

THE  
AGE OF LOST INNOCENCE  
AND THE  
THEORY OF BALANCE



A clairvoyant elder once said onto his spiritual son, who traveled a great distance to seek his counsel, “In the name of God, if you decide to pick one of the Lord's flowers from His garden before you have fulfilled His will, its white pedals shall bleed color, wither, and die.”



# I

## *The Painter and the Musician*

It was mid-autumn, and the early morning sunlight peaked over the mountaintops, shedding yellow rays on a small village in the valley of the Northern Vales. Dewdrops sprinkled across the colorful leaves as the fog that pocketed the lower countryside began to lift. Billows of smoke revealed the dozen or so farms scattered about the valley as the villagers enjoyed their morning meals before heading to the temple for worship.

Worship was a dying custom in the Kingdom of Valoria, but it still remained very much alive in this rural community as the wise and humble elder of the village temple commanded a large following thanks to his powerful sermons. However, today the promise of a riveting message had no effect on two young men enticed by the flawless warm day, a welcome change of pace from the last couple weeks of gray skies, cold winds, and endless downpours. So when the time was right and the elder was not looking, the two friends—Damyen and Liviulé—snuck out through the rear door of the temple, mounted their Northern Surefoots, and set out from the village.

When they reached the village outskirts, they followed the river upstream until it intersected with a trail that led them to the top of the northeastern side of the valley. Once the terrain began to level out, they cantered across a field at full speed heading toward Lake Rockwell, a glacier-made lake in Townerswoods. There the two of them dismounted and high-legged it through the brush until they stood alongside the lake's

muddy shore.

“You have to see this, Liviulé,” Damyen said, prodding his friend to follow him as he darted back into the brush in an easterly direction around the brim of the lake.

Trailing behind while getting pricked by thorn bushes, Liviulé yelled up ahead, “Where in God’s graces are you taking me?”

“Just a little further!”

Damyen sprinted deeper into the forest, dodging overhanging branches and hurdling fallen tree trunks. After crossing over an outcropping of bedrock, Damyen walked the last length underneath a canopy of burnt-red autumn leaves until he reached a narrow peninsula that gave way to the bright blue sky above.

Waiting patiently for Liviulé to catch up, Damyen closed his eyes and listened to the melody of birds chirping as the fresh smell of pine and the poignancy of decay greeted his nostrils. Opening his eyes, he admired the surrounding landscape and thought about how much he enjoyed the softer hues during the fall season.

Nature was therapy to Damyen’s soul. That was until he heard his friend grumbling as he fought his way over the last bit of bedrock. When Liviulé finally made it over to Damyen, brushing clingy burs from his clothing, he shot a glare at his closest friend. “What are you trying to do, kill me?”

“Will you stop complaining and take your boots off.”

Liviulé sighed his exacerbation—especially when he noticed the small island situated not too far from the edge of the peninsula. With a quick refusal he said, “Oh, no. Not the island. There is no way I am getting into that freezing cold water.”

Damyen reassured him, “Eh, come on. It will be well worth our time.”

“Yes, I know. I just hate feeling cold.”

“Is it not better to be outside enjoying life than watching it go by as you stare out the window?”

Liviulé hated when Damyen was right, so he relented and accepted. “Very well, shall we! Damn you and your sayings.”

They sat down on a decaying tree trunk and removed their leather

boots; then they rolled up their wool pants above their calves, hung their tied boots upon their shoulders, and climbed down the muddy ledge. When Liviulé entered into the knee-deep water, he began shouting obscenities and cursing Damyen who waded an arm's length ahead of him.

As soon as they reached the island, they ran up a blanket of red pine needles and plopped down on the nearest rocks. While they wiped off their feet and strapped back on their boots, they watched a multitude of chipmunks scurrying across the undergrowth with mouths full of acorns. When the chipmunks finally scattered out of sight, and the two men had time to catch their breath, they got to their feet and trekked across the island, being mindful not to step on their little friends.

When they at last reached their destination on the top of a small hill at the northern tip of the island, a breathtaking sight sprawled out for miles. Beyond the lake were distant snow-covered mountains that sprung forth from the surrounding forests. Liviulé turned to Damyen with a grin. "I have to admit, this was a splendid idea."

