than to the Camp as food.

“Why does want Ronita to stay away?” the young philosopher-queen asked her bodyguard turned confidant.

“Because he still loves her, and he hates himself, of course.” the reply from Glendina as she fed the birds her daily ration of bread, more in need of their friendship than her own biological sustenance.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Lydia said, moving away from the breakfast line. As was her assigned task in Elasandro’s absence, Glendina followed, leaving the birds to enjoy the morning light, promising them freedom when they were safe from hunters from her own camp, or any others.

Lydia gazed at the trees, sky and animals asking them for answers. She opened up the ears on either side of her head, as well as all of the other ‘senses’ between them. Nothing came from them except animal sounds that had no relevance to any human issues. Lydia felt inadequate, but about issues which would have been of no concern to Bat, or anyone else in Camp. A very selfish kind of issue that she still felt compelled to solve. She looked over towards Elasandro’s solitary tent. “The place where he said he needed to be alone to do his thinking, and other things,” Lydia said, her stare drawn to her, to this point anyway, trusted bodyguard. “You wouldn’t be one of those other things, Glendina?” she asked from her heart. “But if you were, it would be an accepted and oft times effective means of providing what a man needs when his brain is being overloaded by hormones, or under-loaded by such,” she rattled off from a safer place more befitting of her new Station. “Actually, that brings to mind, unexpectedly as is always the case with a thought that is new, novel and requiring of manifesting itself into a discovery, the idea that perhaps there are sensory receptors on a man’s face, knees and chest that when palpated correctly, do elevate the as yet to be defined humors in his blood, most probably involving, but not restricted to, both the outer AND inner layers of the adrenal glands, which bring more blood to the muscles, said muscles required for effective actions as defined by their social roles as defined by---”

Lydia’s extrapolations regarding the whys and wherefores of biology were quenched by becoming the source of investigation herself. The machinery of understanding was drowned by feeling, a flood of warmth infusing into the over-brained young woman by the somewhat older touch of Glendina’s hand on her cheeks. The ongoing-lightening storm in Lydians head grounded by Glendina’s lips kissing her own. The spine weakening then regaining a whole new kind of support by the whisper of her voice. “Don’t be afraid,” the lioness said to the awakened lamb, extending out her hand to Lydia, leading her to the philosopher-queen tent for a conversation without words which felt scary, but very necessary.

## CHAPTER 31

Ever since he could see himself in a mirror through eyes of those others, Augustus hated his body. He was always shorter, fatter and uglier than any other members of the dynasty of chiefs to which he was born. Most of his subjects had well-proportioned faces, legs, arms, and chests which he envied as well. On several occasions in his youth Augustus secretly hired witches to brew up some kind of concoction that would enable him to take over their bodies, a request he even made of Ronita during his adulthood during a moment of intoxicated optimism. A host for his 'soul transplant' lay ahead of him, leading the expedition through tall grasses that, thus far anyway, hid them from the Imperial Army patrols especially picked for their ability to track down stray rebels or deserters, and to kill them mercilessly once found.

"We have to keep moving," Luke advised his troop of fellow escaped prisoners, most of them half way to death already. "All of us!" he continued, as his most important cargo started to sink into mud that had become quicksand.

"You can move faster without me," Augustus said, resigned to death for the first time in his life as stubby legs disappeared into the ground. "Leave me here!"

"So your fat, overfed, body can find that rock you aren't telling us about and tell the Imperial Troops where we are? Or so you can escape trial by your peers for what you did with it if you can't?" Luke sneered. He threw a rope around the former Monarch's waist then summoned his fellow fugitives to pull with all of their might.

"Even if you pull me out, I can't walk as fast as you can! My legs are broken." Augustus grunted through gritted teeth. "And you dumb, stupid inferior peasants will break your backs trying to carry me," he continued.

Despite Augustus' improvised lie and unrelenting resistance to being helped, he was. Pulled to safety, covered with muck, one of his legs he cursed at them, he cursed the angels who had come to his rescue, faining two broken legs. "Damn you all for saving me! Save yourselves, while you can! I'm finished!" he commanded them in a forced, loud whisper.

Luke 'shhhd' Augustus's banter, and the moans of pain of his fellow fugitive villagers. Augustus heard nothing, as did the others. But Luke's sense of hearing, being the natural listener that he was, rang true once again. He pointed up at the path leading down to the marsh. Twenty well armed Imperial cavalymen trotted up the the ridge of the hill, then loped down it. "Down," the pacifist lad now turned soldier ordered his fellow self-liberated fugitives, armed only with a single knife between them safely in the hands of Luke, the only member of the group with enough strength or sanity to use it effectively. All under his command buried themselves in leaves, grass and mud.

The detachment of Imperial troops stopped in front of the reeds, its commander instructing his men to dismount. Each drew his sword in the manner of a trained wielder

of such, perusing the area for anything suspicious. Yards, then feet, then inches away from the prey they were assigned to find, the boots of one of them stepping directly upon Augustus' hand.

“No wild boars, rabbits or pheasants here then?” the Commander asked his men after they had ascertained their present location.

“No rebel meat either, wandering, elusive vagabond prey that they are” the second in command sneered. “And their flesh really does taste like chicken,” he mused. “No sin to eat it, in the Church's eyes. Unless it's Friday.”

The men under the second in command laughed. His superior smiled, well satisfied, and by the looks of his belly after unfastening his armour, well fed. “We rest the horses here,” he said, feeling something not so right about the leg of his steed. “One hour only!” he commanded his men, then his horse.

Augustus and Luke peered up to assess the nature and length of the detachment's business. The first order of such was to relieve themselves of body fluids, a healthy washing of such winding up on the King's head, straight onto balding spot that had evolved prior to his incarceration and now greatly expanded as a result of such. Augustus wiped off urine, pulling out what remaining hairs were hanging on there. The fully-haired Luke smiled with sardonic satisfaction.

“It will happen to you too one day,” Augustus felt like saying to the peasant who looked more like a monarch than he ever did, but he held his tongue. Somehow, that indignation born of vanity had given him another reason to live, for a few more moments anyway.

The Commander unpacked a blanket, book and bag from his saddle while a man of the lowest rank took the horse to the stream to soak its swelling feet in the cooling waters. After another soldier moved a log just the right place under a shade-conferring tree, the Commander sat himself down for a quiet afternoon read. He seemed to be profoundly interested in the book. Its cover was black, its contents seeming very important. The writing on its cover as incomprehensible as the reasons for his own downfall to Augustus.

“Is that the Story of Jesus?” Augustus asked Luke, feeling it safe enough to whisper, and of vital importance for survival of his people to keep communication lines open. “The book that the Bishop reads to himself, but doesn't allow anyone else to read, except the priests who preach to his ‘flock’?”

“Something more... worldly,” Luke said with a sense of primal importance.

“The Saga of Johan, as written by people in your village, or you?” Augustus asked.

“Something more popular than that, I’m afraid,” Luke said.

The Commander laughed, having been amused by a passage his eyes hit while turning the page. “A story about whores, concubines and mistresses,” he continued. “About the pleasures of mischief rather than the Bliss and necessity of Revolution. ‘The Tales of Yolanda’. Entertainment for the masses that was outlawed, but the penalty for owning it rarely enforced. Promoting everything that Johan DIDN’T fight and die for, but in a way that is...fun. Like the gladiator games the Romans started to divert the people’s frustrations against a few pathetic prisoners in the pits rather than their pathetic rules, such as you.”

Augustus hung his head low in shame. “I deserve all that is coming to me,” he said.

“Yes, you do,” Luke said.

“But she doesn’t!” Augustus replied, noting something on the saddle of the Commander’s horse as it was removed from the steed and placed firmly and gently in front of him.

Augustus could spot the hair that had been Ronita’s anywhere. It never changed, from season to season, year to year, decade to decade. To make matters worse, there were bits of scalp to it that were evident as the attachee gently placed it on a stick to air it out, as fearful of it as he was of the Commander’s wrath when he nearly dropped it onto the ground.

“Yes, Ronita’s strength was in her hair,” the Commander warned the young soldier. “But you have to be stronger, and more careful. Get one spec of dirt into that witches’ scalp and I’ll add yours to it,” he said while turning the page of his book.

“Will the rebels eat us after we give this to them?” the youth who resembled Luke in all but clothing, bravado and current political affiliation asked.

“We’re riding in on a flag of truce,” the Commander replied, denying his hunchbacked inferior even the slightest hint of eye contact, or respect. “The rebels get the witch bitch, if we get Abbott Bartholomew. That devil-possessed traitor will tell the Bishop EVERYthing he knows, if he knows what’s good for his old lover, his new daughter and his new people.”

Augustus’s fear turned into rage, then anger, then action. Finding strength in himself that he hadn’t known for years, and a Purpose which had not yet been defined, he grabbed hold of Luke’s knife and pulled himself out of the muck while pushing him back into it. With a battle cry from times of old, when he was Chief Olif, he grabbed hold of the Tales of Yolanda and slashed the throat of its reader just as he looked into the eyes of his executioner. Pulling the sword out of the Commander’s sheath, then knocking the young attachee down to the ground with a swift, effective knock to the lad’s chest,

Augustus invited the rest of the men in the detachment to attack him. They did, and all at once.

Luke emerged from the muck to find his people under their own command. Some fled into the bush. Some remained, paralyzed by fear. Some hobbled onto the hard ground beyond the safety of the marsh and attacked the Bishops' men with sticks, stones and fists. Luke the pacifist, who had never drawn blood from a man, had no choice but to join in the fight.

Augustus fought his way out of the circle the soldiers had trapped him in then put himself between the most vicious of the others and the most vulnerable of Luke's fellow villagers. With each soldier he slew, he threw a sword, lance or axe at the feet of those self-liberated prisoners who now had to fight for their freedom like they never did before.

Luke fought hardest, and but not smartest. Each of his commands worked against survival of his people, especially those that came back from hiding to join in the fight. Augustus' counter-commands corrected such. By the end of the skirmish, three of Luke's men lay dead, and but all of the Bishop's initially 20 string soldiers were slain, save one.

"Spare me, please?" the young Imperial Army lackey to his now dead Commander said as Luke stood above him, sword aimed at his chest.

"Why should I?" Luke grunted, revenge having taken over his reason, referring the young soldier's attention to the faces of three of his slain brethren, one of who was his brother in blood and spirit. "Tell THEM, those dead souls, why I should spare your miserable, undeserving hide!"

"Because we have lots of work to do," Augustus said, placing his hand on Luke's shaking shoulder. "And this boy, who could have been you, is more useful to us alive than dead."

Luke turned to what was left of his group. They all agreed. Reluctantly, Luke did as well. "This is supposed to be a PEOPLE'S democracy, not a King's," he said as he threw the young attaché down onto the ground. The lad ran away. One of Luke's people, a woman who had just lost her man in the skirmish, had second thoughts about it, grabbing hold of a bow and arrow, aiming it at the escapee. The determination in her emaciated, life-tested face revealed that the arrow would hit its mark with deadly accuracy.

"No," Augustus said, his hand up. "For the love of all we hold Sacred and Loved, please, no."

Maybe it was the tone of voice, or the words chosen. It was the first time Augustus remembered saying 'please' to anyone, except of course to Glendina. In any

case, Luke motioned the woman to lower his bow. She did so. Then spit on the ground, then walked away. Two others did as well.

“This is a people’s democracy after all,” Augustus informed a disappointed and angry Luke.

“That has to stay on the move,” Luke said. He instructed the remainder of his people to gather the weapons on the ground, the horses and all portable things of use while Augustus looked over the map in the Commander’s saddlebag. An X marked the spot where he was supposed to go. He thought it strange that the leader of this small detachment, led by very high ranking officer, knew exactly where an illusive, ever moving rebel army was supposed to be.

Augustus ran his stubby fingers through the mane that had once been attached to Ronita. Recalling all of the good times he had with her, and hard times he had later inflicted on her. “I will make all of this right. Somehow. I swear it to you, Ronita. Be you in the land of the living, or the dead. Or any place in between.”



## CHAPTER 32

Bishop LaBlanc felt it necessary to return to Augustus' castle, leaving his Army to defend its perimeter. Former Brother, now Abbott James was as trustworthy a Commander as he could find and matters of State were as important as those of Defense.

He looked out the window of the chamber that had once belonged to Augustus, a large field sprawling down under it. Defenses had to be secured, and dispatchers from Rome had to know where to find him. As did avian messengers of his own, arriving from places Rome could never imagine still existed.

LaBlanc was afraid of nothing, not even the fires of hell, but there was one thing he feared above all things. "Catch that bird now, Achmed!" he screamed out to the Arabic scribe and mathematician who was now re-promoted to being Chief Treasure, hiding under the table from the avian creature who flew into the open window.

"It's only a pigeon," Achmed noted as he calmly took out a fishing net, rolling his eyes at the Bishop's phobia when he thought His Grace was not looking.

