

FOREST AT THE EDGE  
~ Prequel ~

THE WALLS in  
the MIDDLE of  
IDUMEA

IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT KEEPING OUT,  
BUT KEEPING IN

TRISH MERCER

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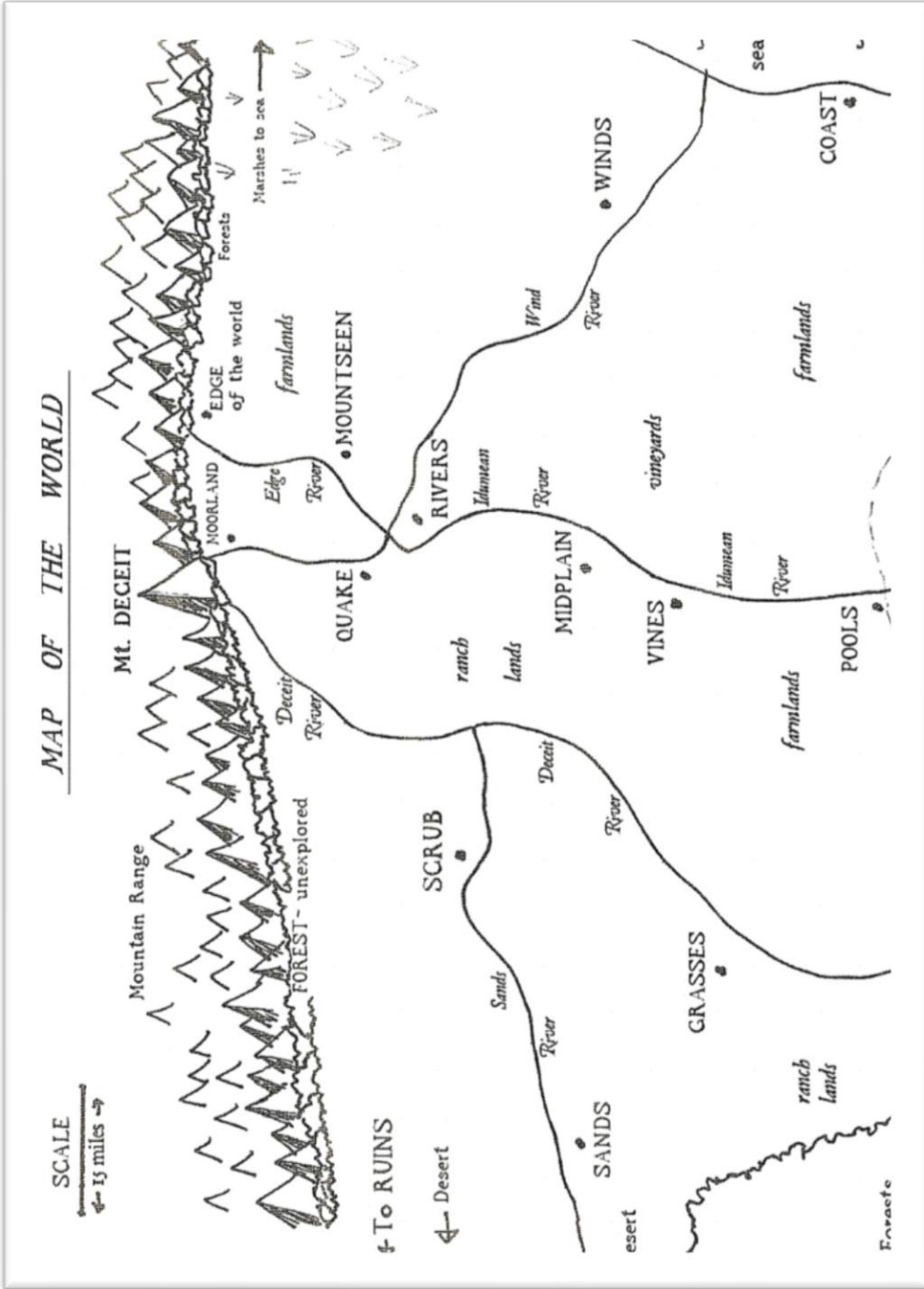
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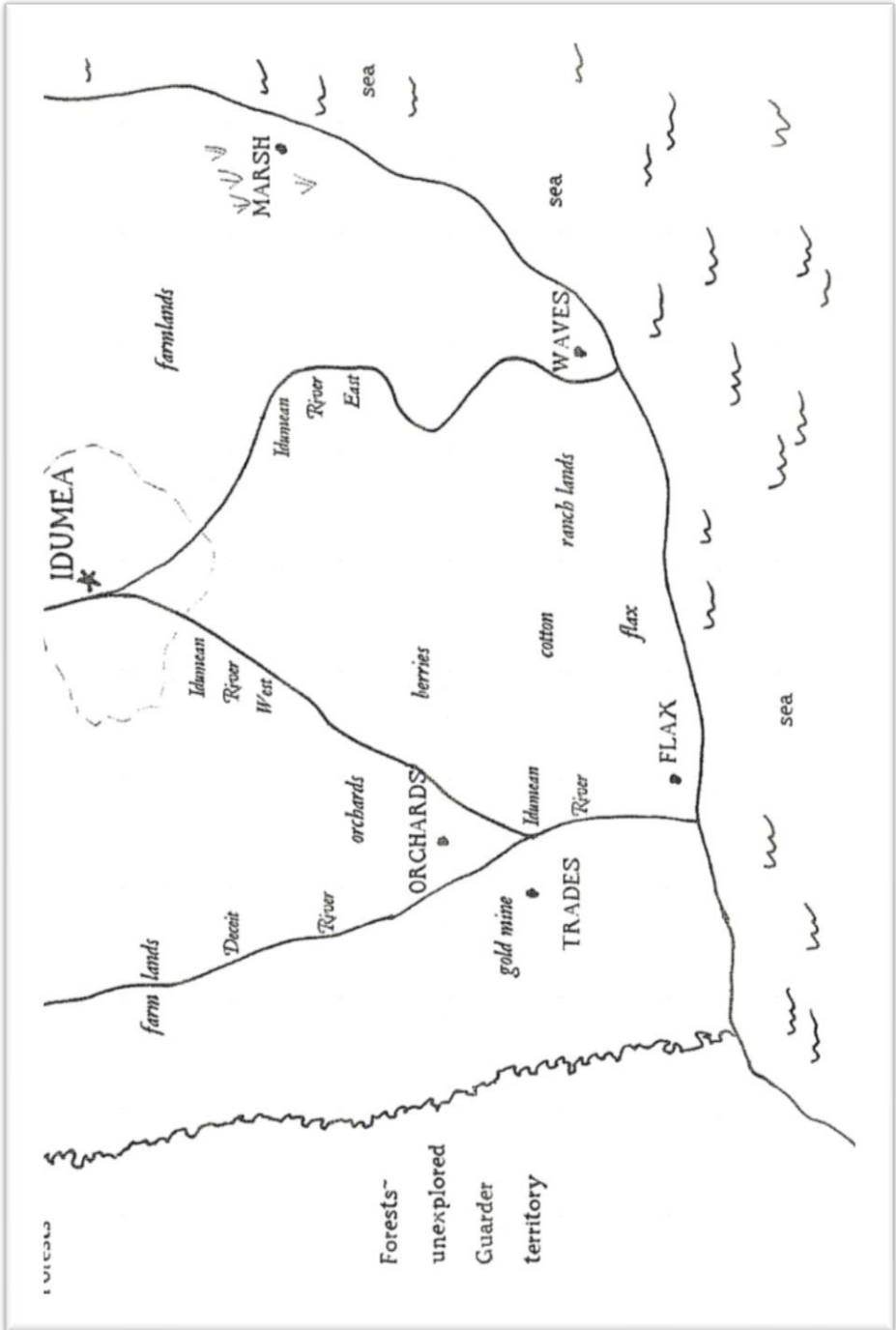
## Prequel

The Walls in the Middle of Idumea

# MAPS



# The Walls in the Middle of Idumea





## Prequel



## ~The First Day of the Week~

The most important thing to remember was to keep the wood boxes full because that kept the war away. And in the largest mansion in the world, there are dozens and dozens of boxes to fill.

Except that Fangi, the boy whose job it was to fill the boxes, didn't know what "dozens" meant.

But he knew the path he had to take each day. Right after breakfast, he'd bundle up in his coat and gloves if it was the Raining Season and cold outside. But if it was Planting or Harvest, he'd head out into the gardens in shirtsleeves but still with boots on, always boots. Boots were proper and expected in the mansion of the king.

The Family said the gardens were immense, but since Fangi had never lived anywhere else—or ever *saw* anywhere else—he didn't know how true that was. He could run to one end of the gardens in the amount of time it took to sing his favorite song in his head, plus another line. He'd be panting really hard, and the mansion would look smaller when he reached the farthest stone wall which surrounded the grand house and the gardens.

Usually someone would be chuckling as he ran, then telling him to skitter back to where it was safer. He wasn't allowed to be near the tall stone walls. On the other side was danger, the biggest danger, the scariest danger. There were only two gates in the stone walls, guarded by men in dark blue uniforms on the outside, wearing swords and long knives. They never looked at Fangi because they didn't know he was on the inside.

In fact, it was only last week that Fangi discovered that the men in uniforms were outside. The gates were always closed tight. Made of many layers of wood boards, the gates were as thick as Fangi's body and so heavy that it took three men to push them open. And they opened only when horses pulling heavy carts came through with sacks of

supplies and more wood for the boxes.

Fangi was usually safely away in the mansion when that happened, and the wagons always came at night when no one could see them entering.

But last week there were mistakes.

Last week, Fangi had again raced to the back wall and was talking to Old Gramps who was inspecting the corn stalks, now taller than Fangi, when they both heard the loud creaking.

“Oh, you’re not supposed to be here,” Old Gramps told him anxiously. “And the wagon is coming at the wrong time! None of us are to be seen! Your mother will trim my beard if she thinks someone saw you.” Old Gramps, while not the oldest of the Family, was very proud of his impressive beard. His pale skin blended so well with his white hair that it was sometimes difficult to tell where his face ended.

Fortunately it took much effort to swing open the heavy gates, giving Fangi and Old Gramps time to hide between rows of corn. The mansion grew nearly all of its own food on the farm, but Fangi knew some things came from “the outside,” like sugar and flour. Where “the outside” was, Fangi didn’t know, nor did Old Gramps. While the world remained in an endless war, there still seemed to be some safe pockets where farming and occasional peace continued. And because the king of the world lived in the mansion, he could always get sugar and flour, unlike everyone else.

They crouched, trembling, in the cornstalks. No wagons were allowed to come in during the daylight hours—didn’t they know that? That’s when Fangi first saw the men in blue uniforms pushing open the gates. They were big and strong and probably not very smart if they were letting in a wagon.

This was dangerous.

Auntie Martha, one of the mansion cooks, had been in the middle of the tomato patches harvesting the reddest ones when the gate began to creak. She let out a little yelp of surprise and looked around frantically for a place to hide, her light brown skin flushing and her hands flapping. She saw Old Gramps waving her down, and Auntie Martha dropped, laying among the tomato plants and crushing a few in her haste.

Fangi shook his head sadly. Auntie Surfi, who did the Family laundry, would not be pleased when she got Martha’s skirt and blouse to scrub clean. Auntie Surfi was always getting on Fangi for stains in his

silk shirts. But wood is just dirty sometimes.

Two of the Cousin Guards, in green woolen uniforms, rushed to the slowly opening gates. They *had* been on the outside of the gates until just a couple of weeks ago when they were replaced by the men in blue. Oh, the Family had been very angry about that, arguing so much at dinner that Fangi covered his ears and left the table to go downstairs to his bedroom. He didn't understand why the Cousin Guards weren't allowed to guard the mansion on the outside anymore, only that they were mad about being replaced by the army. Fangi was only vaguely aware of who the army was, and he knew his Family didn't like them.

And now the men in blue uniforms were making a mistake, letting in a wagon at the wrong time. He watched, with Old Gramps crouched protectively around him, as the Cousin Guards had loud words with the men in dark blue uniforms. Still the wagon came in, with men in simple clothes accompanying it to unload as quickly as possible. One man in a straw hat, pulled down low over his eyes, spoke to the Cousin Guards, slowly pushing them away from the men in blue uniforms, as if he was trying to make them not angry anymore. Fangi hated it when people were angry. It made his heart thump, and he'd think up new songs in his head to feel better. Finally, the Cousin Guards nodded, the man in the straw hat patted one of them on the shoulder, and the other Cousin Guard pulled out something from his pocket to give the hat man. He put the folded something into his shirt pocket and headed for the wagon. They were almost finished unloading it, and would then go back out the heavy back gates.

Back out to where it was dangerous.

Fangi felt heaviness in his belly when he thought about that. His mother told him how people suffered and died outside of the stone walls, how lucky they were that the king took such good care of the Family. But it wasn't until that moment that Fangi realized something: the people he saw right now, driving the team and unloading the wagon, might not be alive next week.

That thought gave him tears, and Fangi sniffled and rubbed his nose on his sleeve.

"Hush," Old Gramps whispered. "They can't be allowed to know we're here. We have to stay hidden, remember? It's the only way we stay safe. Be quiet. They'll be going soon."

Once they did, and the heavy gates shut again with a deep *thunk*, the

Family came out of their hiding places. Auntie Martha shook her head at Old Gramps, and he shrugged back at her. A few more of the Family had been startled too, and were running back to the mansion. Fangi's mother came out to drag him back to the grand house, and everyone talked in worried voices for a while until Fangi got bored and went to fill his wood bucket.

Fangi had felt like crying ever since for those men in blue uniforms and the ones who delivered the wood. The Family had been talking about new dangers and how poorly the men in blue did their jobs. But for the past week, Fangi was worried *for* them, that they might not survive the war because they were on the wrong side of the stone wall.

Today as he reached the back stone wall, he glanced around before sneaking up to the gate. There was a tiny gap in the layers of wood where he recently discovered that he could spy on the men in blue. Soldiers, he'd heard King Querul the Fourth call them. He had been filling wood buckets a few weeks ago and accidentally got too close to where the king was talking with other big men. These soldiers outside the gate stood tall and stiff, and seemed rather bored from the little that Fangi could see. They paced in front of the gate, paused, spun, then paced again.

The Cousin Guards used to play games, Fangi knew. And take lots of naps when the sun got hot. He heard their wives complaining about that.

But not these soldiers. They stood and marched and stared.

What a dull and dangerous life, Fangi thought sadly. But at least they're not dead.

Nervous about being so close to peril, yet feeling quite brave that he'd spent half a song watching the soldiers, Fangi raced back up to the mansion and the massive pile of wood. It must have been a new delivery, come during the night when it was *supposed* to arrive. The soldiers were doing a better job now.

Fangi's mother was there, heading out to the gardens. "Fangi, start your chore. Where have you been?"

"Just running." He couldn't tell her about watching the men in blue. She would be too worried for him. He'd have to forget about soldiers and their dull, dangerous lives. But not thinking about them meant no one was worrying about them, and he felt he *should* worry about them.

Fangi positioned the bucket and started loading it with chopped

wood. The task would take all day, running from one box by the fireplaces to another, keeping them full. The trick was, never to be seen. It was all right if the king saw him—Querul the Fourth often patted Fangi's black curly hair. But no one else, besides the cooks and the maids and the gardeners and the milkers and the groomsmen, was to see him.

The Family had to be safe, and only if no one knew they were hiding in the mansion could they be kept alive. They'd been hiding for many years, and not even the dull men in danger outside the gates knew they were there.

Only King Querul the Fourth, his mother Queen Jezzy, his sons Querul the Fifth and Oren, and then the king's wife Margo—

Oh, wait. Not her anymore.

Today was an easy box filling day because no one else was in the mansion but the Family, so Fangi didn't have to slip behind tall curtains, or dart around trees in big pots, or dive under sofas, or scramble up staircases so no one would see him.

Which meant it'd also be a dull day for him.

So Fangi hummed a little tune. He liked to make up his own music, which his mother said was wonderful, but Auntie Martha in the kitchens said was useless noise. He filled the first wood box in the gold room, with the polished stone floors and the golden silk drapes. Fangi had undergarments made of the same gold silk, leftover from when Auntie Helga made them. He thought it was silly that they made curtains out of underwear.

Noisily he dumped the split logs into the box, aiming carefully to keep the bark from falling outside. Job done perfectly, he rushed back outside to fill his bucket again, tug playfully on his mother's sleeve, then darted into the Officers' Reception Hall. This room was all blue and silver, with heavy curtains which also made up his Greatest Sarafina's skirts. There were three fireplaces here. Fires kept all the bad people away, Querul the Fourth told him. If he didn't keep the fireboxes full, even when they didn't need fires for heat or light, the bad men would get everyone in the mansion.

Whistling proudly—everyone hated to hear him whistle so he did it only in the big empty halls where the songs came back to him—Fangi emptied his bucket and rushed out again.

He hadn't noticed that in the folds of the heavy drapes there stood a

figure of a man whose clothing was nearly the same blue. The figure mumbled to himself, “Who in the world was that?”

A minute later Fangi was back. He dumped another bucketful, spun to head out again—

CLONK!

Suddenly Fangi couldn't see anything clearly, noticing only blue and silver as he fell backward.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” said a deep but quiet voice. “Careful, son. Didn't expect you to spin around like that. Here, let me help you up. Are you hurt? Nah, just clanked a little on the head. I never met a boy who wasn't a little *woo-hoo*.”

Fangi felt strong arms stand him up again, and he held his head which now ached. He had crashed—that much he knew—but into . . .

Silver. That's what he saw right in front of him. A long, heavy silver sword. The cousin guards had swords, but not like this one. It was as tall as Fangi.

And it was hanging off the belt of a man who . . . well, Fangi didn't know men could have bellies *that* big. It was like two men in one pair of trousers.

Fangi was in awe. He forgot his pounding head, his dropped bucket, his quiet feeling that maybe this man shouldn't be here, and instead raised his hand and poked his finger into the big belly.

He didn't expect it to be so firm.

He also didn't expect the man to chuckle quietly as if Fangi's poke had released thunder from his stomach.

“Yes, thank you for that. I like to pretend it's muscle, but it's mostly just cheese.”

Fangi's eyes traveled up to where the belly connected to a chest the size of a horse, then up further to a man taller than any he'd ever seen.

He had dark brown eyes, black hair closely cut, skin as pale as yellow-tinted gravel, and a smooth chin which was strange because almost every man Fangi knew had shaggy hair like the dogs who stayed with the sheep, and beards that covered half their faces. This big man seemed scary, but also not scary. And he was wearing the same blue as the poor soldiers outside. But his blue jacket had all kinds of gold patches and shiny bits of metal on it. Fangi remembered the soldiers also didn't have beards or shaggy hair, and their jackets were not as cluttered with extra things.



With a soft grunt, the man went down on one knee to look closer at Fangi. “And who might you be, young man?” His voice was kind and quiet, and Fangi felt safe, although—

“I’m not supposed to talk to you,” Fangi managed, and remembered too late that the kings had always told him to run, run, run if he saw a strange man. He glanced over to the door, and so did the big man.

“It’s all right, son. You won’t get in trouble. You see, I work *with* the king. A little ‘security check,’ if you will. Best done when no one knows I’m here, understand?”

Fangi shook his head.

The man waved that away. “You don’t need to understand. Just tell me, what’s your name? Do you work here? Why are you in the mansion?”

“It needs wood,” Fangi squeaked.

“Agreed,” the man said, and Fangi realized that there was something smiling in his dark eyes. Something like Uncle Wilbur’s face, that seemed hard but was actually happy under the skin.

Fangi found his courage because he was too curious. “Are you like the men by the back gate?”

The big man grinned, crinkling his eyes. “Yes, I’m the soldier in charge, you could say. If I tell you my name, will you tell me yours?”

He said quietly, “Fangi.”

“That’s an unusual name. I’ve never met another little boy with that name.”

Fangi frowned. “There are no other little boys besides Querul the Fifth and Oren. And me.”

The man tipped his head. “No other little boys? Hmm.” Then he held out his hand. “Pere. That’s my name. Shake hands, boy—it’s polite. Don’t know about shaking hands? This is how you do it. Hey, that’s a powerful grip there. Going to pop my hand off! Don’t look so alarmed, that’s just a figure of speech. Never heard it before? Well, you did the handshake properly, sir.” With another grunt, Pere pushed off the ground and stood up. He put his hands on his waist and scrunched up his face as he examined Fangi. “Interesting,” he said quietly. “Where did you say you live?”

“Here.”

“Really? And how old are you?”

Fangi held up fingers on both hands. He couldn’t remember what it

was called.

“Fangi, are you good at *keeping secrets*?” Pere whispered the last words.

He hesitated, unsure.

“That means, not telling people what you shouldn’t,” Pere explained.

Fangi thought about watching the men on the other side of the gate, and he hadn’t said anything about them.

“I think so?”

“Good. Then Fangi, tell no one that you saw me here. I’m trying to *help* King Querul, and it’s like a secret game we play, where I come into the mansion and see how safe it is.”

Fangi swallowed. “Is it safe?”

Pere bobbed his head. “Clearly not, if I’ve been in here for half an hour and no one but the wood boy has noticed. But I’m going to fix that.”

*Clearly not?* They weren’t safe? But he kept the wood boxes filled, every day! And the fires going! What more did he have to do?

Fangi began to tremble. This must mean the danger was coming inside the stone walls. “Pere, the war won’t get me, will it? Your soldiers outside—they’ll keep the war away from me and the Family?”

Pere stared down at Fangi. “The war? *The war*. Sure, Fangi. That’s my job. To keep the war from you.”

Fangi wasn’t sure, because Pere didn’t sound sure. He sounded even more confused, and Fangi’s tremble turned into full shaking. He thought of the big stone where the garden started. It was for children, Old Gramps had told him. The number of children that he had fingers on one hand. They had died in the war, and their bodies had been thrown over the stone wall. The Family had dug graves for them—it was a long time ago, and Fangi was too young to help much, but he had little memories of carrying rocks and throwing them in the pit. The children had a stone set above them, with lines carved into it. Querul the Third told them, as he helped put flowers around it, that the lines meant that they would never forget the children who died in the war. The war that was now coming to him because even though he kept the wood boxes filled, it wasn’t enough.

Fangi didn’t want to be buried in the garden.

Suddenly Pere was kneeling in front of him again, gripping Fangi’s arms. “Son, son! Calm down. Don’t cry. You poor thing, you’re shaking

like a new puppy.”

Fangi perked up at that. Despite every fear that was coming at him like angry ravens, he couldn't help but feel some little happiness, because he remembered holding the new puppies a few weeks ago to help them get warm. He cuddled so many that his mother said he was the best puppy warmer ever to be born in the world.

He sniffled. “I like puppies.”

Pere began to smile. “Do you, now? Puppies *are* good. Very distracting, I see. Don't worry, Fangi. The war will not touch you. I can promise that. Nor will it touch the Family. Now, remember to be quiet about me being here. I'm trying to help the king, and I can't have you saying you saw me. It's part of the game, all right? This is how I can keep you safe. Like you probably keep puppies safe, right?”

Fangi nodded, feeling a lot better by thinking about puppies.

Pere patted him on the head like the king did, then dragged a large finger gently down Fangi's nose, ended with a little bounce at the end of it and a “boop” sound. “Now go finish your chores. Nice to meet you, Fangi.”

“You too, Pere.”



When the sun was the highest in the sky, Fangi pushed open the door. It was one of many in the hallway in the basement. Some doors were for other families, and one was for his mother and Fangi. But this door led to Great Danny and Greatest Sarafina, seated as usual in their big chair and sofa. They were the very oldest of the Family, and rarely ventured out of their room. It was safest here.

Great Danny sniffed the air. “Is that my Fangi with my midday meal?”

“Sure is, Greats,” Fangi said, carefully carrying in the tray. He set the bowls of stew and thick slices of bread on the table between the two Greats. Every day he took a break from delivering wood upstairs so that he could deliver food downstairs.

Great Danny set aside the ball of yarn he was rolling and gingerly felt around for a spoon, then smiled in the direction of Fangi. “Well delivered again, son.”

“Thank you,” Fangi said, but there was no energy to his voice.

“Something bothering you, Fangi?” asked Greatest Sarafina, shredding her bread with her fingers. Having only a few teeth made chewing hard. “Sit with us for a minute before you get back to filling wood boxes.”

Fangi sat down worriedly on a stool as the Greats began to eat. “How safe are we in the mansion, Great Danny?”

“No place safer in the world,” he said easily, and slurped up a small onion.

“It’s true,” Greatest Sarafina said.

“But what about Oren’s mother?” Fangi asked timidly.

“She’ll be back. Just out on a little trip, most likely,” said Sarafina.

Fangi liked that answer, even if it kept falling down in his mind like it couldn’t stand up straight. Oren’s mother Margo was nice to Fangi, sometimes giving him small smiles when Grandmother Jezzy wasn’t looking.

“Do the men in blue keep us safe, Greats?”

“Which men in blue?” Danny said, patting to find his bread.

Fangi took a deep breath before confessing, “I saw men in blue . . . outside the back gates. They have swords and walk back and forth. Soldiers?”

Danny scowled. “Not sure I like that, men from the garrison. We used to fight the men in blue uniforms, Fangi—”

“And men in blue uniforms used to defend us, too,” Sarafina cut in. “Remember?”

“That was the problem,” Danny grumbled. “Not knowing which man in blue was defending you or attacking you.”

“Do we know now?” Fangi began to tremble again, but neither of the Greats could see well enough to notice.

“Of course we do,” Sarafina said brightly. “The men in blue keep us safe from the Guarders in black.”

Fangi sighed in relief, until . . .

“Wait. Who are the Guarders in black?”

“Haven’t heard of those?” Danny continued to slurp his soup. “The men who betrayed Querul the First. You know this story.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Sure you do. About the last Guide of the world? He was trying to help the dissenters—”

“That means the bad people who were fighting against our Querul the First,” Sarafina interrupted to explain the strangely long word.

Danny continued without missing a beat. “—to find a new land to live in, somewhere in the northern mountains. Thataways,” he gestured to the air, but Sarafina pointed in the correct direction for Fangi’s sake. “Up near Moorland. That’s where they were to go. Past that tiny village into the mountains behind it. The First Querul sent some of his most trusted guards to go with the Guide as protection, because who knows what’s out there. If the Guide succeeded, we could get rid of all of the people who attack and hate us. No one’s ever lived beyond our world’s borders because all the land is poisoned. Everyone knows that. But that old Guide was going to give it a try anyway, see if he couldn’t find somewhere for the bad people to live. But the guards wouldn’t hear of it. If you ask me, those guards were cowards! Afraid to leave the borders of the world following some holy man who said they should trust him. So you know what they did?”

Fangi was shaking his head, wildly and worriedly, but Danny couldn’t see it.

“Fangi’s saying no, he doesn’t,” Sarafina supplied. “Just tell the story, Danny.”

Fangi had to wait because Danny had taken advantage of the moment to take a big bite of bread. When he finished chewing, he said, “Querul’s guards killed the Guide instead! Left his body somewhere on the mountain and pretended he died or fell into a pit somewhere. But Querul the First—ah, he was a shrewd man.”

“That means he could figure things out,” Sarafina explained again.

“—and Querul figured out they had killed the last Guide, so Querul executed them. Ha! Served them right. Their relatives weren’t too happy about that, though, so they’ve been trying to get back at us ever since. They dress up in black clothes, raid the villages, and sometimes make it into the city of Idumea itself. But we’re safe, here in the very middle. No Guarders get here.”

He went back to chewing his bread, but Fangi was rigid with fear. “So, so, so . . . in the war there are now Guarders in black fighting, too?”

Danny looked up from his stew, hearing the dread in the boy’s words. “Are you scared, Fangi? I thought you knew all of this. Goodness, *of course* we’re fighting the Guarders *and* the war.” He turned to Sarafina. “Who should have been telling him all this?”

“Us, apparently,” she said. To her great, great grandson she said, “We’re safe here, Fangi. Always have been. Whatever else happens in the world is only in the world, not here in the mansion. So Fangi, push all worries from your head.”

But he couldn’t because they were so new and terrible and exciting that he had to think about all of them.

“No, he should know this,” Danny said. “He may someday be a Cousin Guard and should be prepared. He’s old enough to know everything—”

“No, he’s not!” Sarafina said so sharply that Fangi jumped a little.

But Danny was looking in his direction. “Do you want to know, boy? Everything?”

Fangi nodded nervously.

“I’ll assume by your silence you’re saying yes,” Danny said. “Fangi, the world has been fighting since I was your age—my whole life. Outside of the mansion, the city of Idumea and the villages are . . . Well, you know the chicken coop? That’s how the rest of the world lives, in shacks like that. Straw on the floor, thin boards. In fact, I think our chickens actually live better than most of the world, because we seal up all the cracks and the roof is weather-tight. But people who live in villages, and outside of our walls? They wish they had the luxury of our chickens! People fight so much no one has enough time to build a decent house. Nor can they grow food like we do, or livestock as we do. They may be safe for a few seasons, then the war moves to them again. Fangi, we’re in the very middle of the world, of Idumea. That’s why it’s never reached us. But on the edges and the villages in the north? At the base of the mountains there’s—”

Fangi waved his hands to stop him, which Danny didn’t see. “Wait, you’ve said that word before: mountains. What are mountains?”

Danny sighed, trying to think. “Give me that blanket on the bed.” Fangi handed it over, and Danny propped it up in big lumps, running his hand over it to feel the contours. “It’s land, but it looks like this. All bumpy and rocky and very high. Impossible to climb and ugly to look at. Very dangerous. Rocks roll down into the villages, and in those mountains live the Guarders who wear black.”

“But, but, but you just said no one can climb the mountains, so how do they—”

“The Guarders aren’t like regular people!” Danny said with a snarl

of remembrance. “They’re vicious, like wild animals, and they don’t care about anyone but themselves. Remember last year when that big wild cat came over the rock wall? Querul the Third called it a mountain lion, remember?”

Oh, Fangi remembered, and he pulled himself into a ball on the stool. The animal had snarled and screamed and even killed one of the sheepdogs before the Cousin Guards filled it with arrows. “It had a hurt leg,” Fangi remembered. “It was scary.”

“That’s the Guarders,” Danny told him. “Wounded and angry and very, very scary. Villages on the edges of the world have to battle them every year, so sometimes they’re fighting the war and the Guarders at the same time. And the villages by the forests? Guarders live in the trees, too, and come out to get the children by night—”

“Enough now,” Sarafina said sharply. “Fangi’s shaking like a land tremor!”

“No, it’s all right,” said Fangi bravely. “Go on.”

Danny continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “It’s safer by the water,” he said, “if you live by Coast or Waves. Yet still the war continues there, between the villagers. They fight for food, for land, for animals . . . no one knows how to share or be civil, Fangi. No one except in these stone walls. And even we haven’t always been safe behind these walls. The fighting’s reached the city, Fangi.”

“When?” he squeaked.

Danny shrugged. “Many times, the last time when you were young. You know about the children buried at the edge of the garden, right? Where the raspberries begin? Fangi, have you ever noticed that between the berry bushes there are tall rocks?”

“Yes?” His voice was even higher.

Sarafina was shaking her head, her lips pressed together tightly in silent admonishment, but Danny couldn’t see her so he kept going.

“Each of those stones marks people who have died, Fangi. You know one of the stones is for your father and your older brother who you never knew. They died from the pox before you were born. But there are many, many other stones. All for victims of the war.”

“It’s a lot,” Fangi whispered.

“Yes, it is,” Danny sadly agreed. “I used to know the number . . . can’t recall anymore. Much more than all of your fingers and toes, though. Maybe in the eighties?”

Fangi only blinked, not knowing what eighties meant.

“But none recently, not for a couple of years,” Sarafina insisted. “We’ve been safer, and I think it’s because of the men in the blue uniforms now fighting for us.”

“I bet they’re sad,” Fangi whispered. “The people in the world. Because they have sad lives and sad houses. We have lots of space,” he suddenly realized. “We could let some of them live here! Grandmother Jezzy has the whole top floor to herself. She doesn’t need so many rooms. Let’s invite some people to live with us! The nice ones, only.”

Sarafina sighed. “What a child. What a heart. Oh Fangi, how do we know who’s nice? That’s the problem. Just like Great Danny told you—Querul the First thought he could trust his guards to take care of Guide Pax. He thought they were nice. But they killed Pax instead, so Querul had to kill those guards, and their families are still mad about it. They still want to hurt us, especially those of us in the mansion. It’s so hard, Fangi, to trust anyone outside of the Family. In fact, we can’t.”

“Not even the men in blue uniforms at the gates?”

Sarafina thought about that. “I want to, Fangi. I *want* to, but how can we ever be sure?”

“Trust no one, Fangi,” Danny said decisively. “Be your nice, sweet self, but trust no one else.”

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The High General of the Army of Idumea lumbered through the garrison that afternoon like an agitated bear with a bee sting. For a man who was usually talkative and genial, he was unusually curt and gruff. The chief of law enforcement for the city of Idumea had strolled in easily for their scheduled meeting, then came rushing out three minutes later in a high-general-induced panic, calling for his men to collect up *all* of the missing person’s files, not just what they had brought in.

By dinner time, the garrison was breathing easier because the High General, grumbling under his breath, was finally on his way home. Now they could natter like grandmothers about what change had overcome him. They had never, during his twenty years of service, seen him so upset.

And every soldier worried for the High General’s wife and son.



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“A child! Where in the world did he get a child?!”

“He has two himself,” his wife calmly replied. “His son Querul the Fifth and Oren, remember? Querul’s probably twelve and Oren’s maybe seven years old now—”

“This little boy was *not* Oren,” the massive man in the blue uniform whispered harshly, trying to keep his voice down. “Oren is pale and stringy and sickly. This little boy Fangi has skin like brown soil, with black curly hair, and was very healthy.” Pere Shin paced in his gathering room as his wife Banu sat down on the sofa, holding her stitching protectively to her chest. Pere paused at the stairs and glanced up them to make sure his fourteen-year-old son wasn’t within earshot. Relf was up in his bedroom where he couldn’t be listening in on army secrets.

Not yet, at least.

“But this doesn’t make sense,” Banu murmured. “Why is there another boy there? How old was he?”

“Maybe eight,” Pere said, punching one hand into another, a new tactic for him. He had been appointed to his new position partly because he was the most amiable officer in the Army of Idumea. He didn’t know how to do ‘annoyed’ effectively yet. His palm was growing red and sore.

“He didn’t know his age,” Pere continued, “but held up seven, then eight fingers. He seems to be a laborer filling the wood buckets. But, strangely, with very nice clothing. A fine linen shirt dyed dark green, and worsted wool trousers of the same quality as my dress uniform. Doesn’t make sense. No one’s missing a child in the area. I checked with the law enforcers.”

That was another thing he hadn’t quite figured out yet: how to be commanding without outright scaring people. The poor chief of enforcement had gone as pale as cheese when Pere bellowed at him about his scanty missing persons report. It’d been the first time during the five years that Pere had been in Idumea that anyone had heard him angry. He was rather surprised himself he could get so worked up.

“And he said he *lived* there? Banu, I’m beginning to have an idea as to why your friend couldn’t get a job as a maid in the mansion.”

His wife looked at him blankly. “Because they don’t have any openings?”

Pere paused in his pacing and glanced at his wife. While not nearly as tall as him, she was close to the same size in girth. Her honey-brown hair was pulled up in a bun, and her skin tone was more gravel-colored than yellow-sulfur tinted like his. She was a kind, sweet woman, generous and concerned—all around a lovely, rich lump of butter, which also happened to be the same ingredient in nearly every fantastic dish she created. But she tended to be a little slow at times. Right now she was molasses in the coldest moons of Raining Season.

Still, he adored her. And molasses.

“No,” he said patiently. “And yes, in a way. What I’m thinking is . . . well, ridiculous. However, it’s knocking at the back of my head. You’ve seen Querul the Fourth a few times, Banu. What’s his most distinctive feature?”

Banu frowned in thought. “He’s not the most attractive man, but he’s not entirely ugly.”

Pere stopped again in his pacing and waited. She’d get there in a minute. Maybe he should keep pacing since the garrison surgeon told him he needed to lose a few pounds to legally still be in the army, a small fact they’d overlooked for the past dozen years or so. But he was now supposed to set the example.

Although Pere always figured that the bigger he was, the easier he was for his men to see.

“I always thought his ears were all right,” Banu continued thoughtfully. “His eyes are not very interesting but at least there’s two. His mouth is, well, a mouth . . .”

Pere pinched the bridge of his nose, hoping it might give her a clue.

“And his nose . . . well, it’s kind of odd. Has a bump in the middle, then a like a little fleshy ball at the end with kind of a line down the middle. Now that you mention it,” she said, suddenly eager, “it’s a rather distinctive nose.”

“I didn’t mention it,” he said pleasantly to her. “*You* are mentioning it, and if you remember his nose, so will everyone else. Banu, that little boy had the same nose.”

Banu blinked. “Are you sure? Didn’t Querul’s father have that same nose, too?”

“Yes,” Pere said heavily, and dropped his bulk on to the sofa next to

her.

“That’s kind of weird, isn’t it?” she mused, setting aside her stitching. “That a laborer boy would have the same distinctive nose? What kind of coincidence is that?”

Pere patted her leg. “It’s not a coincidence at all, I’m afraid. The boy said something about ‘the Family’.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I need to do some more investigating.”

“How did you get into the mansion anyway?” she asked.

Pere smirked proudly. “I have a few sneaking skills that I learned back when I was in command school. Had to make sure I could get back into the dorms late at night when my girlfriend had kept me out too long.” He elbowed her.

“That was never *my* fault,” she insisted. “It was always yours.” She smiled that his good humor was returning.

“I’ll admit it was my fault,” he said nobly. “You always cooked me so much and I’d feel ashamed if I let any of it go to waste. Instead, I let it go to my waist. But I still have my talent,” he said smugly. “And I bet that if we still had our family lines, they’d reveal that a few generations back I had Guarder blood in me. Well,” he exhaled, suddenly uncomfortable at that stray thought, “it’s probably a good thing all those records were lost in that fire. Can’t have anyone in the army related to any of its enemies. At least, not knowingly.”

“But it really wasn’t that difficult to get into the mansion,” he continued. “I had the soldiers outside a rarely-used side gate let me in, but I explained it was a security check and they shouldn’t let anyone know. New procedures, I told them. I found the land inside quite developed, with lots of berry bushes filling the area between the mansion and the stone wall. You know, only the front of the mansion has windows? The rest of its walls merely have slits as openings. Of course, it was built by the Querul the First during the Great War, so if you have small windows, it’s harder to shoot arrows in. But it does leave just enough room to shoot arrows out. So I had the advantage—no one saw me lurking around the shrubs. Banu, I’d forgotten how big that place is! The kings only ever let guests in the front five or six rooms, but the mansion goes back for at least fifty paces. Then again, it’s only been on rare occasions that the army is ever allowed near the mansion. Actually, no one’s ever allowed near it, except for suppliers who go to that much larger gate on

the other side. And even then, the Queruls let them in only after dark.”

“Why?” Banu asked.

Pere sighed. “No idea. It’s a very secretive bunch that lives there. I don’t like it. The Queruls have never wanted anyone to know who’s there. Even the delivery men just drop off their goods at the back barn and don’t see another person before they leave. I’ve spoken to a few of them. You know,” he said, his tone becoming pensive, “that mansion is big enough for . . .” He paused the thought. “Well, it’s three levels high. I can’t imagine what’s up there. Likely quarters for the Family, with probably the entire third floor for that horrid grandmother—”

Banu shuddered at the reference. Queen Jezzy had rudely snubbed Banu at Pere’s Installation Dinner three weeks ago, refusing to speak to her, and on more than one occasion made quiet snorting noises in her direction. But sweet Banu hadn’t even noticed. She was too traumatized to realize that there was only one kind of jam served with the biscuits—and it was plum of all things—and only one dessert option presented at the dinner. Any mention of Jezzy after that dinner put Banu into shaking fits.