Damyen recalled Liviulé's favorite spot to contemplate life. "In comparison to you and your waterfall, yes!"

"Well, shall we artists begin?"

Damyen ambled up to the zenith of the hill and leaned against a decrepit tree that ran almost parallel to the ground. He relaxed the strap of his satchel and swung it before him. Unbuttoning the lip, he opened it up and pulled forth his old fiddle made of cherry. After hanging his bag on a nearby branch, he perched on the swaying trunk.

Tuning the instrument with his ear, Damyen recalled the many memories he had here while growing up. "This is by far my favorite place to sit and think. It is difficult to find these same humbling experiences in the city." Liviulé wordlessly nodded in agreement, and Damyen continued, "But my favorite part is to lay here on this swaying trunk and watch the heavens above. You feel as if you are floating."

"The thought of that is enough to make me nauseous," Liviulé joked, eyeing his friend.

The two had known each other since boyhood, and over the years Damyen's handsome looks matured with each passing year. His gentle

features were accented by deep blue eyes that probed Liviulé when they talked. Unlike Liviulé's dark brown eyes, buzzed scalp, and contrasted unshaven face, Damyen's looks evoked a more classic appeal of golden blond hair just long enough to graze his upper cheeks when he did not tuck it behind his ears.

Damyen considered himself a dreamer and always spoke of grand ideas too far-fetched for the ordinary mind. He was deeply religious, though he appeared otherwise to those who did not know him, instead preferring to keep his thoughts to himself unless in the accompaniment of good friends. Someone once compared him to a hopeless romantic, still in search of his one true love. He certainly could not deny that.

In regards to his calling, Damyen was still searching, always searching. It all began when Damyen and Liviulé traveled to the Tree City of Kent, where they used their savings to barter an apprenticeship. While Liviulé found his apprenticeship with a skilled artisan, Damyen shifted direction from music in pursuit of an apprenticeship as a merchant. Although Damyen found much success in this trade, he always felt something was lacking; he wanted to do something more rewarding—like helping others.

While stammering out some rusty notes on his fiddle, Damyen watched Liviulé as he removed a fairly large sketchbook from his bag. Liviulé's sketchbook was truly unique for he constructed it himself, wanting something compact enough to travel around with. Using thick raw hides, he strengthened it with thread and bone. He then filled the center with sheets of parchment purchased from the local market, thus creating his very own signature sketchbook.

A moment later, Liviulé pulled from his satchel a small leather sack and untied the top. He reached in, pulled out a fragmented piece of charcoal, and set the sack beside him. Patiently, Liviulé held the charcoal in his hand and eyed the landscape spread out before him. With a trance-like gaze, his hand lifted the charcoal to the sketchbook and placed it un-movingly on the parchment. When inspired, Liviulé gave way to repeated horizontal strokes, and within moments, the dark flagellated lines began to coagulate into a coherent, vivid drawing of the surrounding landscape.

With a flick of his wrist, Liviulé pulled his trademark black hood up

over his face—a somber appearance that did not quite match his otherwise colorful personality and kind heart that easily brought women to their knees. But if there was one thing Liviulé excelled at as much as his art, it was his ability to talk; Liviulé was a talker. Liviulé could meet anyone, anywhere, start up a conversation, and in the next moment establish an undeniable camaraderie with that person. He enjoyed being the center of attention, despite the annoyance it gave Damyen and his close peers.

“Damyen!” said Liviulé, while sketching the nearby mountains.

“What is it?”

“Play me the song ‘The Painter and the Musician.’”

“It will be my pleasure!”

Damyen lifted up his bow and gently pressed it against the strings. The song started slow and crescendoed into a wild climax before tapering off. It was a song that Damyen had written to express what an artist goes through when crafting a masterpiece, a song that became the first of many as Damyen played late into the afternoon.

With a final stroke of his bow, Damyen set the fiddle on his lap and said, “I cannot believe that it has been two years since I last saw you.”

“Actually, it is three years to be exact. But who is counting?” Liviulé finished his sketch and blew off the excess charcoal dust.

“That is insane!”

“Yes, I know.”

A moment of silence parted their conversation, when Damyen said rather nostalgically, “But what is really insane is that after all this time, I still do not feel content with my life or what I am doing.”