"I saw that!" LaBlanc blasted out. "Just like I can see every mathematical trick you thought about pulling on me, and God, in your ledgers."

LaBlanc could feel the eyes of the bird staring through him. Again, he darted towards the table under which he was hiding, swooping down and circling around both sides.

"I think he likes you, your Grace," Achmed said.

"He likes the breadcrumbs you sprinkled on this table," LaBlanc grunted, pulling his body into an even tighter ball.

"I can open the door, and let him leave through it," the scribe said.

"NO!" LaBlanc shouted out, unfolding his torso and slowly standing up on his own two feet. "He's not getting away from this room without getting what I need from him," he pledged, grabbing hold of the net, swooping it around the bird once, twice then finally a third time, trapping the avian visitor.

"Now, it's my turn to get what I want from YOU!" he growled at the beast, retrieving a knife from his belt, grabbing hold of its wings, and making a firm slice around its leg.

The taped message fell to the floor. Achmed bent down to retrieve it, his neck meeting LaBlanc's knifeblade.

"I read it first!" the Bishop said.

“As always, of course,” Achmed bowed.

With terrified hands still extended far away from his face and chest, LaBlanc handed over the carrier pidgeon to his entrusted Treasurer and opened the note. He smiled, enormously satisfied with the message, and impressed with the individual who wrote it.

“What does Glendina say this time?” Achmed asked.

“That the rebels are moving South. Here. In five days. And that she’s well on her way to taking personal possession of their most powerful cargo.”

“Gunpowder?” Achmed inquired.

“And that village idiot who MY former Abbott turned into a Wizardess and Queen, according to the ideological simpltons who are following her,” he said. LaBlanc quickly wrote another message, and gave it to Achmed, insisting that the Master Bird trainer tape it to the pidgeon’s leg without reading it.

“It was a good idea, letting some of your men become captured along with these messengers that Glendina could use to tell us where she and the rebels are,” Achmed commenting, bringing the bird to the open window in the locked room. “No one in the rebel camp would suspect you, your Grace, as the one who cut off Major Marcus’ head, and who ordered Glendina, in the sight of the rebels, to slaughter an appreciable number of our soldiers.”

“Some of whom were unreliable, the rest of whom were expendable,” LaBlanc said, staring down Achmed. “Like perhaps that of a Treasurer who asks too many questions. Who still hasn’t told me where Augustus escaped to.”

“Ah, yes, the King,” Achmed said, dismissing the former monarch as nothing.

“The EX-King!” LaBlanc shot back as the bird flew off into the sky, heading North. “An illiterate creatin with the face of a baboon,” he mused.

“The mussle of a camel,” Achmed chuckled back,

“The ass of a cow,” LaBlanc laughed.

“The courage of a lamb,” Achmed continued. “And the balls of a eunic and the penis of a---“

LaBlanc cut short the laugh fest with the swing of a knife, exposing Achmed’s own medical anatomy, which presented both problems and opportunities. “A Jew who has been circumcised, a Christ killer trying to pass himself off as a Christian?” LaBlanc

ticked the private parts of Achmed's reproductive organs, connecting to every fearful portion of what was attached.

"My foreskin has not been removed," he said. "And I am not a Jew!"

"No, you aren't," LaBlanc smiled. "But it may serve my purposes if you were. And you are as good with numbers as any Christ Killer son of Judiah that I've ever had the opportunity to employ."

With that, LaBlanc cut off Achmed's foreskin, leaving him in both pain and disgrace. "You find the King, Brother Bartholomew and the others, or I will see that your men find out what you are missing under your loincloth, and I warn you, they hate Jews more than they fear the devil, or God," he said as he left the room, heading towards the Army that he knew he had to take command of himself. His most trustable ally now being the Glendina, whose motivations had stopped being about revenge and was now about greed. A worthy queen to put on the throne of the Kingdom, whose soul was easily bought with gold, something which the Bishop had ample access to because of the special ties with Rome, and their need to extend the Church's influence beyond the Northern Forests to the Sea beyond it with ports that could stay open year round, to be built for the Greater Glory of God, by former pagans who really knew very little about Greatness, Glory or God. A 'Pax LeBlanc' which would allow him to go home a hero to the family of Nobles who had abandoned him to a life as a Clergyman, which was to be turned around into becoming something far more powerful.

## CHAPTER 33

Bat knew lots of things about Nature, and one of them was that love is not natural for a man, at least the kind of love a woman really needs, and deserves. Ever since Ronita deserted the Camp, a note on a tree saying ‘goodbye’ being her only explanation, he thought about how he had ruined her life while trying to enrich his. And it was not just about how, as Abbott while trying to ‘cure the sickness by pretending to be a part of it’, he allowed Augustus to marginalize, then discredit, then exile her into living as a hermit. It was about a deeper betrayal. The promises he made to bring her up to Father Earth Mountain as his beloved bride and trusted collaborator. The pledges he had made to be her friend, companion and confidant for as long as forever dared to last. Solemn oaths he made to her with everything except words, most particularly on a warm summer day like this one, while picking strawberries.

That botanical expression of Father Earth manifested itself in full bloom today, the redness of the fruit enriching and defining the softly textured green leaves around it. It was being enjoyed now by a someone Bat valued more than he valued anyone, most particularly himself.

“Hmmm, sweet,” Lydia smiled as her tongue rolled itself around the juicy red fruit, made even more succulent by the fingers feeding it to her.

“A gift from Mother Earth that we are obligated to accept,” Glendina replied. “Like others,” the life-tested former slave continued, gently stroking Philosopher-Queen Lydia’s tender cheeks.

They looked into each other’s eyes, conversing a language Bat tried to understand but knew could only be felt. He was grateful for Glendina’s having come into Lydia’s life just as Ronita left, with nothing but a farewell notice as her explanation for such. The young Philosopher Queen whose mind was now doomed to become smarter, bigger and more tortured than any of her “subjects” seemed at ease, even more so than when she was ‘with’ Elasandro. She spoke less about death and more about life now, and it was with words that were more gentle. Words that, when life was to become much harder, would prevent her from contemplating and following through with suicide.

Lydia had talked about that final act of defiance, desperation and determination before. She had defended her position by stating that it was an act of courage and applied intellect. She reminded Bat of others who had used suicide effectively to end their own suffering and awaken others remaining after them. Socrates drank the hemlock presented to him by the courts after his conviction for having ‘corrupted the youth’ of Athens, fully knowing that shining a mirror in front of his fellow citizens would lead to no other conclusion. No doubt, Socrates’ plan was to be killed by the same assembly that would erect a statue in his honor after his death, allowing the writings his student Plato would write down to live forever. Jesus was no doubt more caring and intelligent than anyone he preached to, and he voluntarily accepted death, the ‘normal human’ part of him blinding him to a sure picture of what was beyond it. Whatever Life he gave those

behind him would not have been possible without voluntarily walking to his death. Johan the Rebel became a symbol for freedom and threat to tyranny only after he voluntarily charged Augustus and his Army single handedly. Defying the lancemen to throw spears into his chest. Demanding the archers to fire their arrows into his heart. Requiring Augustus to make an example of him so that his revolt could become a Revolution, converting the scribblings he wrote regarding the ideal form of government to become Holy Proclamation for those left behind.

Bat's inner eye was drawn once again to the Johan Liberation flag, the green in it symbolizing the Earth Father, the white reminding its followers of the Light from Above and Within, the red reminding them that blood had to be shed to make such Visions possible. "Johan, your death was a miscalculation," Bat said. "A mistake that I never planned on," he continued, hoping that no one in the land of the living was listening. "For which I take full responsibility! And pledge to pay the ultimate price!" he emanated from his quivering lips, sweat pouring down his red-hot face, followed by tears from his bloodshot eyes.

"Is anything wrong?" Bat heard from the last person who he thought was listening, or really cared about his inner turmoil.

"Too many onions for breakfast," he replied to Elasandro, who had just returned from another raiding party, washing the camaflog off his face in preparation for a scouting expedition. Pulling out a knife and scraping the hair underneath it off as well. Quickly slipping the garb required for the endeavor over his head. "When did you and your special guard decide to take your vows of chastity and purity, Sister Elasandro?" he inquired regarding the attire he and his most trusted men were struggling to get into.

"Since the prisoners who we captured, and the deserters who surrendered to us, informed us that the Imperial Army has been re-enforced by more men from the South. Four to five hundred very Christian troops from an Order that took vows to not violate any women, considering them to be lower species capable of doing nothing except bringing water to them while they talk about important things," he said. After having converted his appearance to that of a member of the 'seen but not heard' subspecies of humans, Elasandro's eyes fell upon the riverbank where two real women were having another kind of 'conversation', each beat of it escalating with laughter.

"I've heard that you and Lydia are not as intimate as you used to be," Bat said. "It wouldn't have anything to do with...this," he mused, referring to Elasandro's attention to the dress currently wrapping his very male torso. His tight neck getting tenser and redder with each step Lydia and Glendina took together in the cooling river water.

"I'm at war. Love and war don't mix," Elasandro explained regarding Lydia, hiding his hurt behind his 'Commander' eyes.

“And lust?” Bat inquired, regarding Glendina and gentler emotions which he knew the former whore had touched in Elasandro, even when he legally ‘owned’ her.

While the two women cleaned each other’s clothes and bodies in the river, their ‘man’ on shore emanated primal rage from his nostrils. His rage nearly burst into a volcano when Lydia found her fingers around the lower portion of Glendina’s swan like neck. Said swan nodded ‘yes’ to her young lover, giving her permission to do what no one had ever done before, either in the open or behind closed doors.

“That slave collar around Glendina’s neck. She said that the only person who would ever take off would be her final and most beloved liberator,” Bat said as Lydia removed the metal band around Glendina that had been her nemesis when captured, and her trademark after she became the most desired piece of female ‘property’ in Augustus’ empire.

“Hell hath no fury like a man scorned by one woman,” Bat thought, but dared not say to a now enraged Elansanro. “But two women converts that man into a dragon who even the Devil cannot stop,” he pondered. Though more recruits were coming into the Rebel Army each day, even more troops were being brought in from Rome to subdue them, each new addition to the Imperial Army better armed than the last. Yet, to Bat’s thinking anyway, not enough to justify making large stores of gunpowder. He well knew what would happen if such got into the wrong hands, and such would be inevitable. Even if the rebel army was victorious, gunpowder and the weapons it would make possible would destroy whatever victory the Rebels had won. Though the men, and women, in the Johan Liberation Army were fighting to depose a corrupt Bishop and a cruel once-Pagan King who had subjugated his own people, the now-ailing Bat was fighting, and working, for far more than Liberation. The only effective tool against the Imperial Army would be a Crusade led by a man possessed by rage, with no place left to direct it except on the battlefield. Be it to impress the women who scorned him, or to convince himself that he was still a man, at least in some ways.

That man, who still was as masculine as any other in camp, despite his current wardrobe, shot an arrow Bat’s way which he didn’t expect. “Glendina is the most effective lover and motivator I know,” Elasandro states as necessary fact.

“Yes, so I have heard,” Bat smiled, orchestrating the rage in Elasandro being converted into action. Meanwhile, Glendina gently asked Lydia about how fish swam, to which Bat’s young protegee launched herself into a journey of impromptu scientific discovery leading to aspects about boat mechanics that bewildered and pleased the ailing Wizard. In part because Lydia was embellished by the JOY of discovery rather than the obsession for such.

“Glendina is also the most effective interrogator I know,” Elasandro said.

“Who is working for US now!” Bat insisted.

“For ME, as her Commander which at the time of war, is supposed to take precedence over other pursuits. And I would remind you, both of those deluded bitches, and everyone in Camp, that we are at war!” With that, Elasandro pulled up the hem of his dress and proceeded to the area where the other hand-picked ‘Nuns’ were finalizing their external transformations, inserting what was left of the small, official stockpile of gunpowder into their ample ‘breasts’, more conventional weapons strapped to the legs. By the look in Elasandro’s eyes, the Commander seemed to know that he would lose a third of his men in this scouting expedition, all of them if his luck ran out.

Bat found himself reconsidering the gunpowder issue, but felt sure that the world, even if Liberated under Johan’s flag and constitution, was not ready to have an unlimited supply of it. Yet there was one issue which the disgruntled Commander’s frustrations did reveal.

Bat retrieved an object which he had never used since he left Father Earth mountain, blowing up the entrance to it so neither he nor anyone else could access it until the world was ready for what the gold-enriched haven he would never again call home could offer. Underneath the manuscripts, boxes of chemicals, bags of powder and diamond bladed metallic lathes that could whittle down any material mined anywhere else lay the ‘reading’ bell. The one Bat had used to summon the then young Lydia into the Library atop the botanical wonderment that had been her home for four years. It felt heavy to his arm now, and his fingers ached as he grabbed hold of it’s handle. Walking his way to an isolated area close to the river, but far enough away from the ‘peasant-soldiers’ who had entrusted their lives and those of their families to him, he rang the bell with his shaking left hand, holding up a book with his right.