“Anyway, I found a narrow wooden door on the side of the mansion, between two rose bushes. It led over to a rather nice privy, just to the side of the mansion, an eight-holer with interior walls—”

“Wait,” Banu interrupted, already over her terror of stingy Queen Jezzy. “Doesn’t the mansion have indoor washrooms now? I would have thought the Queruls would have been the first to pay for the piping under the mansion—”

“While I’m sure Querul would *love* to relieve himself in comfort and style, there’s a problem,” he interrupted her back. “The rest of us have cellars and houses of reasonable size,” he said, glancing around their home. It was certainly larger than the average home, but also not on the scale of the mansion. “But the king’s mansion—that has polished stone floors throughout the main floor. One can hardly cut into that to lay pipe for waste removal, or even to pump in warm water from the springs. Besides,” his voice grew agitated, “a work crew would have to be allowed into the grounds and the mansion, and Querul has never let that happen.”

“Poor people,” Banu said sadly, “still having to relieve themselves outside or in chamber pots.”

Pere tapped his hand on the armrest of the sofa. He spoke to his wife

mostly to organize his thoughts, not listen to her commentary.

Yet Banu was—well, there was a deep sweetness that Pere would never understand, and it was her compassion for others in any situation that always astonished him.

Even if they were talking about the king of the world, that cowardly idiot.

“Anyway,” Pere continued, “I slipped into the wooden side door on the eastern side of the mansion. It was unguarded—I guess they don’t think they need to keep guarded the privy door, but that’s precisely the kind of door that does need guarding! So I found myself in the tightest of passages—”

“Maybe only tight for you,” she commented.

“You really don’t want to hear about the amazingly delicious secrets of the mansion, do you? I’m about to tell you things no one else in the world knows, and you’d rather insult my love of your cooking, is that it?”

She giggled. “Of course not. Think of how much I could tell my friends—”

“About *nothing*! Banu, my dearest—your incredible, handsome, and charming husband now has the most important job in the army and you can’t tell anyone *anything*.”

“Is that true?” she nearly wailed.

“That I’m incredible, handsome, and charming—why yes, yes, it is. How else do you think I got the position?”

“Because all of the other officers can’t stand the Queruls and didn’t want to work with them. That’s what you told me.”

“And that’s true as well,” he sighed in resignation.

She nudged him. “I promise I’ll keep quiet. So what did you find through the little door?”

“Ah, interested again, are you? I went down a couple of stairs and found myself in the basement of the mansion.”

“But the mansion doesn’t have a basement. Only a foundation.”

“That’s what I thought, but yes it does, running the full length. It’s an entire unknown floor. I was in a hallway that extended to either end of the mansion, and it was quite wide and tall. Yes, even big enough for me—I beat you to that one. I waited a few minutes to let my eyes adjust to the dark. There were a few candles in sconces on the wall, but it was still dim, even though it was a bright morning outside. I also listened

for noises. There were some: voices, softly, from one of the dozens of doors down the hall. I crept along and saw a door cracked open. The room had light coming from a narrow, horizontal crack of a window near the ceiling. In the room were—”

“Potatoes?” Banu guessed.

“Dearest,” Pere patted the sofa armrest again, “may I please just tell the story?”

“But potatoes are stored in a dark basement, so they don’t rot—”

“Yes, and I did find large rooms full of potatoes and onions and barrels of who knows what—yes, half of the basement was storage, but Banu—here’s the important thing—and no, they weren’t talking potatoes: I saw two very old people in that room, one sitting in a cushioned chair, and another reclining on a battered old sofa.”

“Old people? That’s not a very nice way to keep old people, in a basement.”

“Well, keeps them from rotting, I suppose, like potatoes. I mean, they looked like two lumpy bags—”

“That’s not nice, Pere—”

“Then let me finish the story.”

She folded her arms.

“One of them was a man, and as far as I could tell he was blind. He was rolling up yarn and not looking at his work but feeling it. He was so tiny and wrinkled. Must have been close to ninety, if I had to guess. And talking to him was a woman, just as ancient, knitting. Sounded like she was reciting some story or poetry, I couldn’t quite hear her. But Banu, what’s Querul doing with two old people in his basement?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered, very concerned. “But they would certainly have appreciated an indoor washroom.”

Pere had to smile. “Indeed. But the piping would have to go *through* their quarters, which no one outside of the mansion knows exists but me. And now you, but you’ve promised not to tell.”

Banu frowned at that, then remembered something. “What about that boy? How did you find him?”

Pere held up a finger. “Ah, that is interesting. After I poked around the basement for about half an hour—no one came down, and I think the ancients in the room were a bit hard of hearing—I found a dark stairwell. Not the regular kind, big and wide at either end of the hallway, but a narrow one, and I’m fairly certain I found two more but I didn’t

have the chance to explore them. Secret passages, as far as I could tell. I went up the stairs of the first one I found. It angled as if going around other rooms or features in the mansion, and I opened the first door I came to. I found myself facing a long length of dark blue silk.”

Banu leaned forward. “Like in the Officers’ Reception Room?”

“Exactly like the Officers’ Reception Room! That’s because it—”

“Oh, I loved that silk! When we were there for your Installation Dinner, Mrs. Humphrey and I fingered the silk and tried to figure out how much it cost—”

“Banu, Banu, what I’m trying to tell you is that the secret staircase deposited me directly in the Officers’ Reception Room. The same room! I slipped out from behind the curtain in time to see my little friend dump his wood bucket and dart out again. Realizing there were three fireplaces, and that he’d have to come back, I positioned myself next to another curtain panel—you know, there are no windows in that room? Anyway, the little guy came barreling in there, and just as I stepped out, he turned and smacked right into my sword! Clanked his head, I’m sorry to report, but all little boys have to have *some* amount of brain damage, otherwise they aren’t real boys. And that’s how I met him.”

“How unusual!” Banu breathed. “Really, no windows?”

“Banu—the unusual part is that the boy even exists!”

“Well, we already talked about that. But I think it’s strange that they spend gold on windows that aren’t even there.”

Pere sat back. The other reason why he told his wife everything was because she often was accidentally insightful. “You’re right. Why create the illusion of windows? And at that expense.”

“How were the old people dressed? The ones in the basement.”

Pere paused. “Quite nicely, now that I think about it. The sofa was tattered, but the surroundings were rather comfortable.”

“Maybe Querul took in an old couple. How kind of him!”

“Banu,” Pere began slowly, “when in the history of the four Querul kings have we *ever* seen them do something ‘kind’?”

“This could be a first,” she insisted. “Although it would have been kind of them to give my friend a job. Because if they can afford silk curtains for windows that don’t exist, they certainly have enough gold. How many servants do they have to employ to keep up that massive mansion?”

Pere rocked back. “*Employed servants*. Huh. I need to get back in there.”

“How did you get out?” his wife asked.

“Same way I got in. Although I heard other voices and I was intrigued, I felt like I’d pressed my luck as far as I dared. No one saw me, either. There were laborers in the field—talk about fields, Banu! That rock wall of Querul’s—I knew it extended all the way around, probably 20 acres’ worth—but I didn’t realize what he had *in* that yard. Kind of hard to see over a wall that’s twelve feet high, especially since Querul the First declared that no one is ever allowed to build anything taller than the mansion. But they have everything back there, as far as I could tell. Extensive vegetable gardens, berries, grape vines, short fruit trees. He can grow everything he needs, and for probably a hundred people. From the sounds in the distance it seems he also keeps chickens and pigs, and there was even a pasture where I spotted a few cows—”

“Most cows are spotted,” Banu agreed. “Especially milk ones.”

Pere let that one go. “It’s an entire farm, Banu, with at least a dozen laborers. But employment records? Excellent idea. I’m wondering if that little boy is working there without pay. It’d be like a Querul to make a child work while his parents are in the fields.”

“When he should be in school,” Banu said, picking up her stitching.

“Wait, what?”

“The break for Weeding Season was over last week. Don’t you remember your son complaining about having to go back to school today? And that boy you found seemingly couldn’t count, if he’s only holding up fingers.”

Pere smiled in appreciation at his wife and planted a big kiss on her lips. “I knew there was a reason I keep you around.”

She blushed. “Because no one can feed you so well?”

His smile faded. “But I didn’t tell you the worst part. That little boy, Fangi? He thinks the war is still going on.”

Banu dropped her stitching. “The Great War? But . . . but that ended in 200.”

Pere sighed in relief that she got the year correct, for once. The wife of the High General *should* know when the last major conflict ended.

“I need to get back into that mansion and talk to my new little friend. I promised him I’d keep him safe. I better prove that I’m good to my word.”



## ~The Second Day of the Week~

The High General of Idumea knocked on the massive double doors of the king's mansion. Today, he was expected *and* going in the correct way.

He glanced behind him to see the iron gates closing. Those who lived in the mansion never saw these gates, or the grand but empty road beyond them which led to the heart of the city. Only a quarter mile down the cobblestones, the tree-lined land ended and noisy Idumea began on a bisecting road. Over one hundred thousand people, with their carriages, wagons, horses and mules; hundreds of shops, inns, houses, and taverns.

But at the end of this pristine road leading to the mansion, all was quiet. It was *always* quiet. No one dared approach nor seemed think they should.

For so many years the mansion represented power and imminent threat. Killing squads notoriously took out anyone who challenged the kings. But since Querul the Third died a few moons ago, most of that power and threat had faded. Unfortunately, thought the High General, no one in the world noticed that fact. Nor had they realized that if ever they wanted to challenge the rule of the kings, now was the time. All that stood in their way were two useless guards in green uniforms flanking the front door. And even the High General would anyone them a hand in taking them out. Merely flicking the green boys with his fingers ought to suffice.

Then again, whoever would be trying to take over the mansion may prove to be an even worse and more idiotic threat than the Queruls had been for the past eighty years. It was nearly impossible to know who to trust in the city. Factions had sprung up over the years among citizens and the army alike, creating little autonomous societies of who to do business with and who to run away from. A large, organized rebellion

had never been attempted or considered on the Queruls, as far as the High General knew. And why should it? Was a killing squad breaking down your door worth the risk? Not if you had enough to eat and plenty of entertainment. And when a killing squad came after your rival, it was great entertainment indeed.

Nor did any potential rebels realize that the new High General would likely be on their side, and that the new king who currently inhabited the mansion was made of oatmeal.

But there was another reason why no rebellions had arisen, and it had to do with the Guarders. Each Querul as he came to power had demonstrated his ability, by merely sending out the army, to rout out any Guarders. There *were* rebellions, the High General amended his thinking: men in black who raided at night the villages on the outer edges of their world. They usually struck a year or so after a new king was appointed, as if testing to see if the dictatorship was ready to fall. Guarders stole livestock, destroyed crops, and killed any villagers who got in the way. Their attacks were random, illogical, and annoying.

So what did the Guarders want from the world and the kings? As far as the High General could guess, a good steak and maybe the throne. No one had actually captured any Guarders alive to interrogate them as to where they came from and what they wanted with the world. The High General was planning in the back of his mind for their future attack and the possibility of finally questioning one.

But while the threat of Guarders *would* seem like the priority of a new High General, it wasn't. There were far closer, more pressing problems that loomed immediately before him, and they began here in the world's largest mansion.

He glanced to the sides of the front façade at the twelve-foot high stone wall cutting across to divide the sprawling compound behind from the bland garden in the front. No one behind the wall would ever see who was coming and going at the iron gates and the grand front door. The wall continued up along the sides and around to the iron gates which he had come through. The garden in front was hardly a garden: rocks and gravel covered every surface, and a couple of haphazardly-placed trees provided anemic shade. It was perfect landscaping for a place which didn't want landscapers.

The High General sent a last glimpse back to his coach and eight soldiers behind the bars. He exchanged the same irritated look with another

general standing with his arms folded and glaring at the king's guard. His formidable advisor—shorter but muscular, with deep auburn hair—had been told that he wasn't invited to the mansion and needed to wait outside. His lieutenant colonel stood to the side of the carriage, scowling.

“That's not right,” High General Shin murmured to himself. “My advising general should be with me, two of my guards should accompany me, and I shouldn't have to knock on the door like the door-to-door butcher!” Exasperation getting to him, he loudly hollered at the door, “Fresh livers! Come get your fresh livers! Or do you want brains, Querul!”

He glanced accusatorily at the two young men dressed in green uniforms standing at attention at either side, refusing to look at the army's top officer yelling insults at the door. They should be *his* men—*his* soldiers—not some private guard of the king. And who trained them, anyway? Their stance was all wrong, their swords too flimsy, their muscles not large enough, and they weren't watching him out of the corners of their eyes. What did they think the corners of their eyes were for, anyway?

The door swung open with a flourish to reveal a man in his fifties, dressed in silk tails and a frilly shirt, with white gloves on his hands. And no weapons on him, the High General noted with displeasure. He was scowling severely as he said, “Yes, sir?”

The High General sighed loudly. “You know who I am and why I'm here. Just let me in already. No need for us to stand on ceremony unless we're trying to crush it.”

The doorman's mustache twitched in agitation, and he held the door open wider. The hulking general was already on his way in, the doorman barely stepping out of his way in time. The general paused in the broad foyer. “I know you need to announce me. Be quick in doing so, I'm a busy man. Or better yet, let me do it.” He filled his lungs as if ready to bellow again, but the doorman strode swiftly—but grandly—through the foyer to a room on the left. The ten-foot-tall ornate wooden door to the throne room was leafed in gold.

The general sneered at it. Then he sneered at everything else in the lavish mansion. “Ridiculous,” he murmured quietly. “The ceilings are too high unless you have a flock of pigeons in here. Think of how much wood is needed to heat this place in the Raining Season.”

Surreptitiously, he glanced around the fireplaces and their wood boxes, but nothing and no one was moving in the shadows.

“King Querul the Fourth will now receive High General Pere Shin,” the doorman called out majestically, and General Shin rolled his eyes. He plowed into the throne room where he found King Querul. There were no personal guards with him and he was not on his throne. The chair itself was an elaborate and rigid creation of gold with plush cushions, and was strangely the least comfortable piece of furniture in all of Idumea. The High General knew that for a fact because once, years ago, he slipped into the empty throne room and tried out the chair. After a few good bounces, he decided he never wanted to be king.

The king stood near a broad and highly polished black table, as if reading one of the many documents laying there.

“Fourth,” Shin began without any pretense, “we need to discuss your security measures here at the mansion. There’s a lot of—what’s *she* doing here?!”

He’d stopped in midstride and glared at the plump elderly woman who stood rigid and angry at the other side of the table. In her thick hand was a stack of pages, but she let them drop in her shock to join stacks of documents already on the surface.

“How dare you!” she growled in what she likely thought was a grand manner, and even bothered to roll her r’s. Her white-gray hair was pulled up in a tight bun, but even it trembled in fury. “I am the widow of your last king and I demand more respect than this, General!”

General Shin turned his full attention to the new king, a twitchy, squirrel-like man who was now leaning against the table for support. “While it’s *always* a delight and pleasure to greet your *lovely* mother, I came to speak with *you*, Fourth. Not her. Send her out to, I don’t know, to eat someone’s baby or something.”

“How dare you!” she trilled again, as if forgetting she’d already used that line, and put her hands on her ample waist.

“I dare quite easily, ma’am!” Shin roared back at her, putting his hands on his own very wide waist next to where his long knife was secreted under his jacket. “My appointment is with the king. Don’t you have a grandson or two to check on? They recently lost their mother, *you know*. Shouldn’t you be consoling them or something? I heard that’s what *lovely grandmothers* tend to do. And everyone knows what a *lovely woman* you are. *Lovely*.”

Slowly she stepped away from the table and headed straight for the general. “I told them you were the wrong choice,” she snarled in a low voice. “Only forty years old, and he thinks he’s High General material? Bah! Look at you—the insolence of a child, the decorum of a cow, and the belly of a pig!”

He had the audacious bravery to take a step closer to her. “At least,” he said in an even lower voice, “Mother-queen Jezzy, I don’t have the temperament of an old braying jackass. Ah, but a *lovely* jackass!” he added with a sweet smile.

She was only a foot away from him now, trembling in fury and unsure of what she dared to do with it.

He loomed over her and whispered, “*Lovely.*”

“Mother?” the king ventured, growing anxious at the standoff between his mother and his general. “Please?”

“Yes,” Shin said. “I’m sure the *moment* I’ve left he’ll come running to tell you everything the big bully general said to him. Shall I keep notes for you? I know how Fourth tends to forget important details.” Already he was fishing in his dark blue jacket, his medals clanking softly as he pretended to rummage around for spare scraps of parchment. “You may go,” he added dismissively.

She held up a chubby finger, waving in anger. “No one tells me where to go!”

“But I just did,” he said, staring past her finger and into her eyes.

“Mother?” the king’s voice was even more pathetic now.

“Ten minutes,” Jezzy snapped. “That’s all this blob of a general needs.” She spun and headed toward the door. Her yellow silk skirts swished violently behind her as if they were a massive sunflower being swung carelessly by a nasty little girl, and her boots clacked angrily on the stone floor.

“And farewell to you, Queen Blobby!” the High General called after her pleasantly. “So lovely!”

After the door slammed, sending the drapes on either side flapping, King Querul exhaled and turned to the general. “You really shouldn’t speak to her like that. No one does.”

Shin scoffed, his tone a shade gentler. “Yet she’s allowed to speak to everyone like that? Derision is the only language she understands.”

“Why did you send her away?” Querul nearly whimpered. “She knows more about being a king than I do. She was my father’s advisor

for years—”

“And why you need new ones, Fourth! You have a dozen advisors—at least, you’re paying a dozen men an absurd amount of gold to ‘advise’ you—so where are they?” He held out his arms to the massive throne room, empty except for the two of them.

The king sulked and stared at a rug.

“Fourth, you have no idea how to run the world, do you? Well, I’m here to tell you how to run some of it, at least. You have a serious security problem, do you realize that?”

Querul the Fourth sagged. “Well, I suspected—”

“Your wife has been missing for five weeks! From these very grounds! Doesn’t that alarm you? Your guard hasn’t changed at all since then, I’ve noticed. No increase in numbers, no one in here keeping eyes on us?”

The king dipped his head sadly. “Well, sure I’m alarmed,” he mumbled as if hearing only half of what Shin said. “I don’t know what happened, you see, and—”

“Does your mother like your wife, Fourth?”

He looked up sadly. “Does she like *anyone*?”

“She likes your oldest son, I’ve noticed,” Shin said. “Has taken him under her special care, training him up to be the king after you, right? The boy’s only twelve, but when I was here for my Installation Dinner, the Fifth was already talking disciplinary measures with one of my colonels.”

The Fourth smiled diffidently. “He’s impressive, all right.”

“Not impressive; worrisome. He was mentioning the killing squads. Fourth, we discussed this before you approved my promotion, and now that I’m official, I’m going to hold you to it: no more killing squads.”

Querul staggered. “But my mother—”

“Loves them far too much,” Shin told him. “Really, Fourth—she’s out of control and has been for years. When your father died a few moons ago, I thought that might be the end of her influence, but it’s not, is it? She’s probably listening in on this very conversation in secret—”

He paused, hoping to hear an affronted scoff from behind some wall, but was disappointed.

“You approved the garrison’s choice of me as High General because you told me you’re afraid of threats to your rule. You wanted someone ‘nice’ to work with.”

Pere realized that his idea of “nice” was to tell a sad, pathetic man that his life was in danger. Fourth probably took “nice” to mean, *Bring me some mead*, and not *Bring me all the bad news you can*. But this lump of breakfast porridge who thought he was the king was only stirred around by his mother. The sooner Pere could disarm her—or *de-spoon* her, and he realized the metaphor was getting away from him because it was almost time for midday meal and he was getting hungry—anyway, the sooner he could reduce the influence of the very large Queen Jezzy, the sooner the rest of the world could start breathing easier.

“One of those threats lives *in this very house*,” Pere confided to the king in a whisper. “I’m telling you, Fourth: do you want the people of Idumea to support you, for the villages of the world to remain loyal? You need to disband those killing squads. Not just in Idumea but in all the surrounding villages. You’ve got a million citizens frightened that if they say the wrong thing, your mother’s going to send a dozen men to stab them.”

“But that keeps them in line!” Querul insisted.

“Not anymore,” Shin hissed at him. “There are whispers of rebellion, quiet discussions of overthrowing your family and electing a king like the villages elect their leaders.”

Perhaps the whispers and discussions were only in Pere’s head, but they *had* to be elsewhere, right?

Querul’s eyes popped wide open. “Surely not! How dare they?!”

“You and your mother really need to stop using that line,” the High General said, “because when people feel constrained and oppressed, they dare all kinds of dangerous things to be rid of the pain.”

Querul sat down and stared into a corner. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right,” he murmured. “My wife suggested the same thing. She has relations up in Rivers, you know. They warned her that there was ‘talk.’”

Shin took an interested step forward. So there were real whispers and discussions! “Did you tell your mother about that ‘talk’?”

Querul lifted his eyes to meet the general’s and winced. “Yes?” he mumbled, unsure.

“How long ago was this, Fourth?”

“Maybe six weeks ago?”

“And when did your wife vanish from this mansion, in the early morning hours?”

Querul's voice was a whisper, and his wince deepened. "Just days later."

Shin paced slowly in front of him. "Did she send a killing squad to Rivers, Fourth? Your mother?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

Shin stopped in front of the king, grabbed him by the shoulders, and shouted in his face, "DID SHE SEND A SQUAD?!"

It probably was good there were no guards in the throne room, or they would have insisted that the general stop manhandling the king. As if they had a chance to pry the general off of him.

Querul trembled, and his eyes darted over to a painting on the wall: a large, garish depiction of a basket of ugly dogs. Shin glanced at it, too. Why such an amateurish painting would be in the throne room, he couldn't imagine . . .

Until he noticed something. One of their eyes was a little too realistic for the sloppy nature of the painting, and he made a mental note to look for a passage behind that wall on another clandestine visit.

"I really don't know," the Fourth admitted.

Shin released him with a little shove. "I have a web of 'insiders' as well, Fourth—" which meant he knew a few enlisted men at a couple of forts who he actually trusted, "—and luckily for you they've reported no bloodied bodies turning up in the village's amphitheater as a warning to the village. So I'm guessing that if she did send a squad in retaliation, your mother's thugs didn't find their 'talkers.' I want names, Fourth, of every last man she employs, as well as the books about their pay. Where's all the gold coming from to pay them? The garrison will provide the bookkeepers to check those balances. I know your mother employs her own bookkeepers. I want them, too. In person."

"She, she, she won't be happy," Querul stammered.

"Do I look like I care about her happiness?"

Querul took a closer look at the High General and immediately knew the answer.

"Now, Fourth, this leads to the other big problem—your wife and what happened to her. Your guards, I suspect, aren't up to the army's standards. I like to believe that had this place been employing *my* soldiers, your wife would still be here. I've replaced those back-gate guards where the deliveries come in, and I've posted guards at the small eastern gate that I suspect no one uses. But we should replace all of your useless



boys in green. And why are there none of them *inside* the mansion? There should be two posted at each doorway that leads to you and your family, Fourth!”

Querul squirmed in his seat. “My guards are very loyal, General. I’m not worried about that.”

Again Pere had the feeling that Querul really wasn’t hearing him, or that he responded with what he thought sounded appropriate, if it fit the current conversation or not. “I’m not talking about loyalty, but about ability, about numbers! I need a personnel list of everyone who works in the mansion—”

“That’s not possible,” Querul cut him off and stood up in his first show of strength. He didn’t even reach the general’s shoulder.

“Your first task for me as High General was to figure out what happened to your wife, Fourth. Everything *must* be possible if you want me to solve this. Every name, every connection of every last employee in this mansion. I need to know everyone who goes in and out of these doors, no matter their age. Even children of laborers. Someone took your wife, Fourth, and since there are no signs of a fight or a struggle, she went willingly. That means she knew who took her, and she trusted them. *Loyalty misplaced.*”

Querul was staring at the same corner again, unsure of how to respond.

But his son knew what to say.

“High General!” The twelve-year-old boy announced from a doorway at the back of the throne room. His tone far more mature than his age. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?” He strode into the room through the same door his grandmother had left, with all the carriage and confidence of a colonel. He was of average height for a child his age, with wavy brown hair and a way of keeping his blue eyes half closed as if to indicate disdain and displeasure. He was very good at it.

General Shin smirked. “*To what do we owe the pleasure . . .* Only your grandmother could have taught you to deliver that line with such arrogance. Fifth, good to see you,” but his tone indicated he saw nothing good about the visit. “I’m here as part of my investigation about the disappearance of your mother.”

“Yes, very sad, that,” Querul the Fifth said, his hands clasped behind his back as he paced the floor like an old man. “Great tragedy to lose her,” he intoned with no tragedy in his voice.

Shin tipped his head. “Sounds like you assume she’s already dead, Fifth.”

“Not so, General. And I do *not* appreciate you calling me Fifth! My name is Querul, and my father is not Fourth!”

Shin sat down on a golden sofa and sighed as if bored, but privately he was impressed with the boy’s diversionary tactic to shift the conversation away from his missing mother. A natural ruler. Or tyrant. Both fit.

“Well if your parents and grandparents can’t think of any other name than ‘Querul,’ *Fifth*, I need to find another way to distinguish each of you. If I simply say, ‘Querul,’ the ears of two living males and three dead males all prick up, thinking they’re wanted. This is why people give their family members *different* names. They came up with something different for your younger brother, after all.”

Querul the Fifth sneered. He wasn’t as good at that and needed more practice so as to not look like his upper lip was stinky. “My brother’s name of Oren is hardly as distinguished as Querul.”

“True. Not as many letters,” Shin sniffed. “In fact, I’d like to see him. Part of the investigation, you see.” He stood up from the sofa, straightened his blue jacket, and indicated the door. “That way? No need, I can see myself through.”

With two Queruls protesting behind him, General Shin marched through the door, surreptitiously glancing to the left. Yes, there could be a possible hidden door in that panel, with a potential space behind it where the ugly dog painting hung.

Later, he told himself, later.

He found himself in what he assumed to be a classroom, except it was far too grand and plush. Decorated in silks and drapes over non-windows, with massive fireplaces and sadly dim lighting, the room was wall-to-wall shelves of loose pages and maps.

In the middle of the room, at a too-big table littered with parchments and quills, sat a little boy. Skinny and pale in the candlelight, he tried to sit up but quailed at the sight of the High General.

Shin smiled kindly at the boy who should have been outside running around in the sunshine. “Oren, is it? I’ve seen you once or twice before. My name’s General Shin and I’m looking to see how safe you are. Where are your guards?”

Then the boys’ grandmother was right there, where she hadn’t been

a moment before. But Shin was sure he'd heard a muffled movement coming from the direction of where a hidden door may be.

"He needs no guards!" Queen Jezzy announced. "We are perfectly safe."

"Your daughter-in-law wasn't," Shin reminded her. He kept watch on the boy who stared up at him with terrified eyes. "I'm sorry about your mother, Oren. I'm trying to find her. She was your teacher, right?"

Oren nodded.

"So now that she's gone, do you have a new tutor, you and your brother?"

"I am their new tutor," Jezzy said proudly, "and they need no other!"

Shin glanced at her askance. "I'll ask the minister of education about that. Their mother was a qualified teacher. You, madam, however, are a qualified jackass. Oh wait, I already used that insult. Hmm—a qualified turnip."

She gasped dramatically, even clutching her chest for effect. "A turnip? That doesn't even make sense! How dare you—" Then seemed to remember the general was tiring of that phrase. "Just because of your new position you believe you can be rude and insulting? What happened to the supposedly 'charming' Colonel Shin? Turned into a beast when he became a general?"

He grinned broadly. "Oh, I'm still just as charming as you are *lovely*," he said, and turned again to the younger boy. "Oren, a child like you must get bored in this mansion. Who are your playmates?"

"My what?" the boy whispered.

"Friends," Shin clarified. "Boys your age that you run around with. Surely you know one or two."

Oren glanced nervously at his grandmother, who Shin kept in his peripheral vision.

Jezzy didn't give any kind of hint for an answer.

Oren began to stammer like his father. "I, I, I don't really have a, a, a playfriend."

"Well," Shin said casually, kneeling next to Oren, "maybe not a friend, but at least you know of another boy?"

Again Oren's eyes shifted back and forth, now over to his father as if asking permission for something. His lips parted and he said, "No?"

"That's too bad," Shin said. "Little boys need other little boys to play with. Tackle. Attack. Blame for eating the last piece of pie, that kind of

thing.”

That brought a timid smile to Oren’s mouth.

Shin grinned. “Well, we should see if we could find you someone.” He patted Oren on the head, then let a finger drag down the boy’s nose with a soft “boop!” as it bounced off the end of it. He stood up. “Good to meet you again, Oren. I dare say you’re my favorite member of the Querul family. And you people really should come up with a last name. The rest of the word did so a hundred and fifty years ago. Not having a last name sounds so . . . *low-class*.”

Without another word, and ignoring the shouts of, “Come back here!” from Jezzy, Shin headed back to the throne room, with Querul the Fourth on his heels.

Shin stopped abruptly, allowing Querul to crash into the back of him. He spun and said, “I want those employee lists and the payment records by tonight. I’ll send a carriage for them at dinner time. And next time, my advising general gets to accompany me in here, and you better have more guards on duty. I could have killed you and your family a dozen times over.”

That’s when Querul looked down to see the general’s long knife, with the flat of the blade pressed up against his heart.

“Never trust anyone entirely, Querul,” Shin murmured in his ear as he slid the blade up to Querul’s throat.

The king went gray.

“Especially, *Fourth*, your own mother.”

Smoothly Shin deposited the long knife into his belt and patted Querul’s cheek as if he were a toddler. Then he ran his finger down the king’s nose as he had his son, and ended with a “boop!”

“Dinner time. Records. Your mother’s bookkeepers—mine for the night and probably a few days after. Don’t worry, I’ll try to remember to feed them. And later this week, you may expect a dozen new soldiers as guards for your mansion, compliments of the garrison.” With a mischievous grin, Shin bowed deeply and let himself out of the throne room.

---

King Querul collapsed on a nearby sofa just as his mother and oldest son bustled into the room.

## The Second Day of the Week

“He’s gone,” Querul reported. This had been only the third time the new high general had been to his home, and he found each visit exhausting. The man confused him. He hadn’t yet decided if Shin was horribly rude or just slightly insane.

His mother harrumphed as if she had something the size of a mouse to clear from her throat. “Why’d they retire the last High General? A perfectly useful man of seventy-eight-experienced-years!”

Young Querul the Fifth scoffed. “Useful as a doorstep, I thought you once said, Grandmother. So old and deaf, and he did nothing at all for years?” He stopped when he realized he was at the receiving end of his grandmother’s bitter glare. That was one thing he hadn’t yet learned: his grandmother could turn on him as quickly as she turned on everyone else.

“Doorstops,” she snarled at her grandson, “are infinitely more useful than men half the age and with ten times the determination.”

The Fourth remained slumped on the sofa. “I think that edict of father’s might have been a mistake: granting nearly equal rights in governing the world to the High General?”

“Well it made sense back when General Stumpy was in charge!” Jezzy was sure to trill the *r* in *charge*. “Because he left everything up to your father!” Another rolling *r*.

“Stumpy’s no longer around,” the Fourth sighed. “At least, not in the army anymore. Apparently he’s retired to a horse stable where he can watch the animals walk back and forth. That’s not what Shin does. Mother, he wants your books. And your bookkeeper. I don’t know how we can refuse him. He wants to know everything to find Margo.” Querul looked up at his mother. “Do *you* know where she is? Anything at all about her disappearance?” He realized then that he likely should have asked that question weeks ago. But he *had* been busy.

His mother’s double chins jutted out as she said, “You don’t trust your own mother? Shin set you up to asking me that! That man has to be stopped.”

---

Outside at the carriage, Shin tipped his head to his advising general to not say a word until they were safely away. King Querul’s green

guards, while likely not as strong or skilled as the soldiers, and apparently without the ability to use peripheral vision, might actually know how to listen to gossip.

Only after the two officers were safely inside, with their guard around them, the lieutenant colonel on the seat next to the driver, and the horses trotting down the cobblestone road, did Shin say to his advisor, “That woman has to be stopped.”

His advisor sighed. “You didn’t say anything you shouldn’t to Queen Jezzy, did you?”

Shin smirked internally. His advisor was the least tactful man in the army. He’d never know what was the right thing to say, although he frequently pretended he did. History proved otherwise. “I did call her lovely,” Shin said sincerely. “Several times. I was *very* pleasant.”

His advisor snorted. “Oh, I’m *sure* you were. And you called Querul ‘Fourth’ again, didn’t you?”

“And his son ‘Fifth,’ which he so *very much appreciated*. The Family doesn’t have enough creativity to choose a last name or come up with different first names, I’m just helping them along.”

“Well, Queen Jezzy renames people too. The rumor is she calls you General Blob.”

Shin nodded thoughtfully. “I like it. Rather uncreative, but it’s certainly a sign of affection.”

His advisor snorted. “You realize, Shin, that the reason why the rest of us voted for you to be High General is because you’re the only man not afraid of the old queen.”

Privately, Pere doubted that. They voted for him because they’d assumed he’d be as complacent and dull as old Stumpy. While Pere was much younger than the old general, he was also hardly what one would consider “prime army shape.” Too friendly, too cheerful, too seemingly easy-going.

*Seemingly.*

But he was no jolly general; he was a troubled man who had been waiting for his moment to make a difference, to fix things. But no one had ever given him more than a passing glance, because he didn’t train recruits or develop strategy. No, he had been one of the best officers in charge of supplies that any fort had seen. Always full barns! Never anything missing! And plenty of food!

He was hardly noticeable, except if he forgot to order new saddles to

replace the worn ones. That happened once back when he was a lieutenant, and it never happened again. He rose through the ranks, as far as he could tell, through his charisma and charm, and his ability to make sure no one ever ran out of boots. The army can't go far without boots.

And he did everything with a winning smile and a hearty laugh. Forts could use a sweet face to break up the mass of sour and bitter ones, especially when they need someone to negotiate with citizens for their entire herd of cattle. The army had learned some years ago that it's better to first ask politely for what they're about to requisition, letting the villagers think it was somehow all their idea to feed the entire fort. Pere had been able to sweet-talk any farmer out of any goods, and he always made sure it was for a fair price, plus a little extra not on the books, because the army wasn't exactly generous.

But no one ever really expects that "sweet" face to do anything *serious*.

That's likely why the army—shockingly and wonderfully—sat him in the most distinguished seat in the garrison believing he'd warm it in the most undistinguished of ways. Mostly, they expected him to smile and do nothing. A younger, fresher version of the smelly old General Stumpy.

But that's not what Pere was planning.

So for the past few weeks his new advising general had been regarding him with a sneer of disbelief, because the High General was, well, acting as if he were *in charge* of things.

Pere met General Humphrey's befuddled sneer with his own smile, feeling deliciously authoritative. "Not afraid of Queen Jezzy? Of course I am, as any healthy human would be. I just play with her more, like a mouse with a cat."

Eugene sniffed. He didn't believe in any kind of playing. "Pere, I wish you'd tell me what you suspect. It's not like you to be so secretive."

"No offense, General Humphrey," Shin said formally, "but right now I'm not sure who to trust. When I have more solid evidence, you'll be the first to know."

Eugene held up his hands in surrender. "No offense taken, and I understand your trepidation. You wouldn't be a good commander if you weren't so cynical."

Pere squinted at him. Being a "good commander" wasn't at all what Humphrey had been hoping for. "Cynical? That's not what you said in

your nomination speech,” Pere said slyly. “You claimed that I was—what was it? ‘Affable and amiable, a bridge to the people, the army, and the mansion.’ You might as well have called me a jovial high general.”

Eugene scoffed, and Pere was sure he heard undertones of, *Then why aren't you acting like it?* “And I also said something about your excessive diplomacy, which everyone says I don't have enough of—”

Pere barked a laugh because Eugene thought diplomacy was something that you eat with salad. “Unfortunately, I sounded a lot like you in there. I called her a lovely jackass. *Lovely.*”

Eugene clucked his tongue. “Losing your touch, Shin? Already?”

“No,” Pere said, suddenly heavy, fists forming on his lap. “Things are not right in that mansion.”

“What else is new?” Eugene shrugged that off.

Pere wasn't in his usual breezy mood. “I mean it—there's something else, besides Grandmother Jezzy. Something else we haven't noticed before.”

Eugene leaned forward, growing interested. “What, Pere? Maybe I can help?”

Pere leaned forward as well, took his finger, and drew it down his advising general's nose and ending with a “Boop!”

Eugene frowned. “What the—”

“Well done,” Pere said, sitting back. “You've passed the first test. Straightest nose I've ever booped.”

“Pere, half the time I don't know if you're being sincere or just being silly.”

The new High General of the world fixed his stare on his advisor. “I'm usually both all of the time. I like to be efficient.”

“Understood,” Humphrey said, even though he didn't. “Well, hand me your notes and I and my staff will get to work on them . . . Wait. You didn't take notes again, did you?”

Pere tapped his head. “It's all in here, where it can't be destroyed or stolen by nosy corporals and sold to the Queruls' spies in the garrison. There are still a few. I'm sure I haven't flushed them *all*. But I couldn't put off this investigation any longer.”

Eugene sighed. “I need something to work with, Pere! The investigation is going nowhere.”

“I already told you—when I have something solid, I'll give it to you. Work on the problem of that useless colonel in Pools, or the issue of the



Guarders instead. I think we should be putting more soldiers and forts on the outer ring of the world. The Guarders have been quiet for a while, which I'd guess means they're planning something. The borders are where the most danger is."

Humphrey sat back, surprised that Shin was taking such an interest in . . . well, doing his job. "You know Querul and Jezzy won't approve of that—more soldiers on the borders."

"And I can never figure out why, Eugene."

"Simple: they don't care. Those villages don't provide them much gold in taxes, so what's the point? The world is to serve the mansion. Haven't you figured that out yet? That's the point of power—to *be served*."

Pere noticed that he made that claim with a twinge of jealousy. Eugene was only one man away from *all* the army power.

Only one *big* man away, and too late Humphrey was realizing that General Shin wasn't intending to sit quietly in a corner but was instead stomping around where no one expected he would.

---

At home, Pere Shin stood in front of his wife who was darning a sock. "Dearest, I make enough gold that you can toss that out and get a new one."

She frowned. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you're one of the wealthiest women in the world now."

"That doesn't mean I suddenly don't know how to fix socks anymore. I'm not Queen Jezzy, after all."

He smiled at her, then let it fade. "I booped him, Banu."

She glanced up from her work. "*Booped*, Pere?"

He ran a finger down her narrow carrot-like nose. "They have the same odd bumps—Querul, Oren, and my little friend Fangi. Eugene Humphrey, however, does not. No surprise there."

Banu set down his brown holey sock. "So what does that mean?"

"Means I don't write anything down, yet."

---

Jezy saw the boy come scurrying into her third best sitting room with his bucket full of wood. She frowned. He was late today.

“Bucket!” she bellowed, and the boy jumped appropriately. “I want cake from the kitchens. Fetch it now from Skinny Cook.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the boy chirruped. He dumped his load into the wood box, and she nearly yelled at him for not following her command of “now” but realized that he’d likely drop her cake if he still had a full bucket.

She stared at her record books, angrily drumming her fingers on them. She’d already sent out her bookkeeper for a “break” so that she could review in private what General Blob wanted to expose in public. And also see how she might be able to smudge a few numbers. Or columns. Or just rip out entire pages—

Two of her advisors already told her she should hand the books over, or Shin could make “a scene.” Well, let him! What could he possibly do?! Whose world was it anyway, General Shin’s?! What presumption! She was Queen Jezy and the world was hers to rule as she saw fit!

A few minutes later, Bucket boy burst through the doors again, stopping to bow briefly, then rushed over and set a large slice of cake before her. He stared at it longingly, but he had his reward already. He was afforded the honor of bringing her the cake.

“You may go,” she said.

But the boy now shifted his gaze to her.

“What is it, Bucket?” she said, plunging her fork into the four layers.

“Ma’am, you have a lot of space up here, don’t you?”

She shrugged. “Barely enough for the wife of a king, for the mother of a king, for the grandmother of a future king. Some days I use nearly every room up here. It’s a tragedy, really.”

“Tragedy,” Bucket whispered. “That means something sad, right?”

Jezy sighed impatiently. “What do you want, Bucket?”