“The feeling is mutual.” Liviulé closed his sketchbook and stood up to stretch his limbs, adding, “Here we are, two grown men on different paths, yet in the very same predicament.” Liviulé scooted into a spot beside Damyen on the hovering tree trunk. “However, I am glad that we will soon be on another one of our wondrous adventures!”

“You mean misadventures?” Damyen noted.

“It is beyond me why they always turn out that way!” The two of them chuckled at the truth of the statement.

“By the way, you never finished telling me about the journey to your

parents' homeland," Damyen prompted. "How was it?"

"I had a grand time in Roznovia. The people there were fantastic and so were the women; however, life is harsh over there, especially since the war. And after I decided to leave the seminary, I thought it would be best to come home."

"Agh, the real reason why you came home was because you miss me."

Liviulé waved off the remark, chuckling as he pulled out his crooked pipe and began packing it with hash. "As much as I love horse manure, yes!" Liviulé continued with a conscious decree, "I must say, Damyen, I am glad to hear that you and Kiaran are doing well in Brookshire."

"I tell you, it has not been easy. Without Kiaran, I am pretty certain I would not have survived there very long."

"I am amazed that you still live with him! The lad drives me mad!"

"Kiaran is truly a character. And not to worry, you shall see him soon enough!"

"Thank you for reminding me."

Damyen shifted back to their previous conversation. "But I really do love Brookshire. It is an entirely different lifestyle that you have to get accustomed to. The only problem is the women. They love you for your wealth and title, and not because you are a good person."

"With that kind of attitude, you are never going to find someone."

"But, Liviulé, we are getting old, and I have yet to woo the right woman."

Liviulé brought the crooked pipe to his lips and flicked a spark to ignite the crushed hash. Puffing it slowly, he replied, "Shite, I always woo the right woman. However, it is afterwards when I then realize that she is not the right one!"

The two of them belted out hearty laughter as Damyen found a breath to say, "In that case, that kind of wooing should be wooed upon if we are ever going to find true love."

Just then Liviulé's expression went from subtle to serious, a change Damyen easily noticed. "Is everything alright?"

Liviulé admitted, "There is something I must tell you."

"I am all ears."

“I had a dream.”

“Dream? What kind of dream?”

“It is hard to explain. But I had this dream where I was celebrating in the capital of Valoria, and there I met a lady with black hair—my sworn love.”

“Well, I must say, that is a good incentive for coming along on this journey.”

“You are telling me!”

Damyen reached out his hand toward Liviulé. “Let me have a smoke.”

As Damyen inhaled a few puffs from the pipe, Liviulé continued, “Honestly though, I am a little nervous about it.”

“Why?” Damyen rebuffed. “Do you still believe the clairvoyant elder was referring to marriage when he used that euphemism on you?”

“It is beyond me.” Liviulé sighed.

“Whatever the case, I still think that elder was full of shite.”

“Maybe so. But would I bother telling you something that I did not believe to be true?”

“Yes. Plenty of times!”

“Give me an example.”

“Very well.” Damyen picked the first one that came to mind and said, “I remember you telling me about a vision you had where I traveled East with you.”

Liviulé quickly defended himself, saying, “Hello? Are we not going to the Holy Land together?”

“But back then you said it was Roznovia, did you not?”

“That was a long time ago...” Liviulé tried to ignore the fact that Damyen was right and interjected, “But soon we will be in Theoria!”

“Theoria...” Damyen’s eyes sparkled. “Who would have ever imagined?”

“And better yet, all expenses paid for!” The two burst with excitement. Surely going to the Holy Land where the heart of civilization began was an adventure of a lifetime, one that promised excitement from the mundane routine they had grown bored of.

“I was utterly shocked when I received that message from Elder Emeral

telling me to pack my bags!" Damyen exclaimed.

"I know. And what is more shocking is the fact that he is now an advisor to the emperor."

"I am truly astonished."

"So am I. But it shall be good to see all of us united once again."

"Yes, it has been much too long!" Damyen agreed, wondering what would be in store for them upon their arrival.



## II

# *Home*

“Remember—no sleeping in,” Liviulé warned.