Lydia waved a ‘later, when I’m ready’ wave to the old coot while she explained how it is possible to make a boat that could swim under the water to a fascinated Glendina.

Bat rang the bell again, but to no avail, his aching arm now losing its strength as well.

Glendina asked about the possibilities of sending ‘bottles of exploding magic potions’ through the water to walls of rock that could be converted into underground tunnels. Lydia stroked her chin with one hand, allowing Glendina to kiss the other as she pondered the intellectual challenge.

One more ring of the bell resulted in a thud, the instrument slipping out of Bat’s hands onto the ground. “Please, Lydia!” he shouted out with whatever strength he could muster from his aching chest, gasping for air. “It’s important.”

Glendina saw the look of concern in Lydia’s eyes, allowing the same emotion to come into hers. “Brother Bat! Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yes!” Bat insisted, forcing his back into a healthy upright position, breathing slowing and firmly, raising his chin slightly upward in keeping with his Prime Minister Wizard position. “I just want to speak with Lidya.”

“Sure,” Glendina said, leading her young and abruptly concerned lover out of the water.

“Alone, please,” he insisted.

Glendina looked towards Lydia, projecting and feeling a motherly protection for her younger ‘Earth Sister’. The kind that Ronita had and was using, hopefully, somewhere else that was safe, to another child in need of her nurturing.

Bat communicated his meanings, fears and intentions as effectively as he could without using words that would be heard, or body language, as Glendina was an expert in that method of communication. Perhaps he could use the old language of telepathy, the tongue of choice for the animals in the wild considered to be mute by those not listening to their eyes. But it had been a long time since he shared such Visions with the animals, or Lydia. He prayed that somehow she would remember the golden times on Father Earth mountain. But he had run out of Deities to pray to.

“It’s alright,” Lydia said to Glendina, throwing her dress over her frail, yet sustained body. “Your birds need feeding, Lydia reminded Glendina, insisting gently that she tend to them.

Lydia walked slowly out of the water, approaching Bat with caution and care. She connected to something exceptionally human in the old coots eyes, feeling ‘human’ herself. He seemed grateful for her self-permitted ‘demotion’, as if he was thanking the gods, and Jesus. But the teacher who had now become merely an advisor seemed worried.

“What is it?” Lydia asked Bat, feeling the need to explain herself. “I was just---”

“Revealing things before they are ready to be revealed is dangerous,” he warned her, raising his eyebrows in that fatherly tone which she once loved, but now felt to be unnecessary.

Lydia rolled her eyes in what she felt to be benign condescension at her teacher who she now excelled in all ways except with regard to brute strength. “I did think part of the underground boat idea out already. I’m sure it will work.”

“As is she,” Bat warned, pointing accusingly at Glendina while her back was turned, hoping she wasn’t armed with eyes behind her head, as the intentionally-illiterate in camp rumored she was.



“She’s with us now,” Lydia smiled at Glendina as her teacher in love emerged from the river, feeding her caged birds rations of breakfast. Snarling at a curious young child accompanied by his dog, frightening both away with furocity.

“She does have a special affection for those creatures,” Bat said.

“She’s nursing them back to health. She has a kind heart,” Lydia said.

“And you have a corrupted mind, I fear,” Bat said. “One that should be more careful about revealing what’s in it.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Lydia said, ideas beyond Bat’s comprehension spinning around behind her young eyes as she looked up at the clouds. “I really do,” she continued, staring straight into Bat. “And I am Philosopher Queen,” she reminded him, assessing his medical condition with her fingertips, eyes and ears. “I think you should take this,” she said, pulling a writing impliment our of Bat’s left pocket, piece of parchment from his left. “To be read and prepared in PRIVATE”, she whispered to him.

The young genius who had pulled Bat from the jaws of death before, and countless patients in her own army as well, left a prescription in Bat’s hand, after pressing a point on his wrist which enabled it to stop shaking. “Two times a day, starting tonight,” she announced proudly as she walked, then skipped her way back to Glendina. “And follow instructions to the letter or it won’t work.”

Bat looked at the folded paper in his hand, tempted to open it. Giving in to his most fatherly and suspicious instincts, he flipped open the first fold. On it, a map, designating where he should go, and to do nothing else until he did so.

The map pointed Bat to the area of woods that looked ominously like that from which Ronita left him, muttering the salutation of the note she left on the birchbark parchment. “I must leave you forever. Very necessary,” he muttered to himself, living that dark day again in his aching head. Smelling the Spring moss that lingered in the wind after she had left. Seeing the wind in the trees which he thought to be her returning Ancient yet timeless face that turned out to be just...wind. That wind picked up again, beckoning him to enter the woods where the note was found after she had disappeared into them. Indeed, that brush seemed haunted now. Summer grasses and long willow leaves hung there now, reminding Bat of her long hair, into which she wove flowers and pebbled beads that had become more a part of her than they had belonged to the Earth then they were were connected to such.

The woods beckoned him to follow. Perhaps Lydia was an expert now in matters metaphysical as well as physiological. Perhaps she intuited that it was time for him to pass onto another dimension, and this was his passageway to either renewed strength in life or redemption through death. Both had occurred by her hand before. Trusting Lydia, the work which he had created, and the intuitions materializing before his still-worldly eyes, he took the first step into the bush, towards the entrance it seemed to create

for him. The next steps were taken by his feet, carrying his body. The long strands of green, narrow branches turned golden, then brown, then sparked with flowers a beats. He reached out to the long main of hair blowing in the wind, the bearer of such with his back turned to her.

“Ronita!” he said to it with a mouth that seemed to be detached from his brain but firmly connected to his heart. “I do love you, and always have. And if you will have me I’ll---”

“--Not screw things up this time?” an old voice made harsh and strained by hard living rang out from the woods. “We’re all in this together now,” a very human, humbled and tired King Augustus continued as he emerged from the woods, Ronita’s scalp in hand. Half of his men were wearing Imperial Army uniforms, most of which were slashed or bloodied. The other half were garbed as fugitive prisoners, still bearing the chains around their necks that branded them as such. All were emaciated, lame in body and/or mind, but very much alive. “We didn’t know whose camp this was, so half of us dressed as them, and the other half as us.” Augustus said as explanation. “It’s time to set all of this Right,” he continued in the Ancient Pagan tongue that he himself had banned, handing a note sealed with the Bishop’s wax, still bearing Augustus’ Imperial seal.

“Yes, we BOTH have to set things right,” Bat said, having read the ransom note regarding Ronita, his enraged Soul infusing fire back into his ailing body. “But there is one thing I have to ask you first,” Bat said. “The rumors about you are that you are dead, eaten by Johan’s rebels, as all of us are cannibals of course.”

“These people haven’t eaten a proper meal for months,” Augustus said as he commanded his ‘troops’ to lay their captured weapons on the ground in front of the Bat as a sign of respect. Bat picked one of the swords up and aimed it at Augustus’ throat.

“Other rumors say you are more powerful than ever, as elusive as you were once bold!” Bat said.

Augustus hung his head in shame.

“I will take that as a yes,” Bat grunted, repositioning the Imperial Army sword, swinging his body back so he could run it through Augustus’ lying throat.

“Wait!” a voice rang out from behind Bat. “Is that you, Luke?” he asked of the second in command of the group.

“Yes, it is, Papa,” the hardbitten, firey eyed young man said, tears of joy streaming down his eyes. Father and son hugged, each having written the other off as dead, or worse. Bat found himself wondering how it was that his loyal husband brother had so many children, and how all of them looked different. But such matters would have to wait, as looked over the ransom note sealed with wax from Augustus’ own stamp.

Bat motioned for the rest of Augustus' 'troops' to reclaim their captured weapons and proceed to the Camp behind the trees. Bat's brother, with a smile on his bearlike face for the first in months, led the way.

"Face to face the only way to beat them. The Ancient Way. At their home base," Augustus said to Bat as his former Abbot laid down his sword.

"The Bishop will kill her if we do, and besides, we're not ready yet," Bat remarked, looking towards the rabble of peasants who, on a good day, thought themselves to be an Invisible Army.

"They may be carrying swords, but none of them are swordsmen, though by the gods I wish above all else that they were," Augustus lamented. "But I heard that you have powerful magic that can make one farmer more effective than ten swordman, or archers if you load that explosive magic into the right cannons."

"A...limited supply," Bat said, still hovering over the superweapon issue regarding gunpowder and its effective use.

"That is not good, as we have limited time," Augustus said, pointing at the ransom note. "One of my fellow escaped prisoners told me that Ronita is as smart a wizard as you are. Maybe even smarter. And if the Bishop, or Brother James finds that out---"

"---Brother James?" Bat shot back in disbelief.

"And many others whose loyalty have been purchased, or rented."

"He is a smart man, Brother James."

"Too bad he isn't a good one," Augustus said.

Bat contemplated the potentials and possibilities of it all. He perused the hills, which contained minerals. The rebel camp which contained fighting men. And Lydia's bodyguard, who had other skills and affiliations which could be reactivated.

"I know you have a plan brewing in that head of yours, 'Brother Bat'," Augustus said. "Maybe I can be a part of it?" he asked, his humility escalating, allowing for a new emotion which came with it, to his enormous dis-satisfaction.

"We're all scared now, Augustus," Bat assured his new Comrade.

"Olif, please. Comrade Olif." Augustus walked towards the Camp, stripped of his Regal title, clothing, power and human strength. Bat felt his own infirmities taking over his body, which he hoped would be remedied by Doctor Lydia's formulations, which he was instructed to look at in private. Both men helped each other hobble

through the thick brush, stumbling over a fallen log, falling into the mud. Curses of frustrations led to cursing everything under the clouds and below them, then an embrace, and another fall, this time Bat falling into the muck. Augustus pulled Bat up, then handed him Lydia's note that had fallen from his pocket, now opened.

Feeling himself as private as he could get, Bat looked at the note. "It's alright," Augustus said. "I can't read. And if you don't believe me, which I would not blame you for, I will turn my back."

Lydia's medical prescription made sense as it pertained to healing Bat's broken body. But there was another remedy written as well. One which would remedy something far more important. Bat chuckled warmly

"What are you smiling at?" Augustus asked Bat as he burst into mad, victorious laughter.

"Our village idiot has not only turned into a genius, but a muse!" Bat exclaimed.

## CHAPTER 34

“Why should I retreat when we can finish them off right here and now?” Abbott-General James asked Bishop LaBlanc, yet again. He advanced the main column of his troops forward along the top of the hills overlooking the valley below. “I can see no more than a hundred peasants who think they are soldiers and we have three hundred men who we KNOW are soldiers.”

“Who take orders from me,” LaBlanc said, his focus on the map stretched out over a rock, his men hidden from any view anyone could obtain from below. “Just as I take orders from His Holiness in Rome, who takes order from---“

“-----Yes, yes, I know,” James interjected. “You want Brother Bat alive so you can pick his brain. You want to feed King Augustus’ testicles to your dogs. And you want the Philosopher Queen to---“

James’ mouth was silenced by a slap of the Bishop’s hand across it, followed by his dagger placed on the insolent young Abbott-General’s throat, in full view of his men. “I am a Messenger of God!” he proclaimed by way of explanation. “And my God is a vengeful one to those who defy His Will.”

“Which is yours?” James thought, but dared not voice. Not so much because LaBlanc was so good at outguessing anyone else’s strategy, but because of who he represented. And what he had become. A man possessed with abilities well beyond his station, with the strength of ten men half his age to carry them through.

“Our plan is to attack this small Camp, retreat, and let their messengers inform the larger Camp that we’re outnumbered, terrified and one battle away from surrender,” LaBlanc continued. “We set up a trap, at the Northern approach to the castle, let them come running through, and demolish them from their flanks. With arrows marked with a cross!” he continued, holding up a sample of such from a bag in his saddlebag. “To be fired as follows.”

LaBlanc grabbed hold of the head archer’s bow, inserted the arrow into the string, and tied a small sac of powder near its tip. He lit a strand of woven straw into the powder, lighting the other end. “Now you say Hail Mary Full of Grace, Hail Mary Full of Grace, Hail Mary full of Grace,” he continued, after which he fired the arrow at a tree. Its trunk exploded, everything above it falling to the ground, its leaves catching fire.

“A burning bush!” LaBlanc proclaimed. “A message from God to all of the Pagan rebels, which I give you authority to use against them!”

“A witch’s knowledge of basic alchemy combined with a blacksmith-carpenter’s ability to apply it,” James said to himself, knowing fully well that he would not get credit for the mechanics of the delivery system, but maybe, one day, be rewarded for finally extracting knowledge about what it delivered from Ronita. What was left of her anyway.