He hitched up his bucket which he’d need to fill another dozen times to ensure all of her wood boxes were full. It was good exercise for the little fellow, running up and down three flights of stairs each day. It would ensure he’d be strong for when he was old enough to join the Cousin Guard—

Cousin Guard—what a stupid name. Now they had her calling them that. They were the *King’s Guard*, and rightly so! Just because all of them now happened to be some kinds of cousins didn’t mean the

mansion's help could rename them! They were beginning to forget their place!

Bucket squirmed in front of her, and she wondered if he needed to relieve himself. It was only three floors down and outside . . .

"Ma'am? I've been thinking—"

"No one asked you to."

"Sorry, but it just happens. You have a lot of space here—"

"Hmfp!"

"—as much as all of us have downstairs—"

She gasped theatrically. "You want me to *share* some of my space with your kind?!"

Bucket recoiled. "No, ma'am. Not at all. We're happy where we are in the basement. But ma'am, there are a lot of sad people out there in the war. The Greats said that their houses are the sizes of shacks—"

Jezy glaced at the cracks of windows, but relaxed. It was nearly impossible to see out of them. The wood Bucket boy had no idea because he wasn't allowed near the covered windows in the front rooms.

"—but they could be happier with a bigger space, so maybe some of the sad people could live up here?"

She stared at him, perplexed. "What are you saying? Let . . . let people live up here? On MY floor? Why?"

"So, so, so," he stammered, "they could be safe like all of us?"

She exhaled so loudly that her lips flapped. "Why should I care about that? They deserve their miserable lives, Bucket. I do so much for the Family I have nothing left for the world. Don't presume to tell me anyone else deserves my boundless generosity. And who do you know out there who wouldn't try to kill your family while we slept, hmm? No one. You know of no one trustworthy! Not a single soul. Now fill up my wood boxes."

His little jaw went up and down a few times, as if trying to form a retort, but Jezy's glare was enough to bring a man five times his age to his knees. "Yes, ma'am," he whispered and went back to his task with much less energy.

## ~The Third Day of the Week~

Very early the next morning, Pere Shin evaluated himself in his washing room mirror. The black cotton shirt was a good choice—it would blend into the shadows well, he assumed. No ridiculous medals or gold patches to give him away. And his dark gray trousers, again a good choice. He ran his hand over his head, feeling oddly naked without his blue cap. But his black hair was also designed for blending in. Now if only he had skin as dark as the richest soils his disguise would be perfect. He nodded at himself in approval, then opened the door of the washroom as quietly as he could—

Flapping fish! What he saw on the other side nearly gave him a heart attack. He clutched his chest in an effort to calm his breathing, and decided that if he was this easily spooked, it might not bode well for his next adventure.

“Hot chicken bits, boy! How long have you been there?”

His son Relf, his black hair sleep-tousled and his eyes drowsy, suddenly perked up. “Waiting to get in to relieve myself, but I think the more interesting question is, Father, what are *you* up to?”

“Nothing,” Pere insisted, and stepped aside to let his son use the washroom.

But too intrigued, his son followed him into the kitchen. “Are you doing something sneaky? You never wear black. And why would you be dressed like this to go to the garrison? Come on, Father—tell me! Pretending to be a Guarder raiding the garrison? No one will believe that.”

Pere was helping himself to cold morning sausage Banu had left out for him since he’d be rising before she awoke. It was impossible to ignore his son who was now bouncing in place, in earnestness and discomfort. “Go. Do your business. Then come back.”

Relf tore out of the kitchen leaving Pere to think about what to say next. Too quickly, Relf was back, his expression eager. “Well? It’s

### The Third Day of the Week

something secret, isn't it? Take me with you, Father! Think of it as . . . as an apprenticeship. I'm going to go to command school like you when I'm seventeen, so shouldn't I know a little about command?"

"There's nothing 'commanding' about what I'm doing this morning," Pere said, trying to sound like his day was going to be boring, but then he was thinking about how useful his son could be.

Relf sat down next to him at the kitchen table. "Come on, I don't care if it's dull. Take me along, please?"

"You have school," Pere reminded them both.

"Not until after midday meal, you know that. The little kids go to school first. Whatever you're doing, you can send me home in time to get ready for the afternoon."

Stale biscuits, the boy was making a good case. Not that Pere was fighting it too much, he had to admit. Relf was skinny and lanky and could be used for—

Oh, lovely. His wife would be thrilled to hear how Pere was thinking of using their son as a mole or a snake.

"No, no," Pere murmured. "Completely unfair, you're totally untrained, a terrible idea."

He should have known those words would only have interested his son.

Or maybe he *did* know that, unconsciously baiting the boy.

"This is how I start training, Father!" Relf said, standing up. "It IS spying, isn't it? Take me along! I can climb things, squeeze into tight places, crawl under things—"

Pere both admired and loathed himself for wanting to take his son along. It could be a wild success or a disaster.

Either way, his wife would never forgive him.

He looked deep into Relf's eyes, and admiringly the boy held the heavy gaze. In fact, he returned it nearly as well. Sounding far more mature than he was, Relf said, "Father, I am ready to do whatever you need. Take me along. I'll make you proud. You need to start training the next High General after all, don't you?" The side of his mouth quirked up into a mischievous grin, and Pere felt his resolve weakening.

Or strengthening, he wasn't sure what he should have been hoping for at that moment.

What was the fatherly thing to do? The High General thing to do?

The best thing to do?

Still undecided, Pere whispered, “Find your darkest clothing, don’t wake your mother, and I’ll leave her a note. And from here on out, you need to be as silent as a snail.”

Relf burst into a grin, nearly shouted in triumph, but slapped a hand over his mouth and raised his eyebrows as if to say, “*See? I can keep quiet.*”

Pere exhaled in worry and delight as his son quickly padded up the stairs. He pulled out a scrap of parchment and a sharpened piece of charcoal to start his note to Banu, but no words came.

“She’ll forgive me later, won’t she?”

He and his son slipped noiselessly out of the house and on to the back alley, with Relf giggling quietly in excitement. Pere was sure that Banu wouldn’t be making him pie for a very long time.

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“So what’s the plan?” Relf whispered as they made their way out of the dark neighborhood, the sun not yet having risen. “Clearly we’re sneaking into somewhere, you’re not to be identified as the High General, and no one else knows because your guards aren’t here.”

“Well deduced,” Pere said, already beginning to regret bringing him. “Because of all the things you’ve listed, I’m likely breaking a few laws, and dragging you into it. Look, maybe just act as my watch or something. Don’t go where I go, but let’s work out a signaling system so you can let me know if trouble’s approaching.”

Relf scoffed. “Where’s the fun in that?”

Pere rounded on him. “This isn’t about fun, boy! This is about finding out a crime, about figuring out just how wrong something is so that I can start making it right!”

Relf didn’t cower under his father poking a finger into his chest. Instead, the boy soberly asked, “How *bad* is the wrong, Father? And isn’t the High General’s job to protect the defenseless? If that’s what the ultimate result is—protection and resolution—then whatever you do now isn’t wrong. Laws and rules can be negotiated if it’s about making things right.”

Pere dropped his finger. “They’re teaching you to debate in school, aren’t they?”

Relf grinned. “We both know the sky is never just blue, Father. Right now it’s orange on the horizon. Which means we need to get wherever we’re going before we’re caught.”

Pere clapped a hand on his son’s shoulder and squeezed it too firmly. “Keep thinking up scenarios and debates, because we may need to use all of them if things go . . . wrong.”

“Do you have your long knife?” Relf asked, his voice quavering ever so slightly.

“Yes, all of them.”

“How many do you have?”

“You’ll never know until you’re High General. Did you bring yours?”

His son patted his thigh proudly. Pere had given it to him when the boy turned eight. He now had six years of experience with it, more than any new private who joined the army, and he had taken well to Pere’s defensive knife skill lessons.

Not that Banu knew that, of course.

“Well done, Relf. Keep it secure.”

It was only a few minutes before the two, sharing the dark roads only with milk deliverers and the random citizen walking with his head down, reached their destination. Relf gasped quietly.

“The king’s mansion?!”

“Yes,” Pere breathed.

They walked through an old orchard bordering the mansion grounds to the narrow side gate which no one ever used. The fruit trees had been neglected for a decade, probably owned by some wealthy citizen who forgot he had the land, because surely he would have sold such prime property right next to the king’s mansion had he remembered it. But it was fortunate for Pere that no one visited the overgrown pear and apple trees, and that the tall grasses growing underneath were unevenly trimmed by stray goats who made their way over when their owners lost track of them. This was the most subtle way to approach the mansion, another point the king’s guards failed to realize was a security issue, and another one he added to the growing list in his mind of “Things that need to change NOW.” The trees were heavy with fruit soon to be ripe, and he had no idea if anyone ever bothered to harvest it, aside from the lucky goat.

At the forgotten gate, his two guards were expecting him—sergeants

he had trusted for many years who he knew would never reveal him. They had been here a couple of days before, and were the only ones outside of his family who knew what he was doing. They did seem surprised, however, to see him emerge from the tangled orchard with his son in tow. Pere and Relf paused at the edge of the orchard, situated twenty paces from the wall and gate, as the sergeants glanced around, then nodded that the way was clear. It was always clear.

“Ooh, Father,” Relf murmured. “This is risky.”

“Want to stay here with the guards?” Pere said, suddenly realizing it was the best option. “Yes, let’s do that.”

Relf hesitated. “Gimme one minute.” He darted into a thick cluster of shrubs, then came out again a moment later. “Just had to, um, you know,” he shrugged and made sure his trousers’ buttons were all done up. “All right, I’m ready.” He hopped up and down in place as if ready to run a race.

Pere sighed. He was hoping he’d had a stronger feeling of if this was a good idea or not, allowing his only son to come with him . . .

But no nudges in either direction were coming to him.

In a low voice so that his sergeants waiting for them couldn’t hear, he said, “Son, what I’m looking for are secret passageways in the mansion—”

“Ooh, that’s amaz—”

“Son,” Pere said patiently, and his sergeants began to fidget in worry that their general was remaining in the orchard. “Remember what I said about your silence? It begins now. Just listen: I’m trying to find out how many secret passageways there are, and where they may lead. Specifically, I’m trying to discover if there’s a secret way to leave the mansion grounds, if maybe that’s the way Margo was taken. You’re squirming again—need to relieve yourself some more or do you have a question?”

Relf nodded vigorously.

“When I said ‘silence,’ I didn’t mean that you can’t ask questions. Go ahead.”

“So Querul’s wife Margo is gone? Kidnapped?” Relf asked in surprise. “When did this happen?”

That’s when Pere remembered that the news of the king’s missing wife wasn’t discussed in public, and that was a big part of the problem.

“Maybe six weeks ago—”

“What?! I didn’t hear about that!”



## The Third Day of the Week

Pere was still learning what information he could share with the world and what he needed to keep confined to the garrison. Margo's disappearance should have been shared, he realized now, but he hadn't yet been installed when Margo went missing, and didn't know about it himself until a couple weeks after the fact. He inherited this part of the investigation, just as he inherited several crates' full of documents detailing problems, requests, and even crimes that the law enforcers of Idumea didn't believe they should have to pursue, and apparently neither did General Stumpy. It churned Pere's stomach to think of how many issues had been neglected over the years, and that's why he was so keen to start working on the one which seemed most pressing. Once he dove into those dreaded crates, though, he feared he might find more which were worse.

"No one in Idumea is talking about it. Not even the gossips," he told his son. "It's not like Margo was well-known or even talked about much outside of the mansion. She never went to dances, made only a handful of public appearances, and as far as I've been able to discover, she had no friends outside of the mansion. Her main purpose was to have a son or two and educate them. Beyond that, no one seemed to care about or even notice her. Queen Jezzy would never abide someone getting more attention than her. I think Margo was little more than an elevated servant." Pere shook his head, because he hadn't noticed that until quite recently. "I've been in contact with all of her family. None of them has heard from her in weeks, even before my installation. I think that she's been taken, and she may not even be alive anymore. And it doesn't seem like anyone else in the world is concerned about her besides me."

Relf's shoulders sagged. It must have been the first time that he, too, realized that no one in the world bothered to discuss Margo, who didn't even have a title.

"There's also something else going on in there, but I haven't yet told anyone what I suspect. And no, I'm not going to tell you either. Just help me find evidence of whatever."

Relf was too anxious to get going to realize that his father's directions were quite useless. "Ready, sir."

The sergeants nodded again that the way was still clear—nothing ever changed there—and Pere and Relf approached the gate. The soldiers undid the lock and put all their strength into the heavy wood door, allowing it to creak open just enough to let Pere and Relf through. With

soft grunts the soldiers pulled it shut again, with Pere and Relf helping by leaning against the gate behind them.

When it shut securely, Pere and Relf glanced up and down the tall rock wall that extended on either side and ran the perimeter of the extensive grounds. No one could be seen in the approaching dawn. Tall berry and current bushes flanked them.

Pere pointed to the narrow side door that led to the outhouse and indicated that was their way in. They covered the thirty paces to the mansion in quick time. Pere opened the well-used wooden door and darted into the dark hall, his son on his heels.

Immediately they heard voices further in—someone was coming up to use the outhouse.

Pere nearly cursed under his breath. Well, *that* was over quickly. He hadn't yet come up with a decent alibi—

But then he was being pulled backward into the wall, which was no longer there, and before he could see who was coming toward them, he found himself staring at wood again.

Flabbergasted and disoriented in the sudden dark, he whispered, "What the—? Relf?"

"Here, Father. You told me to find secret passages, right? Seemed logical to me to put one right by the exit of the mansion. All I did was lean and, fff! Suddenly the wall gave way on some hinge thing—" He stopped, because they both heard the boots pounding past them in a hurry to get to the outhouse. The outer door slammed shut, and there was silence again in the hallway. Father and son exhaled in relief.

"Well done, Relf," Pere said, groping around in the dark to pat his son on the back. Turned out to be his chest, but the sentiment was still conveyed.

He fumbled in his pocket for matches and soon lit a stubby candle he'd brought. Pere nearly jumped to see how many cobwebs were covering his son, but wisely didn't say anything. Relf hated spiders, which was evident when he recoiled upon seeing his father's shoulder covered in webs. Pere brushed them away, then quickly wiped them off of Relf's head as the boy did a little panicked dance when he realized how fully he was enshrouded. Relf missed quite a few, which Pere concluded he didn't need to know about yet.

"I take it the cobwebs means this hasn't been used for a while," Pere decided. "Can't even see how far it goes."

“But it goes somewhere, right?” Relf said, trying to keep his voice steady. He kept brushing his arms and shivering as if spiders were crawling down his back.

“Or it could just be a hideout until the hallway is clear. Suggestions, soldier?”

Relf squared his shoulders and ceased his shivering which was very unsoldierly. “Onward, General. Let’s see what’s down there. Ew, watch your step. Oh, never mind. The rat has been dead a while.”

*That* sent a shiver down Pere’s back, but he masked it as he gingerly stepped through a dank passageway barely tall enough to accommodate his towering height. “Looks mostly to be stone, but if you see any wood, that may be a stairway. I should confess, I was here a few days ago and stumbled upon three passageways. One led to the Officers’ Reception Room. I have no idea where any others go, so what we may find at the other end . . . well, say nothing should someone discover us. Let me do all the talking, all right? No matter what, *say nothing.*”

“Yes, sir.” Relf didn’t seem about to argue. “Watch your head!”

Barely in time Pere dipped his head as the passageway suddenly became shorter. Another fifteen paces down the stone wall revealed a wooden door.

“Similar to what I found last time,” Pere said and halted progress. “There may be more doors further down, but let’s be systematic about this.” He pulled out sharpened charcoal and in the top corner of the door near the hinge he wrote a number one. “Always mark above the hinge,” he told his son.

“Except that doesn’t seem to be the hinge,” Relf snickered quietly and pulled open the door to reveal Pere had marked the wrong side.

“Oh, horse apples,” Pere muttered and rubbed out the mark, putting it over the correct side. “Looked like a hinge.”

Relf peered closer in the hazy light. “I think there used to be a hinge, but the door was replaced?”

They looked up the narrow steps, and Pere sighed. It was going to be a tight squeeze.

Relf stifled a chuckle. “Let me go first, Father. I would hate for you to wedge yourself in there and I not get you out. They’d need to select another new High General. I can tell you how tight it gets.”

“That’s why I brought you,” Pere admitted. “You’re my skinny scout.”

“Yeah, I’ve figured that out. Oh, drat—more cobwebs.”

Pere looked around and found a stick in the debris that may have been as old as the mansion. “Fend it off with this. Sword the cobwebs!”

Relf scoffed, but held the stick in front of him and waved it furiously, gathering webs as he started down the stairs. Pere took a deep breath, sucked in his gut, and went after his son.

It was only about fourteen steps when they reached a wall which was actually a door. Relf glanced back to his father who had fully intended to squeeze down and be the first through the door, but realized he’d crush his son if he did so. Pere pointed to his ears for them to listen, then hearing no sounds, he nodded to his son.

It took Relf a few moments to figure out how to open the door. A hidden latch kept it secure, and Pere realized that on the other side it would just look like timbered walls. Finally Relf figured it out: the door slid into the adjacent wall and out of sight, but with a cringing scrape. Relf peered cautiously out. Then he took a few steps, with Pere right behind him.

They were in the hallway, the broad one in the basement of the mansion Pere had found earlier. It led to living quarters on one side and storage rooms on the other. There were voices and the sounds of people getting ready for the day’s work, which meant Pere and Relf were about to be discovered.

Pere grabbed Relf’s shirt, dragged him back into the stairwell, and shoved him in, positioning himself to be at the bottom of the stairs. Then he wrestled with the door until it scraped noisily back into place. In his haste he dropped the candle behind him, which was just as well.

Holding his breath, he listened with his ear to the wall-door.

“I’m telling you, I heard something odd, like when Fangi is dragging wood for fun. It was here in the hallway.” It was a woman’s voice, and Pere could practically hear her hands on her hips in annoyance.

“Well I didn’t hear anything,” said a man’s voice, sounding unperturbed. “Morning,” he said to someone else as more heavy boots pounded by.

The woman spoke again, “Vernon, did you hear that woody noise a few moments ago?”

“The only noise I heard was my daughter whining about getting up to gather eggs. That’s quite a grating sound.”

The unperturbed man chuckled. “Just let it go, Sally. May have been

one of the cats with a rat.”

Pere heard the woman exhale in exasperation and move away from the secret door. There were many more footsteps, some slow, some jogging, some light, some heavy, along with voices calling good morning or asking about a cow or clarifying who had what duty that day. It was at least half an hour until all of the commotion of the morning finally died down, Pere listening intently for clues and voices . . . and forgetting that his son was still perched on the narrow stairs behind him.

Only when it seemed that the hallway was clear and everyone was upstairs to breakfast, according to what one woman had called out to another man, did Pere finally feel his shoulders relax. He was about to take a step backward when he realized his son was still there, and had been remarkably silent for the entire time.

Pere managed to turn around in the confining stairwell. “Well, what do you make of what we just heard?”

Relf sighed. “There are a lot of people who live here, Father. Are they supposed to?”

“How do you know they *live* here?”

“I listened to them, didn’t you? Talking about waking up children, getting some grandma breakfast, trading tasks—these people didn’t just show up down here to go to work—they live here!”

“Well noticed, son. And how many people would you guess?”

Relf didn’t answer immediately. “I . . . I don’t know.”

“I kept track of how many I heard, marking on my hand each time I thought it was a new voice.”

“Ooh, that’s clever.”

“That’s why I’m the High General,” Pere said smugly. “Now if you’ll help me relight the candle—I think it’s at my feet—we can count them.”

The marks were already smudged, as the candle soon revealed, but they could still make out the charcoal tally marks on Pere’s hand going up his arm to his sleeve.

“Whoa,” Relf whispered as he counted. “Twenty-one? Are you sure?”

“Those are only the voices I heard. There may be more. In fact, I know for certain that there are three more: two ancient great grandparents in one room, and a little boy about eight years old who fills the wood boxes.”

Relf’s eyebrows went up. “Found that out on your first visit here?”

“Yep.”

“So that’s twenty-four people living in the basement?”

“It’s a nice basement, actually. We’ll go poke around in a few minutes once we’re sure it’s vacant. Sounds like everyone’s gone upstairs.”

Relf was silent for a moment, then asked, “Father? Who *are* all these people?”

“As far as I can tell, they’re King Querul’s slaves.”

“His what?”

“They had them before the Great War, remember? Slaves were people who were forced to work for the wealthy without pay. We did away with that practice—one of the many causes of the war—but apparently someone forgot to tell the Queruls that. These people are not paid. I insisted that Queen Jezzy send over her books along with her bookkeeper so that I could see who the guards are and how they’re paid, and so that I could make a list of all the employees here as potential suspects. There were some notations and records—although I strongly suspect she sent a fake book she keeps just in case someone starts snooping around. But there was *nothing* about employees in the mansion. Have you ever heard of someone working here? And leaving here?”

Relf let out a low whistle. “I’ve never thought about that, to be honest.”

“No, and why would you?” Pere said. “But what bothers me is, why did *I* never think about that until now? I should have.”

“So we’re not only looking for Querul’s wife, are we?” Relf said.

“No, we’re not, as you’ve obviously figured out. We’re also trying to figure out who these people are, and why they’re here, and if they wish they were someplace else.”

“Then let’s go,” Relf said, and Pere’s chest swelled at the resolve in his son’s voice. “Let’s learn what we can.”

“Silence from here on out, remember,” Pere whispered, and blew out the candle to pocket it.

The door scraped less when Pere hefted it upward before sliding it away, and the two of them snuck out of the wall and eased the door back. They crept down the hall, peeking into rooms and seeing evidence of living quarters: beds with ample blankets and pillows; chairs, worn but solid; sofas in some larger rooms, showing wear; cracked vases and even drapes of silk over non-windows. Pere assumed the quarters were

furnished with whatever the finer levels upstairs damaged or no longer needed. Relf followed, peering in and pointing to objects, but neither Shin spoke a word. Pere would tap his head occasionally as a signal for his son to remember something, and they spent the next fifteen minutes counting beds and chairs as they went.

Thirty-five. There were enough beds for at least thirty-five people. If all of them were used or not, they didn't know. But there were separate quarters for ten families or couples, with a few rooms that seemed to be for storing unused furniture. Pere had pointed to the room of the ancient couple who seemed to still be asleep at this early hour. They left that door alone.

At the end of the hall they ducked into a storeroom awash with hanging braided onions, barrels of newly ripe apples wedged against the wall, and countless other crates stuffed and covered. Here, Pere breathed quietly to Relf, "There's a door across the hall that I want to try—perhaps a secret door that maybe no one in the mansion knows about."

Relf nodded, seemingly lost in thought, from what Pere could discern in the faint light that came from candles burning in the hallway.

"You all right, son?"

Relf sighed. "I just didn't . . . didn't expect to see so many people living here. I don't know what to think. It makes me feel strange. They have nice stuff, and good clothes, and there were a couple of beds with silk sheets—how silly is that? But something doesn't feel right."

"I know. It feels like incarceration. A nice place to be trapped, but trapped nonetheless. Ready to try another narrow stairwell? I suspect it will drop us somewhere upstairs on the first level."

Relf sighed. "Yeah, let's go. I'm getting angry, Father."

"Good. Use it to propel you to do something good."

They left the storage room and darted across the hall to the next hidden door which Pere had found on his last visit. It looked only like a shallow closet, but pushing on the narrow shelves which contained only dust revealed another set of stairs. "Found this by accident," he confided in a whisper. "I'd opened the door and stumbled a little, crashing into the shelves. Nearly terrified me when it gave way as a second door. I thought I'd broken the mansion."

With Pere leading the way, they climbed the narrow set of stairs, noticing yet another passage leading off to the left, far too narrow for Pere, but navigable for Relf.

“Later,” Pere whispered, and marked that hallway with a letter A. “Because no door,” Pere told his son. “Labeling with letters.”

“But that makes no sense,” Relf whispered back.

“Just . . . never mind. It’s ‘A’ door passageway now.”

“Without a door. Whatever.”

They heard voices coming through the walls as they climbed—likely they were near the eating room of the basement residents. There were the clatters of dishes, laughter, discussions, admonitions to eat slower, to eat more, to eat less, dropped silverware, the clink of mugs on wood, and another door in the wall.

Pere glanced back to Relf and they both shook their heads. The last thing they needed to do was burst in onto their breakfast.

The stairs continued, turned to the right, and grew narrower so that Pere had to turn sideways to try to fit, his son prodding him unhelpfully.

The passage ended in a new door, one on hinges that Pere marked as number three, because he realized he forgot to label the doubled closet doors leading to the hallway as number two. Or rather two-A and two-B. Perhaps.

So much for systematic. He realized he’d forgotten to label the very first door Relf had dragged him through, which *should* have been number one . . .

This door, which he had no idea how to label now, had a latch, and clearly identifiable hinges, much like the door he discovered which lead to the Officers’ Reception Room. Holding his breath, he slowly pulled up the latch and gingerly pushed on the door.

To his relief, it opened to the side of a large fireplace, behind the elaborate stonework of the surround. Judging by how it was positioned next to a bump-out in the wall, no one would realize there was a human-sized gap behind the surround.

And no matter how eager Pere was to see what grand room he had now found, there was no squeezing through that gap. He grunted, he sucked in his gut, he forced a leg through—

No, no luck.

Behind him, Relf sniggered quietly.

“All right, boy—time to earn your keep,” Pere said, finally giving up. “Can you fit between my legs here? You’ll need to twist because the fireplace surround is next to the corner here—no, don’t twist *between* my legs! Wiggle yourself out first . . . Oh, for crying out loud, don’t you



know how to squeeze through anything?”

Relf was partially chuckling, partially panting, trying to hold his breath to slide past his father as he wriggled on the ground. “Is every room in this mansion dark?”

“Yes, pretty much. No windows—haven’t you noticed? Now stand up—watch your head! Ooh, what did I tell you?”

Relf rubbed the back of his head where the wrap-around mantelpiece had cuffed him.

“Ow. No serious damage, I think.” Relf straightened up and took in the room, while Pere stood anxiously with less than half of his body freed from the crevice. If only his neck were two feet longer like the woodcut drawings of mythological giraffes in children’s books, he could crane around the surround and mantelpiece to see the room beyond.

“What is there?”

“Um, a big room?”

“Well, *that’s* helpful. Size? Furnishings? Evidence of people?”

“Size—well, the entire first floor of our house could fit in here! Furnishings—fancy sofas, chairs, but only a few. Lots of empty space. People? None. And over . . . oh, wait, the door’s opening—”

Pere grabbed Relf’s shoulder and jerked him back, accidentally banging his son’s head against the stone surround again. That time Relf crumpled to the ground in obvious pain, and Pere winced in apology. But fortunately Relf kept his wits about him and remained on the floor, huddled in a grimacing ball.

Pere strained to hear what was happening, and immediately recognized the sound of a metal bucket clanking, filled with wood.

“Fangi!” he whispered, not sure if he should reveal himself. The poor boy might think the wall was talking to him. Instead, he froze in place, wondering just how close the wood box was to where his son remained crunched in pain, and he held his breath in worry.

There was a sound of wood dumping, possibly across the room, but the stone floor carried sound well, and the boy trotted off, whistling a rather complicated tune and slamming the door behind him.

Relf exhaled and slumped against the wall.

“Sorry, son,” Pere said as Relf rubbed his head. “Damage this time?”

“Probably,” Relf said, his voice tinged with frustration. “I saw that boy coming, you didn’t need to smash my head in and give me a new bump!”

“I know and I’m sorry. But well done keeping quiet. Under duress, many soldiers forget themselves and give themselves away. That’s our biggest problem with battling the Guarders: men lose their nerve. But you didn’t.”

“Gee, thanks.” Relf cautiously stood up, eyeing the mantelpiece which had beat him twice now.

“Count how many more fireplaces there are. That boy will be back.”

“I think he filled the box at the opposite fireplace. So he’ll be back to this one next. That means I need to hide, Father—the box is right there!”

“No . . . no, don’t. I want you to meet him.”

“What?!”

“Look, I know it sounds crazy, but . . . well, his name is Fangi.”

“Um, Father? Just how much do you know about this mansion that you haven’t told anyone?”

“I met him last time I was here. He’s a good little boy and I think he can give us a lot of information, but he likely doesn’t know about these passageways, so you have to be my emissary.”

“All right. What do I say?”

“Tell him you’re Pere’s son.”

“He knows your name? Is that smart, Father?”

“No, probably not. He caught me by surprise, and I accidentally injured him when he ran into my sword.”

“You slashed him?!”

“No, of course not! Just a bump on the head from my hilt.”

“Typical. Do you give every boy you know in the mansion a head injury?”

“Trying. Still have two more to go. Trust me, just be nice, and—I hear him.”

Relf straightened up and flattened himself against the wall behind the surround, part of him sticking out.

“Step out,” Pere whispered. “Try not to scare him, though.”

“Right,” Relf whispered, then took a step as Fangi approached, still cheerfully whistling. “Hello, Fangi!”

Pere heard the bucket drop to the floor. So much for not startling him.

“No, don’t run!” And Relf took off after the boy.

Pere tried valiantly to force his way out of the crevice to help but he only wedged himself in worse. “Fangi!” he called, knowing it was risky, but he had to try. “Fangi! It’s Pere!”

He heard the frantic footsteps in the large room pause.

“Pere?” came the timid voice. “Are you . . . are you in the chimney?”

Pere chuckled. “No, because why would a fat man be in a chimney? That’s silly. I’m behind it, actually. I’m stuck. That boy there? He’s my son. Come over here, I want you to meet him properly.”

A moment later Fangi’s little face peered around the surround, and he burst into a grin. “Oh, I didn’t know this was here!”

“Fun, isn’t it?” Pere said, trying to catch his breath and figure out how to dislodge his chest without scraping off a layer of skin. “This is my son, Relf. He’s helping me today.”

Cautiously, Fangi looked to the side to where Relf had slipped in to try to hide as well. “Hi,” he said.

Fangi stared at him, wide-eyed. “How is this? How is there another boy? There are no other boys than Oren and Querul and me.”

Relf’s eyebrows shot upward and he looked at his father.

Pere smiled at Fangi. “There *are* other boys. This is my son. *My* boy. He’s fourteen. Relf, show him how many fingers that means.”

Relf shrugged and showed all ten, then four fingers.

Fangi shifted, agitated. “That’s almost as many as Clematis.”

“And who’s Clematis?” Relf asked kindly. “Your friend?”

“My intended!” he declared.

Now Pere’s eyebrows went up. “I promise, Relf’s not here to take away your . . . intended.” He wondered if the word meant the same to Fangi as it did to the rest of the world.

Fangi was now studying Pere. “You’re wearing black. Last time you were wearing blue, like the soldiers outside.”

“That’s true. This is messy work, helping Querul figure out how to make the mansion safer. I didn’t want to mess up my uniform.”

“But *you’re wearing black*,” Fangi said, his voice pitching upward. He took a protective step backward. “The men in black are dangerous.”

“Guarders, is what they’re called,” Pere said, side-eyeing his son to make sure Fangi didn’t bolt for the door. Maybe the black wasn’t such a good idea. “I didn’t know you knew about Guarders, Fangi. But I promise—neither of us is a Guarder. We’re discovering how to keep you safe *from* the Guarders.”

“How can I believe you?” Fangi said, taking another step back.

“Come see the secret passages we found!” Relf offered.

Pere pressed his lips together. Not the strategy he would have

employed, and Relf could read that on his father's face. He shrugged apologetically and forged onward. "We found a fun way to get back down to your living quarters—"

"Son," Pere said heavily, but the damage was done. Fangi was looking up at him in expectation, and Pere realized that for a boy who likely never left the mansion, something new would be too tantalizing to pass up. "All right," Pere sighed, and wriggled himself backward out of the doorframe. He held out his hand to Fangi, and he took it.

Remarkable trust, Pere noted as Fangi followed him down the dark stairs, Relf behind. Either the boy is so wholly pure as to not suspect anything could go wrong in the mansion, or he's so wholly bored. Pere suspected the latter.

Fangi moved tentatively behind Pere, pausing frequently as the candle failed to illuminate his way. Finally they reached the bottom, and Pere paused before opening the shallow shelves door.

"Fangi, please understand that I need you to remain quiet. I trust you haven't told anyone about my first visit?"

He shook his head. "It's been hard, sir, but I've stayed quiet."

"Well done, young man," Pere smiled. "I promise it won't be for much longer. Once I learn what I need to, I'll speak to Fourth—I mean, Querul, and then you'll be free . . . to talk about anything. So just a little longer, all right?"

Fangi nodded, and Pere slowly pried open the shelf door. Then he pushed open the closet's door to the silent hallway, and let Fangi walk through. He gasped in delight.

"We're here! That's my room down there that I share with my mother!"

"Shhh!" Pere reminded him as he joined him in the hallway. "Quiet, remember?"

"No one's awake down here this time of morning, and the greats don't get up until just before midday meal," Fangi said. "And no one's ill right now, so it's just us."

"And how many people live down here, Fangi?"

"Too big a number to count," he said, examining the door to the closet. "Funny—I never opened this door before. Mother said I didn't need to, it was a bad closet."

"Your mother," Pere repeated. "What does she do here?"

"Gardening. She loves the land," Fangi said, now playing with the

shelf door, opening and closing it and giggling at Relf sitting behind it, waving as Fangi revealed him again.

“And your father?” Pere asked.

“He died before I was born,” Fangi said, still fascinated with the two doors.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Do you have a brother or a sister?”

“I have a sister. She’s older, married to a cousin guard. And a brother, but he died a while before I was born.”

Relf sat up abruptly, but Pere shook his head.

Fangi was speaking again. “He died at the same time as my father, from the pox. I remember mother saying I was born—” and Fangi held up two fingers—“that many years after he died.”

Relf’s eyebrows were sky high now, but Pere cleared his throat in warning. “Son, we’ll discuss the m-a-t-h later. Fangi, I’m sorry about your father and brother.”

“It’s all right,” he said, looking up. “I don’t remember any of it.”

“Of course you don’t. I was wondering—” But a door up the stairs which lead outside slammed, and someone came tromping loudly down.

Pere shoved himself back into the passageway, Relf scrambling up to give him room. Pere pointed to Fangi to follow him, but Fangi was looking down the hall. “It’s Clematis! My intended!” he chirruped as if it was the most natural way in the world for an eight-year-old to greet someone.

Pere was dangerously intrigued, but shrank back and gently closed the shelf door in case Clematis came all the way down.

“Stupid chickens!” a girl’s voice reached them, and even though it was muffled, it didn’t sound like a child’s voice, but a teenager’s. “What is wrong with those hens? I’m filthy! I hate chickens! Fangi, what are you doing there? Why aren’t you filling wood boxes?”

Pere stiffened with worry, but Fangi answered, “Just needed to use the outhouse.”

The girl’s voice went past the hidden door. “Well, get back to work before Aunt Martha sees you, or Grandmother Jezy discovers you’re slow again. I need to change my skirt.”

There was a door slam down the hall, and Relf sighed loudly behind Pere.

“Hush,” he warned his son, then pushed open the closet door to beckon Fangi to join them. But just as he was waving for the boy, the

door down the hall flew open again and Clematis stomped out.

“Why should I change my skirt now? It’ll just get . . . dirty . . . again—” Her eyes locked with Pere’s. “*Man in black*,” she whispered, and Pere stepped out of the doorway in as a non-threatening way as he could, hoping he knew what that looked like.

The girl’s eyes widened. “Wait a minute—you’re the new High General!”

Pere stopped and tipped his head. “How do you know that?”

Clematis glanced at the passageway. “I get around.”

Pere took a chance. “Get around . . . to the passageway behind the throne room? Hideous painting of dogs, perhaps?”

Clematis wrapped her arms around herself as if feeling exposed. “Maybe,” she said, but her tone was, *You caught me*.

Pere smiled warmly. There was a reason he had top marks in diplomacy at command school. He could charm even the grunt out of a hog. “What a clever young woman you are,” he said, walking up to her. “I imagine you’ve figured out a great many things here. For example, I bet you already know about this passageway, and a few others?”

She blushed under his approving grin. “Well, I do. I’ve used that one a few times when I’m in a hurry, but—”

“What?!” Fangi exclaimed. “You never told me about that.”

“Because it’s not safe for you,” she said crossly, then looked back up at Pere and blushed again. “Sorry, sir. Should I have reported this?”

He waved that casually away. “Why? For that matter, why report me here? I’m trying to secure the mansion, by the way. I have a feeling you may be a very intelligent young lady who knows all kind of things. I can see it in your eyes.”

Her light brown skin was deepening with red, and Pere saw immediately she didn’t have an *entirely* boopable nose. It was flatter and wider, lucky girl, but still perhaps with an unfortunate bump . . .

Pere glanced around. “It’s not exactly safe for us to talk here. There’s a storage room down the hall. Might you have a few minutes to spare for me, miss?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, looking both worried and flattered. She hurried down the hall and opened a door on the opposite side, then ducked in with Fangi right behind her.

Pere turned to Relf, still secure in the passageway. “I’m not sure she should see you.”

“But Fangi already has,” Relf reminded him. “Come on, Father. Maybe she’ll be more helpful if she sees someone her age? She sounds older, not a child.”

“You didn’t see her, then?”

“Not yet. Why?”

Pere exhaled. “Come on. Don’t say much of anything, all right?” He glanced down the hallway—still quiet—then led Relf to the storage room where Clematis was lighting a few candles. She turned around and gasped. She wasn’t looking at Pere, but at Relf.

Relf stood taller, squared his shoulders, and said, “Well, *hello*.”

Pere nearly guffawed. Relf had deliberately lowered his pitch, his voice sounding like gravel upon gravel, and he quirked up one side of his mouth into a roguish grin.

Definitely a bad idea to bring him along.

The girl *was* very pretty, Pere had to concede. Long black hair with a natural curl, drawn into a ponytail. Clear skin, large brown eyes, a well-shaped mouth . . . Pere wasn’t very good at judging beauty, but clearly his son was taken.

And Relf wasn’t done. He swaggered—when did the boy learn to swagger?—over to Clematis and held out his hand.

She gaped at him, then at his hand, then up at him again.

Pere had to admit his son was a bit of a looker himself, especially now that he was filling out to be more of a man and less of a gangly teen.

Fangi elbowed Clematis and gestured to Relf’s outstretched hand. “You’re supposed to shake it, like this,” and Fangi demonstrated.

“Why?” Clematis asked, slightly dazed.

Relf gently took her hand, moving it carefully as if it were a wounded dove. “To show that I’m unarmed and mean you no harm. Relf’s the name,” he added, and Pere nearly rolled his eyes. The boy was trying to be charming but it was just awkward. “And you must be Clematis, as Fangi’s told us. A clematis is a pretty flower.”

Pere had no idea Relf even knew that was a flower’s name. There was a lot he realized he didn’t know about his son.

Clematis withdrew her hand and held it to her chest. “How is this possible?” she whispered. “There are no other boys besides Fangi, Oren, and Querul the Fifth.”

Relf squinted, confused, but Pere stepped up because his son had done far too much already.

“What do you mean by that, my dear? No other boys?”

“In . . . in . . . in Idumea. Outside, in the other villages, there are *some* boys, but all they do is fight all day long in the war—”

Pere ignored his son’s whispered question of, “*The war?*”

“—and there are no safe boys anywhere else in the world. Certainly none in Idumea. Fangi is my intended, the last boy left, aside from the king’s sons, but they are forbidden. I don’t like them, anyway,” she added guiltily.

“Father?” Relf began, his tone slightly alarmed.

“Later, son.”

“He’s your son?” Clematis said, astonished. “You’re allowed to have a son? I guess that’s correct. Who will take over as High General after you? Stumpy had no children. At least you can keep him here where it’s safe. You *are* safe, aren’t you, High General?”

“Very much so, thank you for your concern. Clematis,” Pere began, unsure of how to proceed, unsure of how much she knew. “I’m trying to find out what happened to Margo. What have you been told?”

“That she’s gone,” was all Clematis could offer with a shrug. “She’s gone. Sorry to say that I didn’t notice for a few days.”

“Do you not interact much with the Family upstairs?”

“No, not much. They’re *part* of the Family, but there are levels, you know.”

“I suspect there are. Clematis, how much silver are you paid here?”