As the sun began its descent behind the mountaintops surrounding Townerswoods, Liviulé reminded Damyen to meet him outside the temple early the next day for their departure. The journey to the capital of Valoria—Siviu—would likely be a long one, so they would have little time to waste. After saying their farewells, Liviulé took the road north to his parents’ house as Damyen followed the path south along the river towards his family’s villa.

With evening setting in, the temperature started to plummet, so Damyen dug into the ribs of his trusted Northern Surefoot named Stavros, prodding him to an energetic canter down the worn trail before hurdling the neighbor’s fence in order to trim the distance home. Stavros trotted through an overgrown field before hurdling one last fence that brought them upon a path that cut through a small patch of forest. Once through, Damyen made another quick right, and as Stavros rounded the bend, the horse stopped dead in its tracks before rearing up on its hind legs, neighing.

“Whoa!” Damyen soothed.

When Stavros finally stomped down on all fours, Damyen noticed a short woman standing in the middle of the pathway covered in a violet cloak holding a blanket. “Hi, Day!” she greeted him by his nickname. “I apologize for startling poor Stavros.”

“For heaven’s sakes, Ma, you startled me!”

“My apologies. I could just sense that you were feeling a tad bit cold. So I decided to bring you a blanket. The last thing you want to do is get sick before your long journey!”

Still a little startled, Damyen dismounted Stavros, bent over, and hugged his mother, Beta. A petite yet plump woman, Beta stood a good couple of feet short of her son. Her round face, rosy cheeks, and button nose almost gave her an elfish appearance. Cropped brown hair framed their family’s trademark blue eyes.

“How did you know I was on my way?”

Intuitively, she gleamed, “A mother always knows!”

A smile threatened Damyen’s lips. “I should have remembered. As in the time I made Juvyen climb that dead tree and he ended up falling down and breaking his arm. You were there in a heartbeat when it should have taken the whole morning for you to find us.”

Beta playfully smacked Damyen with the blanket. “You almost broke your poor mother’s heart! Now, let me get you inside.”

Wrapped in his mother’s blanket, Damyen briskly followed his mother home in comfortable silence, but it was not long before Beta began asking numerous questions, agitating her son. “So where did you go?”

“I went to Townerswoods with Liviulé,” Damyen replied tersely, hoping to avoid a lecture about missing the worship that morning.

“And how is he?”

“He is well and up to his usual shenanigans.”

“Even after all these years?”

“Well...” Damyen pondered. “Yes, unfortunately.”

“Oh...” Beta replied, unabashed. “And how is his family?”

By now Damyen grew tired of his mom’s insistent interrogation, and he rebuked her, “Mother, they are the same as they always are. I am certain you see them more than I see you in a year.”

“I am sorry.” Beta frowned. “I just miss having conversations with you. You are a grown man now, and well, I am getting old. It is hard when you watch your child grow up to become a young, handsome man and then watching you leave to pursue your dreams. All that while I am left here to wonder how you are achieving them.”

Damyen circled his arm around her shoulders and said with confidence, “I am here, Ma!”



When Damyen and Beta returned home, they ambled through the welcoming room heading straight for the kitchen. A delicious fragrance enticed Damyen, and his mouth salivated as he watched his mother stir a pot of something tasty looking. He watched as Beta’s thick arms tirelessly moved around and around with a spoon in her hand.

“Mother, why did you not eat? It is late.”

“I decided that it would be best to wait for you.”

Leaning over his mother to smell the aroma, Damyen said, “Ma, that is sweet of you, but I bet that Da is not all that pleased.”

“Ha! All will be forgotten once his stomach is full.” The two of them lit up with laughter.

Damyen listened for the footsteps of his father, yet noted not a sound in the house. “So where is he?”

“Hara? He is probably out in the barn helping Juvyen fix the old chariot that he purchased today.”

Damyen shook his head in disbelief. “How many chariots does he need? What is wrong with his other ones?”

“I have no idea.”

“Should he not be thinking about saving his money to purchase his own land?”

“He is exactly like your father!”

Damyen walked towards the door and said, “I shall go fetch them.”