## CHAPTER 35

Something in Bat's gut told him that the age of the bow, spear and sword were over, and that the time for a more destructive and random method of tearing apart human flesh had arrived. It was confirmed when Elсандro rode his in from his 'Nunnery' expedition, at a full gallop, nearly having killed his horse and himself, with news about news of the gunpowder-containing arrowheads. "It's being issued to every archer who could pull a bow and effectively count to three before releasing it," he informed Bat and his new co-commander, Comrade Olif. "The rest of my men are remaining behind as Nuns to get any other information they can find out," he said as he ripped open the blood-stained dress he had burrowed, the slashes on his chest opening up again. The powder in his now giant sized bussom bags still intact. He handed it over to Bat as he slipped off the saddle. "Two bags of ours that I didn't have a chance to use. Two of theirs that looks, feels and smells like ours. We'll need to send a digging party up to the south slope of that old volcano across the river," he instructed Bat's brother and his reunited son Luke. "The rest of what we need is in the charcoal pit ten miles behind us. The salt peter we can get from these places on the map strapped to my piss pot in my tent. We scouted out on the way back, and the traps we laid down around them are still where we left them. And remember, we need seventy five parts salt peter to fiveteen parts charcoal to ten parts sulfur. That's by volume, not weight. We need ten times what you've gathered before. Twenty if it's at all possible."

As Elсандro's men scurried off to the main Camp to gather the appropriate men and supplies, his eyes met Bat's, becoming apologetic and deceptive. "How did you figure it out?" Bat inquired.

"Someone told me," Elсандro said. "Someone who make me pledge to not tellyou that I knew, and for none of my men to tell you either."

"Ronita?" Augustus, aka Comrade Olif, asked.

Elсандro was good at some things, and bad at others. Lying to people he trusted and respected was amongst the latter. "When did she tell you?" Bat asked, demanding an answer.

"When she left," Elсандro shot back. "And WHY she left, I don't know!" he asserted. "I swear on my mother's grave and the Star of David, I didn't. And something else I overheard while I was trying to be liked but not loved by LaBlanc's second in command when he stopped in for an inspection. It may be true, or may not be. Someone in this Camp is working for the Bishop. He's getting messages about us somehow that travel at the speed of---" Elсандro's words were held in his throat by seeing Glendina's cage of birds, empty of beasts now.

“Glendina’s carrier pigeons are gone,” Lydia informed her. “As is she,” she continued. “I gave her my horse, because she said she had to get somewhere important, and fast.”

“To the Bishop?” Elsandro said, feeling pieces of an ongoing puzzle in his falling together. “With information about what where we are, what we’re planning and...” Elasandro gently put his hands over Lydia’s ears, gazing into her naïve, sunlit face. “What did you tell that bitch about all of those ideas in that head of yours? And about us. All of us?!”

“Some falsehoods that I wanted her to know,” Lydia smiled.

“And some strategic lies that we need her to know,” Bat added.

“Which you should have told ME about!” Elsandro fumed, storming away. “But I understand why you didn’t,” he barked back. “I’m just the Commander of this Army. Who nearly got himself taken to his grave, and your enemy’s love bed in the line of duty. Who came to this godforsaken area of the world to be paid in gold, that I could take back home with me to Macadonia. Where no one lies to me! And no one treats me like a child who is denied the basic respect of being told the truth about what he’s fighting, and will probably die for.”

Elsandro ranted on about being kept in the dark about using Glendina as a way of getting false information to the Bishop, just at the time when it was most critical to do so. “I understand why it had to be kept between us,” Bat said to Lydia. “But if you love him, as know you do, you should have trusted him. You should have let me tell him. He’s a brave soldier but a terrible liar. Glendina would have stolen the information from him.”

“And what did she steal from YOU?” Bat volleyed back. “From here,” he continued, pointing to her heart.

Lydia turned her eyes inward, looking at her soul. It had been tarnished in ways that Bat never intended. In ways he could never repair. Though young in age, she had become Ancient in mind, on her way to becoming obsolete, doomed to live in a world she could not share with anyone. It was still a mystery to Bat as to why his methods of turning her into a genius had worked so well. Perhaps a mystery that his creation could discover and impliment. Assuming that she survived the war that was days away, which now operated according to the rules of crude, ignorant people rather than enlightened wizards.

“At least now the odds for us winning this war are not impossible,” the young Philopher Queen commented to Bat regarding using Glendina as their final weapon against the Bishop’s well-funded and now well armed plan for ultimate conquest of the last freedom-loving frontier in Europe. “Not completely impossible anyway,” she

continued with a cynical chuckle akin to what he remembered Johan saying when he was brought the gallows in chains prior to HIS demise.



## CHAPTER 36

The Pagan gods had left the land after the people in it stopped worshipping them. The Papal Roman gods, referred to as Saints and Angels for the sake of scriptural consistency, were in negotiation with the new Pope at the Vatican. The Jesus Spirit was being claimed by and prayed to by so many people, on both sides of the War, and for so many different reasons, that it was an impossibility for Him to really be with anyone. Left in the middle of the battle to follow would be the most innocent, of course, as always.

As the Bishop's mostly retreating army dug in around the Castle and the emerging rebel force moved Southwards towards it, the forest was what suffered most. Trees gave way to the axe and torch like never before, the animals within and beneath them fleeing for their lives to wherever they could. Most found their way out of the zone which was to be a field of death, but one creature not made in God nor man's image remained.

Lydia's young eagle companion from Father Earth Mountain had grown up, just as she had. Like her, he was alone now, having learned more about life than his fellow avians. Though the most eligible winged bachelor on the Mountain, or in any of the valleys around it, he had grown to adulthood having acquired neither wife, family or even beloved concubine. Except, perhaps, for Lydia.

He had always looked out after her on Father Earth Mountain, from the time she arrived as a village idiot, till when she left knowing more about villages and idiots than was knowable by anyone else she knew. Lydia was both of the earth, and bound to it. The Eagle belonged to the Heavens now. And as the reality that never made it into the Book of Jesus or the Saga of Johan clearly states to those open to it, 'heaven watches and earth works'. The latter always trying to change the rules that heaven is obliged to enforce.

As for those rules, they seemed to favor both the Bishop's Army and Agenda. All the eagle could do was watch it happen, and pray to the Jesus Spirit of his own species for something miraculous to happen. One already did, in the form of Lydia herself.

The rebel bands became a single Army moving Southward slowly, towards the Castle, the Bishop's troops fleeing in retreat, and chaos, after each engagement. Elasandro, remaining on his horse at all times, commanded them not pursue the 'small fish' as it would result in 'drowning in river rapids that looked like gentle creeks'. Some of the civilian soldiers dis-obeyed. Most, for the moment anyway, trusted his military judgment. But Bat, seated on a cart on the driver's seat of the main weapons and supply wagon PULLED by a team of ass-rocking horses, seemed pre-occupied with something else. With each tree that went by him, he was pulled deeper into a dark pit, his confident face overtaken by paralyzing fear.

“Are you afraid that ghosts up in the trees will breath fire at your wagon, and blow up the gunpowder inside those ammunition boxes?” Augustus whispered loudly from atop his horse with a bold chuckle.

Bat didn't seem amused, his fear becoming something else that Augustus recognized all too well. Particularly when the trail led them to 'maiden rock', a large boulder which nature, or perhaps some prehistoric artist, had sculpted into a form that resembled a virgin with large breasts and hauntingly large eyes. “She's looking at us, like she looked at me that day when I---“

“---Did what you had to do, and thought was best,” Augustus interjected. “And as for me, I only did what the voices commanded me to,” he continued.

“And what do the voices tell you to do now?” Bat asked.

“Nothing that I obey anymore,” Augustus replied, hearing his own demons in the wind. “And if I think I will obey them, I mutter to myself, clank something, ask someone to sing, or sing myself till they go away. I asked Lydia to devise some kind of potion or machine to make the voices go away, but she said she was still unable come up with anything that worked. Ronita was able to make the voices go away, though. And until we find her, or death finds me...”

Augustus muttered an Ancient poem which emerged into a song that was more offkey than on, but it kept him being Comrade Olif for a little while longer. As the terrain became more familiar, the voices seemed to get louder. As did the ghosts who pulled Bat back into memories of previous times in the 'Rock Maiden's' meadow that turned it into a bloodbath, for one man anyway.

Elasandro brought the Army to a halt at the river, ordering a one hour rest and watering break, as measured by a ticking devise designed by Lydia and built by Bat. One which each of his sub-commanders had as well. Each tick of the clock seemed longer, deeper and louder as the flower-bearing meadow in front of him lost its plumage, a thin layer of frost overcoming the short, brown grass stubble on ground that was hard as a rock.

In the reality behind his eyes, Bat saw Augustus' Army, five hundred strong, lined up at the South end of the field. The rebel Army at the other, represented by two men. “Looks like they need some more men,” a mounted Johan mused to the man on the wagon next to him. “But it would have been good to have the rest of our Army with us,” he continued as he looked behind him. “Where did they go?” Johan asked his second in Command but most trusted Mentor.

“I don't know,” a younger and still unbaptized Bat replied, a full head of hair on his head, a proudly worn Pagan tunic around his chest, as seen through Old Bat's deluded eyes.

“Do you know why Chief Olif decided to oppress his people instead of protecting them?” Johan inquired of Bat’s past, and self-agonizing ghost.

“No, I don’t, Johan,” the ‘Bat ghost’ replied, avoiding his inquisitor’s eyes. “But King Augustus is more powerful than us. Particularly because of his new allies,” he continued, pointing to the Papal flags and tents behind the King’s men.

“Their crosses do look impressive,” Johan noted. “I suppose they need something to put on them. Or someone. A sacrificial lamb to bring the wolves to their senses.”

Old Bat saw the younger Bat ghost gently laid his hand on Johan’s shoulder, knowing all too well what he was thinking and feeling. “No,” he said. “I spoke to Augustus, and if you surrender---“

“---Everything we value will be lost,” Johan said.

“He’ll spare your life! Like he spared the men who---“

“---Were sent somewhere else, on your order?” the Johan ghost replied, staring the Truth of that speculation straight into the eyes of the Bat Ghost..

“We can change things by working within the new Empire that is...inevitable, Johan,” Bat observed the Bat ghost plea. “Forgive me for saying this, but---“

“---NO!” Johan asserted. “Forgive me for what I have to do here. Even though I know you won’t forgive yourself for making it happen this way. After all, it was all...inevitable.”

With that, Johan dug his spurs into his horse and charged Augustus Army, yelling ‘Freedom’ with his sword held straight out, pointed at King Augustus himself. Who seemed to be listening to voices from somewhere else. Who put his hands over his ears, pretending that he was adjusting his helmet. Who closed his eyes as arrows from the Papal tents flew into the air, bringing Johan’s horse to the ground, its rider trapped under it with wounds designed to disable but not kill.

Old Bat saw a shocked young Bat turn his wagon around and disappear into the woods, just before self-armed peasants came out of the brush to witness what had happened to their fallen leader. Then fled back into the brush as King Augustus ordered an assault on them.

“There is something wrong, Bat?” Lydia asked Bat, his shirt soaked in sweat, his face drenched in tears. “If you want to talk about it---“

“---Enough talk!” Bat barked back. “It’s time for action,” he said jumping off the wagon, the hard ground sending intense pain through every bone in his body. “Get me a horse!” he commanded her.

“A gentle one, with a smooth trot, of course,” Lydia replied, turning around to the men under her ‘command’.

“NO!” he ordered, grasping her shoulder. “A fast one! A strong one! And well armoured!” Bat grabbed hold of as many ‘fire balls’ as he could, placing them under his shirt. He complimented them with three ‘hand cannons’ and a sword, strapping under his belt. He grabbed hold of the wildest, strongest horse in the coral, a black mare whose eyes scared him more than the ghosts, throwing a saddle atop the beast who was in no mood to be ridden by anyone except the stallion in the next make-shift coral. “General Elсандro! Comrade Olif!” Bat screamed out, his voice hoarse, his determination unweilding as he finally mounted the obstinant horse.

The present commander and former king ran over to Bat, holding on to each of Bat’s legs while Lydia grabbed hold of the mare’s reins so she would not rear up on him. “I told you this horse could be ridden,” he claimed. “There was a reason why Glendina stole it from the Imperial Army.”

“So it could throw you off and kill the least expendable man in this Army,” Elсандro shot back, struggling to prevent the mare from side-stepping to the right while tossing off its rider to the left.

“And the most valuable person I know,” Lydia offered, calming the horse with her touch, and its rider’s fear with her smile.

“So, that’s how she works,” Bat said, having been shown the mare’s pressure and release points. Then demonstrating his skills using such with a trot, then gallop around camp. One which he survived, but only as long as Lydia sung to the mare, in the way Glendina sung to her.