“Silver? Why would I need silver?”

Pere inspected her clothing—fine linen blouse, elegant silk skirt, well-made boots. She wasn’t neglected, that was for sure. Fangi was dressed just as well.

“Never mind,” Pere said.

“She’s smart,” Fangi said proudly. “She can count to the highest number. Can’t you, Clematis? Show them!”

Worried about just how high she could count, Pere suggested, “How about you just *tell* us the highest number?”

She stood tall and announced, “One hundred!”

“*That’s* not the highest number,” Relf scoffed, and whatever attraction Clematis may have felt for him vanished.

Apparently Relf didn’t know *everything* about impressing girls.

She put her hands on her hips. “So what is?”

“You can get up to a million, and even up to a billion,” he told her, a



tad arrogantly, “but no one can *actually* count all those numbers because they’re too high. But we know what they would look like. There are thousands and tens and hundreds of thousands, too. And by the way, after one hundred is one hundred *one*. It starts over again.”

Her jaw hung open incredulously. “I suspected . . . I thought maybe there could be a one hundred one, but I couldn’t be sure, and no one would tell me.”

Relf’s arrogance deflated as he realized that the girl really didn’t know. “There’s also two hundred,” he said, more kindly.

“Then three hundred?” she asked, hopeful.

“Up to ten hundred, then it’s called one thousand.”

She sat down on a barrel, astonished.

“Son,” Pere whispered, “no more.”

Relf nodded and seemed remorseful of his previous condescending attitude.

Clematis smiled up at him. “Thank you,” she whispered. “No one’s ever told me that before. One-hundred-*one*. That’s so much to take in.”

Now it was Relf’s turn to look astonished.

Fangi glanced at Relf, then at Clematis, then at Relf again, and he puffed up his little chest. “Hey, she’s MY intended! Stop looking at her!”

“Intended,” Pere repeated. “Exactly what does that mean?”

“When he’s big enough,” Clematis said, now growing shy, “we will have one of the empty rooms down the hall, and we will have children.”

Relf tried to hold in his next scoff, but not very well. “You’re going to *marry* Fangi?”

“Marry?” Clematis asked.

“Uh, yes,” Pere cut in. “It’s what we call it when a man and a woman decide to be together for the rest of their lives.”

Clematis nodded and smiled at Fangi. “He’s a cute little boy.” The smile faded. “I didn’t realize there were other boys in the world, though.”

“How old are you, Clematis?” Pere asked.

She glanced at Fangi before mouthing, “*Fifteen*.” Then she spoke. “His older brother was to be my intended. When he died from the pox with his father, I needed a new intended.”

“So his mother had another child, is that it?”

“Yes. So kind of her, don’t you think?”

Pere glanced at Relf who had grown very silent.

“That *was* very kind of her,” Pere said. “Clematis, I don’t want to keep you from your work—nor do I want anyone missing you—but can you tell me one last thing? How many passages are there in the mansion? Secret ones that you know about?”

She shrugged. “Nine or ten?”

“Any that lead out beyond the stone walls of the mansion?”

She shook her head. “Only within the mansion, as far as I know. Sir, am I in trouble?”

Pere grinned again. “Absolutely not, my dear girl. You’ve been an immense help. And the mansion will be securer because of you. Now please, keep it a secret that we were here. I promise that in a short time I’ll tell Querul what I’ve been doing, sneaking around down here, so that we can improve the situation and make sure that no one goes missing from here again. Can you promise me that neither you nor Fangi will reveal that we were here?”

“Yes, I promise,” Clematis said. She looked over to Relf who had been slouching but stood up taller again. She held out her hand to him. “Thank you for one hundred one. I’ll never forget you for that.”

Relf stammered for a moment, wondering how to respond. “I, I, I could bring you one of my old math books, if you like.”

“What are math books?” she asked.

“A book that tells you about numbers,” Relf explained.

“What’s a book, though?”

Relf’s jaw nearly dropped off his face, but Pere turned him around. “Back to the closet door with us. Thank you again, and remember—tell no one. Just for a little while.”

Relf didn’t say a word as his father slipped him through the shelves closet passage again, then realized they should have gone to the *other* passage that led out of the mansion. They waited until all was silent before they snuck out of the mansion, through the quiet side gate that the sergeants manned, then headed out in the overgrown orchard.

“Father,” Relf finally managed, once they were a good fifty paces away from the gate, “what in the world is going on in that mansion?!”

“Quiet,” Pere said. “Say nothing until we get home. *Nothing.*” He’d spotted the carriage and four horses ahead. It was a garrison carriage, not where it should be.

Pere approached it, because surely the soldiers attached to it would

see him sooner or later. Relf trailed behind, confused.

The door swung open and General Eugene Humphrey jumped out. “High General, is that really you? What a surprise.”

Pere heard Relf mutter next to him, “*Hate that guy.*”

But he didn’t have time to mutter back, *We all do.*

“Eugene,” Pere said cheerily, “I’m surprised as well. I thought you were heading to the fort at Pools?”

Crouching apologetically in the doorway of the carriage was Lieutenant Colonel Lazan, Eugene’s right-hand man. He shrugged at the high general, and Pere sent him a quick nod. Lazan was a pleasant-enough man, a little plain and unremarkable, but certainly did his duty. Sadly, his duty was to follow around Humphrey.

“Oh, I’m on my way to Pools,” Eugene said. “But I like this quiet orchard,” he looked around and breathed in deeply, but Pere was sure the man had never given a tree any serious thought. In fact, judging by his stiffness, he didn’t know what he was doing there.

Which made Pere wonder all the more why Humphrey *was* there.

He glanced again at Lieutenant Colonel Lazan, who looked bored. He sat down on the floor of the carriage and let his legs dangle out the doorway.

Pere frowned. A little too casual for an officer, and not a proper way to treat the seat of his uniform. But restlessness will do that to a man.

Still, not to a *trained* officer. That should be rule number one: respect your position, no matter how dull your present position may be.

General Humphrey was speaking again. “You know I like to clear my thoughts before heading off to deal with troublesome soldiers.” Humphrey was known to usually “clear his thoughts” with a few mugs of mead which, unfortunately, made him even more Humphrey-like.

“Of course you do,” Pere said genially. “Curious, how’d you choose this spot?”

“Oh, someone recommended it,” Humphrey waved carelessly. He rarely remembered the names and faces of those he considered beneath him, which was just about everyone.

Lazan cleared his throat. So that’s who recommended the place, and was promptly forgotten. Pere didn’t blame him for not wanting to be confined to a carriage this early in the morning with a tipsy Humphrey. This was likely Lazan’s attempt to give the general some “thought-clearing-space” until he finally gave in halfway on the way to Pools when

Humphrey would get thirsty and direct the driver to one of his favorite taverns for a rest stop.

Eugene blinked as if trying to remember why he'd left the coach in the first place. "And what have *you* been up to? Dressed in black? What, you brought your son with you? Wolf, isn't it?"

"Relf, sir," the boy sighed quietly, because it wasn't the first time he'd corrected the general about his name. He stepped forward to shake the general's hand.

"Why are you here?" Eugene asked again.

Relf began to stammer, but Pere was prepared. "Early command school training. I wanted him to see how easily men dressed in black can move through the city. Fortunately," Pere chuckled, "not too easily! We've been walking around for only fifteen minutes and have been glared at, pointed at, and reported by five different citizens. Funny that none of them thought to consider that Guardsers don't wander around in the daylight and on the sides of the roads of Idumea."

Eugene stared at him as if trying to decide what parts of that to believe. There wasn't a lot of trust in the garrison yet, something Pere was trying to improve.

Except, he realized, that lying to his second in command wasn't really accomplishing that.

"Strange," Eugene finally said. "Want the ride or not, Shin?"

"Nope," Pere said. "I'm supposed to be exercising, remember?"

From the carriage the lieutenant colonel called, "Only thirty more pounds to go, sir. That's all that you need to lose so that we don't have to kick you out of the army. We're all pulling for you, sir!"

"Thanks for the reminder, Lazan," Pere called back and clapped a hand on Relf's shoulder. "We'll head home now, clean up before Relf's school starts and my afternoon shift begins. Enjoy Pools, see you in a couple of days." He saluted his men who returned snappy salutes. Lazan scrambled to his feet to do it properly, nearly hitting his head on the roof of the enclosed carriage.

Pere and Relf watched the carriage drive away, and twice Relf tried to say something, and twice Pere shushed him. In silence they walked home and entered the back door to the kitchen by mid-morning.

Banu was there, tapping her foot. "You **TOOK** him along to . . . where did you go?"

"Banu, I'll beg forgiveness later. For now, I need you and Relf—we

have some things to discuss, and yes, Banu, I'll tell you everything."

Ten minutes later she remained motionless on the sofa, mystified. "Twenty-five people at least?"

"I bet there's more," Relf said, his leg bouncing anxiously. He'd been bursting, but Pere wouldn't let him speak until he finished. "Father, I have some questions."

"I know you do, and your mother can help answer them."

"That boy Fangi—his father and brother died, *then* his mother had another baby to replace the son she lost, for Clematis? Umm, I know we already had this 'talk,' but doesn't a baby take nine to ten moons to be born?"

"Yes, it does!" Banu said, wringing her hands angrily. "And that's a well-proven fact!"

"But it sounded like Fangi was born two years *after* his father died, so—"

"Querul's his father," Pere announced heavily, and Banu shivered as if spiders were going down her back. "It's obvious. The Fourth. Or maybe even the Third; they both have that bumpy, bulbous nose."

Relf was sneering. "Fangi's father is . . . Oh, *that's* gross."

Banu shuddered again. "His mother had that baby to give Clematis a mate," she said bitterly. "What if she had a girl? What then? Pere!" she exclaimed. "Fangi said he had an older sister? That means his mother had *three* children!"

"I was going to ask about that," Relf said. "Aren't women allowed to have only two?"

"Yes," Pere said in leaden tones. "*Only* two. In fact, the kings were the ones who saw to it that any woman who had two children never had more, to keep the population in check. Until the rest of the land outside of our civilized world is no longer poisoned, we can't run the risk of overpopulation. That was another reason why the Great War was fought—over land and children."

He and Banu exchanged a meaningful look. They deliberately had only one child, because if Banu had a second baby, the king's "doctors" would take her away for a few days, and she'd return a shattered woman in extreme pain. "The procedure" would take her another two moons to recover from. But if she never risked a second child, she'd never have to suffer for it.

Apparently, no one in the mansion suffered that way. While that was

to be celebrated, it was also to be resented.

Pere and Banu had longed for another child—for another three or four, even—but it was impossible until the world changed. They were grateful for the strong son they had, and in quiet moments wondered what his siblings may have been like.

“Wait,” Relf remembered, not noticing the looks of longing his parents shared. “The Great War! Those two in the mansion think the war is still going, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do,” Pere said. “Clematis confirmed that for me. And she believes there are no other boys in Idumea now, except for you.”

“Mother,” Relf turned to her, “she didn’t know anything about math except how to count to one hundred. And books? She didn’t know what books are! How can they not know about books? Doesn’t Querul have any upstairs?”

Pere pondered that. “Now that I think about it, no—I’ve seen ledgers and loose papers, but not *any* books. How strange.”

“How purposeful,” Banu said with atypical anger. “They’re keeping their own family as stupid as possible! If you don’t know there are any other boys, you won’t go looking for them! If you don’t know there are any other numbers, you won’t try to count to them! If you don’t know there are any other options, you won’t try to take them! Pere, what are you going to do about this?!”

He puffed in pride to see his wife now on her feet, punching her fists in the air. “Will you help me?” he asked.

“With anything!” she exclaimed. “This can’t continue!”

“I’ll help too, Father,” Relf said, then stood up because it seemed to be the thing to do.

“Our son is very generous, Dearest,” he said to Banu. “Offered to give Clematis his math books.”

“We *need* to give them to her! And all of them, lots of books!” Banu decided and marched over to a bookshelf. “Here, these are easy to read. Relf’s old childhood tales. We can bring these over, and—”

“No,” Pere cut in. “No, we can’t.”

“What?!” Banu cried.

“No one knows what I know,” he reminded her, “except for possibly Eugene Humphrey.”

Banu held the book to her chest and turned to face her husband. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, he was waiting for us.”

“Not really,” Relf said. “We just ran into him. He said he was on his way to Pools but he said he was stopping to clear his head first.”

“Think, son: the mansion is nowhere near any roads to Pools. He was tipped off. Someone told him where we went, and he was waiting, *and* he seemed very edgy. Well, edgier than normal. Who is he working for and who told him? I don’t know. Stumpy was very lax in his last years, and many little spy networks grew up around him. I have no doubt that someone in the mansion is in contact with someone at the garrison, but I don’t know who. They saw us, though, and sent for Eugene, who’s going to play innocent until the moment is right.”

Banu frowned. “Right for what?”

“To expose me, to turn me in, to become the next High General,” he said coolly.

“But . . . Eugene nominated you for the position!”

“Yes, he did, expecting I’d take him as my advisor when I won. Then he could control things for me and even take over if things didn’t go as he and others expected. He knew he couldn’t get the soldier votes I’d have, but once I’m thrown out, he could easily step over to my office and make himself at home. If they can’t manipulate me—and they’re discovering quickly that I’m no Stumpy—then they’re going to discredit me and try a new tactic. Call me paranoid, but since I don’t know who’s working for whom—and if anyone is actually on my side besides the enlisted men who I bribe with snacks—I can’t trust anyone.”

“Oh,” Relf said, his voice small. “That’s why you didn’t want me to speak until we got home.”

“Exactly. There are spies everywhere, unfortunately. Walking casually past, following a few steps behind, waiting in a shrub. It’s also why I don’t employ servants, or want to move into a larger home where we would need servants. Trust no one, Relf, even your servants. They’ll bring you your meal with a smile one day then stab you in the heart the next.”

“Pere!” Banu exclaimed. “That’s not fair! My friend is a servant.”

“And maybe we’ll employ her when all of this mess calms down. Until then, I stand by what I say, Relf. If not the servant, then the relative or friend of one. Remember that anyone in power is a target for anyone without power.”

Relf gulped. “Yes, sir.”

“You mean that, Pere?” Banu asked.

“Every word.”

“About Matilda?”

“I’m sorry, who?”

“My friend, trying to get on at the mansion—you’ll hire her later?”

“Uh, sure. In time.”

Banu clapped her hands in glee.

“Other issues first, Banu,” Pere reminded her. “The mansion?”

“That’s right,” she said, patting the book in her arms. “Books for the mansion—”

“No!” Pere burst out. “Not books! Not any little help, but big help. *Real* help!”

“What do you want to do, Father?” Relf asked, a little intimidated to see his father growing angry. The jolly general was fairly fuming.

“The only thing that should be done: we’re going to free them.”

No one spoke for nearly a minute. Finally Relf said, “How are you going to do that?”

“Carefully,” Pere said. “Very carefully.”

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Queen Jezzy took the folded note from the King’s Guard. He bowed deeply as he handed it to her, but she waited to unfold it until he left. He didn’t know how to read—none of them did—but still Jezzy couldn’t risk it. Once he was well on his way down, she marched to her Letters Room, shut the door, glanced around to make sure all was quiet, then opened and read the note.

She growled at the news, paced back and forth, screeched at a painting of a flower on the wall, then finally sat down to the wide writing desk.

Jezzy pulled out the carefully cut parchment slices—only she had that quality of parchment with that tint of gold—and inked the message:

“Next job—get the Blob.”

She pondered that, tipped her head, then smiled. Crossing out “the Blob” she instead wrote, “the son of the Blob.”

That would send a memorable lesson to never sneak around in her house again! Her killing squad had been restless lately. This would



satiate them. As if she'd disband her squad just because General Blob demanded it. Who did he think he was?!

She folded and sealed the parchment into one of her specialized envelopes—the guard would know where it was to go with the evening messages—then she left her Letters Room and locked the door. No one was allowed in there, ever.

She pulled on the pipe near on the wall and shouted nonsensically into the speaker. Her voice would echo throughout the corresponding pipes in the mansion, and within two minutes the Flower-name girl was panting at her door.

“You called, Queen Jezy?”

Jezy pointed to the message on the desk. “Bring it to the guard for delivery.”

Flower-name curtsied and turned to leave.

“Stop,” Jezy said, and Flower-name turned, looking worried.

Jezy stared at her for a minute, unsure of how to say what she wanted without giving anything away. “How are you and Bucket boy doing?”

Flower-name glanced nervously around. “He’s just a little boy, ma’am. We won’t be sharing a room for many, *many* years yet. He’s . . . very young.”

“I see,” Jezy said, and fingered a plate which had held her afternoon snack of cream pie. “But you’re satisfied with him?”

The girl shrugged, not meeting Jezy’s eyes.

Blast it, she’d seen the younger Blob! She knew that there were others out there.

“Flower-name!” Jezy barked, and the girl jumped. Jezy tried to speak kindly. “Give Bucket boy time. He will likely grow to be very impressive. You won’t regret waiting for him.”

Flower-girl nodded and tried to smile, but it was a pathetic attempt. “Yes, ma’am,” she said obediently. “Is there anything else?” She was gripping the message tightly in her hand, and Jezy was relieved it was the parchment, and not the flimsy paper they were now making near the forests. The girl would have sweated through and shredded that message before she got down the three flights of stairs.

“No, go. Deliver that. Needs to go out this evening, to my regular man.”

Flower-name nodded, curtsied again, and darted away.



Less than a minute later, Clematis was in the secret narrow passage behind the ugly dog painting with convenient eye-hole cutouts which allowed for spying on the throne room. Querul the Fourth was in there, arguing something with his advisors which Clematis didn't find interesting.

But what was in her hands *was*.

She knew that only certain messages went out on that parchment, and that for the past two years only she had been trusted to get it to the correct cousin guard who delivered it to the messenger outside the walls.

But what no one knew was that she had taught herself to read. She'd been sneaking out discarded papers, asking Fangi to retrieve them for her from the kindling boxes, so she could try to decipher the shapes. She'd figured out all of the letters, asking a relative here and there what sounds letters made. Some of the older members of the Family remembered a few.

Then she'd sit in that passage when she could, spying on the Queruls and listening to drafts of decrees, written on paper, until the perfect draft was penned on the parchment. Querul the Third had been most vocal, always shouting, always repeating what was on the pages to point out to his timid advisors how something was wrong or inane. Most of the paper decrees were then tossed in the kindling bin, and Clematis, who had an excellent memory, compared them to what she'd heard Querul the Third shouting over and over at his advisors.

Querul the Fourth wasn't nearly as useful to learning to read, Clematis realized a few moons ago. All Querul the Fourth ever did was sit in a chair and mope while Queen Jezzy yelled at him. So it was a good thing she'd learned to read while Querul the Third was still alive and yelling.

There was something else she had, secreted in a false panel under the dog painting. She had stolen it—the only thing she'd ever stolen in her life, ever—from Oren's shelves when once she was tasked with tidying it up. Auntie Helga, who normally cleaned the king's rooms, had been ill for many days, so when Clematis was twelve she changed jobs for a week. That's where she found them, in the room where the boys slept: rows and rows of pages bound together with leather and string. Since

Oren and Querul the Fifth were out with their grandmother, Clematis pulled out those strange things and thumbed through them.

There were shapes, all kinds of shapes in tidy rows, with occasional dots and slashes and marks.

Clematis was fascinated, and knew it was something important—something kept from her. Intrigued, she pulled out another and another, making sure to put them back carefully again. Finally she pulled out one where the shapes were much larger, and only a few on each page. And there were simple line drawings to go with them.

Something in her chest seized as she looked at that, and realized it was much simpler than the others. The drawings were for children, she surmised, and then she understood: this one was to teach children how to figure out the shapes.

That's when she stole it—impulsively, guiltily, lovingly. She shoved it into her apron pocket and, feeling near to retching in fear, rushed it down to her bed and hid it under a pillow. Then under the bed. Then in her underthings drawer. Then behind the silk curtains, then half a dozen other places until nerves finally led her to the secret passage where she knew no one else ever went. She'd scattered teaspoons of flour lightly on the floor after she'd leave each time, knowing if someone followed, they'd leave tracks.

In the four years she'd been using that passage, no one had ever left tracks.

She'd also accidentally found a loose panel in the wall there when she hurried into the secret passage one day, nearly being caught by Queen Jezzy who had been in a huff to get somewhere. Clematis had stumbled against the wall in her haste and the false panel gave way, revealing a convenient place to hide anything thin.

She opened the panel now, finding again the beloved bound pages, sure now that she knew the name of it: *book*. This is what Relf was talking about, and there were books about numbers? Oh, too wonderful, she thought as she took out the one book she now considered her own. She could read it, too.

*This is a cat.*

*This is a mat.*

*This is a rat.*

*This is a dog.*

*It made the rat go splat on the mat.*

*The cat did not splat.*

It wasn't the most riveting story, and the drawings were a little harsh if they were for young children. Especially the drawing with the word "splat." But the book was enough to get her started, and with the pages she had Fangi take and the conversations she'd listened to and the few things that the greats downstairs remembered, she'd taught herself to read.

With trembling hands, she eyed the message from Grandmother Jezzy in her hands. Oh, no one *ever* called Jezzy "Grandmother" to her face, and Clematis often wondered why they gave such a term of endearment to such an awful woman. But as part of the Family—albeit on the highest level—she was referred that way. Not entirely lovingly, though.

Grandmother Jezzy loved no one, that was certain. And whatever was in this message was to make sure the world has one less unloved person in it.

She patted her pocket to make sure she had matches there. Yes, she could remelt the wide wax seal just enough to reseal the envelope. Her hands shook so much she could barely peel off the seal without cracking it. The last time she did this, nearly six weeks ago, the message was about "The ugly Woman."

Clematis knew who that was—Querul the Fourth's wife, mother of the Fifth and Oren.

In fact, that's all the message said: "The ugly Woman." Clematis thought that was horribly unfair. Margo was a pleasant woman who smiled at the Family, spoke kindly the few times that she did speak, and seemed very, very sad. Maybe that's why Jezzy called her ugly. A woman that sad rarely looks beautiful. Clematis wondered what she was always sad about, but she never dared speak to her. No one was allowed to.

Clematis had thought the message was sent out by Jezzy so that someone could bring her sweets or silk from the city. But shortly after, when Margo was suddenly not there anymore, Clematis began to think something horrible had happened, and that the gold-tinted parchment had something to do with it.

She had to know what this new message said. Maybe this was a clue for the High General, and maybe he'd come back with his son—

At that thought, Clematis fumbled so much that she dropped the message, and then dropped it again because she couldn't get out of her mind

the image of that boy . . . another boy!

Never mind, she told herself, and carefully unfolded the envelope, then pulled out the message . . .

She stared at it, a ball of nausea growing in her belly.

*Next job—get ~~the Blob~~ the son of Blob.*

It was easy to read, as easy as the book she owned.

But if there were an illustration with it, Clematis knew she'd find it even more repulsive than the splat.

She dropped the note on her lap and held her face with her hands. Jezzy wanted something to happen to the son—to Relf.

No!

Then there'd be only Fangi. But *another* boy!

That's why Jezzy had asked if she was satisfied with Fangi. How could she be, when there was a boy like Relf in the world?

Clematis had to do something, had to stop whatever this was supposed to be. But how?

Her face felt flushed and hot. It took her nearly five minutes—yes, she knew how to count time, she'd learned that on her own as well—to finally reseal the letter, affix the wax seal, and make her way out of the passage unnoticed. She trotted to the cousin guard messenger who sat by the second back door and presented it to him with a little bow.

He nodded once—he was her mother's cousin—then he left for the side gates guarded by men in blue.

Usually that's as far as Clematis ever watched, but today she slipped back inside the doorway to spy on him. How far did the cousin ever go?

He was back already, Clematis noticed. He merely gave the message to the soldiers who shut the gate behind him. Whistling, the cousin sauntered down to the barns where he'd probably take a nap in the hayloft.

Clematis clenched her trembling fingers into fists, because an idea was growing in her mind. She estimated she had about five more minutes before she'd be looked for to help in the kitchens again, so she had to move quickly. She rushed back up to her secret dog painting passage, opened the hidden panel, retrieved a piece of paper filled with words and numbers which she'd used to study strange sounds like “sh” and “gh” and “mps,” and evaluated the back side. It would suffice.

But what could she use to write with?

It was too risky to steal anything from the throne room, even worse to take something from the Oren's and Querul the Fifth's learning room.

Clematis came to a decision. She slipped out of her passage again, went down to the basement, and into the room of the greats.

Danny was rolling yarn again—she suspected it was always the same ball, but since he was nearly blind, he'd never know it—and Sarafina was knitting. Next to her was her big crate of sewing supplies.

“Clematis!” Sarafina smiled as she entered the room. “How are you, child?”

“Good,” she said, hoping she sounded light and cheerful, although she was normally ornery and impatient. “May I . . . may I borrow a needle? I have a little sliver to dig out—”

“Oh, I can help you get that out,” Danny said mischievously, and he patted around himself for his pocketknife. “Just point me in the right direction . . .”

Clematis laughed, knowing it sounded tight and nervous, and said, “Thanks, I can do this myself. Just a small sliver. Thank you,” she said to Sarafina as she retrieved the sharpest needle she could find.

Maybe only four minutes now, until she was missed. Her heart was bouncing up to her throat, and she ducked into her room and shut the door. Taking a deep breath, then another, and another, she finally stabbed her palm. It didn't bleed as much as she had hoped, so she tried another vein, sticking out on her wrist. That stab stung, and it bled more than she expected.

Exhaling in frustration, and counting down time in her head, she worked as quickly as she could. That's when she realized that while she'd memorized the shapes of letters, she'd never actually *written* them. Her note was sloppy and maybe gory, but the letters were legible. It had to do.

She wrapped a kerchief around her wrist—yes, the “sliver” was deeper than she expected, would be her excuse—and she folded the note as best she could. She had no envelope, but this would have to be enough.

Maybe one minute left? She came up with another excuse—berries. She needed some, just had a craving for fresh ones, and headed back outside.

The cousin messenger still wasn't there, and the way to the side gate was free.

Filling her lungs with fresh bravery, she strode to the gate and wondered how one got the attention of the soldiers on the other side. So she

knocked. Simple enough, and it worked.

One of the men, maybe in his mid-thirties, was wide-eyed when he opened the gate a tiny gap. This never happened more than once a day.

Clematis stood tall and slipped the message to him through the gap. “Please—for the High General?”

That was as long as her bravery lasted, because at any moment the war could come barreling through and destroy her and the Family, so she turned and ran her fastest back to the mansion, up the stairs, and into the kitchen where she peeled potatoes until her breath came back to her and her heartbeat returned to normal.

It took more than an hour.

---

The sergeants stared at each other, dumbfounded.

“Duvera, has that ever happened before?” one asked the other.

“Never, Longtin. What do we do?”

Sergeant Duvera shrugged. “One of us brings it to the High General, obviously.”

In a low voice, Sergeant Longtin said, “Does anyone else besides us know he and his son were here?”

“No, and it needs to stay that way.” Then, realizing that maybe his answer wasn’t as correct as they assumed, he stared at his companion.

“One of us needs to deliver this,” Longtin said, “but that leaves the gate untended.”

“When has anyone *ever* approached these gates?” Duvera murmured.

“Well, we’ve been at this job for only a few weeks since we replaced those useless king’s guards. But counting today? I’m betting never. But today suddenly things are different.”

Duvera smiled hesitantly. “That’s because the High General is different. I’ll bring it, and I’ll try to call a backup for you.”

“What about the other message?” Longtin reminded. “The one given to you by that guard ten minutes ago?”

Duvera pondered that, then said, “I think the High General has time to read two messages, don’t you? Besides, the man who picks those up won’t be around until after dinner. When has he ever come earlier?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t done this job very long.”

“And that’ll be our excuse.”

---

Pere Shin sat at his desk glaring helplessly at the piles of files. He hated paperwork, and hated even more that old Stumpy hadn’t bothered with any of it. That meant it was all now his—years’ worth of crates, waiting in two huge offices. Too bad there couldn’t be another fire like the one that destroyed all of the world’s family lines and ancient history some years ago. While that was a true tragedy, burning all of the past army files would be an act of mercy.

At least for Pere it would be.

A knock at the door was most welcome. “Enter!” he called cheerfully.

His secretary, a lean and clever lieutenant winced in apology as he opened the door. “Sir, I know you don’t like to be disturbed—”

“When have I *ever* told you that when I’m dealing with files?”

The lieutenant smiled, still not used to working for a man who actually had a personality. “True, sir. But there’s someone here to see you. A sergeant who says it’s urgent?”

“Yes, let him in!” Pere nearly shoved the files aside, but that would have caused a cascade again, that he didn’t want his poor lieutenant to clean up once more.

His visitor came in cautiously. It wasn’t often that the enlisted men visited the highest authority in the garrison. When Pere recognized who it was, he leaped to his feet and came quickly around the desk to shut the door himself, and locked it.

“Sir,” Sergeant Duvera began, “I know this isn’t protocol, but something’s happened we thought you’d be interested in.” He held up two folded pages, one in a gold-tinted envelope, the other filled with strange black and red writing.

Pere put his finger to his lips to signal to the sergeant to speak more quietly—he hadn’t chosen his secretary; the garrison had—then took the messages. “From?”

“One from the mansion’s messenger, to be delivered to a man who comes every evening wearing a straw hat,” Duvera whispered. “Then the other was brought to us about ten minutes later . . . from a teenage girl.”



Pere's eyebrows rose in surprise, and the sergeant nodded. "She seemed terrified, sir, so I brought it right over. I know you didn't tell us to—"

"Don't apologize. You did the right thing. I told you two to take initiative, didn't I? This is exactly what I was hoping you'd do."

Duvera relaxed and Pere weighed the two messages. "Let's start with the official one, shall we?"

He opened it and smirked when he saw "the Blob," then frowned when he read "son of."

"Dear Creator," he whispered, although he was never much of a praying man. Now seemed to be a good time to begin.

"May I, sir?" the sergeant asked.

Pere handed it over.

"Well, *that's* rude." Then Duvera paled. "Wait, what does this mean?"

Pere swallowed. "Not entirely sure yet, but working on a theory." He remembered the other message in his hands and opened it.

One side was filled with black in script, practiced and clear, about a new taxation formula. The Queruls were always looking for ways to increase gold and silver coming into the mansion. But why send this?

Pere turned it over to see the red side. "Is this . . . is this written in blood?"

Duvera recoiled as he looked over the High General's shoulder. "The girl did have a kerchief wrapped around her wrist."

"Hot gravy!" Pere exclaimed. "The girl used her own blood? What is she trying to say?"

He set the page on the desk because the words were so clumsy he was going to need help deciphering it.

"Looks like a five-year-old wrote it," his sergeant said in a disapproving tone.

"Or perhaps it's the very first time someone has ever tried to write a letter, using her own blood!" Pere snapped.

"True, sir. Very sorry, sir."

Together they made out the print:

*Pare, Jezy is bad. Wants to hert yur bo. Tak care. Sav him. Culumatus.*

Duvera let out a low whistle. "Sir, may I venture a guess?"

"Go ahead," Pere whispered.

“Queen Jezzy still has her killing squad.”

“Got it in one, Sarge.”

“Sir! We need guards at your house! Your son is—”

“—on his way home from school right now, and this message did *not* get to Jezzy’s friends, now did it?” Pere said, folding it up again and trying to keep his voice steady, and rather successfully, he thought, considering he just realized he’d set up his son to be the next target. “There is no danger, yet. What do you do with these messages from the mansion anyway? Give them to that messenger of Jezzy’s? When does he arrive?”

“Usually around dinner time.”

Pere tapped his finger on the message. “Dinner time’s in about an hour, right?” He looked at the careful script of the first message. Very predictable script at that. “You’re going back, and you’re going to deliver this message to that man. But first, we’re going to modify it a bit. We need a woman’s hand, though.” His tapping increased. “I know!” he snapped his fingers. “That surgeon’s assistant—the blonde woman. She wrote me out a list of what foods I’m not supposed to eat anymore. She had very neat script just like this. Go get her!”

Duvera was already grinning. “Yes, sir. Can I see her handwriting?”

“I threw away the list. But I remember her hand. Hurry!”

As the sergeant rushed out the door, Pere studied the message. There already was one line crossed out so further modifications wouldn’t be suspicious.

A few minutes later the surgeon’s assistant came into the room, very confused but with an expression of optimism to realize that she was in the High General’s office. She was slender and energetic and old enough to be his mother, and acted like it with annoying frequency. She meant well, but she didn’t understand that food was sacred. She treated it like an experiment to be measured and analyzed and presented in tiny portions. She was no fun at all.

“Sir!” she exclaimed with too much hope. “The sergeant here said you were ready to try some of our recommendations?”

Duvera shrugged and Pere smirked. Whatever tactic works—that’s what the enlisted men were taught.

“No,” Pere said kindly, “but I have a more important task for you. First I need to know—what’s your security clearance?”

“The highest a civilian can have,” she said proudly.

“That was under High General Stumpy. What is it under me?”

She blinked, insulted. “Sir, I will maintain complete confidence in anything. I’m one of the few women to be employed by the garrison, and I take that as an incredible honor. I would never do anything to betray you or the army, sir. My father was an officer, you know. And I knew your father as well. Colonel Ricolfus Shin was an excellent man, sir.”

Pere held her gaze in his throughout her little speech, watching for any giveaway, any tell. There was none. He nodded once and whispered, “Thank you. Well, I have no choice but to trust you. I need you not for your diet suggestions—”

Her expression fell. For a woman in her sixties, she was in excellent condition and could probably wrestle a hog into submission. She rather seemed to have hoped that would have been why she was called, if not to advise the general on how to lose weight.

“—but I need you for something infinitely more important.”

“More important than the health of the High General?!”

Pere put a finger to his lips before whispering, “The *most* important thing of all: the life of my son.”

She took a hard step backward. “Oh, sir. Is he ill? Injured? I am fully trained, but let me get the top surgeon—”

“No, he’s not injured . . . *yet*. And you’re going to help me make sure it stays that way. You have lovely penmanship, by the way. Would you please copy the following words for me?”

---

The sergeant panted as he returned to his position next to his companion.

“Where have you been?” Sergeant Longtin murmured. “I’ve been alone for over an hour now!”

“What’s wrong? Did someone actually come by?” Duvera looked around interestedly.

“No, I just got bored,” Longtin admitted.

“Well, I’ve got news, and you’ll be glad you waited. But first, we have a message to deliver to that man who comes around. Silence until then.”

They stood at attention, occasionally pacing in front of the gates to keep their blood pumping, their senses alert.

Eventually the man came, dressed in nondescript trousers, a faded old green jacket over a tidy white shirt. On his head he wore a wide-brimmed straw hat pulled down nearly over his eyes, making it difficult to discern his color of hair. His scruffy beard, however, was a dark brown.

When the sergeants took over gate duty several weeks ago—at the insistence of General Shin and despite the temper tantrum of Queen Jezzy—Duvera and Longtin were told by Jezzy herself that she would still insist her regular messenger would be treated with the utmost respect. He'd always wear the wide-brimmed hat, would always retrieve her messages, and no, the sergeants didn't need to know what kinds of treats and luxuries she demanded from the city center each day. This was her little indulgence, her reward for her diligence to the city of Idumea and the world itself.

She could still send her messages, and the High General would let them go, *unless* his sergeants felt something was wrong—a sentiment he shared only with them.

His sergeants respected him. They'd been with him for over ten years, beginning as privates joining his fort over in Marsh when he was a lieutenant colonel and at only thirty years old. But they soon saw why he'd been promoted so young in an army where most officers were so old: Shin was a man to be trusted, a man who would never let them down, a man who would subtly hand them bacon sandwiches when he passed them on guard duty.

An officer who gives you free bacon sandwiches is a man you'll follow for the rest of your life.

When he was promoted to colonel three years ago and transferred to Idumea to oversee supplies for the entire army, he asked his sergeants if they wanted to come along. "Because," he said, giving them each a thick slice of sweet bread his wife had made, "I don't trust city folk. No one ever should. I need two men I can always rely on."

Also always follow a man whose wife makes such sweet bread.

Duvera and Longtin had been disappointed to learn a few weeks ago that they'd been assigned away from the garrison—and the general-delivered snacks—until Shin walked them through the orchard, glancing around to make sure they were alone.

“Men,” he had said as they sauntered near the high stone wall of the mansion, “I need your eyes and ears. There are too many factions, too many spy networks, too many attached to the mansion and the army who don’t care for the world but only for themselves. I need to expose them all or this world will crumble.” He said it so simply, so plainly, but his sergeants had felt their knees buckle. “There are very few people I can trust, but I believe in you two, so I’m giving you the most important position in the entire army. No other man in the 12,000 that I command in the world will have as much responsibility as you two.” Then he pointed at the lonely gate where two of Querul’s guards in green watched them with loathing.

“Seriously, sir?” Longtin whispered. “*That?*”

“That,” Shin murmured back. “I just have this feeling that that gate will be the key to changing everything. The problem is, I’m not yet sure what that ‘everything’ is just yet. But I will. Can I count on you two?”

Of course they’d said yes, and for the past three weeks had been passing the dulllest duty in all of the world’s army standing in front of that lonely gate where the only travelers to go through had been the High General and his son.

And where *this* man—they still couldn’t tell his age or even his skin color—came every day and picked up Queen Jezzy’s messages. Sometimes the parchment was thin and cheap, sometimes it was thick and expensive. Today, Duvera knew, was the highest quality of parchment in his fist, which he handed off to the man.

The recipient never looked up, never acknowledged the sergeants. He just walked off through the old orchard and out to the main road again.

Duvera and Longtin exhaled and exchanged places again in front of the gate. The most important thing had just happened, and no one knew it yet.

It seemed the most important events usually passed unnoticed until it was too late to do anything about them.

---

When Pere returned home from the garrison that evening, he did something he’d never done before—he told his guard that yes, for once, he *did* want them to stay and surround his house.

The six men were surprised but delighted to finally do their job, and took up positions around the modest structure only a quarter mile from the garrison.

Pere walked into the house, his step heavier than normal. His son was at the table doing his homework, his wife on the sofa darning yet another sock. Pere didn't have the heart to tell her she always fixed them in the lumpiest of ways.

Banu looked up and smiled. "Your supper's on the table under the cloth. I'm sure you ate dinner at the garrison, but I know how you miss my cooking when you work late."

Pere wasn't smiling. Nor did he rush eagerly to the table and playfully throw elbows at his son to make sure he didn't touch any of his late dinner. Instead he said, "Banu, I've made a terrible mistake."

To his astonishment, his wife and son looked at each other, then laughed. "What did I guess, Relf?" Banu said. "Within a moon's time, right? He'd confess that."

Relf grinned. "She did say that, Father. So what'd you do? Offend a major somewhere? Tell General Humphrey to take smiling lessons? Or—"

"No," Pere cut him sharply, and his son and wife stopped chuckling. "Banu, please forgive me, but it seems I've drawn the attention of something I don't yet know how to control."

She frowned and put down the hopeless sock. "What do you mean?"

There was no sense in prolonging it. "Jezzy's sent a killing squad . . . for our son."

Banu nearly fell off the sofa.

Relf did fall off of his chair.

Pere merely looked down at him in sympathy.

"Wait, wait," Relf said, trembling. "What are you talking about? How do you know? Why did she do this?" His voice pitched higher with each question.

"I'm sorry, son. Someone knows you were in the mansion with me—that's the best I can figure. My sergeants intercepted a message from Jezzy that you are the next target. Probably trying to teach me a lesson or frighten me."

"Inter . . . intercepted the message?" Banu stammered. "Longtin and Duvera?"

Pere nodded.

“Oh, I always liked them,” she said, forgetting for the moment *why* she liked them tonight. It caught up to her a second later. “But Pere, if they stopped the message, then—”

Relf looked up hopefully from his spot on the oak-planked floor, but Pere was already sighing. “Jezzy never uses only one method of communication. She’d be foolish to do so. Her bookkeeper who I interrogated the other day accidentally confirmed that Jezzy has different messengers for different times of the day. I’m only sure of the one at dinner time. There are others.”