“You’ve created a monster,” Elсандro commented regarding the horse-fearing Wizard who now fancies himself a master, and perhaps suicidal, cavalryman.

“He’s created one as well,” she replied, looking at her reflection in a reflective piece of iron. The image distorted, godlike and terrifying. She walked away, to her tent, in that ‘I need to be alone’ manner that Elсандro respected, feared and hated.

Augustus used the spyglass to assess troop movements ahead of him. “Time to break camp?” Elсандro asked, noting a renewed sense of urgency in his former Commander’s worried face.

“Time to pray that the Bishop believes the lies about us that Glendina thinks are the truth,” Augustus said. He glanced over at Lydia, morosely sitting by the river. “And that the plan our Philosopher Queen suggested won’t kill ALL of us.”

Even the Eagle could see that the once-Life loving Lidya was developing a closer relationship to death than life, seeking solace in the idea that she may be united with that ultimate lover soon. And that the idea that ideas were more important than people, the latter being expendable if that was the only way to impliment them. The only idea that made sense to the Eagle was to swoop into camp and stand in front of her tent, knowing fully well that she would ignore him, and whatever he had to say to her, in a language which he knew that she COULD understand now. Or so he hoped of the species which was about to destroy the delicately-interconnected network of valleys which he and all of his ancestors had called home.

## CHAPTER 37

“They’ll attack the South Wall looking like an army of vultures, then scatter like chickens into the woods, change clothes, then try to appear like eagles,” the messenger reported, out of breath, energy and patience. “Then linger in the woods and attack you with flying machines that are manned by people, who have handcannons which they can aim at anyone in the castle. But though they can go four hundred feet into the air, they can only travel a quarter of a mile from their launching site. Sites they don’t have enough man, or woman, power to keep guarded,” the messenger reported, out of breath, energy and patience. “But if you can kill more than one in ten guards in each detail, the rest WILL flee. And are allowed to, by contract.”

“An Army that’s paid to fight but not prepared to die?” Bishop LaBlanc enquired of his most trusted, and most reliable source of information regarding the Rebels, or for that matter, anyone else.

“The best way to draw them all out is to continue to pretend to retreat, put a quarter of your men inside the castle so you appear small in number, but leave the rest in the swamps behind the woods, from which you can massacre or capture the rebels when they run away, or shoot them in the back if they feel confident enough to attack the castle,” a saddle-sore Glendina continued, gulping down a pitcher of water retrieved from the well rather than the jug of wine offered by the Bishop.

“You lost your choke-collar along with your taste for fine wine,” LaBlanc noted, seeing her naked neck for the first time.

“It was...necessary to do so,” the ever elusive but always reliable former love-slave said regarding the most alluring aspect of her ever-changing wardrobe. She looked up at the Bishop’s men, and supplies, particularly the most important item in his arsenal. “They have a very small supply of gunpowder relative to what you have, and an even more limited supply of fighters who know how to use it.”

“Or have the courage to do so?” LaBlanc surmized, feeling confident about things seen by the eyes, but uneasy about those beyond the scope of his immediate control. “But what about Brother Bat? Where part does he play in all of this? And why didn’t you bring him in, captured, like I overpaid you to do?”

“Because he’s going to surrender himself,” Glendina replied. “For your promise to not harm Lydia.”

“That village idiot who was thought to be possessed four years ago, who is now considered ‘gifted by God’”, LaBlanc said, licking his lips. “I’m told that she has the kind of beauty that can turn the

“She’s mine,” Glendina shot back, a strange kind of aura around her coral green eyes and long red hair. “And I’m hers,” she asserted, pulling the Bishop away from

view of his men, making her point by pulling out a dagger and pointing it at the Bishop's throbbing neck.

"Hmmm," LaBlanc noted regarding her new 'look'. "Sincerity. A arsenal in the plethora of your many tools. A dangerous and precarious attribute if such has taken possession of what the metaphysicians in their quest to define the undefinable call your Soul."

"I thought you were a simple man of God who believes in the Soul," she grunted.

"And to the best of my recollections, my most accurate assessment of you was that you are far more pragmatic than passionate, aware of that *prid pro quo* is a *sina quo non*, and that *quid pro quo* is never reciprocated. True, *carpe diem* is your current mandate, but with regard to your carnal appeal, and its longevity, *tempus fugit*, and so will the chance to advance yourself in the Empire which WILL endure here for the next two hundred years," he pontificated to the confused whore who fancies herself a self-educated scholar.

"That means that any threat you make on him now is bullshit," Glendina heard from a behind a tent behind her, the voice drugged, but very familiar. Holding the Bishop hostage with her left hand, rope burned as a result of a hard ride into Camp, she slashed the tent open with the dagger in her right. "Nice hair," Ronita slurred, stroking Glendina's long, red mane. "Can I have some?" she continued, stroking her scalped head. "I think someone took mine. Do you know where it is?"

"She does," LaBlanc replied in the manner of an overworked and overburdened adult to a slow-thinking, naive child. "And if you eat all of your breakfast, we can go look for it together," he smiled. "But first, sing Daddy a song. You know the one I like."

The agnostic Pagan who refused to convert to Christianity, even at the point of a sword, sang one of the Bishop's favorite Christian Devotion songs, dancing around the post to which she was still chained, opening and closing the snaps on her dress in tune with the music, flapping the beaten but still desirable womanly flesh underneath. While Bishop LaBlanc enjoyed the 'show', Glendina helped herself to a cautious lick of the uneaten breakfast in front of her.

"I've heard about this," Glendina said. "An herb that loosens the tongue." The dance became more erotic, then pathological, even to Glendina's tastes, particularly when he notices an extra addition to the 'armaments' between the normally-boy-loving Bishop's legs. "And loosens other things, apparently."

"It makes doing what I need, and want, to do, easier," he said by way of explanation.

Another bowl in the hostage tent aroused Glendina's attention. The content in it had a color different than what she was used to, but the smell was very familiar.

“Gunpowder!” she said of the substance which, when used effectively, could enable its user to obtain as much gold or anything else as required, or desired. “This pathetic, old hag told you how to make it!”

“YOU said she didn’t know how to make it,” ‘Daddy’ LaBlanc smirked, instructing his dancing puppet to twirl around in circles.

“She didn’t,” Glendina replied. “Not according to Lydia, Bat or even Elasandro. Particularly Elasandro.”

“And how did you and my once-most-favored Mercenary Commander get on, Glendina?”

“Effectively enough to get what I needed from him, Your Grace.”

“But not effective enough to give him what he needed, or wanted,” Ronita interjected in a little girl voice between stanzas of the Devotional-turned-erotic song to which she continued dancing.

LaBlanc shot back one of his ‘Bishoply’ stares at Glendina, his eyebrows up, his hands extended out in Papal manner demanding that she confess both her sins and miscalculations.

“This drugged old witch doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” Glendina said. “She doesn’t even know who she is. Ask her!”

“Who are you, my child?” LaBlanc asked his dancing bear. “What is your name?”

“Ro...Ro...Ra...Ru... something, let me think,” she muttered as she allowed her worn out feet to stop dancing. “No...Ronita? Is that who I was, your Brace?” she slurred out to her protector though a wad of sputum, falling to the ground as her lean and beaten legs finally gave out.

“It’s your Grace,” Glendina shot back. “You pathetic Earth Mother...Earth Aunt...the kind that crawls on the ground.”

“Earth SISTER!” Ronita blasted back, finding something in herself that she remembered, struggling her way of a drunken stuper. “Who was thrown out of my village. My Profession. But not my Calling. By King Augustus, who was not so kingly in bed when I knew him as Ol..Ol...”

“Olif,” LaBlanc said.

“Yes. Now I remember,” Ronita said, her speak still slurry, but her eyes clearer. “I remember a lot of things now.” Tears came to those eyes.



“Like the flying machine that Bat built, according to Lydia’s design, Ronita?” Bishop asked Ronita, while staring down Glendina.

“They got no flying machine,” she confessed. “The flying machine is a fib.”

“And the men who are fighting with Bat and the others. Is it true that they have orders to retreat if one in ten of them is killed, so that they can preserve the lives of their families back home. Good Earth Sister?”

“That’s fib too. Every one of the men, women, and the colorful people in between who no one talks about, is prepared to die fighting, your Brace! Especially Bat. He will never surrender, and neither will Lydia. They will fight, to the death!”

“That’s not true!” Glendina asserted “Lydia told me that---“

LaBlanc silenced her with the lifting up of his hand, then a whistle which summoned three well-armed guards into the tent. “And where will they they fight, to the death, Good Earth Sister?”

“Straight up the South approach to the Castle. And they have enough blow up powder to blow up the walls first. Blow up powder like...” Ronita said, sniffing something in the air, finding its source to be the bowl of gunpowder in Glendina’s hands. She grabbed hold of it, then tested it. “This is it. Light it with a torch and it goes flash and boom. I first saw it on Father Earth Mountain. Saw some writing next to it and figured out what was in it. And lots of other things on Earth Mountain, too. Like...hmmm.”

“She’s lying, to you and herself,” Glendina asserted as the soldiers grabbed hold of her arms, slapping a collar around her neck again, but this time, one to which she didn’t have a key. “You throw me into the pits and you throw away a golden opportunity.”

“Gold!” Ronita slurred out. “That’s it! They have tunnels there that have lots of gold in them...Magical tunnels from another time which...” The words halted in her tht, consciousness left her eyes. Though she was breathing, and erect, Ronita was hardly in the land of the living.

“What kind of tunnels” Glendina pressed, pushing her way towards Ronita, trying to shake her back to some of her senses.

“None that you told me about!” LaBlanc blasted back at Glendina, kicking her away with a boot to her belly.

“And none that I would tell you about, not now anyway,” she blasted back, engaging the Bishop in a long duel of stares.

“What do you want us to do with her, your Grace?” one of the guards inquired.

“Dispose of her,” he said. “She’s poison. And useless” He grabbed her by the hair, stared into her eyes, then pulled out a knife. “But she has some attributes we can still use,” he said. He smiled, chuckled, then said a solemn prayer in Latin which he knew she wouldn’t understand. She bowed her head, her eyes sneaking a peak upward, just in time to see the shadow of the blade go over her mystically-alluring coral eyes slice the skin on her forehead, and lift her long red mane off from the scalp in four clean and painful strokes.

“It looks better on her than you,” he said by way of explanation, placing the scalp and bearing the full head of red hair on the old hag, Ronita.

LaBlanc kissed the still-despondent old hag on the forehead and ordered a mirror to be placed in front of Glendina’s eyes, which were now closed. “Open them! Open your eyes or so help me, by your gods and mine, I’ll cut them out!” he commanded.

Fearing for what was left of her life, Glendina opened her eyes, seeing the mutilated person she had now become. “No...no....Kill me.”

“Not quite yet,” LaBlanc smirked. “We had an arrangement. You failed to deliver at your end, so I must deliver at mine. You are now a Sister of God. MY God, by God,” he yelled at the woman he trusted and perhaps once loved. “To the Nunnery with...this. As far away as possible,” he ordered head guard.

“And that?” the guard asked regarding the scalp-wearing catatonic hostage.

LaBlanc had not figured it all out yet. He motioned the heavily armed behemith and his two goons to leave, taking and to take the new Nun with them. He looked over the valleys to the mountains, focusing on one in that vast, wild range. He vowed to claim Father Earth Mountain which he would claim as his own, on a timetable that would be of his OWN choosing. A mountaintop from which even a Christian Bishop could acquire the power and wealth of a Pagan god.

## CHAPTER 38

While Glendina's lover, Lydia had 'asked her advise' as to the Rebel plan to attack the Castle from the Southern approach, armed with flying machines that could drop explosives only from a short distance. As well as the moral integrity and military effectiveness of retreating into the woods, and mountains if necessary, if more than one in ten rebels were wounded. Glendina had advised Lydia that her plans were sound. Apparently, the Bishop seemed to believe it was sound advise as well. Lydia apparently was very good at making misinformation she told Glendina sound like it was the truth to Glendina, and her real boss.

Elasandro perused the Good Bishop's battle plan from a tall tree atop a hill on the Western aspect of the fortress that had evolved into a city, affording him a bird's eye view. "He has indeed put the lion's share of his men and defenses on the Southern side of the Castle, with special detachments in the swamps surrounding the woods where any army in an organized retreat would seek shelter, drawing us in, then dividing us, then conquering us," Elasandro yelled down to his assistant on the ground.

"Just like I did to Johan and his troops," King Augustus noted. "But if we move in from the West, or the North, we'll have to be very, very careful. And be sure that everyone has a map of where the underground pits are that I dug. And that they follow it!"

"They will if you're leading them," Elasandro smiled down to his former employer, hoping he didn't have a death wish. He slithering down the tree while trying to not make its branches rustle, doing a final numbers check on the citizen soldiers hidden in small groups amidst the brush in the valleys below him. "Are you sure that you didn't tell Glendina about them when you were asleep, or LaBlanc when awake, or the voices in your head about them when you were---?"