Relf’s eyes were darting toward the thick wavy glass in the windows. “We’re secure right now,” Pere told him. “I’ve got six guards tonight. A dozen more will be patrolling the road. Killing squads never have more than twelve men. They’ll be outnumbered.” He patted his hip where a long knife was secured, then subtly folded his arms to make sure the second was in his sleeve, and could feel the third still in his right boot, and the fourth in his left one.

Relf had his hand on hip where his long knife was, and curiously Banu was patting her side as well.

“I’m very, very sorry, son,” Pere said to Relf and held out a hand to pull him up. “And Banu, please forgive me. I never should have brought him along to the mansion.”

Banu nodded and blinked rapidly. Tears were building in her eyes, and she dropped her stitching to hid her face in her hands.

Pere sagged. He was never a bigger failure than when he made his wife cry. “Oh, Banu, Banu,” he said, stepping to her side and kneeling in front of her. “Dearest, they’re *not* going to get him. We’re going to put an end to this, to all of this, very soon. We’re secure tonight, and I’ve put into action a plan to fix everything.”

She looked up, her face splotchy. “How!?” she demanded, and Pere flinched at her anger. “How will you fix this?”

“I’m, I’m working on a plan,” he stumbled in his words. “Still trying to figure out—”

“NO!” she cried out. “That’s how you always do things, half thought-out! You get a notion and just run with it, and the next thing you know our son’s life is in danger! You’re not prepared for this sort of . . . this sort of thing. Jezzy’s squads are very effective, and you know that!”

“And very illegal!” he exclaimed. “I outlawed them just the other day with full army support!”

“So what? Has she disbanded them? No one knows. And why should she? She thinks SHE’S in charge, doesn’t she? You can’t keep going like this, Pere! You’re not just filling barns with uniforms anymore. You have to have real plans, real backup. You have to trust the army, and you have to think things through, not just make up ideas on the run because *you’re no good at running!*”

He swallowed down a variety of angry responses, and the random question as to why she thought he filled barns with uniforms, because she was correct on too many points. He couldn’t get by on his charm and his luck any longer. And, he began to suspect, Humphrey was likely waiting for him to fail in just such a way. Eugene Humphrey always had a plan, always had contingencies, always had such . . . dullness.

Then again, knowing his son’s life was in danger made “dull” seem very appealing right now.

Relf had come over to his mother’s side. “It’s not Father’s fault,” he said quietly. “I begged him to go along. I wanted to be part of whatever he was doing . . . it’s my fault—”

“No, it’s not,” Pere cut him off. “It’s Jezzy’s. Only Jezzy’s. We’re trying to reverse all of that, but we just didn’t realize how clever and cruel she really is.”

“So how did you find out?” Banu asked him, her arms folded angrily. He had wanted to hug and comfort her, but she was sending every signal to stay far, far away.

“The files,” Pere admitted. “The ones I’ve been avoiding? After I sent Duvera back, I was about to give up on the files when . . . well, I just had a feeling. I picked up a file, then another, and found one containing a report from some captains last year. They’d been conducting surveillance on the mansion themselves, curious as to what was going on there. They noticed that there were three times men picked up messages from the mansion. One at dinner time by the gate where I keep my men. One in the morning from the main front gate, and,” he sighed, “another who comes at random times to the back gate where deliveries are brought. He’d come and go with nothing in his hands, from what they could discern. He’d just show up at the same time as the wood wagons, usually at night. The captains wrote up their findings and recommended someone should investigate, but after they presented their concerns, they were both transferred away.”

He massaged his hands anxiously. More messages may have already



gone out, and a killing squad may have already been converging as of midday meal. His son had walked home from school completely vulnerable. The note his sergeants intercepted may have been a follow-up one, or even a decoy.

To the silence of the room he said, "I've already sent for those captains. One's stationed down in Orchards, the other over in Grasses. They should both be here by the morning. I've ordered them to travel at night. I think they'll suspect why I want them, and they'll be eager to arrive."

Banu's chin was trembling. "And who ordered them transferred? General Stumpy?"

"No," Pere whispered. "Eugene Humphrey's office. They knew: he and Lieutenant Colonel Lazan. And they directed attention away from the mansion. I suspected Eugene wants me out of the way, but what if he's connected to the mansion somehow? Banu, I'll be honest—I'm beginning to think I'm sinking. I knew this position would be overwhelming, but . . ."

Pere felt fear—real fear—that he couldn't find a solution. Could Humphrey actually be involved with the killing squads? It's not that they'd ever been good friends in the three years Pere had been serving at the garrison, but they'd had an amicable relationship, and working together as the army's two generals had gone as well as could be expected in the few short weeks they'd been serving. But if Humphrey was involved with the killing squads—which he agreed with Pere needed to be disbanded . . .

Oh, no. Humphrey had seen Pere and Relf coming from the direction of the mansion. Did he have spies watching them actually enter and exit by the side gate? Even though he was in Pools, did Humphrey have contacts willing to take out the boy whose name he could never get right?

Pere felt he was sinking deeper into despair. He didn't trust enough people in the garrison, know enough who he could get on his side. Only two sergeants, maybe now two captains, and then . . .?

His wife must have picked up on his distress because she pushed herself off of the sofa and fell into his arms.

He squeezed his eyes tight and let his wife hug him as hard as she could.

"But you can do this, Pere! You must! You've got to get to the bottom of all these spies and make this place truly free. I know you can."

"But," he whispered, "just a few minutes ago you were saying—"

“Oh, I was just mad at you,” she blubbered. “You know that.”

“Thank you,” he mumbled into her hair. “I’ll read more files. I might even make some myself. I’ll stick to my desk more rather than running off like a new lieutenant.”

“But not right now,” Relf’s voice cut in, and Pere opened his eyes to see his son standing over him, his eyes red and puffy. “You can’t read files right now. We have to fix the problems at the mansion first. And, and, and the killing squad thing.” His voice cracked.

Pere smiled and stood up, peeling his wife off of him so he could embrace his only son. “Absolutely. You and your mother will pack a bag and be prepared to leave before dawn.” He held his son at arm’s length to look him in his eyes. Relf was nearly as tall as him now, just a few more inches to go. “I’ve arranged for you to leave by a milk wagon before dawn—that won’t be suspicious—and the milkmen will all be soldiers in disguise. We’ll get you up to Vines via some back roads. I’ve got trustworthy connections at that fort. Jezzy’s men will never know where to find you. Once I’ve put down the squad—and we *will* capture them—I’ll send word for you to return.”

Relf looked disappointed. “I feel like it’s running away.”

“So what?!” Pere nearly shouted. “Run!”

Banu nodded. “It’s the most sensible thing to do. Relf, I’ll find you a bag for your clothes. We’ll figure something out to tell your teacher, and—oh Pere, something fell out of your jacket there.”

“No, don’t!” he called, but Relf was already picking up the paper with black and dark red writing.

“What is this? This side is normal,” he said, unfolding it and taking it to the table while Pere looked up to the pine-planked ceiling, knowing it was already too late. “But this other side . . . whoa, is this written in blood?”

“Blood!” Banu exclaimed, coming to his side to look at the message on the table.

Pere rubbed his eyes with his fingers as his wife and son murmured to each other to make out the message. A few seconds later, Relf said out loud, “Calamitous?”

“No,” Pere sighed. “She doesn’t know how to spell her own name. This may have been the very first thing she’s ever written. She rushed it out to Duvera and Longtin herself.”

“Clematis?” Relf cried out. “Father, she knows?”

“Oh, the dear girl,” Banu crooned. “Look how sweet, how she tried to write ‘boy’. Oh, isn’t that precious—”

But Relf was already thinking like a commander, for which Pere was both pleased and devastated. “Father, I can’t go anywhere. Clematis could be in danger, especially if Jezzy or Humphrey have spies, especially if someone saw her deliver that note to your sergeants—Father, we have to get Clematis out first!”

Banu looked up from the message. “Oh, dear. Really? Is this what that means?”

Pere took a deep breath, knowing his milk cart escape was about to be modified. “Relf, it’d be safer to get *you* out first.”

“But, Father,” he said stoically. “It’d be better to get Clematis out first.”

Banu frowned. “I think you’re both wrong. Why not just get *everyone* out of the mansion? I keep thinking of those old people in the basement with no indoor washing room. They deserve that luxury in their last years, don’t you think? Clear out all of those poor people, which will shake up Jezzy and probably many of her plans, and then my friend Matilda can get a job there and be your own spy, Pere!”

Relf and Pere stared at each other.

“Get them *all* out?” Pere whispered, and his son’s smiled quirked up on one side.

It just might work.

“But I’ll need a bigger milk cart.”

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The door to the secret passageway behind the ugly dog painting creaked open. It was a tight fit—it was easier to squeeze in when she was a new bride spying on her father-in-law and his advisors, but Jezzy could still fit in *most* of her body. With her reaching stick, she popped off the cover to the hidden panel and poked at the sheets of stolen pages from the kindling box.

Yes, one was missing since yesterday.

The slugging girl *had* sent a message. Stupid flower child. Now they’d be short one servant in a few years. Fangi’s older sister had better start producing babies or something more drastic would have to be done.

But no matter. Her son Querul no longer had a jealous wife to worry about, and there were several women still of child-bearing years.

But how to dispose of the troublesome girl without anyone suspecting? Outside of the mansion, that was never a problem. She had the killing squads throw many of their successes over the stone wall into the farm, and the Family buried “the war victims” among the berries. There were still lengths of land with no bodies in it yet.

But she’d never thrown a body *out* the other way before. Margo had walked easily away, with her accompaniment. And someone in the Family might actually miss the sour-faced girl.

Ah, well, they’d get over it soon enough. Hardly anyone remembered the Ugly Woman anymore and it’d been less than two moons.

Jezy stooped over as far as she could to pop the cover back over the panel. Then she blew gently on the flour that the Flower-name girl always spread across the floor to detect disturbance. It was too easy to cover tracks, and that’s why the girl deserved to die. She thought she was so clever, learning to read and count to whatever she could count to now, but she wasn’t as clever as Jezy.

That’d be the last thing she’d learn.

## ~The Fourth Day of the Week ~

Early the next morning, even before the milkmen were doing their rounds, Pere sat in his office with the most unusual collection of people: two sergeants; two bleary-eyed but grateful-to-be-there captains; Relf and Banu; Banu's friend Matilda, who he had to remind was *not* on her way for a job interview; Mrs. Kayle, the surgeon's diet-turned-handwriting specialist; and thirty soldiers dressed as farmers.

Since his office was large, but not *that* large, it was quite a cozy fit.

Many of them knew why they were there; others weren't quite sure. But Pere realized he had to start trusting *someone* in the garrison, and these were the best picks he could come up with.

"I realize this is an odd morning, but I also believe you will follow my lead and do as I ask. Perhaps we will need each of you men, perhaps we won't. However, there's a problem which has been growing right under our noses, and it's time it was addressed and resolved. Gentlemen—and our three ladies—I need your help if we're going to fix this city and this world. It's time to tear down the old lies and start letting new truths grow."

Pere realized that his speech wasn't doing much to clarify things, but only complicate matters. Some of his corporals dressed as farmers were likely worried that they actually were expected to plant something called truth so it could grow.

"Well, we best be on our way. There are ten wagons hitched up and ready to go. Choose your ride, I'll be in the lead, and whatever you do, remember this: we serve the citizens first."

They filed out silently, through the garrison headquarters which wouldn't be seeing much action for another hour or so until the morning shift arrived, past the night-shift soldiers on duty who wore perplexed expressions that the high general, in his full blue uniform, had had an early morning meeting with a bunch of farmers and three women.

Soon the procession of wagons was rumbling down the cobblestone

road. Pere told his driver to turn down one road before the mansion, to the tracked lane that led to the adjacent old orchard. The rest of the wagons followed, and Pere wondered if the noise would wake anyone inside the thick walls of the mansion. The Family downstairs, however, would be assembling for breakfast as they had a few mornings ago at this time.

Wordlessly, Pere signaled to his soldiers to disembark. He nodded to his chosen sergeants to replace the other soldiers standing guard at the rarely-used side gate, then pointed to the captains to head to the front gate to inform the army guards on duty that early morning visitors were about to surprise the mansion.

Pere nodded to his wife and her friend, who remained in the wagons with four soldiers and Mrs. Kayle, while the bulk of his “farmers” started pruning the trees. If any of them actually knew what they were doing, Pere didn’t care. They just had to look busy, and it was a good way for them to be armed with sharp steel in their hands. They spread throughout the long orchard, working in pairs, scattered far enough apart to look like they belonged in the neglected farm, should someone pass by.

Interestingly, no one *ever* passed by or approached. Pere was counting on that.

The wagons pulled away to hide on a back road—only two were to remain for the “farmers”—and the one carrying Banu, Matilda, and Mrs. Kayle would park over behind a thick stand of brush. Pere heard their quiet conversation before the wagon left.

“Mrs. Shin, so nice to meet you. I don’t know if your husband told you, but I created a list of recipes for him—”

“Oh, how kind, Mrs. Kayle! You know, I have only twenty-two ways of cooking bacon for him. Do you have new bacon recipes?”

“Bacon?! No, Mrs. Shin. Why, bacon’s on top of the list! Did he not give you that list?”

“A list?”

“Mrs. Shin, my recipes are all about replacing meats with vegetables—”

“Why would I do *that*?” Banu was exclaiming when mercifully their wagon started away.

Pere knew Mrs. Kayle was twisting on the bench to send him a *look*, but he was concerned with far greater issues than his weight.

Near the sergeants Longtin and Duvera, Relf took his place, leaning against the high stone wall and eyeing it curiously. Pere winked at his

son, and Relf winked back, patting his side where his long knife was secured, but had never been used.

Maybe today.

Pere took a deep breath and marched up to the front gates where his captains swung them open, and the lieutenants recently assigned there watched in question. The High General pointed to each, then to himself.

Instead of remaining at the gates, the four young officers followed their High General to the front doors where two of the king's green guard still stood, now fidgeting in worry.

Pere finally spoke. "Surprise inspection, boys. Open the doors. Now."

The guards glanced at each other, at the four officers who were broader and stronger and wore heavier swords than they did, and then they each took a step away from the door.

Pere frowned at their disobedience, until one of the guards mumbled, "Not locked, sir. Never is."

"Oh really?" Pere said. "Good to know. Thank you. And, uh, by the way—go to the side gate on the south there. Things will get interesting soon, and I suspect you may want to be a part of it. You *are* part of the Family, are you not?"

Both men stared at him with big eyes at his knowledge of the term the Family, and Pere wagged his eyebrows and pointed in the correct direction, as if promising children where they'd find cake.

He pushed open the doors—yes, no lock, how remarkably stupid—and the five officers strode in. One of the captains headed automatically for the throne room, but Pere shook his head.

"No one's there at this hour. We're going somewhere different."

"But sir, I thought you said we're fixing the mansion? I've been waiting to find out exactly what kind of 'fixing' you mean."

"You're all about to find out. If my guess is correct—and, honestly, it frequently isn't so just pretend I get it right the first time anyway—what we want is down this hall . . . oops, nope. Just as I warned you—down *this* hall."

Faintly he could hear the sounds of plates clattering and muffled conversation, and he led his men past several grand reception rooms with tall ceilings and long drapes and cold fireplaces. The smell of fried eggs reached them, but before they turned down the last hall, Pere paused and turned to his men. "With smiles, soldiers. Smiles!"

They tried to copy him, and Pere began to think this might not work. But there wasn't enough time for a new plan—this one had taken all night as it was to arrange, and who knew how much time Relf—and more importantly—Clematis had, if she'd been found out? There was a killing squad assembling, and if there had been a message before the one he retrieved yesterday, time may already be past.

And where would Queen Jezzy be this early in the morning?

He turned down the last hallway and found an open door just as he had almost predicted, and strode straight through it—

—to screams and panic.

He held up his hands as if in surrender and kept smiling as broadly as he could. "Please, please," he called as more than two dozen people, many who had been sitting around a long table, scrambled into a corner as if they'd practiced this. "My name is—"

"PERE!" called out Fangi, and he broke from the clutches of someone who likely was his mother to rush over to him.

"Hi, Fangi. I told you I'd come back. And I dressed in my uniform today."

His mother stood tall, reaching for her son and gesturing as if she'd been betrayed. "You, you *know* this man?"

"It's the new High General, Sally," said a middle-aged man standing bravely in front of most of the Family, his tone cold. "I've seen you coming to visit Querul."

"Yes, I am," Pere said with his most genial smile in place. "And I've seen you answering the front door wearing white gloves and ruffles. But this look is better for you—a work shirt and no gloves. I never trust a man wearing white gloves. And I suppose you dress up only when you expect visitors at the front door?"

The doorman looked less stuffy, and surprisingly more threatening, as he stood his ground in front of the Family, not saying a word but with his mustache twitching in annoyance.

But many of the Family were relaxing, glancing at each other, moving out of the corner. The High General was supposed to be safe.

"And I'm here to . . . well, I'm here to *free* you. I and my soldiers. It's my understanding that you've been here a great many years, and today it's time for you to move on. You can go now. Free! Door's open, we've got rides, you can pack a few things . . . shall we go?"

They stared at him, dumbfounded. No one moved.



Fangi shrugged. "I don't think we want to go, Pere."

The Family gazed at him as if he had announced that the color orange tasted like how a horse smells. They couldn't comprehend anything he was saying. Pere wasn't expecting this. He rather thought a *few* would be eager for a change of pace, but not a single person shifted their position.

A captain stepped up, a young man with a pleasant demeanor. "Everyone, we realize this is sudden, but we are here to help you. It's not natural that you've been shut up in this mansion for so long, and we're here to let you out."

The doorman stood taller. He merely cleared his throat, and the entire family tightened up into the corner again. Pere had seen that behavior with a guard dog and a flock of sheep. It barked a certain way, lunged another way, and the flock obeyed.

"Thank you," the doorman said formally. "You may now leave."

The captain looked at Pere perplexed, but Pere said, "I get it. You think this is a trap, don't you? And you seem to be the leader here. I'm sorry, I don't know your name?"

"Nor will you," he said staunchly. "It was a mistake for Fangi to reveal his name, even to a uniform, but I'll not make that mistake."

"Although you just revealed that Fangi's mother's name is Sally," Pere pointed out. "No, don't worry. I'll forget that, so you can stop that eye twitching. You think we're here to harm or trick you," Pere nodded sadly. "Sir, I need to call you something during our negotiations. Clearly you're a man to be reckoned with, so if you won't tell me your name, may I call you . . . Reckon?"

He stood staunchly, immovable, but a woman behind him smirked, and another smiled a little proudly. One may have been his wife, maybe the other a daughter.

Pere nodded once. "Reckon, sir, we're not here to harm or worry you. We're here to offer you something you've never had before: a chance to live as you wish to."

"Why?" Reckon demanded.

The other captain next to Pere threw up his arms. "Because why not? Why not choose where you want to live and do as you wish?"

"Because that's not possible, and everyone knows it!" a woman in her fifties exclaimed. "You're trying to lure us out, to sacrifice us to some unknown something. Where's Querul?! What have you done with

him? Where's Grandmother Jezzy?"

"Grandmother?" the captain recoiled.

Reckon lunged unexpectedly for a pipe on the wall, but Pere held back the lieutenant who was about to wrestle it out of his hands. The man shouted into it, something that sounded like, "INTRUDERS!" But it was so garbled and panicked that Pere wasn't sure.

"I knew this would happen," a younger woman whimpered, sheltered in the arms of a young man. "As soon as they forced back the Cousin Guards and replaced them with *that blue*," she spat in disdain, "I knew it would be the end!"

"Sir," one of the captains turned to Pere with a low voice, "I don't think this is going as we thought it would."

"Honestly," Pere whispered back, "I hadn't thought at *all* how it would go, so to me it's going just fine. But I've got an idea." He turned back to the Family who had rearranged themselves: the women were against the wall, and the men had formed a shield before them. One of them was waving at Fangi to come back to their group, but Fangi was too curious, admiring the patches on the uniform of the captain who stood before him.

"Please," Pere tried again. "You can see that Fangi's not afraid of me—" and he nudged the boy to go back to his mother who was frantically motioning for him to join her, "—and I know that you have two revered and ancient grandparents sleeping downstairs. May we please speak with them? Together? I think they may be able to help explain some things."

He'd been counting the heads—twenty-eight, a few more than he expected—which meant with the two old people, the two guards he'd already sent to the gate, and Clematis there were thirty-three in total.

Wait—

"Where's Clematis?" he asked heavily.

The huddle of family examined each other, looked around, and then a woman called out, "CLEMATIS! Where are you?"

Pere swallowed when there was no answer, and Fangi looked over at him, his dark eyes worried. "I haven't seen her yet this morning," he confessed.

It was easy to tell who her parents were. They were the most agitated. Pere caught the eye of her mother. "Did she wake up easily this morning? Eager to tend to the chickens?"

“How do you know she doesn’t like to get up in the morning? And she hates the chickens,” she snarled.

“I *know* teenagers,” Pere said kindly. “None *ever* wants to wake up early, especially for chickens. Did you see her this morning?” he pressed.

The woman shook her head and looked to a man in front of her. He turned, panic rising in his voice, “I thought YOU got her up! She wasn’t in bed!”

Pere resisted the urge to draw his sword, but said instead to his officers, “Gentlemen, we need to sniff out Queen Jezzy—”

“She’d never hurt us!” another woman called out. “Never!”

“Why don’t you sound so sure of that,” Pere demanded.

No one from the sheep huddle answered him.

“Dear Creator,” he whispered, because now seemed like a good time for another prayer, even if he didn’t know more than to call on His name. They had reason to fear Jezzy, which made his fear increase as well.

“Fan out!” he ordered his officers, and they took off like lightning out the door. They knew how to work together to clear out rooms, but it was a very large mansion, and now Pere wished he’d called for the thirty “farmers” to join him earlier. Someone had suggested that, during their all-night planning session. He couldn’t remember now why he rejected having all the soldiers storm the mansion—

No, he saw it now. Considering the skittishness of the Family, who stared at him in dread, they would have thought they were being invaded. Five men in blue were more than enough to terrify them. Plus, it would take them a few minutes to find the old queen, and Pere could use this time.

“I am on your side,” he said in his soothing manner. Banu always said he could smooth-talk a saw into a salamander, although he thought the comparison an odd one. “Clematis’s parents—you don’t have to cower there. You’re free to go look for her. Maybe she’s at the outhouse, or braiding her hair?”

Her parents looked uncertainly at the rest of the Family, but then broke ranks and darted out the door, calling for Clematis.

The High General turned back to the rest of the Family, half of whom looked like they wanted to go help, the other half eyeing Pere suspiciously.

Anything could be a trap.

“I understand your reticence about Jezzy,” he told them. “You may or may not know this, but she has employed killing squads for decades now. Whoever displeases her or speaks out against the king, she’d have them killed. No inquiry, no trial, no negotiations. I recently outlawed those squads, in my position as High General, but she’s made no sign to disband them. Nor, frustratingly, do we even know *who* is on those squads.” He met the eyes of each of the men in the room, and to his relief they looked horrified. “Anyone?” he asked carefully, although he doubted any of them had ever left the grounds in their lives.

They all shook their heads.

“I came to the mansion earlier this week for the first time, trying to find a way in which may have been a secret entrance. I found a few. Some of you know about secret passageways, don’t you?”

He could read their guilty faces, and he smiled knowingly at them.

Melting them like butter, Banu would say. His honeyed tones, his syrupy smile . . . he always craved pancakes when she talked that way and now he remembered he hadn’t had breakfast.

His smile slid away. “I was looking for passageways when I came, because I’ve been worried about Querul’s wife, Margo. She’s been missing for weeks now with no sightings reported anywhere, and I fear she’s dead.”

Several in the Family glanced miserably at each other as if he was verifying what they were thinking.

“And the last known person to interact with her was Queen Jezzy. I wonder if her killing squad had anything to do with her disappearance. I’d heard that Margo wasn’t happy here. I’m guessing some of you can attest to that?”

Now many of the Family were squirming, and Pere watched Fangi’s mother. Her head was down as she stroked her son’s fuzzy black hair.

Pere put the pieces together. It must have been hard for Margo to live in a house where her husband could, at a moment’s notice, be used as breeding stock to increase the number of servants.

He smiled in sympathy. “She had a hard life here, and I’m sure all of you did your best to make her time softer. Now I’m afraid she’s gone. I snuck in here looking to see how she may have been taken out, if that’s what happened. And, worryingly, none of you *ever* knew I was here. You have guards, but they’re pitifully ineffective. I got in, was here for over half an hour, and got out undetected. You may wonder why I had

your mansion guards removed. It's because my soldiers will truly keep you safe, especially from threats younger, faster, and skinnier than me."

Now there was more fidgeting, especially among the men who seemed to believe they were guarding the Family well.

But not well enough.

"What I *didn't* expect," Pere continued in his sugared tones, "was to find a charming young man delivering wood, or to find that he has a large and loving family behind him. I can feel your affection for each other, and only because you've supported each other so well have you endured for this long. I'm deeply impressed, and deeply concerned for you as well. My duty is to protect the citizenry, and I didn't even know there were citizens here to protect."

Reckon folded his arms. "We *are* protected, sir. Very well, here. Our guards did their duty. You just got lucky."

"Sir," Pere said to him, "with all due respect, no—I was not lucky, and you are not well protected. You see, I snuck in here a second time, and with another person, and was listening in to your breakfast through that very wall. Had I been someone less trustworthy, I could have killed you all. Sir, how many blades do you see me wearing right now?"

Members of the Family was now paling, withdrawing into themselves. Pere could discern who the former guards were. They were huffing silently.

Reckon tried to firm his stance. "Your sword, High General."

Pere removed it and set it on the table between the platters of eggs and toast and bacon, which made his belly rumble. "Easily spotted. But I have three more."

No one who was pressed up against the wall—the wall where he supposedly had listened in to them—seemed to like that response.

Pere bent over and pulled out the long knives from his boots, setting them on the table. Then he slid his hand up his sleeve and removed the third long knife.

"I remove these weapons as an act of peace, of good will. I don't want to hurt you, I never did. But I fear there are those in this mansion who do, and who have. I fear for your lives. Please, may we speak to the grandparents who sleep downstairs in that room where he rolls the yarn and she knits it?"

"How can you know all of this?!" Reckon whispered harshly.

Pere's smooth, melty smile was back. "I told you—I've been here

before. And I know a fast way to get down there.”

He approached the wall and hoped he guess rightly. There was a shallow floor-to-ceiling shelf with a few narrow dishes on the shelves. With his audience keeping a watchful eye on him, he removed the dishes and hoped that there wasn't a lock somewhere. Putting all of his weight behind the effort—and any lock would have struggled mightily against it—he yanked on the shelf. It broke way with a loud crash to reveal a dark stairwell behind it.

Pere was careful not to sigh in relief that the passage was there.

Gasping, the Family moved as one body behind Pere to peer into the darkness.

“I forgot that was there,” someone murmured.

“Me, too,” said another voice.

Pere stepped into the darkness. “Would you like to follow me?” Someone handed him a candle, and he led the procession down the stairs.

For nearly thirty people, they were shockingly quiet, likely too astonished to make much noise. But he heard whispers of, “Didn't we play here as children?” and “Well, THIS would have made mealtimes easier. Can't believe no one told me this was here.”

Soon he was at the double doors at the bottom. He handed the candle to a man in his twenties who was awe-struck, then Pere wrenched open the false shelf door and pushed open the closet door.

“Well, I'll be a hornet's middle . . .” the man didn't finish his sentence, to Pere's disappointment, but followed him out into the wide hallway, as did everyone else.

Pere kept his voice low when he said, “Would someone be so kind as to wake up your great grandparents? Whose grandparents are they, anyway?” People were trickling out of the stairwell, a few calling down the hall for Clematis, but of those who heard the High General, every one of their hands went up.

So did Pere's eyebrows.

“Well, in a way, they're related to all of us,” one middle-aged woman explained. “They're sort of *together* now, as they were in the past, then there were others they were *together with* who have died, so now we just *keep* them together. You know what I mean?”

Pere smiled understandingly although he hadn't followed most of that.

"I'll just go wake them," she offered and slipped into the door.

The yell of "VISITORS!" nearly made Pere jump out of his boots.

"A bit deaf, they are," someone else told him.

"I can see how they became that way," Pere quipped back, and a few people chuckled with him.

Sixth lesson in diplomacy: get your opposition to laugh with you. Pere should teach that class in command school.

After some loud exchanges of, "VISITORS? Who'd visit us?" and "What time is it?" and "Why visitors?" the door opened again and out came two elderly people, rumped and confused, shuffling into the dim hallway and stopping abruptly when they saw the large officer in blue.

"Good morning," he said kindly. "Please forgive the rudeness of this early hour. Clearly I have no manners."

He was surprised to hear how many quiet chuckles there were behind him. The Family was warming up to him.

"But—your names, please?"

"This is Danny," said the woman who woke them up, patting the elderly man's shoulder. The old couple was squinting at him. Pere could tell Danny's eyes were gray and cloudy. He squinted just for show. "And this is Sarafina."

"Very nice to meet you, sir, ma'am. Danny, may I ask, how old are you?"

Danny cleared his throat, stood taller and said, ". . . I don't really know."

Pere suspected as much. "Sir, how old were you when the Great War started?"

"Ah, that I know!" he said proudly. "I was seven years old."

"What about me?" Sarafina demanded. "Don't you want to know my age?"

"No, ma'am," Pere said gravely. "My wife has said I should never ask a woman her age."

That made everyone laugh, and Pere knew he had them practically in his back pocket.

"A wise wife you have there," Sarafina smiled, showing her few remaining teeth. "But you may be interested to know that I'm three years older than Danny! I was probably eleven when the war began."

"Congratulations!" Pere said, ignoring the problem with the math, and clapped his hands in delight. "Now, my dear Sarafina and Danny—

how old were you when the Great War ended?”

Danny scoffed, as did everyone else around Pere. “It hasn’t, sir! It still rages on in the world.”

Several voices murmured their agreement, then noticed that the High General hadn’t said a word.

Pere waited until all was silent, then asked, “How do you know it hasn’t ended?”

Danny hemmed and guffawed and harrumphed before he finally said, “It’s how it’s always been! What are you, part of the army? Why aren’t you out there fighting for us?”

“Because,” Pere said, “the biggest battle is going on right here, in this basement.”

“What are you talking about? Are we under attack?” Sarafina’s voice pitched higher. “Get to the safe areas—” she began to wail, but Pere caught her flailing arms.

“No, ma’am. There’s no attack, but there has been a great injustice, for far too many years—”

He was interrupted by Clematis’s parents rushing down the stairs to the hall.

“We can’t find her anywhere!” her father panted. “Something’s wrong!”

“Agreed,” Pere said. “Fan out!” he ordered the Family, forgetting that they didn’t know what that meant. “Search every room, under every bed, behind every chair and sofa, and in those storage rooms! My men will have the upstairs cleared any moment now, so let’s make sure she’s not down here. MOVE!”

They moved, rushing into every room, calling her name, while Pere took a deep breath and—

He noticed the wall panel, down about fifteen paces, where he and Relf and emerged from the passage that led outside, and where they listened in to the morning routines a few days ago.

“She knows,” he murmured, and was surprised to discover Clematis’s mother at his elbow.

“Who?” she asked urgently. “Which she?”

“Both of them, Jezzy *and* Clematis. Stories floated around the army for years that Queen Jezzy had ‘secret ways.’ She always seemed to know what her husband and the army leaders were planning, because she was undoubtedly spying. She’d burst into the throne room at the



most opportune moments and declare this or that was wrong. It's that hideous dog painting in the throne room—I'm betting she even painted it. The woman knows no subtlety. She'd hide behind it, I'm sure—"

"I did, too," Clematis's mother whispered. "I discovered it on accident and knew I shouldn't be there, once when I was a girl. But Jezzy found me. Beat me for it," she confessed miserably.

"I'm very sorry," Pere whispered back. "Did you ever tell your daughter about the passage?"

"Oh, no! Oh, I wouldn't want Jezzy angry with her, too!"

"So she found it all by herself," Pere said, to her mother's astonishment. "Because she's a smart girl, a very smart girl," he said. "She knows Jezzy's secrets, ma'am. Lots of them, I bet. And one of them is that panel in the wall here. Find your husband. I could use his help."

An instant later Clematis's father was rushing to Pere. The rest of the Family was still rummaging around the basement and calling for the missing teenager.

"Here," Pere said, and scraped aside the hidden door panel.

Clematis's mother exclaimed, "I knew I heard a noise the other morning!"

"Sorry, but it *was* me. You nearly caught me, too," Pere smiled sadly. They peered up into another dark stairwell. "Clematis?" Pere shouted.

A muffled something came back, and Clematis's father turned to the hallway to shout, "SILENCE!" to hush up the Family. At the hole in the wall he again shouted his daughter's name.

Another odd sound came down, nothing that Pere could identify. He met the eyes of Clematis's father, and without another word the men starting running up the stairs.

That's not the smartest thing to do in the pitch dark, and soon they were stumbling over each other in their race to the top. Clematis's father trampled Pere in an effort to get past him, giving Pere a new headache and reviving an old knee injury.

"A light!" he called down the stairs, rubbing his head, as Clematis's father shouted her name over and over.

An older man rushed up with two candles in his hands, followed by three younger men.

"The passage goes both ways," Pere told them. "To the left, you'll come out the narrow stairs that lead to your outhouse. To the right, well, I don't know. I didn't get any further than this."

More candles in the hands of more men came up the stairs, and the dust and clutter of years of disservice were soon illuminated.

“I know I heard something,” Clematis’s father insisted, looking down one way then the other, unsure of which to take.

“I did too,” Pere said. “Try the right with some of these men, a few others—follow me to the left. Watch your steps, there are rat remains here.”

He almost didn’t hear the faint creaking to the left, but something nudged his mind and he headed toward the secret door Relf had found first.

Men followed him, and he wished they’d be quieter so he wouldn’t miss another subtle sound. Soon he was at the door and he worked his fingers into the narrow gap to pull it open.

The men behind him exclaimed in surprise to find they were in the outhouse hall, but Pere was already outside the mansion, examining every large shrub and every stone for someone hiding behind.

He nearly missed it, the flash of cloth that disappeared behind a tall berry bush against the mansion. Without a word he raced over to it, men on his heels.

Behind the thick bush was the stone wall of the mansion—no, wait, not entirely. There was another false wall, only halfway up, with a door made of wood skillfully painted to look like stone, and it was closing, closing in on a boot—

Pere lunged over the bush and grabbed the boot, preventing it from slipping into the new passageway. Although he tumbled to the ground, crushing the poor plant, he didn’t let go of the boot but hauled on it with all his strength as if fighting the heaviest catfish in the river. He dragged out a leg attached to a raging, screeching voice that rebounded in muffled tones in the passage.

“YOU SLAGGING, FILTHY BLOB OF A MAN!”

He nearly dropped the leg in surprise, but instead firmed his grip and yanked his hardest, hearing a satisfying *thump* as the owner of the voice undoubtedly banged a body part on its way out.

It was nasty labor, the creature which the poor mansion was birthing, but when Pere finally retrieved the thrashing body which didn’t want to be extracted, he placed a firm boot on its belly to keep it from escaping, and he sneered in delight.

“Jezzy,” he announced as the rest of the Family circled around him

in shock. “You’re too fat to go crawling around under mansions. And you, madam, are no longer lovely. Not that you ever were.”

Her head was gashed and bleeding, her face filthy with muck, and she was dressed not in her silk gowns, or even in her bedclothes, but in old green trousers and a man’s shirt, dirt brown. She continued to thrash like a wild animal, or like a toddler having a temper tantrum.

“What in the world are you doing?” Pere demanded and stepped harder on her belly so that she quit flailing but writhed in pain. “Trying to sneak yourself or someone else out? Or in?”

“Stop it!” one of the men said. “Can’t you see you’re hurting her?”

“Yes, yes!” Jezzy cried, suddenly producing tears and wailing like a delicate lady. “You see what this brute of a soldier is doing to me?”

The commotion of Pere’s capture had brought the rest of the searchers outside, and Clematis’s father came around the bush, glaring at Jezzy. “Where is she?! Where’s my daughter?!”

Jezzy wasn’t much of an actress, Pere noted, because her fake crying suddenly shifted to smugness. “She’s gone,” Jezzy said, trying to sit up, but Pere wasn’t about to let her. Not until his officers returned. And where were they, anyway?

“She said she hated it here,” Jezzy continued, “and I told her, fine. She wants to leave? I’ll let her leave. I even helped her. That’s why I’m dressed like this, so no one would recognize me. She took off this morning after some other boy she saw. She was always a sour one anyway—”

“What?!” her father roared, and even if Pere had been sitting on the old queen, there was no way he could have held her back from the fury of Clematis’s father. He grabbed Jezzy by the shoulders and hauled her up, slamming her against the stone wall of the mansion.

Pere winced at the new bump the old queen would have on the back of her head, but he didn’t feel too badly about it.

“She’d never leave!” her father shouted at her. “Where is she? What’d you do with her?”

Pere had forgotten about the two guards in green, who likely had been standing obediently by the thick wooden side gate down the rock wall on the other side of Pere’s sergeants, but they had come over to see the action. They were now perplexed as to who they should be guarding: Jezzy or Clematis’s father. Pere suspected that they’d never actually confronted anyone in their entire guarding careers. They were merely

for show, and right now they were merely *watching* the show.

Around the other side of the mansion came the four officers, surrounding Querul the Fourth, still in his lavender silk nightshirt, and his two sons in tow, rubbing the sleep out of their eyes. The soldiers were running the king's family to the scene, where Querul the Fourth stopped and stared wide-eyed at his mother being slammed again against the stone wall.

"Shin!" the Fourth cried out. "Have him release my mother!"

"Why?" Pere said. "So that I can have a turn at her? She's done something with Clematis!"

The Fourth frowned. "Mother?"

But Pere wasn't going to wait for her lies. He was already indicating to the slender lieutenants. "In here," he gestured to the half door in the wall. "This isn't a foundation access but a passageway. Go in there and pull out what you find—very, very gently."

Clematis's mother crouched next to Pere and peered in. "Clematis? Are you in there?"

The officers scrambled in, and it was only moments later that their muffled shouts came out.

Pere swallowed and prayed, *Please let her be alive, please let her be alive*. He kneeled at the passage next to Clematis's mother, trying to make out in the gloom what his officers were doing, but it was impossible until one came out, backwards, carefully dragging a body. Her ankles were bound in silk scarves, then came her torso, with wrists bound with more silks, dyed scarlet, then finally her head, cradled awkwardly by the second lieutenant, trying to move her and crawl out at the same time.

Clematis's eyes were only halfway open, her brown skin tinted blue, and Pere knew why: more silks—several, and very thick—were wrapped around her mouth and nose, suffocating her.

"Give me your long knife!" Pere cried out as the soldiers propped up the teenager, and her mother fumbled with the silk on her wrists. That wasn't the problem, Pere knew. With his lieutenant's blade in hand, Pere ordered, "Hold her still—we need to get her breathing again!" There was no clear knot to slice off, so Pere glanced at the girl's mother.

She understood immediately and nodded. "She'll heal. Do it fast!"

Pere slid the knife as gingerly as he could up under the silks along Clematis's cheek. Then he began to saw through the cloth, the blade facing him, as fast as he could without nicking her flesh. Within seconds

the silks began to give, then one layer and another and another fell away, until Clematis was freed and gasping.

Pere stood up and away so that her father could smother her with her mother, but Clematis was pushing him away with her still-bound hands, and forced her eyes open.

“Pere!” she gasped. “Jezzy—”

“I know, I know,” he assured her. “We’ve got her under guard.” He looked to make sure, and the captains had their swords out and pushed right up against Jezzy—one blade pressing against her ample belly, the other positioned where her heart should be, if she had one. With her back flat against the wall, she had nowhere to go, although she was throwing angry glances at her son, who looked around as if he wasn’t sure where he was.

“No,” Clematis tried again. “Relf! She’s . . . after . . . Relf!”

“I know,” Pere said warmly, crouching again next to her and ignoring the pain in his knee which hated the motion. “Clematis, you were so very brave to warn me. Thank you so much. He’s safe.”

“No!” she tried her best to sit up, the color coming rapidly back to her face. “He’s not! A killing squad has been sent—”

“I know,” Pere said again. “And I told them where to go and when. And if they followed the note, then they’ll be here right now, and also in custody.”

Jezzy heard that and screeched, “Impossible!”

Pere was about to respond to that, but suddenly was struck with a thought. “Clematis, how did you get under there? There’s no way Jezzy could have brought you down . . . Is there another exit?”

Clematis shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

Pere spun to Jezzy, but she was suddenly very tight-lipped.

“Back in there!” Pere ordered, gesturing to the passage. “No, none of the Family!” he called, as Clematis’s father tried to climb in there. “Someone armed and skilled! Never mind, I’m going first.”

The space was big enough, but more importantly, he was angry enough. He crawled through the gap, encountering a dirty planked floor and low clearance, maybe only four feet high. He strained to see in the darkness, but soon a candle was given to him, which he snatched as the lieutenants crawled in after him. The area was broader than he expected, the flickering flame not casting far enough to light the ends of it.

“To the corners,” he whispered to his officers, and nodded which

directions he intended. He'd go up the middle hoping to flush out whatever or whoever may be hiding there.

It was dank and smelled like old urine, but as he crawled forward, he could see the end of the space less than twenty paces ahead, the inner foundation of the stone mansion. On the ground ahead was old cloth, perhaps canvas from past construction. But because it was conveniently rolled up, Pere headed straight for it.

His lieutenants were sharp enough to see his clambering, and they converged on the rolled canvas at the same time.

It seemed to take a breath.

Pere flopped on top of it, crushing it with his full weight, and heard a muffled grunt come from its interior.

"Gotcha! And rolled up for suitable moving. What an obvious hiding place. No, don't bother checking the cloth," Pere said to a lieutenant who was attempting to peer into the open top. "I think I know what we've got here." From under the now-squirring bundle he wrenched out a crushed straw hat with a brim. "This is our man. Let's drag him out of here, and keep it tight!"

They dragged the rolled bundle out of the passage, letting it bang and bump along the way. Clematis's father was waiting, bouncing in fury, ready to punch something. Pere stood up and handed him the hat.

"It's part of the uniform, I suspect. Have to know who is on your side, and it's also easy to toss away. Hold on to this."

The lieutenants were now unrolling the bundle, several men of the Family standing by as support. What was revealed at the end was indeed a man, scowling and furious, his face smeared with soot and muck. Pere didn't know if his filth was a result of his adventures that morning or an attempt to disguise his appearance. He was immediately taken up by Querul's former guards. Pere wasn't sure they were up to the task, but there *were* four of them. One of them said, almost pleasantly, "Hey, what are *you* doing under there?"

"You know him?" Pere asked.

"Only by . . . well, not by face, but certainly by body shape. He always picked up the messages in the morning."

One of the captains exclaimed, "That's the man, sir! The one we wrote about in our report? The one no one wanted to investigate, so they had us transferred instead? And there was another one, at dinner time, right? Also wearing that style of straw hat! Then one at night—could

have been that man, I'm not sure."

Pere turned to Querul the Fourth, who looked to his mother. That was always his strategy: what would mother say?

Jezy thrust her chin into the air and looked high into the sky at nothing.

Pere said, "I think I know who insisted that Stumpy have you transferred." He turned back to the man now being held by four of the Family. In the captains' report they had described a thin, shorter man, but exceptionally strong, as if he was muscle through and through, and fully capable of carrying off Clematis. Pere took the hat from her father, who had been smashing it in his hands, and plopped it on the new prisoner's head.

"Nice fit. Easy uniform. Can barely make out your face and certainly not your eyes. Is this what every assassin in your killing squad wears? So you can identify each other then toss away the evidence?"

His glower was intense, but Pere was tired—he hadn't slept all night—so the glare did nothing to him.

"How many in a squad? In *this* squad, sent to take out Clematis?"

The man said nothing.

"All right, then. Here's my theory. There are headstones—grave markers—throughout the grounds. I suspect many of them are your squad's victims, people who Jezy the Turnip hated, had you kill, then you threw their bodies over the wall."

Quiet gasps behind him from the Family turned him part-way.

A younger man, likely a former guard, said, "There *were* bodies thrown over the wall, but they're part of the war!"

Pere searched the faces of the Family—yes, they all believed that. He paused when he saw the old man called Danny who had joined everyone else outside, Sarafina by his side.

"You told me earlier, Danny, that the Great War began when you were a boy, but that it didn't end."

"*Didn't end?*" one of the lieutenants whispered.

Pere held up his hand to keep him quiet. "Danny, what year was that?"

Danny frowned as he pulled out the memory. "The year 195."

"That's right. Lieutenant," Pere turned to his surprised officer. "Please tell us what year the Great War ended—it's question number two on the command school admissions exam."

“Certainly, sir. The Great War ended in 200—five years later!”

Everyone among the Family shifted positions, startled and disbelieving. Someone muttered, “That’s a lie!”

“Captains,” Pere called out. “Would you please confirm the date that the Great War ended?”

“The year 200,” they chorused.

“Thank you.” But Pere could see the Family wasn’t about to believe it.

So he turned to Querul the Fourth, whose entire demeanor was wilting.

“Fourth, when did the Great War end? Remember, there are army witnesses here.”

He shrank more in his silky nightshirt, seemed to think about the question, then shrugged. “In 200.”

“What?!” came dozens of responses from the Family, but Danny was slowly shaking his head.

Pere walked over to him and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Sir, do you know what year this is?”

“No,” Danny said, his voice quivering. “We kind of . . . kind of stopped keeping count, I guess.”

“Sir, it’s 280. The Great War has been over for eighty years, sir. *Eighty years.*”

Pere was afraid the news was actually going to kill him, the way the old man fainted on the spot. But fortunately he wasn’t heavy, and Pere easily caught him and gently laid him down between two headstones among the blackberry bushes. Two older women, maybe his daughters, rushed over to fan his face.

Sarafina, however, the oldest of the group, stood firm and trembled in fury. “Why?!” she demanded, and Pere wasn’t sure who her question was addressed to. “If this is true, then why keep us here? Jezzy! Answer me!”

Queen Jezzy was still inspecting the approaching dawn, defiant and mute.

Fourth began to open his mouth, but his mother suddenly let out a screech of fury, and he clamped it shut again.

His two young sons just stared stupidly.

“I have a theory,” Pere said when he realized no one else would answer Sarafina. Surveying the Family only added substance to his theory.



There were at least six very boop-able noses of varying ages, likely more. He needed to get closer to be sure. “Sarafina,” he began, then hesitated. “I’m sorry, I don’t know your last name?”

“My last what?” she asked, still glaring bitterly at Jezzy.

“Never mind. Sarafina, you were a child when the Great War first began. How many of you were living in the mansion at that time?”

She pulled her gaze to look at Pere. “My parents, Danny’s parents, then their grandparents,” she gestured to a vague cluster of people, “then Danny and me.”

“Eight of you? You were likely old enough to be a servant, so seven as servants? Then I assume your parents and the others had more children?”

Sarafina’s glare was back on Jezzy, then over to Querul, who shrank a little. “The First took us in as a safety measure,” she said, her voice calming slightly. “It was a terrifying time. Fighting was very close—I know that! I remember that!”

A captain cleared his throat, but Pere shook his head. History lessons would come later.

“They made us rooms down in the storage area so we could stay during the worst fighting. They set up their old furniture, gave us bedding. After a while, it just seemed easier to stay every day instead of going home. We moved in,” she explained.

“Do you recall how far into the war this may have happened?”

She mulled that over. “I had a birthday shortly after we moved in. I think I was twelve.”

“And you may be ninety-one or ninety-two now?”

She nodded proudly. “I remembered my numbers.” She stood up taller. “That’s another thing—I used to go to school!” she suddenly remembered. “I learned letters and reading and numbers—math! They called it math. But Querul the First said school was too dangerous, and that . . . General Shin, did they ever close the schools during the Great War?”

Pere turned to the captain who seemed to brimming with history lessons.

“No, ma’am,” the captain answered her. “I’m sorry to tell you, but the fighting never actually reached the interior of Idumea. Only on the outskirts, and only a couple of times. Schools never shut down in the city, and only for a few moons at a time in the surrounding villages.”

Sarafina's fists were in balls now, trembling with rage. "I *liked* learning!" she seethed.

Jezy finally dropped her chin. "That wasn't my fault!" she yelled at Sarafina. "I wasn't even *in* the mansion back then! I didn't come until years later!"

"Then why did you keep us?!" Sarafina raged back. Pere had noticed that the Family was clumping around her, either to hold her up or hold her back. A couple older men shared her features—they were likely her sons, sturdy men in their late sixties or early seventies—and their faces were hardening in shared anger. And, sadly, they had very boopable noses.

"You did this on purpose, didn't you?" Sarafina demanded. "You, you, you're just as bad as all of them! You kept us for . . . for what?"

"Convenience," Pere said, glaring at the Fourth. "Built-in, home-grown servants. Slaves, if you will—"

That finally got a rise out of Querul. "They're not slaves! Look at what they're wearing! They dress finer than anyone else out there! We took care of them, fed them, loved them—"

"—Love them a little too much in some cases, I'd bet!" Pere belted. He tapped his nose then pointed at Fourth's.

Fourth shifted guiltily, but he wasn't finished. "The world was—*is*—a dangerous place. We protected them, kept them away from all of *that*!"

"All of WHAT?!" Pere held out his arms. "There's still some fighting, sure, but only with Guards and only a couple times a year. And the only ones who get injured or die are usually MY soldiers! You know where the greatest danger is? HERE! How many bodies has your family buried in this yard over the past eighty years, Fourth? How many?!"

Querul didn't answer immediately but bobbed his head. "I'm not sure—"

"Shall we count? Give a lesson in counting to your 'servants' as we do so? How many of you can count higher than ten? Twenty? Clematis can count higher than one hundred now, so let's start with these stones, right here! Look—three bodies buried here? I'm assuming that's what those crude tally marks signify. And no names? Jezy's work, is it? Come on, Querul—more than one body per stone and etched with only slashes on it? HOW MANY?!"

Fourth's jaw was going up and down now, his eyes darting around

the Family looking for a friendly face. He paused on Fangi's mother, but she was slowly shaking her head, baffled.

"Soldiers!" Pere shouted. "How many citizens has the world lost to Guarders since the END of the Great War eighty years ago? This was on the latest report issued on army conflicts, so I expect at least *one* of you should have read it."

Their responses were a little slower, and Pere noticed out of the corner of his eye his young officers mouthing numbers to each other and shrugging in agreement. Finally they seemed to have come to a consensus, and one of them made to respond, but Pere held up his hand.

"First I want to hear the number from Querul or Jezzy. A rough estimate, if you don't mind? How many of the kings' enemies have you buried here over the years, throwing them over the walls and pretending the Great War killed them? Starting with Querul the First."

Fourth was staring at his mother who was beginning to realize she had no friends anywhere.

"Well over two hundred," said a low voice Pere hadn't heard yet. He'd nearly forgotten about the muscled prisoner held by the Family, and twisted to see his dull eyes. "The queen may have records, I don't know. But according to *my* records—"

"You're not supposed to have any!" Jezzy shrieked.

"Have to make sure I get paid properly," the man explained calmly to Pere, ignoring Jezzy's continued shrieks of "Traitor! Traitor!"

"Good thing she doesn't have a killing squad to come after you now," Pere said dryly.

His prisoner scoffed.

Stale biscuits. There must be more than one killing squad.

"Over two hundred," the man repeated, and Pere began to realize his voice *was* familiar. His gut twisted as the man continued. "That's how many we've dumped here over the years. More elsewhere," he added as Jezzy continued to throw a fit, in spite of the swords on her. "I'm a dead man anyway, I've got nothing to lose. Let me see that fat sow suffer and I'll give you my records."

Stunned, Pere couldn't respond but only stepped aside to give the man a clear view of Jezzy—muddy, bleeding, in hideous clothing, and now screeching like a stuck cat. The man nodded. "Always hated her, but she pays well."

"How could you?!" Pere snarled at him, finally finding his voice.

“You’re an officer!”

“What?!” one of his captains exclaimed, nearly leaving his post at Jezzy to come see for himself, until his companion frantically waved him back. “Who is it?”

Pere’s fists clenched so tight he was trembling, but it was his boot that was bothering him. So badly it wanted to kick that filthy face until all the soot and dirt came off, and he could see the dull expression of Lieutenant Colonel Lazan. “And here I thought the insider was General Humphrey. So what does he know? ANSWER ME!”

Lazan shrugged. “Really nothing. I used him and his office. Convenience. He’s quite clueless. Almost as useless as General Stumpy was.”

“Humphrey’s supposed to be in Pools—with you!”

“He still is, but I got ‘sick’,” Lazan said lazily. “Came back early in the carriage.”

“Why?! Why betray the army and the world like this?”

“Because Aunt Jezzy pays more,” Lazan droned.

‘Aunt Jezzy’ was shrieking and screeching now, trying to drown out her nephew’s confession.

“It made sense,” Lazan explained easily. “In the army, I could see what Stumpy was up to, let Jezzy know, and both of them paid me. Was a great run, but tiring, working both sides like this. I’m ready for retirement.”

Pere huffed. “Ready for trial and probably execution!”

“Same thing,” Lazan said idly.

Pere was hating him more each moment, and the urge to kick the man repeatedly nearly overwhelmed him. But there were, surprisingly, more important matters at hand. He realized the entire Family was watching him, some with sympathy, others with disdain. The army couldn’t even control their own man? One was working for Jezzy in the mansion?

Yes, High General Shin was doing a *fantastic* job.

Pere turned to his soldiers who were scowling in disgust at the filthy officer. “Men, we *were* discussing the number of dead citizens. Here there are more than two hundred buried. What number did you come up with? How many do you *think* was listed on that report of dead citizens over the past eighty years? Together now?”

They watched each other as they said, “One hundred forty—” and the last number was a bit mumbled, but Pere nodded once in approval anyway.

“For those of you not familiar with numbers,” he said to The Family, “those living *in* this mansion have killed more than those living *outside* of it. Your enemies live *here*. And Clematis would have been the next victim, along with my son. Correct?” He looked at Lazan.

He hesitated, then tipped his head in acknowledgement.

“Even my own son. You encourage me one day then plan to kill my son the next,” Pere seethed. He bit back his anger and tried to keep focused on the task at hand. “And your killing squad, created by Jezzy, is waiting out there, in the orchard? Waiting for you to throw the body of this poor girl, suffocating and silent, over the wall for them to finish the task, along with nabbing my son?”

Now Lazan finally looked interested. “How did you know that?”

“The message,” Pere said. “The words on it, after designating that the ‘son of Blob’ be your target, also said, ‘east wall of the mansion, at sunrise.’”

“No, it didn’t!” Jezzy shouted.

“Yes, it did,” Pere said coolly. “Because that’s what I had added to it before your nephew here picked it up. Did Lazan tell you he was coming this morning? Maybe that’s why you decided to do a two-for-one with your killing squad. Toss over another teenager, since Clematis was starting to get too nosy. So Jezzy, you dressed up as a . . . I don’t even know *what* you’re trying to look like, but not yourself, I’m guessing. It’s probably how you dressed up to escort your daughter-in-law out of the mansion. Go for a little walk or something? Then in case anyone sees you, they’d never be able to identify you, but would think she’d left with some dumpy old man. Then maybe you handed her off to someone supposedly ‘safe,’ such as an officer—probably Lazan?”

Jezzy stared up at a passing cloud, her chin jutting out angrily.

At least Pere had finally found a way to make Queen Jezzy stop talking: confront her with the truth. “What about Clematis? How’d you get her out here?” He turned to the girl. “What happened this morning?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, rubbing her wrists where her mother had just unknotted the tightest scarf. “I kind of woke up, but the scarves were already around my mouth, and Jezzy and that man were tying up my hands and ankles. I was growing so dizzy I couldn’t do anything and I felt myself falling back asleep,” she added in frustration.

“Of course you couldn’t do anything,” Pere said understandingly. “You were already suffocating. Then Lazan snatched you up, he and

Jezy headed out the secret door in the hallway, and were storing you under the mansion until all was quiet and they could toss you over the wall to the killing squad while the Family was at breakfast. All of the noise we made looking for you changed their plans a bit.” He turned to Lazan. “Did I get it right?”

“You’re proving to be smarter than most of us in the garrison thought you’d be, Shin,” Lazan said dully. “A few people are going to regret installing you. Thought you’d be another Stumpy. *Blobby*—”

Pere ignored him. If he was easily insulted, he’d never get anything done. It wouldn’t be the last time someone made light of his weight, or of his character. He knew they had low expectations of him, but that didn’t mean he didn’t know what was going on, or that he was going to let those things keep happening.

The best way to counter the insults, he learned some time ago, was to show there was no basis for any of them. By the look of startled and reluctant admiration in Lazan’s normally dull eyes, he was beginning to succeed.

And, hot corn buns, so far he was guessing correctly. Ideas were coming to him, pieces were falling together in unexpected ways, and he felt he was seeing pictures focusing left and right in front of him. He just described what was unveiling in his mind, and for a moment he wondered where it was all coming from. But that moment passed because yet another idea was presenting itself.

“Jezy, you probably have some spies outside of the mansion seeing who goes in and out of the gates, true?”

Unsurprisingly, she didn’t respond.

“That’s how you saw me, and also my son. And Clematis,” he pulled out a page filled with black and red writing, “Jezy knew you sent this, I suspect.”

“My note!” Clematis cried. She was now fully free of her bands, thanks to her parents, and Pere winced to realize that he had accidentally sliced her cheek with his long knife, but she hadn’t noticed the trickle of blood. She was getting to her feet, taking the note from his hands. “You got it!”

“I did. And it was well written,” he told her as she blushed in pride. “Your first attempt?”

She nodded, and her mother stood up to take the note. “You can write?”

“And read,” Clematis said proudly.

“May I?” Pere took it back. “You may be able to read, but I don’t think you fully understand what you sent me. On the back here—these numbers are what we call a formula. It’s a taxation rate. Looks like they were experimenting with several. I can see that means nothing to you. What it means to the rest of the world, however, is that we have to send portions of our gold and silver to the mansion here, so that the Queruls and Jezzy can live in luxury and opulence, and also take care of you. However, according to the notes here written by who I can only assume was Jezzy’s bookkeeper, she was wanting a larger portion of that income for her ‘special projects.’ In fact, it seems she wanted another 20%? That’s a huge amount of gold and silver, by the way. Enough to run a small village of three thousand people. And Jezzy wanted it all for herself and . . .” Pere turned to the prisoner. “How many do you employ? You said it yourself—you’re a dead man, what do you have to lose? Come on, Lazan, how many have been in your squads?”

Lazan sighed and said, “Up to sixty. Depends on the location, ease of job. Usually use ten or less for each job. I’m not even sure I’m her only point man.”

Jezzy let loose an entire round of profanity and screeches, but no one paid attention.

“Up to sixty,” Pere said, letting go a low whistle. “Clematis, when you took this page from—where *did* you get it, by the way?”

“Fangi got it for me, from the kindling box,” she admitted. “He’d bring me many pages.”

“Ah, clever again. When you took this page and wrote on the back of it, you didn’t realize you were revealing that Queen Jezzy has private funds that no one else knows, and that she was altering the taxation rate for her own gain. That’s illegal in Idumea, even for an old queen. But Jezzy knew you’d sent it. She probably didn’t know to where or why. She’s frothing so much right now we’d never get a clear answer from her. And judging by her current tantrum, I’m guessing she didn’t realize you could write, or that you revealed that she was trying to kill my son. You read her message too, didn’t you? The one that was intended for the squad?”

She nodded, partly proud, partly worried she was in trouble.

“Well done,” Pere said to put her at ease. “And because all is silent on the other side of that wall, I’m assuming my men did their job well.

Thirty soldiers in disguise with forty backup all around the mansion walls should have subdued the killing squad. How many for this job?" Pere asked Lazan.

He slouched. "For teenagers? Need only five. They have no skills."

"How nice," Pere said bitterly. "An easy job." He began walking over to the gate to verify what he was 99% sure was correct: that his son was still alive and there was no killing squad waiting.

But he didn't expect the sudden panic of the Family.

"NO!" they cried out. "Don't do it! Stay away from the gate! It's death!" After that he couldn't discern what they were saying because of the wailing and shouts. He turned around and saw that the women were now being shoved rapidly back through the narrow door, with men standing guard around them and yelling warnings.

"Whoa!" Pere said, holding up his hands. "Whoa, whoa! STOP!" He marched back over to them, and their yells subsided, their shoving slowed. A few women even came cautiously back outside.

"What in the world is wrong—" Pere paused. "Oh. Oh, I get it." With new fury he turned to Fourth. "Well done. Your father and grandfather and great-grandfather taught these people to be scared of the wall and terrified of the gate, haven't you? Unbelievable. I wondered why none of them ever tried to leave before, but look at them. You drill for this, don't you? Teach them how to run and hide and shelter each other in preparation for absolutely nothing!"

The Fourth stood firm. "The training has always been of good use. No one's ever infiltrated these grounds . . ." his voice trailed off as Pere pointed to the prisoner still being held and looking bored.

"I'm guessing he's infiltrated a few times," Pere said. "And guess what, Fourth? So have I. Want to know why your mother wants to kill my son? Probably because he accompanied me on one of my infiltrations of your mansion! Ah, finally a look of shock on your face. It's about time. I've been here twice, Querul, and no one here ever knew except Fangi and Clematis. Not even you. So much for your good training."

Fourth began to huff. "How DARE you come into my mansion—"

"Trying to find your wife, Fourth!" Pere reminded him. "I didn't find her, but I sure found a lot of other interesting activities! And you know what? It stops today. Right now! Look," he turned to the Family. "I sense you feel betrayed, and I sense you don't know who or what to fully believe. And I assume it's going to take you a long time to believe anyone



ever again. But please—put a little faith in me right now. Nothing out there will harm you, I promise. I brought seventy soldiers with me, plus a few other helpers to prove to you that the world is safe for you again, that you can come out, that you can be part of it. Just let me open the gate—”

He wasn't prepared for a dozen men to suddenly rush him, circle him, and link arms. Another tactic they'd clearly practiced.

“All right,” Pere said, curious as he observed his small prison made of men. “And this is to . . .?”

“Keep you confined until help arrives!” one man told him.

Pere scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Nice idea, men. But honestly, you look like you're playing a children's game. Notice that my officers aren't even alarmed? They look amused, actually. And now I wonder, *who* is supposed to come help you?”

It was almost comical, had it not been so sad, how each of the dozen men glanced at each other to see if he had an answer.

“Here's an idea,” Pere continued conversationally. “Let's all walk—slowly, yes, slowly—over to the gate. I won't open it, I just want to get reassurance from my sergeants that all is well. All right? Let's go together. Shall I count to three? Will that help? One, two, three . . . ah, very good. Look how fun this is? And . . . this is close enough.” He cleared his throat as his circle of new friends stopped. “Duvera? Longtin?”

“Yes, sir?” their voices came over the gate.

“Status?”

“All is secure, sir! Easy capture, and you were right—they were all wearing straw hats with brims. The backup you sent is taking them to the garrison right now.”

The men surrounding Pere looked at each other questioningly. Some were ready to believe the High General, but some still suspected this was all some kind of set-up.

“Well done,” Pere called back. “How many?”

“Five, sir. Should there have been more?”

“Apparently not.”

“Do you need help, sir?”

“No, no, thank you, men. I'm . . . Let's say that I'm taken care of right now. However, call for the wagon to approach. You know the one, right?”

“Yes, sir. And sir? Someone here wants to know if the young lady is fine?”

Pere smiled. Relf was worried about Clematis. “Yes, tell that person that we reached her in time, but just barely. I assume that he is also safe?”

Clematis had stepped away from her parents and was approaching Pere and his new circle of friends, wondering about Relf.

“Had a tricky moment, sir,” Duvera called over. “He was a little worried—oh, apparently I wasn’t supposed to say that. Stop hitting me in the shoulder, boy! Anyway, he was never in any *real* danger. We kept him safe.”

Pere sighed in satisfaction and nodded at Clematis. She beamed and clapped her hands in relief. Pere almost felt like doing the same thing. While he didn’t relish the idea of using his son as bait, Relf had. But apparently not anymore. They’d have a conversation later, he was sure.

“Thank you, sergeants, and well done. Stay close, men. I may be chatting with you again.”

He could practically hear them shrugging in confusion to each other. This wasn’t going to plan. The gates should have been thrown open some time ago. But obediently they called back, “Right, sir.”

He looked at his entourage, still questioning each other with their eyes. Was this believable or a trick?

“Shall we head back to the mansion?” Pere asked if they were simply taking a walk around the grounds, “or . . . stay here a bit? Your call. But I’d really like to show you that it’s safe out there. What do you say?”

A middle-aged man strode purposefully from the mansion. “No! It’s all a trap. Can’t you see? He’s upsetting poor Querul, has Jezzy all worked up, and is manipulating our children! He’s planning something!”

Pere was losing patience. All of this was taking too long. “Why?” he said simply. “I mean, really—*why*? Why would I want to lure you out? What can you possibly offer me, or the world?” It sounded harsh, but nothing else was working. “You’re unskilled—this little circle thing is useless. Look,” and he plowed successfully through two older men whose link was pretty weak. Ignoring their protests, he continued on to the man. “You’re behind the times, you can’t read or write or do math—not most of you, I’m sure. Maybe you’re good at farming and animals, but frankly, those cattle are on the lean side and your corn should be taller this late in the season. I’m sorry, but you’re unnecessary to the

world. You benefit me in no way whatsoever. Yet here I am, wanting to help you. Why? Because it's the right thing to do, because you deserve a chance to make your own decisions. Because you deserve to *live*. I'm getting nothing from this. In fact, I didn't get even a minute of sleep last night trying to find a way to save my son, your family's daughter, and all of you, and what do you do? Accuse me of trying to trap you? Guess what—you're already trapped! You have been for decades! Haven't you ever yearned to see what's *really* going on the other side of that stone wall?"

He didn't expect to find Fangi at his belly again. "I want to go outside, Pere," he said quietly. "Can I go with you?"

"Fangi!" his mother cried.

Pere held up a reassuring hand. To Fangi he said, "Not without your mother's approval. But as soon as she says yes, then yes."

"Prove it," someone said in the crowd. "Prove that it's safe out there!"

"Gladly!" Pere said. "What would you have me do?"

"Stick your head over that wall. If it's not filled with arrows, then I'll believe you."

Pere scoffed a chuckle, but realized no one else was. "Oh. You're serious. Really? That's what you think will happen?"

He looked to Fourth who was examining a cuticle. Jezzy, too, was gazing elsewhere.

"I see. That's what they've been telling you all these years, isn't it? Ever have a body come over that wall filled with arrows?"

Their grim faces told him the answer.

"I see," he said again, more soberly. "I'm very sorry. I should have realized. Well, if that's what it will take . . . Anyone have a ladder? Maybe in the barn down there?"

"No," said Reckon, who had been part of the failed circle of men. "If you use a ladder, they'll see that first and it'll signal that you're coming."

"But not if it's a ladder shorter than the wall," Pere pointed out.

No one was about to move. Logic wasn't the strongest skill here, he had realized a while ago.

He squared his shoulders. "All right, then."

"And no warning your soldiers," Reckon said in a low voice. "Go up quietly, don't give yourself away, and let's just see how safe the world is."

He looked across all of their faces. Many wore expressions of pity—

they didn't think he was going to survive. Others were defiant, sure this would be the end of the High General. Still others seemed hopeful, as if they'd been wishing someone would at least try it.

Clematis bit her lower lip in worry but nodded encouragingly.

What a dear girl, he thought. Not a sour face whatsoever. Sorry I gave her that slash that will likely become a scar. War wound, though. She can wear it proudly.

"Then I'll go over. No problem for a slender, toned man like me, to climb over a twelve-foot high stone wall . . ."

His officers were casting him looks of doubt, but one lieutenant pointed out, "Down there a ways, sir. Notice how the rocks jut out more? Simple up and over, sir. You can do it!"

Reckon stepped forward again. "Take off your jacket. That's a signal as to who you are. I want no one on the other side to recognize you right off."

Pere kept his face sober, deciding now wasn't the time to explain that shortly after he was installed a few weeks ago, he made it a point to shake the hand of every last soldier in the garrison. Every single man on the other side of the wall knew who he was, jacket or no. Nor was there another man quite his height or, um, *stature*. But no matter.

"Fair enough," Pere said, unbuttoning the brass buttons of his jacket, then taking it off.

A few women gasped, and Pere worried for a moment. Yes, he was big, but his clean white undershirt covered him quite completely—

Then he noticed Reckon and everyone else staring at his hip.

"Oh, this?" Pere handed the man his jacket and pulled out his long knife. "Yes, I left several blades on your breakfast table, but I'd never leave *all* of them. I realize you may think that I wasn't completely truthful with you, but I never would have pulled this on any of you, and I had ample opportunities."

Reckon held out his hand for Pere to give it to him, but the High General shook his head. "You don't get to command the entire army by being wholly unarmed. This one stays with me. To protect *you*."

He slid it easily back into his waistband, moved down the wall to where the lieutenant had suggested, and took a deep breath. It'd been years since he'd climbed, and now he had a captive audience. It would be humiliating to slip and fall.

He better not, then.

After surveying the wall, he chose his route, placing a boot on this jutting rock, reaching for that little outcropping, and steadily making his way upward. To his surprise, it was easier to scale than he anticipated. The bulbous rocks made natural holds all over the wall. The Family could have scaled and hopped over this a dozen times a day if they had only tried. Still, he was grunting and straining near the top, swearing under his breath that, yes, it might be a good idea to lose thirty pounds. Or a hundred.

His right hand grasped the top of the wall, and he was peripherally aware of Clematis and Fangi bouncing up and down in encouragement.

“Don’t lose it now,” he murmured to himself. “Come on, Perry-boy, one more little stretch, you’ve got this, big guy. Oof.” With a mighty heave and a last kick upward, he got his chest to the top of the wall, then hauled the rest of himself up. Exhausted, he lay on his belly on the wide stone wall to catch his breath. He’d completely forgotten that arrows were supposed to be coming at him right now.

But the Family hadn’t forgotten. They were holding their collective breath in anticipation.

Pere didn’t notice at first. He was watching his sergeants, who must have heard his grunts and huffing. They’d walked down and were looking up at him.

“Sir?”

“Long story,” he panted. “Don’t shoot any arrows, all right?”

The sergeants glanced at each other. “Were we . . . were we *supposed* to bring bows and arrows?” Longtin asked.

“Nope, don’t worry about it, boys. I think I’ve almost got them convinced . . . Oh, hello, son. Having a good morning?”

Relf was grinning like a maniac. “What are you doing, Father?! We could just open the gate—”

“No, don’t! I’m trying to prove a point. Ah, and here’s my dear wife. Banu, why are you looking at me like that? Oh, and you brought Matilda and Mrs. Kayle. See, Mrs. Kayle? I do get exercise.”

“You’re redder than a tomato, General,” Mrs. Kayle smirked. “I wish I could get up there and take your pulse because I’d guess it’s so high I could hardly count it.”

“You’d be right,” he confessed. “But not because I’m exhausted, but because I’m trying to prove that I’m not about to be killed.”

Banu paled. “What?!”

“Long story.”

“That’s what he told us, too,” Longtin told her consolingly.

There was a commotion behind him, and Pere twisted to see what was happening on the inside of the wall.

Clematis was striding bravely to his position, her parents running after her. “No, you don’t!” her father was saying. “It could still be dangerous!”

“Clematis,” Pere called down. “Listen to your father. While there is no danger, I don’t want you disobeying him. How about someone else come on up? Look,” and although he really dreaded doing it, he sat upright, then stood on top of the wall, two-feet wide, willing himself not to look down. Even though he was such a tall man, heights weren’t really his thing.

Some in the Family began to applaud his achievement, while others were still watching the other side as if counting down to when an arrow might come over and take him out.

Queen Jezzy rolled her eyes dramatically. “A fat man climbs a wall, and you all think that’s *something!*”

“It is!” called out a voice Pere didn’t expect.

Sarafina.

The old woman was elbowing her way through her sons. “You want a volunteer? Here I am.”

“Mother!” one of the men exclaimed. “How will you get up there?”

“By you pushing me up, what did you expect? Come on, the two of you. I’m going to prove something today. I want OUT!”

Pere was grinning now, and realized that he wasn’t alone on the wall.

Mrs. Kayle was hoisting herself up next to him, having scaled it with no problem, even with her skirt in the way. She beamed down to the Family. “Why, hello there!”

They stared at her, aghast. She was an older woman and not a soldier, seemingly healthy—if only they knew how much, Pere thought, since the sixty-year-old woman ran to the garrison for fun—and here she was, greeting them cheerfully.

“Ma’am,” she called down to Sarafina, “we could just open the gate—”

“Nope,” Sarafina said, holding out her arms to her sons.

They shrugged at each other, then picked up the old woman and started to push her up the wall. “You could help a little, Mother. At least

grip that rock, there. And the one above it? Come on, Mother. We're not that tall."

"Or that young," her other son gasped, a man probably close to seventy.

Sarafina was now giggling like a little girl and was past the reach of her sons who watched her in awe as she climbed on her own, up to the waiting hands of Pere and Mrs. Kayle. They strained to pull her the last bit since she stopped climbing herself, and soon Sarafina was sitting on the wall, looking out in reverent awe.

"Welcome," Pere said, and sat down next to her. "That sad orchard needs trimming. We've started on it, but—"

"Shh," Sarafina said in a whisper. "You talk too much, High General. Anyone ever told you that? Look at that view! Just look. It's dawn."

Pere smiled and glanced behind Sarafina to Mrs. Kayle. The bacon-hating woman had tears streaming down her face.

Down below, Banu and Matilda clasped hands in anticipation. Sarafina hadn't noticed them yet, but she would, once she was done watching the rising sun brighten the hundreds of rooftops of Idumea, sunlight glistening off of large windows, and illuminating treetops and flower gardens. The only sounds were from birds chirping in the orchard.

And no battles, anywhere.

"It's so peaceful," she finally said.

Pere nodded, not daring to speak in case she chastised him again.

"Is it always?"

"Mostly," Pere said. "Not always. But it's worth it, Sarafina. It's worth it."

"What did I say about you talking too much, General?"

Pere chuckled.

After another moment Sarafina sighed deeply. "All right, then. Let's go."

"Which way?" Pere asked. He was aware that the entire Family, except for the men holding the prisoner, were now at the bottom of the wall, looking up.

"We go on," Sarafina said simply. "Out there."

"Mother?" called up one of her sons.

She twisted to look down at him. "What are you waiting for? Get up here! Someone has to get me down the other way!"

Her sons grinned and began to climb, their own sons and grandsons

pushing them playfully up the first part.

“Scoot down,” Pere said quietly to Mrs. Kayle. “They don’t realize they can come up at any part of this wall.”

Behind them, Jezzy was shrieking again, screaming for them to stop, to come back, but no one listened.

Querul the Fourth sat down despondent on the ground, watching as now three, five, ten of his servants scaled the stone wall.

Next to him, Fifth finally spoke. “Father, who’s going to cook breakfast?”

Oren was asleep on the dewy grass.

Sarafina was now looking down, waving back to Banu and Matilda who were happily waving up.

“I’m Banu Shin, Pere’s wife! So happy to meet you! We’ve got a wagon, where do you want to go? Do you need something to eat? I brought bacon pancakes.”

Pere whistled once, and suddenly out of the trees dropped more than two dozen young “farmers,” smiling welcomingly and holding out hands to help Sarafina, and anyone else, down.

Sarafina glanced at Pere, worried, but he said, “They’re mine. They’re here to help. Trust them. I do.”

“All right, then,” Sarafina said, and pushed off.

Fortunately, three soldiers were right there to catch her, and Pere held his chest in fright. Mrs. Kayle gripped his arm, also sure that old Sarafina was about to fall to her death, and that would have ruined the entire day. Banu and Matilda brought Sarafina to the wagon, and two soldiers gingerly helped her on to the bench.

“One rescued so far,” Mrs. Kayle whispered. “Oh, General—thank you for inviting me along to witness this!”

“Actually,” he confided as they shifted awkwardly down on the wall they straddled to let the next wave of five reach the top, “I asked you along in case any of these females needed medical attention. But if you find anything enjoyable about this—”

And he couldn’t go on. Something was caught in his throat, and his vision was blurring.

They were coming, all of them who were able. They stood as damp lumps below, and cheered as their fuzzy relatives reached the top, then sat in amazement and gazed out at the smudgy orchard.

Pere wished there was a better view for them, but if they saw it as



splotchily as he did, it didn't matter. In time, they'd have all kinds of views.

He sniffled and wiped his nose, forgetting that he didn't have his jacket on but was drying his nose on his bare arm.

Behind him, Mrs. Kayle handed over a handkerchief.

"A cold," Pere explained as he blew his nose.

"Understood," she said quietly back and patted his shoulder. "Incidentally, I think you're becoming an outstanding High General, even if you won't follow my diet and your wife brings bacon pancakes. Who in the world makes bacon pancakes?"

He burst out laughing, knowing that released a few more tears he wasn't expecting. He quickly wiped his face and nose again, and tucked the handkerchief in his trousers' pocket. He might need it again.

Sarafina's sons and three more women were now nearly down the orchard side of the wall, being aided by soldiers and shown to the other wagons which were coming to transport them. Pere had spoken last night to a couple of rectors in Idumea who agreed to house the Family—however many would agree to leave—in one of their rectories until Holy Day. They'd have food and a place to sleep until . . .

Well, those details hadn't been hashed out yet; there'd be a lot of work to do in the next few days.

He glanced over again to the mansion and saw his lieutenants speaking to the last four men of the Family who were guarding the prisoner, two of them in green. It was clear by their earnest expressions that they wanted to join everyone else going over the wall, but someone needed to hold Lieutenant Colonel Lazan.

Pere began to open his mouth, intending to call for his farmer-soldiers to toss him up the chains they use for prisoners, but he was too slow. So eager to head over to the wall were the last four men that they didn't pay attention to the lieutenants trying to take over, and they released Lazan too soon.

"No!" Pere cried out, but it was too late. Lazan broke free of his guards and sprinted for the wall, much further down. With cat-like agility, he nearly ran up the wall—obviously he'd gone over before and probably quite frequently—and was on his way to freedom—

Except that Pere had scrambled to his feet, forgetting his fear of the height, and had drawn his long knife. With an aim he'd practiced for twenty years, he threw the knife.

For a moment Pere wasn't sure where it went, because Lazan was now at the top of the wall, crouched as if to jump, but he hesitated, looked down, then shifted his gaze to Pere with unmistakable hatred.

Jutting out between his ribs was the handle of Pere's long knife.

For a few terrible seconds, no one moved, no one breathed. They all just stared at Jezzy's nephew who began to slowly sway, then tipped over and fell into the orchard.

Six farmer-soldiers converged upon him immediately, but Pere already knew what they'd call out.

"Lazan's dead, sir."

"Stale biscuits," Pere mumbled, putting his hands on his waist.

One of the next people coming up was Reckon, who had crested the wall just in time to see Pere's perfect throw.

"Stale biscuits?!" he said. "Why, that was a remarkable aim! How'd you do that?"

"Years of practice," Pere said dully. "I could never outrun a man, but I can always outthrow him. But," he said with renewed annoyance, "I had more questions for Lazan. Now I'll not get those answers. Nor the record book he claimed he kept, which I doubt is in his quarters or office at the garrison. Well, a thorough search might turn it up—"

The horror of having just killed one of his officers would descend upon him in the middle of the night, he knew, when he remembered the last living look of Lazan—the look of fury, hatred, and pure surprise—and Pere would stare at the ceiling for a few hours wondering who else who wore the uniform he needed to worry about, and maybe not get too chummy with.

He'd stopped a few Guarders in his day with his knives. At least, he *assumed* he had. He'd thrown, they'd caught, then limped off into the dark forests, and he'd be glad he was the supply officer so he could requisition himself new long knives again and not reveal how many he'd given to the forest.

But he'd never seen a man die right before him, with his knife jutting out, his accuracy unmistakable. He could always outthrow men in fort competitions. Yet this . . . this was different.

"But you'll get your knife, back, right?" Reckon asked, pulling Pere out of his sinking reverie.