"---It's the only way we can get close enough to the Castle to outflank LaBlanc's troops! And if we have to, to storm the walls on the only sides that aren't defended with twenty-times the equipment and men than we can handle!" Augustus barked back.

Elasandro knew Augustus was right, but wanted him to say so. The rebel Army was small, in reality outnumbered three to one, but it was composed of men, women and now well-informed children who were all prepared to die for the Cause. Bishop LaBlanc's men were prepared to fight for money. Elasandro wished he had more of that most powerful of weapons now, with which he could purchase defections or desertions from the Imperial Army. How he yearned for Bat to tell him how to make gold, or how to obtain the reserves that were still on Father Earth Mountain. But Bat's firm recommendation, and Lydia's resolute order was to move the Army ahead, avoiding at all costs sending anyone to Father Earth Mountain. Its exact location was still known to only a few, and if that number were to increase, something far more valuable than the rebel army would fall into LaBlanc's hands. But there was something more valuable than even Earth Mountain to Elasandro now. Though Bat's amplified spy glass, he could see

her all too clearly in the 'central' camp, the area of the Army which was protected from all sides in some ways that he told her about, and in other ways he didn't. It had been days since Lydia spoke to him. Weeks since they talked. Months, so it seemed, since they communicated. She remained alone more than ever now, intensely writing a book a day containing ideas and observations that even Bat couldn't understand. The only emotional interaction she had was while observing children and animals at play.

"She envies them on some days, and pities them on others," Augustus commented regarding this 'break' Lydia had taken from her work, observing her hot and sweaty by a pool of cool, calm water, her gaze held captive by something in her distorted reflection.

"And you know this because you 'read' it in the books she is writing, 'Comrade Olif'?" Elasandro inquired of the former Monarch who had confessed his illiteracy to him.

"Because she said that to me once, Comrade-General Elsaadro," the impish dethroned King replied, feeling both honored and touched.

"She doesn't talk to me," Elasandro said. "But I've heard that she talks to Jesus," he continued. "The Real Jesus Spirit behind the Jesus myth."

"The real Jesus speaks in Silence," Augustus commented, after which he looked around him in all of the four directions, defiance in his eyes, his sword hand shaking, his gut aching. "No matter what the Jesus voices say!" he said to the North, South, East and West.

Augustus' application of courage brought stability to his fighting arm and relieved the pain in his belly so he could stand up straight and use it. Such would be needed in this final battle to come. But Elasandro wondered if courage was the prescription for Lydia's ills, or condition of advancing intellect. "She is becoming very Enlightened," he noted, feeling himself envious.

"'Enlightenment brings pain if there is no one to share it with, or who can really understand it', I have heard her say to the Jesus Spirit," Augustus related. "She said that this is why Jesus killed himself. Allowed himself to be crucified. She asked Him to reveal a more effective way to serve the Creator and Creation."

"And did she get an answer?" Elasandro asked, finding his lips turned upward in a smile.

"None in any language that you, me, the children or even that Eagle she dines with seem to be able to understand," Augustus replied, throwing the ropes back down the cliff for the long journey downward to the world below which would change forever by sunset the next day.

## CHAPTER 39

As the dark gave way to dawn, the Eagle saw it all from his vantage point above the trees, mountains and valleys. The people below seemed like ants to his eyes, but he knew that they had become the most powerful insects walking upon the earth with their two legs when doing their business, crawling on their bellies when on the way to it.

Such was the entry for most of the rebels though the Western and Northern approaches to the Castle. They were quiet as snakes, and armed with all manner of weaponry ranging from handcannons that fired pieces of metal with the thunder stolen from the gods, to rocks they kept in their pockets upon which the names of those who had died in the previous revolt were carved which were tied to the end of stubby clubs. King Augustus had led them through the marsh without losing a single man, horse or dog to the deep pits around them. Over the years, those camouflaged pits had swallowed unsuspecting rabbits, foxes, hogs along with human travelers, the spikes on the bottom fixing their dead or dying bodies onto a spike for all manner of avian scavengers until the King's men would come out and cover them again. Normally, crows, vultures and hawks circled the pits looking for the morning breakfast before the guard maintaining the pits came out on their mid-day patrols, but on this day, those avian competitors stayed away. Perhaps it was the smell of the exploding powder that kept them away, or perhaps it was the smell of impending death. And the sound of fear from men who could afford to show none of it to anyone.

“We should have brought more horses with us,” an upright Elasandro informed Augustus as he assessed the distance between the area of the woods which was inaccessible to the castle and the open ground ahead of them. He stroked the neck of his, thankfully still unwounded steed. “A skilled archer can shoot three shots at a man running to the walls, but only one at a rider at a brisk lope on horse.”

“Who is a bigger target,” the horseless Augustus pointed out. “Even if he’s carrying a metal ball containing explosive powder that has to be delivered at the most guarded area of the wall to make a hole in it.” The mud covered, impish, former King pointed out the area to hit, and the approach to it, drawing out a map as to how to get to it without falling into one of the pits covered by blankets upon which weeds were sewn so as to make them look like grass.

The two men concerned themselves with the ticking of the ‘clock’ on Elasandro’s saddle as the men behind them readied their weapons and the women behind them quietly brought in as many horses as could be afforded on that end of the assault.

Another group of rebels readied themselves on the Southern approach to the Castle, a large, open field upon which all adversaries of old were ‘invited’ to present themselves before doing battle. Bat, his Elder brother and Luke rode in front at a short-gaited, collected lope, none further ahead than the other. They wore nothing on their chests except their courage, paint on their faces in the manner of the hunters of old. Behind them were twenty mounted riders, each rider surrounded by ten more citizen

soldiers on foot. They sported all manner of clothing, or lack of it. Some seemed to look like Christians, others Pagan, but all carried some element of both cultures in their attire, demeanor and method of prayer. Under the same banner used by Johan four years ago in this very field, they approached to the beat of a drum, halting just short of the range of the three-deep line of uniformed archers lined up atop the castle walls, the distance of their trajectories being well known to the Eagle as he was still seeing people rather than having been eaten by them.

Bat looked at his clock, nodded to his men, then retrieved a white flag from his saddlebag, tying it to his cane, which he was now holding like a lance. He galloped ahead, his horse more at ease with the speed of transport than he was, and planted it into the ground. He gathered up his horse, and his posture on it, and circled around the flag. "Bishop LaBlanc!" he shouted out to the Castle at which he was once an important part-time resident. "If God is with you, let you and He come out and face me! And face us!" He invited each member of the Army behind him to greet the Bishop with their own salutation, or gesture. Some screamed out fire-infused dares, some dropped their drawers and showed His Grace their asses.

The Castle's answer was given though its archers, who fired a warning round that fell a fifty feet short of the guests who sought entry into it. Each greeting was attached to an exploding blast of powder that produced a bolt of light and a blast of thunder. From behind the lines, a large cannon was wheeled up, answering the blasts with a single round that landed in front of the castle door. It landed like a dud, then when some arrogant guards came out to retrieve it, it blew up with a blast that flung human flesh into the wall, producing a large hole.

A dark-skinned Arabian looking soldier in an important looking uniform walked out of an enclosed tower and gave a piece of parchment to an archer, who attached it to his arrow and shot it through the air. It landed directly in front of Bat's horse, spooking the animal, throwing its rider onto the ground, causing his infirmed arm to bend, then break. He dusted himself off, grabbed hold of the horse, and read the message.

"The wall has been made thicker than your magic," Bat read. "Very poetic," he replied. "But tell your superior that we have magic he has not even imagined in our heads, as well as in our hearts! And that he is a disgrace to his men, his God and whatever family he has in Rome if he doesn't come out and face us himself!" Bat raised his good arm, then his broken one, showing his adversaries that the bone in the latter was broken but the spirit lifting it wasn't. The men, women and children behind him raised shouted, sang, danced, clanked and revealed their anatomy even more boldly. The outnumbered and perhaps seemed scared of it, as was even the Eagle.

The uniformed humans inside the Castle seemed worried. The non-uniformed ones outside of it were anything but, creating a ruckous that was louder than any thunder the Eagle ever heard, be it from the clouds above or the new powder below. Then, finally, the gate to the Castle opened. A man clad in an even more important uniform bearing a cross with a long visor that covered his face rode out at a bold gallop. Nuns

and Monks walked out behind him, singing his praises in loud melodies that were sad, but forceful. They held crosses over their heads that were twice as big as they were.

“Face your confessor!” the dark skinned man atop the castle walls announced to the rebels in a loud voice. “Bow to him and all will be forgiven, and you will be rewarded in this life and the next.”

The rider halted, the Nuns and Monks advancing toward the rebel line, dropping gold on the ground, crosses on top of them, then retreating back to the shadow of the castle walls.

The Arabic Minister opened a large scroll. “Take these gifts from God and God’s Ministers and go home as obedient and well paid servants, or receive the devil’s fire.”

Larger arrows were shot from the towers, this time with louder bangs and bigger bursts, setting ablaze the ground itself with a flame that would not go out. Some of the Christian and Pagan rebels were terrified. Others broke ranks to try to grab the gold, laying down their arms in its place. Bat approached one of the ‘burning bushes’ and sprinkled powder on it from his pocket. Using nothing but the fire in his eyes, he convinced all but ten rebels to throw the gold back on the ground and pick up their weapons again, joining the ranks of those behind him. The taller than life former wizard turned to the rider, the center of the ‘show’ and addressed him directly.

“You don’t seem to be the man we requested to see,” Bat noticed and voiced loudly, after which he fired a hand cannon that knocked the helmet off the Supreme Commander. “Yes, by the way you hold your pathetic ass on a good horse, I thought it was you, Brother James,” he said. “Or is it Abbott now?”

“And General,” the power-seeking scholar who betrayed Bat, Augustus and everything he once swore allegiance to while a mediocre blacksmith. “Who will see that every rebel who comes to his senses is rewarded, and every one that doesn’t is hanged, slowly!” he announced.

“We’re running out of time, ‘Brother James!’” Bat screamed out to . “You, us and the Bishop, who maybe is hiding under one of those Nun’s skirts!” he continued. “Or perhaps the Protector of our Christian Souls is licking one of the young Monk’s balls!”

The un-uniformed soldiers outside the Castle laughed, feeling strong again. The ones in important looking uniforms inside it rolled their eyes, feeling very superior. Bat looked at his time piece, then the Elder, then Luke, who nodded ‘yes’. Brother James nodded ‘no’ to Bat, pointing his attention to a high tower upon which Ronita was pulled out.

“She has red hair now,” James said. “Which will be blood red if you and your men don’t--“

James' ultimatum was halted by a loud scream from Ronita, followed by a blood curdling grunt from the old hag, then a push that freed her from her two guards, then the ledge upon which she was held. "Freedom" she yelled out in the Ancient, forbidden tongue as she fell to her death. Said death brought renewed life into the fighting spirit of the rebels, which was good for their Cause, but bad for their timing. They attacked in full force, each man, woman and child their own Commander, storming the walls against everything the archers threw at them. Those who fell motioned the others ahead, giving them their weapons to move onward as they joined Ronita in the Paradise in which she most probably was now.

Thankfully, there was something to storm. The cannon behind them blasted out two more rounds that blew a hole in the wall that opened a hole in the wall, but it was still not large enough. Bat mounted his horse and rode in at full gallop, having as little control of the horse as he now did of the Army that was under his command. Each arrow that found its way into his body gave it another boost of youth, vitality and strength till he was as energetic and unstoppable as Johan had been in his prime. The old, now young, Bat threw his special exploding balls into spots in the wall where, according to his best present intuitions and Lydia's previous recommendations, it was the weakest. In the Cause of making her reign as Philosopher Queen possible, Bat created three holes in the Castle Walls which brought the people it was supposed to serve inside it.

The Eagle observed the bloodbath that was happening at the South Wall under Bat's 'command' as well as the assault on the West and North Walls led by Augustus and Elasandro, respectively. His peircing eye could feel the tide turning against the rebels, then in their favor. One body caught his attention, that of a remorseful Ronita in the arms of Augustus and Bat. "Forgive me," she begged of both of them as she breathed more blood than air on the hard ground upon which she flung herself. "I think I said some things that I shouldn't have."

"And we didn't say some thing that we should have," Bat said.

"Men who say 'I love you' never mean it," she smile at both of them. "But your being here, now, shows that you mean it. We will continue this discussion in...the afterlife. Or some other life, I think," she said, looking up to the sky. "No," she continued as the Light hit her face and the life left her body. "I know."