For once, Pere wouldn't have to resupply himself, and a dark chill coursed through him. He'd killed an officer. One of *his* officers. And

he'd get the knife back. How lovely.

It had to be done, right? Actually, he hadn't intended to kill at all—just to maim, slow down . . .

Pere felt weak. Perhaps the excitement of the morning, the lack of sleep the night before, the absence of breakfast—it was all getting to him.

No, the fact that he killed one of his own men was getting to him.

Reckon positioned himself on the wall, his first view of the world now being that of farmer-soldiers inspecting the corpse in the orchard. In a softer voice, he said, "I see now how great a sacrifice it was for you to leave so many blades on our table."

Pere scoffed in sad agreement. "Never be without a weapon," he whispered. "Rule number one. Well, it should be. I think I'll write up some rules," he mused out loud, observing his soldiers. He had to shove away the cold chill and the heaviness that wanted to topple him from the wall. He was the head of the army now, he had to maintain composure, had to be the solid symbol. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his two sergeants glancing up at him with too much admiration. A dozen more soldiers were looking up, too, with new respect.

The story would get around as to what happened here with their high general. By dinner, the entire garrison would have a version that had likely grown larger than the wall itself, with creative additions, side-plots, curlicues, and likely a lot more bloodshed. This event would be remembered and held up as an example of . . . what? Pere worried. It was out of his hands, now. Too many witnesses, too many variations of the knife thrown. Depending on how the men regarded him, some would assert that Pere had thrown it a quarter of a mile with lightning speed, throwing Lieutenant Colonel Lazan all the way to Pools with its impact. Other men would argue that Shin had merely dropped his knife, and Lazan was unfortunate enough to be underneath it.

Whatever the case, Pere knew that from this day forward, the army would have a new view of him. If that was good or not remained to be seen.

Maybe he could see to it that the story wouldn't get around at all . . .

"But sir, you're weaponless now," Reckon again interrupted his thoughts, for which Pere was most grateful.

Pere looked down at him. "I only *seem* to be." He held out a hand to help the man stand up.

Reckon held on to it for a moment and whispered, “Could you teach me to throw like that? If we’re going to be part of the world, I should probably learn how to defend myself.”

“I can teach you how to throw, certainly,” Pere smiled grimly. “But you can also trust my soldiers to defend your family. That’s what they’re here for. All right, *not* Lazan—he’s a terrible example. But he’s exactly who I’m trying to flush out. I’m going to get them all, I promise you, Reckon. Every last threat. That’s my job, and I won’t quit until I’m a success or I’ve died trying.”

Together they watched the soldiers pick up Lazan’s body and carry it to a much further wagon, away from the joyful family gathering below. Pere’s long knife had been extracted, wiped off on the dead man’s shirt, then handed to Relf. Pere cringed to realize his son had been watching all of that far too closely. At least there was a look of apprehension and some revulsion in his son’s eyes as he stared at the weapon he slowly walked back to the wall.

Banu and Matilda had smartly turned away before Lazan fell, and Mrs. Kayle had been making ready to go down the wall to lend assistance, until it was clear that Lazan wouldn’t need diet suggestions ever again.

“See?” Pere said quietly to Reckon as the wagon with the body pulled away. “Already the world is one man safer than it was a few minutes ago.”

“Strangely, and despite all that I’ve seen,” Reckon said, “I believe you. Am I completely naïve?”

“Yes, you are,” Pere told him. “And that’s a perfectly fine way to begin.”

Further down the wall, Relf, who had tucked his father’s long knife into his own belt, was scaling his side of the rock as easily as a squirrel, and he peered over the edge. Scanning the crowd, he soon saw who he was looking for.

“Clematis!”

She was still standing between her parents who seemed just about ready to let her follow the others. She beamed when she saw Relf, propped up by his elbows on the wall and leaning over to see her. “How’d you get up there?”

“It’s not hard,” he said modestly, but Pere could see his feet scrambling for a foothold.

In her enthusiasm to see him again, Clematis didn't even notice she was hastily climbing up the wall, her parents rushing to catch up to her.

"What happened to your cheek?" Relf called down.

"Your father did that," she said casually, pushing her full skirt aside as she looked for another rock.

Relf's head snapped to his father.

"Long story," Pere called over the half a dozen bodies between them.

Down below, Longtin said, "That's what he keeps saying: long story."

Relf shrugged and leaned down to reach a hand to Clematis.

She didn't take it, but managed her way to the top of the wall, then perched proudly on top. Relf twisted to sit next to her.

"Wow," she whispered. "Just *wow*."

"This is nothing," Relf said off-handedly. "An ugly orchard. There are nicer ones. But you can see parts of the city, the nicer houses at least, just over there. And wait until you see the other villages! Most people never travel, they just stay in the village they were born in, but I've seen a lot of places because my father used to inspect all the forts' supplies. There are hot pools of Pools, and there are waves at Waves, and fields of flax in Flax, and—"

"Those are village names?" Clematis asked. "Places aren't named very creatively, are they?" she pointed out.

Relf pondered that. "Well, there's Sands because of the desert sands, and Orchards has . . . yeah, orchards nicer than this, and you're right. At least you know what to find in those villages."

She grinned. "Relf?"

"Yes?"

"I know what orchards are, but what are hot pools and waves and flax and sands?"

The innocence of her question so startled Relf that he didn't know how to answer her. Everyone in the world knew what those things were.

He stammered for a moment, then said, "I, I, I brought you books, just in case you left the mansion. My mother has a whole crate full in the wagon. Easy reading books, and some math books, too. And I think there's even one about the villages of the world. There are woodcuts—those are drawings—that show you what all that stuff is. You can have them all."

Clematis bit her lip in delight and turned to take in the view of trees

and rooftops. “Thank you. I’ll never forget that you told me about one hundred *one*. I can’t stop thinking about it. There’s something *bigger* that I only guessed at but didn’t dare believe. And all the numbers after it? Too much! And now books? You’re too kind.”

Blushing, he bumped her shoulder with his.

A moment later her father’s head popped up between them, and he shoved himself between the two of them, giving Relf a pointed glare.

Relf quickly wriggled himself down the wall a safe distance.

Clematis’s father was now easily swinging himself on the wall, his focus solely on Relf, who was beginning to squirm in worry.

“She saw *you*, is that right? In the mansion?”

Relf gulped. “Yes, sir. It was . . . it was an accident. We didn’t even know she or the rest of you were in there.”

Her father’s chest heaved as if readying to yell, then something seemed to pass him by. He relaxed and tipped his head. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “I’m glad you’re both safe. But I don’t like this,” he added, his tone sharpening. “I don’t.”

Relf nodded rapidly. “I understand, sir,” although he didn’t.

Clematis’s father looked over to Pere, who nodded back once.

He understood.

While he never had a daughter, he could see many things that her father didn’t like. Nothing was now easily decided, nothing in the future was clear. Today, everything became much more difficult. Options meant decisions and choices, and some would go wrong.

That wasn’t a bad thing, though.

Clematis’s family descended on the other side, with Relf following at a safe distance.

With the Family enjoying the trip up and down the wall, Pere felt it now safe to signal to Duvera and Longtin that they could subtly open the gate. The captains, still holding Jezzy against the wall, could use some relief. The sergeants headed into the compound with chains for the old queen.

No one of the Family noticed the soldiers binding Jezzy’s arms and legs, but Querul the Fourth did. He stared mutely from his spot on the grass, seeming to not comprehend what was happening with his mother.

Pere almost felt sorry for him. Fourth hadn’t been king very long, only a couple of moons, ever since his father had died. Talk about a man who loved killing squads. Pere sometimes wondered who enjoyed

organizing random deaths in the world more: Jezzy or Third? It was probably how they kept their marriage going.

Their son, however, didn't have a deliberately mean bone in his body, nor did he have an intelligent one, either. He always seemed a few steps behind and was constantly bullied by his parents. When Third died, it was as if the world had breathed a little easier, not knowing much about Fourth, but assuming he wasn't as bloodthirsty. Nobody could be as bloodthirsty as Third and Jezzy. But no one expected his mother to continue controlling him, running the world which legally was now her son's to rule. Fourth had inherited the leadership of the world, but didn't know how to lead it.

Never mind feeling sorry for the Fourth, Pere amended his thoughts. Feel sorry for the world.

But right now, today, there was hope. He doubted they could imprison or execute Jezzy, but today was a turning point in just how much power she could wield. They were still stuck with Fourth, but at least his snarling guard dog was, today, losing her teeth.

Jezzy, fully bound but able to walk and somewhat move her arms, wasn't about to "go quietly" to the wagon that would bring her to the garrison for questioning. Oh, no. She flailed and screeched and broke free from the captains to waddle, wailing, to the front doors of the mansion.

Astonished at the sight, the captains hesitated, then began running after her, until a sharp whistle from Pere stopped them. He waved them over to the wall on which he was still standing, his officers looking behind them anxiously after the screaming queen.

"Let her go," Pere said. "What can she do? She's chained, and soon she'll discover there's not a single person left in that huge house who's going to help her. Let her throw her little tantrum. She's had a hard morning. I predict we'll find her in a few hours, spent and sobbing on a sofa somewhere. Then she'll be a lot easier to move."

"But sir," said one captain, "you left your *belongings* on the servants' eating room table—"

"Moldy beef!" Pere exclaimed. "I forgot! All right, run in there, get my weapons, then get back out with them, and don't let Jezzy near you."

His captains nodded and sprinted back to the mansion, Pere muttering his hopes that they got to his supply of long knives and sword before Jezzy could. Despite her chains, she could still do some damage to

someone.

His gaze tracked down to the open gate, which all of the Family was ignoring, except for one member. A couple of soldiers had entered the compound to lend assistance, and they'd discovered old Danny, now fully revived and scowling in confusion. A soldier seemed to be explaining to Danny what was going on, and he led him out the gate to the other side.

Pere could just hear his conversation over the chuckles and exclams of the last of the Family to come over the wall.

"So we're doing this?" Danny said incredulously. "We're leaving? Wait, did I just come *through* the gate?"

Sarafina, in conversation with Banu, paused to chuckle at him. "Welcome to the world, Danny. Yes, we're doing this. But you did it wrong—you're supposed to go over the wall! Go back and do it right."

Danny reached over and patted it. "Just a cloudy blur to me, but I remember it from years past. Why not just go through that gate?"

"Good question," Pere called down. "Sir, you may do now whatever you wish. You don't have to follow anyone else. You can think and do what you believe is best. That's freedom."

"Freedom to think, huh?" Danny said. "I think I want breakfast because I'm hungry."

"Ooh!" Banu cried out, pulling from behind her a giant picnic basket. "I've got just what you need: bacon pancakes, a specialty of mine!"

Danny perked up. "Really? Freedom is bacon pancakes, huh? All right, I'll give it a chance."

Pere knew Mrs. Kayle was still behind him, calling out encouragement to the last women going down the wall. He leaned back enough to say to her, "Never underestimate the power of bacon pancakes, Mrs. Kayle."

She laughed. "Fine, bacon wins today. But not tomorrow."

Pere grunted his disagreement and chuckled with her.

What a fantastic morning, he thought, once you looked past the whole Lazan incident. The sunshine, the orchard, the wagons filling with people, the excitement of leaving, the terrible thrill of a new life . . .

It wasn't going to be easy, not by a long throw. He couldn't even imagine what struggles they'd face trying to make peace with a world that had been at peace for eighty years. Their entire way of thinking would have to change.



But today, they could revel in that change, and Pere decided that all around, it would be a good thing. No, an excellent thing.

Except for a few people.

The Fourth was still sitting forlornly and dazed in the grass, his son Fifth having plopped next to him, equally confused but with a bitter bent. The Fifth was too much like his grandparents, and Pere knew something had to be nipped in the bud.

Oren, however, continued to doze and would likely wake up a few hours later not remembering a thing.

“Time for me to go down,” he said to Mrs. Kayle. “Some unfinished business. I know you’re primarily a diet person, but you do have *some* training, right? In scrapes, broken bones, egos damaged by tumbling down a wall?”

She chuckled. “Yes, I’m a fully trained surgeon’s assistant, and I have my bag of supplies. Should you tumble, High General, I can patch you up. All except for that ego.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“If I may make a suggestion?” she leaned over to whisper. “Whatever happens, pretend to have *planned* it that way. A little rolling, a little flourish—I can tell you have a dramatic flair. Play to that. No one will ever be the wiser.”

He twisted to see her clearly. “You are a very smart woman. I’m going to have to remember that.”

“You could have a few soldiers help catch you,” she added.

“Oh, hot gravy, no. I’d never live that down! Obviously, you know nothing about egos.”

“Only too much,” she mumbled as Pere laughed.

He twisted himself to be feet first and started to work his way down the mansion side of the wall. It was tougher going down, harder to find footholds, until he decided to just make what was about to happen look like part of the plan. He let go, pushing off the wall, and landed *fairly* well on his feet, to his surprise. But his knee was never going to forgive him.

“Ow, ow, ow,” he murmured as he tried to walk without a limp, not too successfully, toward the miserable Queruls. Before he reached them, his captains came jogging out of the back door of the mansion, Pere’s knives and sword in their hands. He noticed his jacket—the symbol of his status and power throughout the world—tossed over a gravestone,

and he gingerly retrieved it.

There were four tally marks on the stone.

He nodded respectfully to it and made a mental note to send someone from the fort to make a full counting. Maybe a few mysteries could be solved, but since there were no dates, names, or even genders, likely not.

Putting on his jacket, he was official again, and didn't realize how anxious he'd felt until his officers handed him back his knives and sword. It didn't feel right to not be clanking. The steel was comforting. He tipped his head to indicate the captains should follow him.

"Whatever I say," he said quietly to them as they neared Fourth and Fifth, "follow my lead. I'm trying to stave off a potential problem, and you two will be my helpers. You wrote a report last year, right? Well, I may be adding to that report, if you get my meaning."

"Yes, sir," they murmured back. One said, "And thank you, sir, for listening to us."

"If ever I forget to listen in the future, remind me," he answered. "Loudly, until I pay attention. I don't want to be a Stumpy."

"Appreciated, sir. Already you've done more than he ever did."

A few moments later they came to the Queruls mourning on the grass. Despite the pain in his knee, Pere kneeled down in front of Fourth.

The wretched man looked up at him. "You've ruined everything."

"Oh, good," Pere said. "That was my plan. Querul, you *know* this was wrong. You can't possibly think holding these people all these years was ever the right thing to do!"

"But we own the world—"

"No, you do not! I know that's what your father said, what your mother pounded into that tiny brain of yours, but no—you do NOT own the world, or anything in it. Your great-grandfather took over ruling the world only because he was the most powerful bully, and you merely inherited the throne, which I could never figure out how that made any sense. But you have to be better than them, Fourth! You have to listen to the world. I warned you before, but now I know: I just saved your life. Yours, and Fifth's and Oren's there. How does he sleep with all of this going on? Never mind. The fact is, you were about to die."

Fourth frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

Pere gestured to the captains behind him. "They wrote a report last year, after observing the mansion. They noticed your mother's messenger, who was connected to at least one killing squad, and they also

noticed other messages going in and out. I suspect your mother has spies outside the mansion, watching what happens around it. That's likely how she discovered that I and my son were in there. There are all kinds of messages being sent. In fact, these two captains intercepted a few, just as I had. Fourth, your wife still had family up north, right? What village again?"

"Rivers?"

Pere shook his head sadly. "That's where the messages were going. And Fourth? They were going to Guardians."

He heard one of the captains make a noise like a cough or a guffaw, but his companion elbowed him.

Fourth didn't notice anything, too caught up in the story Pere was creating for him.

Fifth, too, was staring wide-eyed at the High General.

"They didn't like what was happening to your wife here in the mansion, Fourth," Pere continued. "She was writing to them, telling them how miserable she was. And she seemed to be suggesting that the youngest boy in the mansion may have been . . ." Pere reached out and booped Fourth's nose as he had earlier that week.

Fourth rocked backward.

"Worst nose shape nature ever came up with," Pere said sadly. "Fortunately it seems only one family in the world is cursed with it."

"I don't follow," Fourth said.

Pere groaned. "I was trying to be subtle in front of my captains and your sons, but . . . Fourth—Fangi? He's yours, isn't he?"

Fourth began to blink more rapidly. "Is he?"

"You don't . . . you don't *know*? How could you not know?"

"Well," he began hesitantly, "no one really knows how long a baby takes to come. I mean, Mother said it can take up to two years, so Fangi could easily be his father's son—"

Pere pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fourth, Fangi *is* his father's son. And everyone in the world knows it takes nine to ten moons for a baby to be born. It's never, in the history of our 280 years of existence in this world, *ever* taken longer than that."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Oh."

Pere sighed. "Margo knew that, too."

“But we needed another boy in the mansion, you see,” Fourth went on pathetically. “And Mother said I was just helping along what was supposed to happen, and—”

“Please stop,” Pere cut him off, because Fifth’s face had gone strangely contorted. “I’ll send Mrs. Kayle from the garrison surgery to explain things better. To *both* of you. She’s eager to help, but doesn’t yet realize what I’m setting her up to do,” he mumbled more to himself. Remembering his audience, he said, “Just realize, Fourth, that Margo knew, and she was unhappy. She wrote letters, and it seems that some of her family are connected to Guardians. And here’s the really bad part, Fourth.”

Pere hesitated because it was getting complicated and he wasn’t sure Fourth was going to keep up. But the story would work. It had to work.

“Fourth . . . Fourth? The Guardians have been talking, and it seems that some of the first people your great grandparents kept—the parents of Sarafina or Danny or someone else—their relatives *were* Guardians. The very same ones that your great grandfather Querul the First tried to banish from Idumea. Fifth,” Pere turned to him to make sure the twelve-year-old was keeping up. “What have you been told about the Guardians?”

The boy swallowed nervously. All arrogance was gone, replaced with appropriate fear. “They . . . they were supposed to take care of Guide Pax. He was going to find a new place for the dissenters to live, but the guards killed him on the mountain. Um, Mt. Deceit it’s called?”

“Very good. That’s what we named it after—their *deceit*. Keep going.”

“So Querul the First tried to kill all the bad guards, but some got away, and then other people ran away to join them, I don’t remember how many—”

“Up to two thousand, by our best guesses,” Pere supplied, surprised at how accurately Fifth knew the history. Surely the knowledge came from Margo, not Jezzy.

“Um, all right . . . and those people come back. Not the first people, because they’re all old and dead. But their descendants, mad about my great-great-grandfather punishing them for being bad. They shouldn’t have killed the last Guide, even if The Writings are rubbish and the idea of a Creator is silly. People still should be able to follow the Guide out of the world.”

“But why didn’t they go out of the world? Or couldn’t they?” Pere prompted.

“Because outside of our villages and city, the world is poisoned,” Fifth explained. “Because there’s no place else safe to live. Guide Pax would have failed anyway to find them a place to live. But he should have been allowed to try. That’s why the First was so mad at his guards. Killing Pax made everyone mad.”

“So where do the Guarders live now, Fifth?”

The boy blinked in confusion.

Fourth, who had been silent, now revived. “Wait—where *do* they live?”

Pere sighed. “That’s what the army’s been trying to figure out for decades. Since everywhere outside is poisoned, then Guarders can’t live outside our world. Many speculate that they live in the forests at the base of the mountains—above Edge of the World and Moorland, around Mt. Deceit. But I fear it’s something worse. Fourth, I think some of them live *in* the villages, undercover, in disguise. People like Lieutenant Colonel Lazan. And I have reason to suspect that the distant relatives of all of those who just went over that wall are on their way to attack you and your family because you’ve been holding them. Do you see what I’m getting at? If the Guarders showed up and found you still holding their descendants as servants?”

“That would be bad,” Fourth said tonelessly.

“That *would* be bad,” Pere agreed.

“So I can’t get them back?” Fourth squeaked.

“You can’t get them back,” Pere repeated. “Your mother’s not going to agree. She’s going to want you to get them back, but you know better. You and Fifth, right?” He turned to the boy.

Fifth nodded, his face pale.

“If you try to get them back, the Guarders will come after you,” Pere repeated. “Say it with me. I want to make sure you understand this.”

They repeated it together three times until Pere was sure that the simplest message was received.

“How do you know all of this?” Fourth asked, and Pere knew he would be struggling to keep it all straight.

He gestured to the captains behind. “What did I say they wrote?”

“A report?”

“Very good. And what happened to them because of that report?”

“My mother heard about it and probably told Stumpy to transfer them.”

“Exactly. She didn’t like what was in the report, and while I don’t think either of the captains realized an officer of the garrison was involved, any investigation may have revealed Lazan eventually. Now he’s gone, and now hopefully the rest of the killing squads will get the word and smartly fade into nothingness.

“But now you’re safe, Fourth, and now your servants are freed, and now word will trickle back to the Guarders as well that you should no longer be a target. You’re welcome. Get in the house, find some bread, make your sons a sandwich. Fifth looks like he’s going to topple over from starvation. And don’t forget to carry in Oren. It’s all up to you now, Fourth. No one’s here to help you. But I’ll send you a new bookkeeper who can help you work out a budget and figure out how many employees you can hire and *pay*. That’s a big house, with extensive gardens. Good thing Jezzy isn’t paying for killing squads anymore, so all that expense can go to paying citizens for a job well done.”

“Um . . .” Fourth began. “What?”

Pere sighed. Sometimes he *did* talk too much. “Feed your boys. I’ll send help over later. Go in the mansion, Fourth.”

“All right.” It took him a minute to figure out how to carry his sleeping seven-year-old, and again Pere felt a pang of sympathy for the man. Watching him strain under the first manual labor he’d likely ever done in his thirty-seven years was pitiable. Pere would send over half a dozen helpers, as soon as possible. Matilda surely had connections.

He nodded to his captains as they turned back to the gate. “Well done not saying anything.”

One of them guffawed. “Sir, about our report? You took quite a few liberties.”

He was all innocence as he said, “I did?”

“High General, we never wrote *anything* about Guarders!”

“Oh, you didn’t? Could have sworn I read it somewhere last night.”

The captains grinned. “How do you do that? Lie so easily?”

“It wasn’t all a lie,” he said as they walked slowly back to the gate. “I said I had ‘reason to believe,’ correct? Well, I do. Any reasonable Guarder would want to raid that mansion, and I believe in reasonableness.”

“Wait—” said the other captain. “That’s . . . that’s not *exactly* what

you said, though.”

“Isn’t it? Well, I can’t remember. Same words, different order. Message got through, though. The Queruls will never do what’s right, but they’ll always do what will protect them. If I have to explain things a little differently to help them understand, what does that matter?”

“You, High General, *sir*,” began one of the captains with too much reverence, “are definitely no Stumpy.”

“Boys, that’s the nicest thing anyone could have ever said to me.”

The last of the Family was now over the rock wall, and because Pere was feeling traditional, he walked through the gates.

The crowd looked to him for the next thing.

“Load up!” he called. “We’ll bring you to where you can get a good meal, find a place to rest, and in the meantime men from the army will be packing up your possessions for your new homes.”

That froze everyone in place.

Reckon, who was halfway up into a wagon, turned around. “New homes?”

“Yes. And you’ll all have a say in what happens next. But we’re going to relocate you out of the way of danger—”

Reckon leaped off the wagon and marched up to him. “You said there was no danger!”

“There’s always *some* danger, Reckon. You know that. But the real danger is from that woman crashing around in her mansion. She had up to sixty men in her killing squads, maybe more. That’s a lot, for those who don’t know the numbers,” he added. “We have five in custody and one who died. That’s *not* a lot, which means if Jezzy is feeling vindictive, she may still find a way to send someone after you. By next week, I intend to have all of you living in another village where Jezzy will never think to look, and you’ll begin your new lives.”

“With learning?” Clematis asked.

“With learning. We call it school, and we’ll create a special one, just for all of you. Whatever you want to learn.”

Reckon looked back at the Family, some in wagons, some climbing in, others still uncertain. But there was an expression of consensus on their faces.

Reckon nodded at them. “Let’s start a new life,” he called, and the Family continued to load up.

He turned back to Pere. “Wilbur.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Wilbur. That’s my real name. You can know it now.”

Pere grinned. “Wilbur. *Wilbur*. You know, if you don’t mind, I think I like Reckon better. That’s more . . . *you*. The name of a leader.”

Reckon smiled back. “I think so, too. You asked Sarafina her last name—is that a second name people have?”

“It is. Everyone in the world took a family name, probably one hundred fifty years ago now. Somehow the trend skipped you lot in the mansion.”

“How do I get a last name?”

“Take whatever you want at this point, I suppose.”

Pere wasn’t at all surprised by what he said next. “Then my name is now Wilbur Reckon.”

“It’s perfect. Welcome to the world, Mr. Reckon.”



## ~One Week Later~

It was a long procession of wagons that creaked slowly to the outskirts of the northeastern village of Winds late at night. In the darkness, twenty men and women waited quietly. They knew who was arriving, they'd prepared as much as they could, and all concerned thought it best that the newest members of their village arrive when no one knew they were coming.

Jezy still had men roaming the world, and recently Guardians had become active again, looking.

Only High General Pere Shin knew the *full* truth of any of that.

He rode in the lead wagon, wearing dark trousers and an old gray work shirt. No uniform tonight. None were seen anywhere, although soldiers were everywhere.

The lead wagon came to a stop, with the eight behind it rumbling to silence as well.

Pere wearily stumbled out of the wagon and peered into the gloom for his contacts. A few women came up to shake his hand, and he quietly directed them to the wagons. Some men followed them, after receiving instruction.

The row of small houses had been recently freshened up, along with a few hastily-built homes.

A man as dark as the night made his way up to the High General. His height was nearly as tall, but his stature far leaner and more muscular. During the day he was an imposing figure; at night, he was quite terrifying.

But appearances were deceiving, fortunately.

"Nice to see you again," Shin said, grinning at the man. "Although it's so dark I'm only assuming you're my former corporal, but few men are as large as we are. It's been what, well over fifteen years? What have you been doing with yourself since you left the army?"

The man extended his hand to shake Pere's. His voice was even

deeper as he answered, “It is indeed me, sir. And congratulations on becoming High General. Even back when I knew you as a lieutenant, I realized you had great potential.”

“And had you stayed longer than two years, you’d be a sergeant major by now. You don’t have to butter me up, former Corporal Hifadhi—you already have the job.”

The man chuckled, and Pere patted him on the back. “Tuma, thank you again for taking this on. I was so relieved when you agreed to help. You’re a hard man to track down, though.”

“Sorry about that, General. Unlike most people in the world, I do get around. But I’m glad you remembered my cousin was a rector here. He knew how to contact me.”

“And he and his wife and congregation have been exceptionally helpful,” Pere said. “They’ve put all of this together in such little time, but I’ll be honest, Tuma: I think we’ve bitten off a little more than we can chew.”

“Sir, do you need something to eat?” Hifadhi asked. “I imagine riding in wagons for two days has left you worn out, and you’re making food references again. Buttering up, chewing . . .”

“I forgot how astute you were. Always noticing the little things. Actually, I’m famished, but I don’t feel I can eat until we get them secured in their new houses.”

“Leave that to me, sir. I’ve made all the arrangements. It’ll be extremely difficult for any killing squads or even Guardians if they exist here, to get past my men and me.”

“I’d feel better if you told me it’d be *impossible* for them to get past.”

“General, you know that’s not a promise any of us can make.”

“True, true,” Pere sighed. “I also know no one will do a better job than you for these poor people who recently lost their family farm and adjoining houses to a massive fire.”

“Yes, yes. I heard the flames could be seen from miles around. An astonishing blaze.”

“Truly tragic,” said Pere somberly. “It’s so fortunate we could find all of them homes in the same area, and that so many of their relatives decided to move with them as support in their new village.”

They watched for a few minutes as the wagons unloaded in the lamp-light and people moved into their new homes.

“It needs work,” Hifadhi mumbled. “The story. It’s too clunky.”

## One Week Later

“Agreed,” Pere sighed. “But there’s been so many things to get lined up, I hadn’t given the story too much thought.”

“Leave it to me. I’m good with stories.”

“Remember—the more real it is to you and everyone else, the easier it’ll be for everyone to believe,” Pere told him. “Keep this second ‘truth’ as close as you can to the first truth and even the eight-year-old won’t trip up on it.”

Hifadhi eyed him in the dark. “Don’t take this the wrong way, sir, but you have a gift for lying. Are there some interesting jobs *you* do on the side?”

Pere snorted. “Nah, I just think about how someone would deceive me. I listen to what’s been said and more importantly what *hasn’t* been said. For example, I noticed that you didn’t tell me what you’ve been doing for the past fifteen years, but that you skipped over that question in order to compliment me.” Now it was Pere’s turn to eye Hifadhi.

His new head of security for the former servants chuckled. “Well done, sir—”

“Compliments again. Hmm. You’re being very secretive.”

“Not at all, General. Actually, the past nineteen years—yes, it’s been that long—have been rather quiet. I’m a teacher now—”

“Teaching what?” Pere asked.

“Whatever needs to be taught,” Hifadhi said cagily, “and quite recently I took on an interesting side job. I also got married and am a father.”

“Congratulations! What’s your wife and family think of you being here?”

“Well, she was a little hesitant at first, since I’ll be away for a few moons, but I told her just enough about the situation so that she agreed this is a necessary job to take.”

“Must be hard to be separated from her. I can hear in your voice how much you love her. How far away is your family, Tuma? Close enough for visits? I can arrange that.”

Hifadhi hesitated. “Nearly got me there, sir. You know I won’t reveal the location of my family to anyone. Not until we’re sure of the security of *this* family.”

“Well done,” Pere said. “That’s why I wanted you. Even as a younger man you were so quick to catch on. Anytime you want to rejoin the army, I’d love to take you. I could really use you in Idumea.”

“Thank you, sir, but my wife would leave me if I even *mentioned* the name of the city.”

“So she’s not in Idumea, then,” said Pere breezily.

Hifadhi groaned. “Well done, sir. So perhaps I’m a little rusty.”

“That’s all right. Still means there are sixteen more villages she may be in. I’ll get it out of you eventually, then visit your wife and tell her how much she wants her husband to rejoin the army.” He elbowed Hifadhi, who chuckled.

“Sorry, sir, but no chance. I’m in my forties now—”

“So am I. And?”

“Fair enough. But I’m doing this as a favor to my cousin and you. And, because I can’t believe none of us knew what was happening in the mansion.” His voice grew tight. “Sounds strange, but I feel almost a little responsible.”

“I know the feeling. I should have asked, I should have noticed, but . . .” Pere shrugged. Changing the subject, he said, “I understand you’ll be teaching the men a few things? And found five other teachers who will work with everyone full time? I can’t imagine how you pulled all of this together so well.”

“Sir, it wasn’t just me. I know you’re not exactly a man of faith, but there have been miracles to make this happen. And I’d say it all began with you.”

“Good thing it’s dark so you can’t see me blushing, Hifadhi. Can’t have a High General who blushes. It all began with Jezzy, though. Or rather, her in-laws.”

“No, I mean the rescue and liberation—”

But Pere didn’t want to talk about that. “Jezzy’s been set free, by the way.”

“What?!” Hifadhi cried, almost forgetting to keep his voice down. “Why?”

Pere sighed. “Negotiations. It was part of her deal.”

“There should be no deal for such a woman!”

“Agreed, but this is a complicated issue. The garrison has seized control of all of the mansion’s assets, and a third party has stepped in to negotiate how the mansion will be run. We’ve appointed a board of bookkeepers, former law enforcement officers, and business owners to give ‘direction’ to the mansion.”

“So why is she free?!”

## One Week Later

“Because it was the only way she’d tell us who was on the rest of her killing squads,” Pere explained. “For her information, we’ve agreed to let her go back to the mansion. However, she doesn’t have any more gold and silver to spend as she wishes. Only a small allowance which will make it impossible for her to pay off anyone. The killing squads are effectively killed.”

“Thank the Creator,” Hifadhi sighed.

“Yes, but the problem is, not even she knows all of who she employed. Anonymity was part of her deal with the squads. Her nephew Lieutenant Colonel Lazan had some records. We searched his rooms and found some books, but he’d made up his own code which we haven’t yet deciphered.”

“And how has General Humphrey responded to all of this? His own man a traitor to the army?”

Pere scoffed. “Oh, he’s been surprisingly quiet as of late. I think he’s a little shocked that so much was going on that he didn’t bother to notice. As soon as he got back from Pools—in record time, I must add, once he got notice that Lazan had died—he was most helpful, almost meek, I’d say, in uncovering all he could. He’s going through boxes and boxes of files, the poor man, looking for what else we may have missed over the years.” He tried not to feel too smug about that. The piles of hated paperwork would be considerably smaller by the time Pere returned to Idumea.

But his smugness didn’t last.

“It’s most aggravating, and also worrying, Tuma. If the rest of the killing squad hasn’t been paid, they may do a job for free in vengeance. Jezzy has agreed to let the army know if she receives any news of the former squad members so we can stop them. And she’s promised she doesn’t have any more secret relatives working anywhere. Lazan had been doing ‘jobs’ for the Queruls for nearly twenty years, ever since he was a teenager. None of us ever realized it.”

Hifadhi grumbled under his breath.

“I don’t know what you’re saying, but I agree,” Pere murmured back. “We’ve sent investigators into the mansion’s gardens to record how many people are buried there. Want to hear the count?”

“I’m a little worried, but yes.”

“Three hundred thirteen, definite. Maybe up to two dozen more.”

Hifadhi exhaled. “You can’t be serious. It’s an entire graveyard!”

“It is,” Pere said bitterly. “And we’re letting the garden grow over. We’ve told Querul it’s a memorial now.”

“Could any be identified?”

“Not really,” Pere admitted. “No records, no dates on any of the rocks. But one burial is confirmed, one of the more recent ones. At the edge of the garden are five children. Querul the Third had purposely been looking for dead children, as far as I could discern. These little ones had wandered into a herd of cattle and were trampled. Third sent to the families in Grasses to ask for their bodies to bury as a ‘memorial’ to the youth of the world. They thought he made some kind marker or headstone for them in the city’s cemetery where he buried them.”

When Pere didn’t continue, Hifadhi cleared his throat. “I hate to ask, but I’ll always wonder: so what *did* he do?”

Pere was silent for another moment before he said, “It seems he merely tossed their bodies over the wall, in order to terrify the Family. The poor little ones were already bruised and mangled—” He paused to clear the emotion from his throat. “One of the Family told me how broken they were. A stampede will do that, but that’s not what the Family believed. Third told them it was a result of the war, and if they didn’t keep Clematis and Fangi close, they’d be next to be treated so horrendously. Both Clematis and Fangi helped with the burial. Third made sure of that. None of the Family forgot that burial.”

Hifadhi held a hand over his mouth. “Just to scare them?! Misusing someone’s dead children just to push forward his own agenda—”

“I know,” Pere said, his teeth clenched again as they had when he first pieced together what had happened. “I’ve decided not to tell the families. Let them believe the children are buried in the Idumea cemetery. We’re having a large headstone created with their names on it, just in case one of the parents ever happens to travel to the city and looks for it. It’s all we can do now.”

Hifadhi shook his head sadly. “In a way, I suppose that headstone could stand for all of the unidentified bodies.”

“Good idea,” Pere said quietly. “I think I’ll have the number of known dead etched on the back of the stone. No one else will know what it stands for, but it’ll make me feel an ounce lighter that *some* kind of acknowledgement has been made. I’ll make the mansion pay for it.”

Hifadhi snorted. “Can the Queruls afford it?”

“Well, Fourth can’t afford to run a farm anymore. He may be selling

that back section off as part of the reparations to get the Family what they need now. As far as we can tell there isn't anyone buried in the farm area. Fourth and Jezzy will have just enough income for ten servants, and that will have to suffice."

Hifadhi nodded into the dark. "So the mansion has real employees now?"

"Started on the first day, in fact. At midday meal, my wife's friend Matilda walked into the mansion—the guards let her—found Querul sitting wretchedly on the sofa in one of the reception rooms, and she made him and his boys sandwiches."

"Allow me to guess—you sent her there?"

"I can't help but feel bad for him, Tuma," Pere confessed. "The king is as useless as he is senseless. We're trying to get him some better advisors as well. A few men from the University of Idumea have volunteered to work with the committee we established, now that Jezzy is under control . . . we hope."

"Sir, it sounds like you've done as much as you can. I almost hate to say it, but—"

"Say it."

"You have a *lot* of people suddenly involved. That may cause more problems in the future, sir."

Pere sighed. "It's causing problems now, already. But at least nothing can happen quickly in the government. Maybe if enough groups are arguing for a while, a better consensus can be reached? It's a working theory."

"As good as any other," Hifadhi replied.

Pere turned to him. "You don't sound entirely convinced. Do you have any other suggestions for governing a population of one million people, each who has his or her own idea as to what they should be allowed to get away with?"

Hifadhi could hear the uncharacteristic tension in his voice. "I mean no disrespect, sir. I admire what you're doing here—"

"Compliments again," Pere exhaled. "Quit flattering me. Just talk."

Hifadhi chuckled tightly. "No flattery but genuine appreciation. I'm just thinking about the first five hundred families placed here, and how the Creator established a way to govern them, and—"

Pere's long exhalation stopped him. "I've never been much for The Writings, Tuma, nor for the stories about the Creator. Even if I was, He

dealt with only five hundred couples. A million people of various degrees of prosperity and willingness to work is something entirely different.”

Hifadhi was silent, but Pere could feel his last comment thrumming around him.

“Just say it, Tuma. Get it out.”

“Sir, it isn’t *entirely* different. The same principles back then could work now. But you are correct in that the variety of people now wouldn’t allow it. It has to be their choice. Everyone has to be in agreement, then—”

Pere poked a finger into Hifadhi’s firm chest. “There’s *the* problem: agreement. The committees I mentioned? Those have less than a dozen people in them, but agreement? Ha! Too many opinions, too much knowledge—”

“—too much pride?” Hifadhi suggested.

“Egos,” Pere grumbled. “The world is stuffed full of them. Especially in the army and the city.”

“But not you, sir,” Hifadhi said warmly. “And that’s not flattery, I promise. You—you have real potential.”

Pere rolled his eyes. “Compliments again.” He hadn’t remembered Hifadhi being so magnanimous when he was a soldier. Something in the past few years had softened the man. Hopefully not too much; he needed someone tough.

Pere tipped his head to the wagons now nearly unloaded of people and their baggage. “I’m sorry we couldn’t stagger their arrival, but it wasn’t possible.”

“You mentioned something in one of your letters about problems shopping in the city?”

“Oh, that was a rough day!” Pere chuckled ruefully. “We needed to get them looking like everyone else. Who else wears silk for everyday? The idea is to help them blend in, not stand out as a target for any disaffected killing squad members or Guardians.”

Hifadhi winked at Pere, which he nearly missed in the dark. The real purpose was to not let anyone know they were hopelessly naïve former servants with no understanding of the real world, which may leave them vulnerable to those with too much understanding and looking for easy targets.

“My wife Banu and Mrs. Kayle tried to take a handful of them to the



shopping district, but they became so distraught being apart. No one in the Family has ever been out of shouting range of each other, and they didn't get more than two roads away before having to turn back because those with them became so anxious. So Banu and Kayle had to bring clothing to them, take measurements, deliver finished goods, and then—then! They were disappointed that our clothing didn't have ruffles and elaborate trim, and nothing was made of silk. They'll get used to cotton soon enough, especially in the heat. Anyway, none of them could bear being too far apart, so we had to move all the Reckons altogether."

"Wait, the Reckons?"

"The last name all of them took." Pere still felt odd about that, realizing the first label he slapped on one of them had become the Family name. He wished he had been a little more prudent in what he'd said to their leader. At least it wasn't something like StubbornMan or ObnoxiousVoice—so Reckon was as good as anything.

"The drive here was daunting for them as well," Pere went on. "For decades they had believed that everyone lived in horrible conditions and had houses the size of chicken coops, for some odd reason. But to see that nearly every house has a stone foundation, timber uppers, thick glass windows and gardens and fences, and that there were even a few smaller mansions? I can't describe the looks on their faces, Tuma. Absolute astonishment, mixed with betrayal and dismay. And to see so many children and teenagers going about their day laughing, shouting, running up and down the roads, dodging wagons . . . Some of them were in tears that life continued, others were ready to run back to the mansion and beat Fourth to a pulp, until I reminded them that it wasn't Fourth's fault, but First's, Second's, and Third's, and they were already dead. Still, it wasn't good enough for a few of the Family who had been feeling confined for decades, only to realize they never needed to be."

"Our rectors and teachers are going to help them through those feelings of betrayal," Hifadhi assured him. "To discover that the world is something entirely different than what you've been led to believe? That takes some time to process."

"Glad you see that," Pere continued. "Because I wholly underestimated the impact the truth would have on them. They're happy, yes. But also very, very angry."

"But overall I think it will all work out," Hifadhi decided. "And arriving here so late hides the fact of just how many there are. They should

be pretty untraceable, you think?”

In a low voice, Pere leaned over to Hifadhi. “It’s not killing squads or Guarders I’m really afraid of. It’s Fourth.”

“I suspected as much. I’m sure his mother is wanting—”

“No, not her. What I mean is, the day after we liberated them, Fourth went into a strange rampage. We had new servants and advisors entering the mansion to help put things in order, and apparently their presence set Fourth off. We hadn’t considered how attached he was to the rest of the Reckons. They called themselves the Family, and Fourth was as much a part of it as anyone.”

“Fangi?” Hifadhi guessed.

“Even more than that. Some of the Family are Fourth’s half brothers and sisters, half aunts and uncles . . . Tuma, it’s clear now that First, Second, and Third each fathered some of the Family. No one is entirely sure, but I’d say that including Fangi, nine of them are of the royal line. Nine of them have as much claim to that ridiculously uncomfortable throne as Fourth does. And he needs them around, but we’ve ripped away from Fourth the majority of his family, and left him with only the worst member—his mother. After such a quiet night in the mansion, he was determined to get his family back and headed out all alone after midday meal. My soldiers brought him back, as much for his safety as for the Family’s, and he threw a manic fit. That’s when I told him that Guarders were seen within the borders of the city, and that my soldiers were on top of the situation, but that Fourth would be dead by nightfall if he tried to get them back.”

Hifadhi was silent for a minute before he finally said, “Never in my life have I ever felt sorry for any of the Queruls. Today, though, that’s changed.”

“He’s facing a world he never expected. Just like the rest of his family.”

Once Pere and Hifadhi and the undercover soldiers were confident everyone was settled for the night—Fangi running over to give Pere a hug before going to his new bed—Pere and Hifadhi strolled to the Winds’ Fort less than half a mile away, chatting about everything they didn’t dare discuss in written correspondence.

Lagging behind them a few paces was Relf. He’d been on the trip as companionship for Clematis and Fangi. Pere had been initially worried how much Relf enjoyed Clematis’s attention. But soon Clematis began

to notice *lots* of new boys. She still had eyes for Relf, but Pere was sure that it was just a passing fancy, especially since her eyes lingered on every passing male under age twenty-five during the past two days. Weary and not at all interested in his father's discussions, Relf agreed to keep his distance so security measures could be discussed.

Eventually Hifadhi said, "I'd like to move them again, sir, once they get their feet beneath them—"

"Oh, don't do that!" Pere exclaimed. "We've already moved them twice! How much more can they stand?"

"Not immediately, sir," Hifadhi assured him. "Maybe in a few moons, or even years. It's not like Querul the Fourth is going to forget them. He'll long for them and try, sooner or later, to find them again. And that could be a very difficult situation for everyone. But if they just vanish—"

"No," Pere said resolutely. "No, you can't do this to them again."

"I wouldn't do it *to* them, General," Hifadhi said with just as much determination. "But *for* them!"

"NO!" the High General snarled in a whisper, but it sounded as threatening as thunder.

Hifadhi stopped, shocked. He'd never heard High General Shin—or even good-natured Lieutenant Pere—sound so furious.

Relf stopped a few feet behind him, having heard the snarl that cut through the night. With big eyes he stared at his father.

Pere felt a little guilty about his outburst. But the past week and a half had spread him thinner than a drop of butter on thick toast.

Butter. Toast. Cold jelly, he was hungry.

In a gentler voice he repeated to Hifadhi, "No."

The men stood just outside the fort walls in the dark, Hifadhi too stunned to move, Pere pacing in front of him, and Relf hanging back.

"I'm sorry," Pere eventually said. "I shouldn't have snapped. I'm half asleep and second-guessing everything we've been doing. Then you say *that . . .*"

Hifadhi cautiously asked, "Second-guessing *what*, sir?"

Pere stopped pacing and noticed that Relf was still within earshot. No matter. If he's someday going to be an officer, he has to learn that they don't always know everything. In fact, they rarely did.

"Did I do the right thing, Tuma, taking them away from the mansion? Showing them that everything they ever believed was a lie intended to

keep them trapped? Demonstrating that the world is much, much larger than they ever imagined? Liberating them *sounds* so noble, but maybe I just shattered them beyond repair. Only time will tell, and I haven't slept well in over a week fretting that some future time may reveal that in my first major task as High General, I ruined the lives of thirty-three innocent people. And all I was trying to do was figure out what happened to Margo." He gestured futilely to the air. "And I haven't even solved that!

"Maybe it would have been kinder to leave them at the mansion," Pere muttered, resuming his nervous pacing. "Maybe do a gentler transition, with teachers brought to them, with new advisors introduced, then give them the choice to leave on their own once they learned the truth? I don't know, I don't know . . . I think I've lost fifteen pounds this week. If being High General is this stressful, I'll be the skinniest officer in a year. No wonder Stumpy gave up and just sat there watching the horses out of his window. What was I thinking?" He kept pacing, now adding hand massaging, head rubbing, and private mutterings.

Hifadhi gently prodded, "Sir?"

High General Shin didn't hear him, only the castigating of his own mind.

Hifadhi tried again. "Pere? Pere, look at me."

Pere paused and turned to his security man, as if forgetting he was there.

"Sometimes you can introduce change slowly," Hifadhi said. "But sometimes it has to come as a shock. So in your gut—no, in your *heart*, which I think is even bigger, what do you feel? Don't think about it, just ans—"

"As a shock," Pere cut him off. "It had to happen all at once. I don't know why, but I felt that was the right thing."

Hifadhi nodded, then tipped his head. "How often did you experience that, Pere? That feeling of the 'right' thing? Of maybe taking a turn just because you felt it was right, or noticing something you wouldn't normally see?"

Pere stared at him for a moment, then whispered, "In the past couple of weeks? More often than I ever have before. As if no decision was entirely mine, as if I was being nudged."

Hifadhi smiled. "You *were* being nudged, Pere. As I said before, I know you don't believe much in the Creator, but it seems He believes a great deal in you. So much that He knew He could count on you to follow

His nudges, as you put it. The Reckons aren't going to have an easy time, that's for sure. But that doesn't mean this wasn't the right thing to do. I feel it in my heart that this was necessary. It's the only reason I came out to help you. Rescues are never easy, but they're always worth it. And Pere, it's not by any chance that you're the new High General. I fully believe that the Creator had His hand in directing you to that position, to freeing those servants at the right time. You, sir, are the only man who could have climbed up that wall and showed them that there's a possibility of another life. Then *they chose* to follow you over that wall. It's going to be tough, but it's also going to be more rewarding than they ever suspected."

High General Shin had been staring at the ground for the past few minutes, but when he looked up, his eyes were shiny in the light of the two full moons. He cleared his throat gruffly and said, "Since when do you call me Pere?"

Hifadhi smiled and said, "Since I realized what an extraordinary man you are."

Together they said, "Compliments, again."

In silence they stood in the dark, both pondering, until Pere said, "Thank you, Tuma. I didn't realize how much I needed to hear that. Granted, you may be as wrong as I am—"

Hifadhi chuckled.

"—but at least we're united in our errors. I'll just put all the blame on you if something goes horribly wrong, so thank you in advance. However, I think you're a lot smarter than you let on to be," Pere side-eyed him, and Hifadhi shook his head. "I think you've got a handle on a few things that you haven't shared with me."

Tuma lifted his chin. "Would you want it as a shock or little by little?"

Pere chuckled.

"The world isn't entirely as *you* think it is, Pere Shin," Hifadhi said.

"Of course it isn't," Pere sighed. "I'd be foolish to believe I knew everything. This week I've been plagued with the thought of, 'What have I been taught that is actually an elaborate lie?'"

"And would you really want to know? What would you want to do about that lie?"

Pere sighed. "I'm doing what I can, Hifadhi. I'm shattering the lies I find, securing the world as best I can, and hoping for the best. Sounds rather lame now that I say it out loud, but until I know, what more I can

do?”

“Hoping for the best,” Hifadhi repeated. “What ‘best’ are you hoping for?”

“You’re full of big questions tonight, aren’t you?” Pere chuckled sadly. “Hoping for . . . I guess hoping for the day when the land beyond the desert and mountains is clear again, when people can once again live in the ruined lands to the west, when the danger’s gone and my job is no longer needed.”

“Those are big hopes from a big man,” Hifadhi said, almost reverently.

“Sadly, I think everything about me is big—*too* big,” Pere said, trying to chuckle but feeling he’d run out of humor. He was too weary for such discussions, too caught up in the worries of if he did the right things. Too . . . too hungry, first of all. Hungry for a lot of things that he’d never get.

But Hifadhi wasn’t done yet, even though Pere was yawning to try to give him a hint. “What if, sir . . . what if the western deserts were already clear, and the world not poisoned?”

Pere wearily waved that off. “I saw the latest reports about the poisoned areas. Still poisoned. Nothing’s changed.”

“That was years ago—”

“And it’s been hundreds of years that the land’s been dangerous. Everyone knows that. I’m sorry, Tuma, but I’m feeling like I’m going to fall over at any moment, and then no one will have any hope of moving me for the next eight hours. I need to sleep. I’m just too—” and an enormous yawn nearly split his head in two.

“Of course, sir, of course. I shouldn’t keep you out here like this, talking your ear off. Your son is . . . oh dear, I do believe your son has actually fallen asleep leaning against the fort walls. I can just throw him over my shoulder. Let’s get you both in.”

A few minutes later, Hifadhi escorted father and son to the guest quarters of the fort at Winds, dropped Relf as carefully as he could on the first cot, while Pere fell gracelessly on the second one with a mumbled, “*Thubs*” which he knew Tuma would interpret as “Thanks.”

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## One Week Later

High General Shin fell to snoring almost immediately, his cot creaking ominously beneath him; Relf never knew that he'd been moved.

Tuma Hifadhi spread a blanket over each of them, blew out the lantern, and evaluated the dozing High General.

He pondered a few things, consider a few others, then closed his eyes to ask.

Pere had missed it. The suggestions, the hints Tuma was dropping like bits of cake to see if Pere would sniff it out. But as hungry as the man was, he wasn't ready, he wasn't noticing. He was like the rest of the world, so sure he knew what was true, and because of that confidence, he wasn't ready for what *was* true, either in small bits or as one big shock.

Hifadhi smiled sadly at the two, shrugged in gentle defeat, saluted the general and his son, then closed the door.

## ~Two Days Later~

It was a long wagon ride home, which Pere decided to make even longer by stopping in for surprise visits at a few forts along the way. He told his son he delighted in seeing the soldiers casually approach the visitor in gray at the gates, only to realize it was their highest commander, then, oh—how they did panic!

“That’s the way you see what’s *really* going on in a fort,” Pere told him. “When they’re not expecting you.” Usually Relf stayed in the wagon doing the school work he was missing while traveling with his father or ate in the mess hall while the High General terrified privates and majors. Pere would come back to the wagon chuckling and climb in behind the two sergeants, also dressed in civilian clothes, who drove the wagon back to Idumea.

Pere noticed his son was unusually quiet on the drive.

“What’s wrong?” he finally asked on the morning of the second day. His son’s silence was probably no longer a result of exhaustion from the past week.

It took a while for Relf to find the words. “You weren’t sure? About any of this? That’s what you said to Mr. Hifadhi.” His tone made it clear that whatever elevation Pere may have had in his son’s esteem, it had been knocked down to a human height.

High Generals aren’t supposed to doubt themselves.

They doubt everyone else.

And they *never* let anyone know of their self-doubt.

“No, I wasn’t sure,” Pere confessed. “And I’m still not. I feel *fairly* confident we did the right thing, but to be *sure*?” He shrugged. “Only time will tell.”

Relf’s response was so quiet Pere had to strain over the noise of the wagon to hear him. “You’re *supposed* to know before you act.”

“How?” Pere asked. “How am I supposed to know in a situation that’s never been presented to me before? I have to go with my gut. Or my



heart. Whichever is more demanding at the time. Fortunately, they seem to work together most of the time.” He smiled dimly.

His son did not.

“You’re disappointed in me,” Pere concluded. “Well, it won’t be the last time, I’m sure. Being a commander, or even an adult, doesn’t mean we know always what’s right. We have to trust the nudges to do what we *believe* is right. And I think as long as you try to do the right thing, it will eventually turn out. It’s when you stop caring or don’t want to get involved and *let* anything happen—that’s when everything crumbles. General Stumpy was lazy and selfish. He allowed for all kinds of injustices and cruelty to flourish. The only example I have to follow is his; whatever he would do, I try to do the opposite. It’s all I’ve got.”

Relf scoffed quietly, apparently not satisfied by that answer.

“As if you are *any* better,” Pere murmured.

Insulted, Relf sat up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That means that when we were in the mansion, you didn’t follow my orders in a number of situations. You insisted on meeting Clematis. *You’re* the one who put her in trouble, you realize that? You got all goopy-eyed at her when I told you to stay put in the stairwell. She risked her life to send me a warning because she didn’t want *you* to get harmed! Had she never met you, she never would have intercepted the note, or delivered a message to my sergeants, or made herself a target for Jezzy’s killing squad! *You* did that, boy!” Pere jabbed his finger in his chest. “True, many things worked out to our advantage. We flushed out Lieutenant Colonel Lazan and you got to witness your first death in action, but the facts have to be stated: had you not insisted on coming with me that day in the first place, there never would have even been a killing squad sent for you. The trouble would have been only between Jezzy and me, and none of those complications would have occurred! So, why did you go? Huh? Why did you insist? And why did you want to meet Clematis? Answer me!”

Relf had shrunk into himself, hunching over guiltily. His lower jaw began to quiver, and Pere bit back an apology. No, the boy had to hear it. He had to realize how his insistence had complicated everything, his own ambition and desire for adventure had led to near disasters. Clematis was moments away from suffocating to death, and Relf would have had that on his conscience for the rest of his life knowing that meeting him cost the innocent girl her life.

But because she was saved, none of those scenarios had played in his mind.

They were *now*, that was for sure, judging by the boy's shaking shoulders.

"I . . . I . . ." was all he could say after a few minutes. He tried again to speak, but the words choked him.

Eventually Pere put an arm around him and drew him near. Relf resisted at first, then finally leaned his head against his father.

"We speak of this never again," Pere said into his ear. "But now you know how hard it is to make the right decisions, and how impulses can lead us to terrible consequences. Whenever you make a decision, remember how you feel right now, because you never want to feel this way again. If your gut or heart tell you to do something, do it. But you need to learn to listen to them, instead of your own desire for glory."

He gave him a little squeeze and released him.

After a moment, Relf whispered, "It would have been you, wouldn't it?"

Pere leaned in. "I didn't quite catch that."

Relf took a deep, shuddering breath and said, "The killing squad—you would have been its target instead of me or Clematis. You . . . you knew that, didn't you?"

"Well, yes. I was trying to draw them out by whatever means necessary. That's why I was going back in a second time. In case Jezzy was on to me, she would have sent someone after me as soon as possible. But I should *never* have let you come along, and I apologize that I didn't force you to stay at home. I shoulder that fault, more than you. But honestly, I thought Jezzy would have targeted me no matter what the situation. I *never* imagined she would have gone for you. I underestimated her heartlessness."

"But why?" Relf asked. Before Pere could ask for clarification, Relf amended, "But why set yourself up? Why let yourself be the target?"

"Why not? Who else? Think about this: I didn't want to take you to the mansion that morning when we set up the killing squad to arrive, remember? But you begged and begged. You wanted to see it through, instead of letting me dress up a young-looking private to play your part. Why, Relf? Why allow yourself to be the target?"

Relf thought about it. "Because you're right—you can't ask someone else to do it. You have to be brave enough to take on the full

consequences.”

Pere leaned back and looked at his son with new appreciation. “That’s very mature of you. And I understand it didn’t go so well? You being bait for the squad?” They hadn’t talked about it yet, too much had been going on. But now the long ride was dull . . .

His son squirmed. “The five men of the squad saw me dawdling under the peach trees, but they didn’t realize the soldiers were up in the trees. Duvera and Longtin were hiding as well, leaving the gate unguarded. All the soldiers went really still when they saw the men in straw hats converging. I guess I got a little scared because they were getting really close . . . Longtin said they were still like twenty paces away when I started running—yes, I was trying to run away and kept jerking in different directions because I didn’t know which way to go, and for some stupid reason I totally forgot there were like fifty soldiers in the area to help me. The soldiers started dropping out of the trees and captured them. Sorry, but . . . I panicked,” he admitted.

“And why shouldn’t you?” Pere said easily. “What kind of training had you received? None! We put the plan together only a few hours before and had to hope it all worked out. And it did. We all survived. Well, except for Lazan,” Pere said, still annoyed by that. His knife was supposed to hit him in the leg, to keep him from running. But the stupid man had leaned over and caught the knife in his chest instead.

Why do things only *sort of* go to plan?

“I’m sorry, Father,” Relf muttered. “I guess . . . I guess I hoped you were just surer of what you’re doing. I thought by the time you’re as old as you are, you’d have all the answers.”

Pere scoffed at that. “You *do* have more answers, but even more questions, and they usually don’t match up. But I’m pleased with your attitude, son. Take full responsibility. Don’t worry about how the consequences will affect you, do the right thing for everyone else. Somehow, it’ll all work out in the end.”

And that was the last they ever talked about it. Pere never again brought up Relf’s impulsiveness, nor would his son ever speak again about the servants. He had vowed, as had everyone else involved, never to mention them to anyone, as much for the Reckon family’s protection as for their own. No one could ever be sure that all of the killing squad members were identified. There was also no story ever spread around the garrison about the High General’s knife throw, and Lieutenant

## The Walls in the Middle of Idumea

Colonel Lazan had died “in a tragic accident.” Soldiers knew things had been hushed up, but also knew better than to ask why and for what reasons.

The only person involved in the entire servant incident who never made a formal pledge to keep everything he knew quiet and confident, nor signed his name to the official parchment which the High General kept in a secret drawer, was Pere Shin.

## ~Two Years Later~

High General Pere Shin came home to hear women's voices. He cleared his throat loudly, and the talking immediately ceased. In the eating room he found Banu and Matilda waiting for him, along with dinner, thank the biscuits. Sixteen-year-old Relf had already eaten his dinner and was finishing up homework.

"Good evening, Dearest," Pere said, bending over to kiss his wife on the forehead. "Sorry, Matilda—no kiss for you."

She laughed ridiculously.

Relf rolled his eyes. Matilda wasn't his favorite. "Mother, can I please be excused?"

"Did you finish your homework," Pere asked severely.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you eat your dinner?"

"Yes, sir."

"Complete your calisthenics? Command School candidates of next year need to build their muscles *this* year."

"Yes, sir!"

"Is that young lady down the road still sitting out on her front porch?"

"Yes, sir—" Relf tried to stop himself, but too late. He blushed and looked at his empty plate.

Banu elbowed her husband to let their son go. Relf used to write to Clematis, who practiced her penmanship in letters to him. Then as her writing improved, her letters became shorter and her responses more clipped. They hadn't written to each other in four moons.

Undoubtedly she'd discovered a few more local boys her age.

And a new girl had moved in down the road from the Shins.

Pere tipped his head for Relf to go.

He bolted out the door, then tried for a nonchalant swagger down the road. All they ever did was talk to each other across the garden, and sometimes Relf would show how many pushups he could do.

It was horribly painful to watch. Pere knew, because he frequently watched.

As he sat down to the table, Banu whisked away the cloth over his dinner which had been waiting for over an hour, and he smiled in appreciation. "Sorry I'm so late," he said, more to his food than to his wife.

"I'll just go . . . wash up," she said vaguely and nodded to Matilda.

Pere watched her leave the room, then turned to his wife's friend.

"How's work?" he asked conversationally and took a forkful of potatoes.

Matilda scooped herself down to be right across from Pere and lowered her eyelids. He'd told her repeatedly she didn't need to do that, or any of the other tactics she employed, because really, he was just asking his wife's friend how her day at work was. That was all.

Matilda, however, knew she was the most important spy the High General had in King Querul the Fourth's mansion, and she reveled in that.

She clasped her hands in front of her and leaned ludicrously forward.

Pere leaned forward as well, to reach the salt shaker.

After unnecessary shifty-eyeing, she said in a low voice, "High General, there have been letters."

In the same secretive tone, he said, "I know. There are *always* letters."

"Not like this," she insisted. "Not ones to make King Querul sob."

Pere was unmoved. "The man sobs a couple times a week, according to his advisors. They push him too hard."

Matilda drummed her fingers on the table. That meant she was trying to think of a subtle way to express what she knew.

Pere took another bite of sugared carrots and said, "Just blurt it out, Matilda. We both know that works best."

"They're gone," she blurted.

"All right, except for maybe today," he conceded. "Who are 'they'?"

More shifty-eyes. "Our former friends."

"How many friends?" Pere asked.

"Thirty-three."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. News about the servants! Now, what did you say about them?"

"Pere, they're gone!"

The fork was nearly to his mouth when the words finally made sense in his brain, and he set his dinner down. "What do you mean, *gone*?"

## Two Years Later

Faster finger drumming, more leaning. “Fourth had been looking for them again. Tracked them down to a village in the northeast. He had been sending people looking in Edge and Rivers, but then he got word about a large family that had moved to Winds almost two years ago.”

Pere’s mouth went dry. “I need to send a letter to Hifadhi—”

“No, that’s what I’m trying to tell you! Hifadhi is gone, too. And all of the Reckons. Their houses are abandoned, half of the furniture is there and some of their books and clothes, but other items seem to be gone. They . . . they moved or something, but no one knows where. And no one saw them leave!”

Pere pushed back his chair, knocking it over. “Chief of Law Enforcement in Winds! I need to contact him—”

“Querul already heard from him. That’s why he was so upset today. The chief had investigated and sent him the letter that all of the Reckons were gone without a trace. The chief was giving up—”

A sudden knocking at the door stopped Matilda and startled Pere. The door was opened by one of the two guards he had stationed on the front porch.

“Sir?” the young man called. “A message just arrived for you from the fort at Winds. It was delivered first to the garrison, but the commander at Winds seems to believe you need this immediately.”

Pere snatched it out of his hands and quickly unfolded it.

It verified Matilda’s news that the Reckon family, after living quietly and peacefully in Winds, was no longer there. The chief of enforcement, some of his men, the fort’s commander, and some of his soldiers inspected all of the houses, the barns, and the fields looking for clues. There were none to be found. But in one of the houses on a bed, there was a note under a pillow.

The commander had sent it to Pere, and it slipped out of the envelope the message arrived in: a carefully cut, thin piece of parchment.

In a lovely script it said only, “Tell Pere thank you.” Signed with a flourish was the name Clematis, and below it, in the sloppy hand of a ten-year-old, was the name Fangi.

Pere sat numbly on the sofa.

Banu tried to get him to eat, but he wouldn’t for another hour until he’d sent frantic letters to Tuma Hifadhi and his cousin the rector.

Neither of them ever wrote back.

And no one heard of the Reckons—or the Hifadhis—ever again.

## ~More Than Two Decades Later~

High General Pere Shin strode purposefully through the mansion district. The large houses, each more garish and self-important than the next, had been constructed over the past years on lands that used to be an old orchard and the back farm of the Querul's mansion. The property had been sold off to cover expenses, and now the largest mansion in the world had as companionship other exquisitely built houses, none as big, but all trying to be as impressive, and with much larger windows.

But nothing could approach the mansion, primarily because the Army of Idumea kept soldiers posted all around. But the twelve-foot-high stone wall remained, although longer stretches had been demolished for the new mini-mansions, as Pere referred to them, and the back had been reconstructed much closer to the king's home, keeping the mansion surrounded by walls.

There was one original section, however, for which Pere still felt fondness.

A part which he felt his own grandson should see for himself.

"Glad you came along with your father, Perrin," Pere said to the twelve-year-old boy who was exceptionally tall and strong for his age. He showed immense promise. But he was also awkward and gangly, his limbs not yet always responding to his brain. While he was a handsome boy, he was also a clumsy one, and he tripped on his own massive feet every five minutes. It was best not to walk too closely to him.

"We had to come, Grandfather," Perrin said. "You ordered us to be here."

Pere chuckled and tousled his grandson's thick black hair. "Benefits of command, boy. You can order around any colonel in the army, including your own son and his family. No, I actually needed your father at the garrison for a few days. I'm starting to feel my age, and it's nice to have a robust son to check up on me."

"You're not *that* old, Grandfather," Perrin said obligingly.



Pere bobbed his head, his black hair now more silver like the sword at his side. Banu, bless her, said he looked even more distinguished, not tarnished at all. She wasn't entirely sure what tarnished meant. At least, he assumed she didn't know.

"Soon to be sixty-four," he sighed. "No, not *that* old. But I *am* slowing down."

His grandson poked his large belly. "*That's* slowing you down," he mumbled.

Pere wasn't even going to protest that. He'd tried over the years to lose the weight, but after a while no one seemed to care that he had it. Even Mrs. Kayle had given up on him after he tried her diets. What she didn't know was that Banu was supplying him with "snacks" to keep his energy going during those long weeks when he was reduced to eating mostly green foods. Banu could always be trusted to secretly supply the forbidden brown foods. After some five or six years, the command board decided that Pere Shin had done so much to improve the reputation of the army and clear out its corruption that a few extra pounds could easily be ignored.

At least, that's what the head garrison surgeon had recommended, and the command board approved: the stature of his character outweighed even the stature of his body. He'd done more for the army than any other general, and frankly, they were all weary of the battle of his bulge and decided to quit forcing him on to the scale every six moons.

Besides, Mrs. Kayle had retired, in defeat.

Pere felt a little bad about that, but only a little. They still had her over for dinner three times a year and pretended to eat only green foods when she was around.

"You may be surprised what this belly and I once did," Pere told his grandson, "and it has to do with this wall." He nodded to the soldiers on guard who saluted him, then directed his grandson to the side of the compound, to the surprise of his men who were preparing to open the massive iron gates.

Instead grandfather and grandson pushed their way through bushes until they reached the point where Pere was fairly certain he had made his climb.

The wall looked bigger today, and Pere was grateful he wasn't recreating the event. "Sometimes," he said to his grandson, "there's only one person in the world who can do something *for* the world. I see that

potential in you, as I saw it in your father, because I discovered it quite by accident in myself.”

And he told young Perrin the story.

He was pleased to see the boy stare up at the wall in awe where his portly grandfather had once perched, where his father had also climbed, and, not being able to help himself, he ventured up the stone wall too. But with coordination equivalent to that of a drunken bull, Perrin made it up only halfway before he got mixed up in his own arms and legs and took a tumble.

Pere nodded sympathetically. “We don’t have to tell your father about this.”

“Thanks,” Perrin said, brushing himself off. “You really went over that?”

His chest swelling with pride, he said, “Yes. Yes, I did. To show these people how they’d been trapped and lied to, and how they could leave that.”

“And you have no idea where they are now?”

Pere sighed. “None.”

“What about the guard you hired to help them? Your former corporal, what about him? What was his name?”

Pere opened his mouth, then admitted, “It was an unusual name, and I’ve kind of forgotten it.”

Perrin mumbled, “Could have written it down.”

“Oh, you too, huh?” he snapped at his grandson. “You’ve been listening too much to your father! No, I don’t keep good records and for good reasons—there are still plenty of idiots in the army, and Fourth keeps trying to use them to get into my boxes. I’m not going to record such important names because some things *should* be forgotten! Then no one can go poking around where they shouldn’t and find information that could cost someone their life!”

His grandson stared at the ground, bobbing his head apologetically.

Pere exhaled and gave the boy a half hug. His earlier and too-frequent arguments with his son shouldn’t have traveled to his grandson. “Sorry, Perrin. Your father and I had a bit of a falling out this morning again over the same thing. That’s why I decided to take a walk with you, to cool myself down. But then I hear you repeating him . . . He just doesn’t understand, Perrin. Not *everything*. Don’t get me wrong: he’s a good man, a fantastic officer—he’s going to replace me someday, I already

know it. Strict and unbending in everything.”

His tone didn't make it clear if he was pleased or annoyed by that. Probably equal parts of both.

“But we don't always see eye-to-eye, as you can tell. He writes down *everything*. His fastidious record-keeping may get him into trouble someday, I fear.” A thought occurred to him. “By the way, Perrin—what does your father say about me? Come on, I know he talks and I know you listen in. Honestly now? And remember, I can order you.”

His grandson pondered his response for a moment, then said, using the best diplomacy he knew how, “He says that you really have gotten rid of all the spy rings. That the army's a lot safer and more trustworthy than it has ever been, and that perhaps, just maybe, you're a little . . . paranoid sometimes. Only a little!”

Pere scoffed at that. “Only a little. He thinks I'm a lot more and we both know it. But I can't help it. Nor do I want to. It's never going to be completely free of intrigue, Perrin. Never going to be entirely safe: the world, the army. I'm afraid your father will trust the wrong people because he's too confident in the army as it is. If only he would understand that . . . Anyway, enough of that. I brought you here for a reason, other than taking a break from your document-obsessed father. Sorry, again, I shouldn't be calling him that. Anyway, now Perrin, listen carefully—”

And he hesitated, because while he thought the boy had potential, he couldn't even climb the wall. What if he never grew out of his clumsiness? What kind of officer could he possibly become?

Well, they always needed helpful captains and majors—

No.

No, *this* boy would be more than that. He could grow to be like his father, but hopefully not as Relf-like as Relf was. Maybe a little more Pere-like.

Give the boy a few years . . .

“Perrin, sometimes there's only one man who can go over a wall, only one person who the servants will believe, and no matter the danger or your worry—or the potential for embarrassment—you *have* to be that man. Go over that wall, Perrin.”

“But I already tried, Grandfather—” He gestured lamely to the stone before him.

“Metaphorically, Perrin. Whatever ‘wall’ comes your way. A metaphorical wall—”

Oh, burnt toast. Maybe the boy wasn't as bright as he had assumed.  
"You *do* get it, right? What I'm trying to explain is—"

But his grandson's eyes were twinkling, and Pere sighed in relief.  
He got it.

Pere put his hands on the boy's shoulders, nearly as tall as him but flimsy enough to flip over. "Promise me you'll never forget this place, this story. This is important, son—promise me."

Perrin smiled easily. "Sure, Grandfather—"

"No," Pere said solemnly. "This isn't a 'sure' thing. This is important. Do not forget. Maybe someday you can find them again. They've disappeared so well that I've never been able to track them down. I fear . . . well, I fear something dreadful may have happened to them. Try for me, will you? Someday when you're older? Maybe they'll be less secretive then, or their descendants may be at least. Perrin, never forget them, how they were imprisoned by those who claimed to protect them."

The twelve-year-old nodded just as gravely. "Yes, sir," he whispered. "Grandfather? Why has my father never told me any of this?"

Pere squeezed his shoulders before letting them go. "Because he signed an oath more than twenty years ago that he never would. Everyone involved vowed not to reveal anything about the former servants. We couldn't let their story get out. We had to keep them secret for their protection, and for ours."

"So why are you telling me this now?"

The High General smiled. "Benefits of command, boy. Get to my position, and you'll have all kinds of privileges, and can get around all kinds of restrictions meant for *other* people. *You* can climb any walls, if you have enough power and you use it wisely. Want to be High General someday?"

Perrin grinned. "I sure do." Then remembering the admonition that this wasn't a 'sure' thing, he straightened up and said, "Sir, yes, sir!" Then he tried to salute, but his arm was too long and his elbow was too slow to comprehend what was intended, so the boy thwacked himself on the forehead instead. He dropped his hand as if confused as to what it was doing.

Pere's smiled woodenly as he thought to himself, *Still have a few years for this one.*

And oh, curdled cream, Perrin's going to need them all . . .

## ~About Two Years After That~

**T**uma Hifadhi made his way to the tidy house and sprawling gardens. He knocked on the front door, and a teenage girl opened it.

“Is your mother in?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hifadhi, but she’s out. But they’re supposed to return soon.” The girl was trying to subtly look around Tuma, but was far too obvious about it.

Tuma smiled. He knew she wasn’t watching for her mother’s return, but was looking for someone far more interesting.

“This was a last-moment trip out here, Asrar,” he told her. “I had very little time, otherwise I would have made sure to bring along a certain grandson of mine. He’ll be disappointed as well.”

Asrar’s dark skin flushed deeper as she ducked her eyes. Tuma turned when he heard the approach of three adults. They were in earnest conversation and hadn’t noticed him standing on their front porch until they were walking up the stairs. Asrar’s mother recognized him first.

“Tuma Hifadhi? What a surprise! What brings you here?” Clematis gave him a quick hug and stepped aside so her cousin could shake his hand.

“Come all this way for my concert tomorrow?” Fangi asked. “The soloist will be amazing,” he said, slapping the back of the second man with them. “So glad my cousin married a man who could actually sing.”

Clematis’s husband shook his head humbly, and Clematis patted his light brown cheek. “It was a bonus. I married him for his mathematical mind. Always marry a man with all the answers—that’s what I tell Asrar. The fact that my Professor Hilbert can actually perform what you compose, Fangi, just makes him all the more perfect,” gushed Mrs. Hilbert.

Professor Hilbert rolled his dark brown eyes. “And I tell our sons to

*not* marry a woman who asks the hardest questions in the world, because you'll have to make up the answers just to placate her, and then she'll go on to prove how you're wrong."

Clematis beamed. "Oh, go on. You love it when I disprove your theorems."

"Not during my lectures and in front of my students!"

Tuma chuckled. "Clematis, why don't you accept the appointment at the university?"

"I despise teaching," she said dismissively. "I don't enjoy the students as much as I enjoy the numbers. They're far more predictable."

Fangi nodded sympathetically. "That's why I married a flutist. We never argue about math." To Tuma he said, "So my concert is tomorrow—are you coming?"

"If my schedule allows. But please, I've come with some news. If I may?"

Recognizing his heavy demeanor, they led him into the gathering room.

"It's about Pere Shin," was all Tuma had to say.

Clematis and Fangi had both begun to smile until they saw how somber he was.

"Oh, no," Clematis whispered and unconsciously held her cheek where he accidentally gave her a faint scar when he saved her from suffocating.

Tuma nodded gravely. "It was his heart, from what they could tell. Apparently he clutched his chest one morning as he was getting out of bed, and then . . . that was it."

"His heart was too big," Clematis whispered. "Along with everything else of the man."

Fangi sat back against the sofa, deflated. "I realized just the other day," he said quietly, "that we're nearing the same age he was when he climbed that wall for us."

"I remember it every day," Clematis said. "I think all of us do."

Fangi nodded in agreement.

They sat in reverent silence for several minutes, each recalling their own memories, except for Professor Hilbert who hadn't even heard the name of Pere Shin until some moons after they had married. But without Pere Shin, he never would have found Clematis or her extended family. That was worth a few moments of silent gratitude.

Eventually Tuma spoke again. "His son has been named High General."

"Relf?" Clematis smiled.

Her husband elbowed her softly. "Any lingering regrets about him?"

"Of course not. Especially now that he has to live in Idumea and in walking distance of the mansion."

Everyone shuddered in sympathy.

"High General Relf Shin," Clematis tried out the name. "Good to see it's staying in the family."

"And he has a son," Tuma said. "He's about fourteen now, the same age that you and Relf had been."

Fangi whistled quietly. "When did we all get so old?"

After they chuckled sadly, he asked, "What's the boy's name?"

"Relf named him after his father," Tuma said. "Perrin Shin."

Fangi's and Clematis's eyes met. "Perrin Shin," they repeated.

Clematis saw her daughter standing in the doorway, listening in. "A new name for the Family to remember," she told Asrar.

Her daughter nodded.

"I'll let everyone know," Fangi said. "That there's a new name for us to try to someday free."





## This book is just the start . . .

But, weirdly, the last written.

Well, that's incorrect. The *start* of this series would be 280 years before *The Walls in the Middle of Idumea*, when the first 500 families were placed in the land east of Idumea. But I haven't written that prequel yet, so that will likely be the "last written."

So the *next* "start" would be in the year 195, with the outbreak of the Great War, and the story of Lek and Lorixania Shin. Bits of their history are mentioned in Books 5—8, but I haven't written *that* prequel yet, either, although I have notes, so that might be the next "last written".

This current book, about Pere Shin and the servants of Querul, was a prequel I didn't expect to write, but about four months ago I thought, "Hey, there's a story there. Could be a *short* story . . ."

(That was also my thought when I first began the entire Forest at the Edge series: a short story, which turned into eight books. I now understand what a "shorter" story is.)

*The Walls in the Middle of Idumea* is a good place to start reading the series, since it elaborates on incidents referred to later, introduces a few key characters, gives background to a major conflict, and ties up loose strings I didn't realize I'd left dangling in the series. Making those connections was great fun, and I hope it will be for those who already know the books. So start here with this prequel or start with Book 1. The books don't mind where you begin.

Here's the rest of the series:

## FOREST AT THE EDGE SERIES

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Book One:

*The Forest at the Edge of the  
World*

Book Two:

*Soldier at the Door*

Book Three:

*The Mansions of Idumea*

Book Four:

*The Falcon in the Barn*

Book Five:

*Safety Assured Leaving East of  
Medicetti*

Book six:

*Flight of the Wounded Falcon*

Book Seven:

*The Soldier in the Middle  
of the World*

Book Eight:

*The Last Day*

Prequel:

*The Walls in the Middle of Idumea*

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Sometimes life just isn't fair.

## The Walls in the Middle of Idumea

## About the author . . .

Trish Strebel Mercer has been teaching college and high school, or editing graduate papers, or changing diapers since the early 1990's. She earned a BA in English from Brigham Young University and an MA in Composition Theory and Rhetoric from Utah State University. She and her husband David have nine children (and now adding grandchildren) and have raised them in Utah, Idaho, Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina, and Maine. She dreams of the day she'll be old enough to be a campground manager in Yellowstone National Park.

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## The Walls in the Middle of Idumea

A PREQUEL TO THE *FOREST AT THE EDGE* SERIES

### "WHAT HAVE I BEEN TAUGHT THAT IS ACTUALLY AN ELABORATE LIE?"

Newly appointed as High General over the Army of Idumea, 40-year-old Pere Shin knows he's only a figurehead. He's hardly the typical officer: he's cheerful, overweight, and bribes his favorite enlisted men with sweets.

The army only expects him to sit quietly out of its way.

But Pere Shin has other ideas.

There are secret groups to be exposed, and wrongs to be righted-- he just has to find out who, and what, and where they are.

As he does, he discovers more problems than he anticipates. So when his teenage son Relf offers to help, Pere decides that now may be a good time to give Relf some early command school training.

That's not the first decision he's going to regret.

Taking place four decades before Book 1 of the *Forest at the Edge* series, this prequel tells the story that later inspires Pere's grandson, Perrin, to go beyond the barriers that hold him back to expose what's really going on behind the walls in the middle of Idumea.

#### FOREST AT THE EDGE SERIES

BOOK ONE:

*THE FOREST AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD*

BOOK TWO:

*SOLDIER AT THE DOOR*

BOOK THREE:

*THE MANSIONS OF IDUMEA*

BOOK FOUR:

*THE FALCON IN THE BARN*

BOOK FIVE:

*SAFETY ASSURED LEAVING EAST OF MEDICETTI*

BOOK SIX:

*FLIGHT OF THE WOUNDED FALCON*

BOOK SEVEN:

*THE SOLDIER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WORLD*

BOOK EIGHT:

*THE LAST DAY*

#### *What readers are saying:*

"This series . . . is full of heroes, heroines, secrets, family, love, hate, betrayal, growth, and most of all, the Creator. There is enough intrigue to keep you guessing to the end, but the story has so much activity, relationships, and faith built into it that it's a can't-put-down book. . . . These books will definitely be read over and over and shared with others."

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