Ronita breathed her last, taking with her the answer to the Ultimate Mystery that only the dying know, and are not permitted to tell those left behind. But the Eagle felt more concerned about the living, and who was not present at the Castle. The Bishop was no where to be seen, amongst the wounded, captured or dead. The avian observer to it all got an awful feeling in his crop and gizzard, heralding his departure immediately to a place where he had once called home, to someone he should have protected.



## CHAPTER 40

“So,” Bishop LaBlanc said to Lydia as he personally held a dagger to her throat. “You know how to get up this mountain. And to the riches on it.”

“Which you or your men will never have,” Lydia smirked at her captors, most of whom were clad in rebel garb atop their Imperial uniformed as she stood on the South slope of Father Earth Mountain, midway between the camafloged vines and the blown out entrance to the tunnel. “You were all smart enough to infiltrate the Camp, and particularly you, ‘Your Grace’, as an Earth Sister,” she smiled. “But I have a weapon far more powerful than anything in your sword sheath, holster or ‘bussom’. It’s my lack of love for life, and indifference to death.”

“Which is trumped by my powers of observation,” LaBlanc replied, noting hereyeline. “If I’m not mistaken, those rocks look like an entrance to a tunnel.”

“Which is now a cave!” she smirked.

“That can be opened up with this,” the Bishop answered, throwing a shovel into Lydia’s hand. “As long as you dig, we don’t kill ‘Brother Bat’. Or ‘Aunt Ronita’. Or Elasandro, who I know you love, or want to some day.”

“How do I know you have captured them?” Lydia asked. “You could be lying to me.”

“Yes, we could. But if we aren’t...” LaBlanc said.

Lydia felt a chill going through her bones. Fear turned every wise or clever thought in her head into mush. She dared not show LaBlanc, but he saw right through her. “Dig me that tunnel into where the gold is,” he commanded. “Or I command my men to send word to throw one of your beloved Comrades into a grave which they’ve already dug.”

“You have no reason to spare their lives if I do what you want,” Lydia said. “The laws of logic and reason dictate that you kill them, and me, even after you get the gold.”

“A man with enough gold can dictate anything he wants,” he smiled, dismissing his men while he had a private conversation with Lydia, stroking her tender cheeks with a touch that drove terror into the brain behind it. “You should know, and surmise, that I will get what I want, and deserve. You’re a smart girl, really doesn’t want to become a stupid one again. Or a violated one. Or a blind one. Or a, well, you get the idea....When force meets reason, force always wins. And you know that if I am rich in gold and the knowledge about how to make it, and other things, I’ll have all the force I need. You and your Comrades can play here in the wilderness, while I, well, do important things in the civilized world. And if you decide to join me, the well being of those you leave behind will be even more assured...”

The Eagle watched as Lydia lost her confidence, perspective then reason. She dug into the mountain at the entrance to the gold-laden tunnel leading up the mountain containing manuscripts worth far more. Driven by a sense of urgency, the ultimate mover of applied intelligence, he swooped down and grabbed hold of a chunk of her hair, a piece of her dress and the necklace Glendina had offered to her as a token of her 'love'.

Avoiding the hateful wrath of LaBlanc's most trusted swordsmen, handcannon holders and archers, the Eagle swooped up into the clouds, finding a current that thankfully blew him in the right direction. Mother Nature was looking after Father Earth Mountain, but her plan depended upon the bipedal human vermin who so often desecrated her.

## CHAPTER 41

The revolution for a people's democracy very quickly led to mob rule in the wake of the rebels taking the Castle and all of the lands around it, the rulers being the rebels who were most armed, and in many cases, most drunk on stolen wine. The most potent elixir was the Communion wine 're-appropriated' from the Bishop's rectory, its recipe combining the flavors of the Ancient Pagan brews the population had grown up with and a dangerously high alcoholic content added by the Roman priests, perhaps with some mind-slowng agents thrown in by the Bishop.

Luke's senses and sensibilities seemed particularly vulnerable to that elixor. He orchestrated the ceremonies in the large Court where the King, then the Bishop, had conducted public government business, one of the previous transactions being his incarceration into a dungeon after the then-Christian King Augustus had promised that he would be merely relocated to a village that was not his home. "Dance, jester!" he commanded the 'entertainment', as he lay atop the throne, beckoning the wench on his lap who knew nothing about revolution to pull the strings attached to the source of ridicule in the middle of the 'people's court' for the crowd of dedicated soldiers turned into drunken partiers. "Make us laugh or we will have to cut your tongue out!" he went on. "I have been elected the People's Minister of Entertainment and do, with the power invested in me, bequeth it!"

The tarred and feathered puppet obeyed, dancing and making funny faces as desperately as he could to save his life. Brother James had wished he had been put in the dungeon with the other former Pagans who were loyal to King Augustus and subsequently vowed allegiance to the Bishop after the Monarch's 'abdication'. He was also allergic to feathers, his nostrils sneezing large wads of snot with each stanza of the 'I'm a happy hen' song the crowd requested him to sing. It made Luke glad to see the man who made his life so miserable, and who killed his brothers, desperately trying to act 'happy'. And it felt right to have a consort on his lap who most probably pleased Brother James after he had been promoted to the Bishop's Abbott, then General. Even though he had read Johan's warnings about mixing personal pleasure with Revolutionary Passion, and the need to always be vigilant, that state being the price of freedom.

'Minister Luke' quickly expanded his gustatory exploration of the wine jug till he clearly could see its bottom, then felt absorbed into the abyss between the wench's ample sized breasts. He was deposed by another drunken rebel citizen soldier who declared himself Minister of Enlightenment, rolling a laughing Luke off the throne with an effortless push of his arm. The new provisional King commanded James to laugh like a donkey while dancing like a chicken, promising him that his head would be spared if he could lay an egg, or piece of manure that tasted like one.

"So, is that how we're supposed to elect our leaders now?" a very worried Bat asked a very sober Augustus, each being equally ignored by everyone around them. Most particularly the rebels running through the room proudly displaying their new stolen wardrobes, adorning themselves in all manner of jewels and gold, sported atop prime equine livestock. Bat recognized one of the ensembles.

“That robe and broach belonged to Elina,” Bat commented to Augustus. “She was not with the Bishop, with you when you were the Bishop’s King, nor with us. All she wanted was to be left alone, with the jewels that she labored to earn. And that horse was trained by Thomas from a colt. Neither horse nor rider raised a hand against us, and both refused to be of service to LaBlanc or you.”

“Yes,” Augustus commented. “I remember trying to acquire that horse for a Holy Mission someplace, and seeing that noble beast throw every rider I put on it. Including myself. Thomas was the only man who could ride it, and since what was important to him had nothing to do with what was important to me, I let him ride home and promised to leave him and his family alone.”

The horse, true to its nature and owner, bucked off the overdressed rebel, the jewel-encrusted robe he was wearing ripped off him, tying itself around the saddlehorn. The horse bolted out of the room, finding his way down to the square below the courtroom. Thomas was there, being held by three rebel warriors who now carried themselves off as Imperial Guards, one of them cursing out the horse as he was trying to get on it for a victory ride, threatening to blow its defiant brains out with a hand cannon if it didn’t obey. “That’s my horse!” a terror-stricken Thomas asserted. “And those are my clothes!” a nearly naked Elenia exclaimed while trying to hide her anatomical wares from three lower ranking rebels who had just decided by lot who would be the first to avail themselves of them.

The instant before Thomas’ horse was to become ‘people’s revolution’ meat, and Elina was to be conscripted into the ‘People’s Pleasure’ brigade, two loud thunderous bolts silenced the crowd, most particularly because of the man carrying the hand cannons, and the number of wounds he had sustained in the battle to take the castle, such being the only valid measure of worth left in the mob. “This is not re-distribution of wealth!” Elasandro commanded from atop his own horse, the Macedonian mercenary realizing more than ever that his diction and manner of speech was indeed foreign to this place. “This is not what we fought for, and our brothers, sisters, children and mothers died for.”

“You haven’t lost anyone you care about in this war!” one of the rebels yelled out to Elasandro, with a voice that sounded very familiar. “You came here to fight for King Augustus, and got paid well for it. You were thrown out of his Army, so you joined ours. Why don’t you collect the gold you want, and deserve, and go home! To Macedonia. To the other wandering Jews who wear those funny hats and funny dances and funny rituals,” he continued with an accent mocking the General, who only hours ago he looked to for direction and strength.

“And why don’t you give me back that gold you stole from me in the alley just around that corner,” Elasandro volleyed back with an outstretched finger to the location in mind. “After you sold me a bottle of wine that made me go to sleep!” he continued to the former soldier in his Imperial Army Command had been before being conscripted into the King’s Army who had robbed him in a back alley.

“It was your fault for falling asleep!” the former beggar said, the laughter of the crowd supporting his claim. “Which is maybe why our Philosopher King has stopped making love to his Philosopher Queen!” he growled out to the crowd with a shit-eating grin.

His boast was stopped by the point of Elasandro’s sword on his neck.

“I am speaking my mind,” the power-drunk former beggar spat back. “We are allowed to speak our minds.”

“Yes, you are,” a voice rang out from the back of the mob, a tall man having spoken it. “As well as everyone is,” he proclaimed. “As Johan ordered it so, and died to make it so.” Bat and Augustus walked through the crowd, holding up the Johan banner as a reminder to those who could still listen, and a warning to those who wouldn’t, or couldn’t. Augustus took the robe off the horse’s saddle and wrapped it around Elina’s shivering and naked shoulders. Bat handed the reins of the horse to Thomas, who mounted the steed and offered Elina a ride out of castle, then took her away with swift speed. Elasandro kept the edge of his sword on the beggars throat, determined to not let him go.

Augustus motioned to Bat that it was his turn to officiate. The old, tired man spoke gently and softly to the young, angry one. “She wanted to be alone,” Bat said to Elasandro in Greek, a language which he hoped that no one in the ‘congregation’ understood. “And she needs to be alone, for a little while anyway. You read the note she left you, me and everyone else.”

“In her own handwriting,” Elasandro noted. “Just like Ronita’s note?”

Bat’s optimism turned realistic. “We’ll find her,” he promised.

“I know where she went,” Elssandro said.

“There is no future for her there, or any of us. Besides, I told her never to go back to that place,” he continued.

“Which is why she is probably there now,” Elasandro said. “And I’m going to rescue her myself if I have to, even if she doesn’t want to be rescued,” he continued, his depression turning into anger. “But first!” he went on, while preparing to make the mark of ‘theif’ on the beggar’s chest.

The punishment was stopped by the cawing of an Eagle that landed on a tower, displaying its large wing span. It helped itself to some recently slaughtered human meat. One of the rebels pulled out his bow, prepared to convert it into dinner. “Wait!” Bat commanded, noting something in its claws. He took out his spy glass and looked, then showed it to Elasandro. “Lydia’s dinner companion,” he said, in Greek.

“With her hair, dress and her lover’s necklace,” he noted, in common speak, handing the spy glass to Augustus.

“The revolution is not quite over,” Augustus said. “A lot of things have to be set right.”

“And done effectively,” Elasandro commented. He put the sword back into his scabbard and looked up at the Eagle. The bird flew away, circling around the South gate of the castle. Elasandro rode over to the weapon’s supply wagon and with his wounded arm loaded his horse with anything it could carry. The Bird cawed again, beconing Elasandro to follow.

“It’s bad luck when the birds want you to follow them, and death to all who follow them,” the beggar-thief said, the crowd convinced of the Ancient belief.

“I’m dead already,” Elasandro said as he rode to the gate. “And I’m doing this alone!” he proclaimed galloping off into woods behind the Eagle.

“A deposed King’s gotta do what a deposed King’s gotta do,” Augustus said, requesting a one of his new ‘subjects’ to get him a horse.

“Which is to stay here, and preserve what we fought for, and Ronita died for,” Bat said, taking the steed himself. Riding out with his usual lack of equine skill, barely holding on to the neck of the horse and the hope that the girl he loved more than life itself was still alive.

## CHAPTER 42

Lydia was never afraid of hard work, and she always took it on when called to. But even when she had been the village idiot, her arms were as weak as her head was empty. When that head became full, whatever dexterity was required to create with her hands what was envisioned in her ever-expanding brain stopped at the neck. Evidence of her recent inexperience at using her hands for anything except turning a page on a book or writing a new one found its way into her bloodshot eyes as she looked down at her hands after having moved a heavy rock.

“They’re called blisters,” Bishop LaBlanc said as he examined the progress regarding how much rubble had been removed from the entrance to the gold-enriched tunnel Ronita had informed him about while under the spell of Achmed’s tongue-loosening drugs, and how many more rocks and dirt had to be removed to open the entrance to that cavern, and the route to the mountaintop above it. “But at least you still have hands to put blisters on,” he continued, taking out his sword and feeling its edge. “When we are ungrateful for the tools God gives us, and do not use them in the service of Him and his Ministers on Earth, they become objects of sin, instruments of evil and must be removed.”

He demonstrated his point by slashing a branch of a tree, which fell in front of Lydia’s mud-soaked, blood-caked feet. Lydia was startled out of exhaustion, not by the falling branch, but by a bird’s nest that fell from it. Stretching her blister-covered hands out, she caught the nest, discovering that the young birds inside it were still alive. Eagles by the looks of them. She smiled at them, but sadly. It was not only their young eyes that she could see, but also the older ones they would become, and the aged ones after that, and the dying ones after that. She remembered her Eagle companion, wondering what he was dining on today. Hoping of course that he wasn’t dinner for someone or something else. Lydia’s knowledge and intuition of Nature was that it honored the strong and the clever, but rarely the wise and certainly not the compassionate. Though universal compassion, applied to those in need according to need and available access, was an easier emotion for a highly developed mind than any of the others. Using that she climbed up the cliff, and laid nestled the nest on another branch, staring down the Bishop as he prepared himself to chop that branch with his sabre.

“You want me to save these birds, you have to give me something in return. Qui pro quo. That means---“

“---I know what it means!” Lydia blasted at LaBlanc.

“Then you know what I really want from you,” he smirked, walking his way to her along the chain he had attached around her ankle. “This,” he said putting his ice cold hands on either side of her shivering forehead. “This,” he said, his index finger pointed at her heart. “And this,” he said, stroking her breasts.

Lydia slapped him across the face.

“Such will make it sweeter after I obtain them,” LaBlanc said. He retreated to his position on a large rock under a shady tree, opening his book and eating a succulent apple from his satchel, loudly enough for a Lydia to yearn for its moister and nurishment. He looked up at his men, all of whom were perched at vantage points high enough to spot anyone approaching, and far enough so they could not hear LaBlanc’s conversation with Lydia.

“What will happen if they want to share the gold with you?” she asked.

“You’ll find a way to discourage them from following me, or talking to anyone else about what they saw here,” he replied. “Or I’ll...”

LaBlanc pulled out a hand cannon and aimed it at the bird’s nest, hitting one of the chicks squarely in the heart, causing the others to flee, two of whom fell to the ground as they were not ready to fly yet. But one was able to fly and did, losing itself in the bush.

“Survival of the fittest, and the strongest. That is the ultimate law of Nature,” LaBlanc proclaimed. He turned his attention to his book, sharing its contents with Lydia. “The meak shall inherit the earth” he mused. “No doubt a mistranslation, which will be corrected once I hire the appropriate translators to support my contention.”

Lydia had read portions of the “Jesus Book”, the ones which Bat, as Abbott had access to anyway. They never made sense to her, but they felt right through the mistranslations that she could intuit, the manuscripts having had to go from Arameic to Greek and then to Latin. It was the story of Mary that didn’t make sense to her. The Virgin Birth seemed as strange as the tale about Ancient travels from the stars visiting Earth and living as gods, for reasons known only to them. She remembered that the same word meant ‘young girl’ and ‘virgin’ in scriptural languages that preceded Latin. But such made no sense anymore. No one was a virgin anymore, even the young female eaglet which managed to fly away and live apart from humans. A place where Lydia yearned for, but knew she could never inhabit again.

“Enough thinking, not enough digging,” LaBlanc commanded.

Lydia obeyed, knowing that she was digging her own grave, one way or another. Escape from that fate was impossible, every route blocked LaBlanc’s guards encircling her from elevated locations, who were as skillful at shooting their bows as she had once been at designing them.

Denied, food, water, rest and respect, she dug for hours that felt like days. Dry hard rocks led to wet mud, then to another layer of even harder rocks which seemed to be part of the mountain. “I’m sure this is where the tunnel is,” she insisted, digging more forcefully than ever into ground that didn’t give way. Perhaps her original perceptions were off as to where the downslope entrance to the upward winding cave



started. She had paid no mind to where the entrance was when she exited it several months ago. “Are you sure Ronita said it was here?” she asked LaBlanc.

“As sure as the old hag is alive, and will remain so as long as you keep digging,” he said, looking over the terrain, the sun dropping down towards the horizon, then the map he took out of his pocket. “Which will commence tomorrow, maybe a hundred feet to the left,” he continued, calculating his bearings. “But in the meantime,” he said with a wide smile, standing up on his feet for the first time since noon, whipping off a blanket which covered an elegantly arranged arrangement of food. Apples, bread, pudding and stew, reminiscent of better times. “It is my understanding, from various sources, that this is what you ate every day at this time when you resided up there, on top of this mountain.”

“Yes, it was,” Lydia said, gobbling down the food, finding that her instinct for survival stronger than her desire for death.

“Builds strong muscles,” LaBlanc commented with a cordial gusto.

“Maybe for your men up there who you’re underpaying to guard me,” she replied.

“I was talking about muscles that MATTER,” the Bishop continued, releasing the chains around her ankles, then pointing to her head. “Here. The muscles between your ears. With some special ingredients that make that marvelous brain of yours miraculous, and very powerful.”

“Potentially powerful,” she said, putting down the bowl of stew, sniffing what she had just ingested. “Whatever it is, it’s not in here.”

“So where is it?” LaBlanc pressed. “Where!” he continued, trying to shake the answer out of Lydia’s shoulders. “Where!!!” he blasted at her, cutting open her dress from the neck down with his knife, pointing its blade at her belly.

“Here,” Lydia heard from a voice she hardly expected to ever hear again. “Under those trees just under these rocks that look like angry faces,” Bat continued, standing as tall as a pristine pine, though his limbs were knarled and his freshly scarred face especially gaunt.

“How did you get here?” LaBlanc demanded to know of the ghost that appeared in front of him. “My men are---”

“---Occupied with someone else,” Bat said, pointing up to the lookout points. Lydia observed Elasandro atop his horse posing as a target for the archers, all of their arrows missing their mark, so far anyway. The mounted Macedonian rode in towards each of his attackers, using his arrows, hand-cannons and sword to leave marks on each of them. Some left wounds that incapacitated the prime soldiers in the Imperial Army, slicing into their flesh. Some cut into their wardrobe and long manes, leaving them half

naked and cropped. “Your men are concerned with their own survival, and dignity, than with you,” Bat said. “Or what you came here for.”

“Which I will get!” LaBlanc grunted out, grabbing Lydia around her chest, holding his blade to her tender, thin-skinned, quivering neck.

“And which you shall have, since you seem to want it so much,” Bat replied. “Follow me, please,” he said with a humble bow, leading LaBlanc and a re-chained Lydia under a pile of bushes to a small opening under them that led to a larger opening, that led to an open door which contained Ancient writing. On the other side of the door lay walls of black soot, a tall ceiling of hard, stripped, jagged rock, and a floor covered with shimmering yellow pebbles.

LaBlanc sniffed, felt, then tasted it, keeping Lydia’s chain wrapped around his waist.

“Gold,” Bat said. “Some of which has been mined on this mountain.”

“The rest of which you made,” LaBlanc replied, giving his ‘bitch’ a longer leash, but keeping it tightly around him.

“Using my hands, and Lydia’s brain, which was made so by ingredients and devises you will find just around bend,” Bat said, pointing to a well-lit room attached to the cave. “Legend has it that Ancient visitors from another place, who we called gods, did some things to some of us to make us smarter than the rest of us. And as you know, all legends are based in fact.”

LaBlanc pondered the matter. Bat used the opportunity to plant another idea into his head, after coughing blood out of the mouth attached to it. “My time in this world is ending. And it will be a matter of time for the revolution we started to fall apart. I only ask that you and Lydia share the elixir which makes geniuses out of village idiots equally and that you ingest it slowly.” Bat withdrew a bag of powder from his pocket and threw it into the adjacent room, a trail of the contents falling on the floor.

“Slow is for village idiots and fools!” LaBlanc shot back, bolting towards the lit room, licking the contents of the bag with his tongue like a dog. A canine that got stronger in body and brighter in the eyes with each swallow. A raging empowered superbeing that followed the trail into the next room, out of view of Lydia, and Bat, who used the opportunity to cut the chain LaBlanc had attached to her with an axe which contained a gel on its blade that exploded when it hit the metal, breaking it open with a flash of light that made no sound.

“I heard that!” Lydia heard LaBlanc say from behind the partition with vengeful rage in his voice. “I will kill you both now, slowly, so that your cranial perceptions of it feel that most primal emotion which you both need, and fear, which is...”

LaBlanc's first steps out of the cavern were confident and proud. His next two were stumbles. His fourth was an attempt to pull himself off the ground, revealing a face which was one that Lydia remembered all too well. "Whhhicchhh isss..." he studded, in the manner of a village idiot.

"Pain," Bat informed the deflated minion of evil devolving into a babbling idiot in front of Lydia's disbelieving eyes. "What we need and fear is pain."

LaBlanc caught a reflection of himself in one of the gold-covered plates covered with Ancient writing. "Isss...thattta...me?" he asked Bat, Lydia, then the reflection itself.

The rest of the speak from LaBlanc was anything but scholarly, nor threatening. A nonsense speech that Lydia recalled from her childhood as a village idiot whose brain capacity did not allow her to be smart, but did allow her to be something else.

"He looks...happy," she commented to Bat.

"But not Alive," Bat replied. "Or able to exert his influence over anyone else. A condition which, according to all I know anyway, is permanent."

"I wish the revolution was permanent," Lydia said, feeling the pain in her ankles and wrists.

"It is," Elasandro said as he walked into the cave. "We had to trick 'his Grace' here, and you, by telling him that--"

Lydia cut Elasandro's explanations as to battle plans gone right and wrong with a hug around him that felt---right. Though the blisters on her fingers made the wounds on his back, chest and shoulders feel 'distant', she could feel the pain underneath them. And the Passion he felt for her in ways that went beyond being a Philosopher Queen.

She had one request of Bat to make the dreams incubating in her head come true. "Could you give some of the REAL powder that made me smart to Elasandro?" she asked him.

"I've done enough harm already, please forgive me. Both of you," Bat said. With that, he walked into the cave, disappearing into the darkness, which became a fog, then a cloud of dust falling from the ceiling.

"NO!" Lydia said, rushing into the cloud of dust.

Elasandro held her back. "He wanted it this way!" he said by way of explanation, as the dust cleared and rocks occupied the corridor through which the wizard who was more human than any 'mortal' Lydia knew had vanished.

“Why?” she demanded to know.

“I don’t know, but maybe, together, we can figure it out?” Elasandro asked, and requested. LaBlanc, trapped in the mentally retarded child’s brain which was now the only one accessible to him, sung a tune. A happy tune, out of the mouth of someone who had caused so much unhappiness. It seemed right for Lydia to offer Elasandro a warm, but cautious smile. And for Elasandro to retrieve the singing ‘puppy’ from the cave with the chain that he had used to enslave the woman he now knew that he loved as he loved no other.

## CHAPTER 43

Weeks turned into days, then months, then years. Augustus stopped listening to the voices in his head and learned how to hear the bitching, moans and suggestions of his people, and served them according to Johan the Rebel's Constitution. A document which he learned to read by himself, with the aid of Luke, who officiated over an elected assembly which had veto power over the King. The Kingdom acquired a new name, and kept its form of government rule by the people secret so that those kingdoms around it that were still ruled by Kings, or Popes, would not band up together to destroy it.

After having the tar, feather and whatever hair was still left on his head and body removed, Brother James was paroled to Rome, where he rose up the ladder there just high enough to fall down on his face, and return to his homeland a beggar.

In lands beyond the Castle, and the new Kingdom, a new order of Nuns was formed, which specialized in serving the physical wants of men, justifying such as being connected to their spiritual needs. Mother Superior Glendina demanded only one thing of her novices---that they donate half of the money paid to them for their labors of love to the poor.

Brother Bat was never seen again, though Augustus claimed to have heard him whisper suggestions as to how to rule as a smart, and compassionate king, from the other side of the walls of the humble hut which was his new 'palace'. The voices sounded more real than imagined.

Elasandro ruled the Army, which was soon not needed. Having lots of spare time on his hands, he spent every waking moment with Lydia, who had trouble sleeping as her brain moved a faster and faster speeds while both awake and in 'slumber'. However, a few moments of love did materialize between them, producing a child of which he was very proud, and who they called 'Johana', educating her regarding all Spiritual Faiths and Beliefs, leaving what she believed to her at a later age. The family was happy, and effective, until one night a bright light came to the sky above Father Earth Mountain. As it still remained a place which was to be visited but not lived upon, Lydia woke up out of a restless slumber, kissing Elasandro fondly, as he never did outgrow his habit of sleeping soundly. Lydia climbed her way up the mountain and greeted the Light, smiling at the horses in the sky that pulled the strangely shaped charriot. By morning, the Light had gone, as was Lydia. Johana saw it all and wrote it all down, as instructed by her mother in a letter written to her in a tongue that only she and her daughter could understand. As she did the events in this legend which became fact for those who need, or want, to believe in it.