Damyen exited through the back of the villa and followed the cobbled path leading to the nearby barn. Pulling the door open, he entered and found his father and brother standing before a chariot perched atop wooden blocks. Dressed in thick wool cloaks to shield them from the evening’s chill, they discussed the need to mend a brace underneath the chariot to secure the axle.

“Nice chariot, Juvyen!” Damyen cut in, drawing their attention at the sound of his voice.

“She is a beauty!” Juvyen replied as he wiped his dirty hands with a clean rag.

Although two years younger than Damyen, Juvyen was nearly twice the size of his older brother. His blue eyes twinkled with excitement at his new “toy,” and his thin lips spread into a long grin beneath the beard that minimized his wide nose. Despite his gruff appearance, Juvyen was accredited by his peers for having a large and kind heart.

Damyen shattered his brother’s hair-hidden smile as he admonished, “But why would you go and spend all your hard-earned money on something that you already have?”

Hara threw up his hands. “Here we go again!”

“What does it matter to you how I spend my money?” Juvyen retorted.

“Because I would rather see you owning your own land.”

“Be easy on him, Damyen!” replied Hara. “The lad is still young.”

Hara sidled beside Juvyen, who was a spitting image of him with the exception of Hara’s ash-blond hair and a rounder nose from age. Hara’s carpentry, surveying, and farming skills showed through his thick arms and rough hands that had seen years of manual labor. It was his passion in life to instill these valuable skill sets in his children from a young age and to teach them that through hard work and discipline, one could succeed in anything he put his mind to, even if it was not one of Hara’s prized specialties. This was the way of his father’s lineage, the way that he was taught.

“But you know how I worry about Juvyen and the family,” Damyen pleaded.

Hara approached Damyen, placed a hand on his shoulder, and warmly said, “My son, we might not have the education as you do, but your mother and I have always managed to get by, and we always made certain that we had enough food to feed you and a roof over your head. Nonetheless, we are simple, Damyen. Remember that. It is not our plight to see such things in the light that you were given.”

“Agh, you are right, Da,” Damyen regrettably admitted. “My apologies, Juvyen.”

“No harm committed, my dear brother.”

Hara grabbed his two sons and hugged them tightly. Futilely resisting the embrace, Juvyen burst into laughter, shouting, “Come on, Da, let go!”

Hara chuckled. “Now, how about we go inside and have some of your mother’s good cooking!”



Sitting around the polished oak table, the men eyed Beta’s beef stew, which steamed from the bowls before them. Damyen called to his mother, who busied herself grabbing a handful of items from the kitchen, “Mother, come sit with us!”

“I am on my way!”

“Eh, you know your mother,” Hara noted. “She is always running around once you get her going.”

When Beta finally sat down, tired and out of breath, she reached for a piece of potato bread while Juvyen filled her glass with wine; however, Hara was in no mood to wait around as a chunk of beef tempted him from his spoon. Just before he lifted the choice meat to his mouth, Damyen berated, “Da, can you wait until Ma first gives us a blessing?”

Annoyed with Damyen’s due diligence for holding steadfast to tradition, he replied, “Such blessings are nonsense.”

“It is because of Him that we are given such gifts,” replied Damyen.

Hara let his spoon plop back into his stew, and he scolded, “This gift of food was made by the hard work of my hands in the field. Thank me!”

Worried to see another evening ruined by such bickering, Beta pleaded, “I am ready, I am ready!”

While Hara stared at Damyen, who bowed his head to pray, Beta began, “*Dear God, let this food strengthen our bodies and our spirits. Let Your love shine upon our family’s house and the houses of all families who honor You. Forever and Anon.*”

Everyone quietly tended to their meals, which allowed the tension in the room to ease away slowly. But as usual, Beta started asking Damyen a

plethora of questions. This time it was about his other best friend, saying, “So how is Kiaran? I bet he is probably very happy to see his family.”

“Indeed! It is not easy being away for such a long time, especially when it is just us out there by ourselves in such a large city. But thankfully, we have grown from our experiences and are making the most of our time there.”

“And that is all you can ask for,” Beta acknowledged before further inquiring, “So is he excited about traveling to the Holy Land?”

After taking a sip of wine, Damyen replied, “Agh, yes he is. But I dare say that it shall not be fun riding with both him and Liviulé.”

Beta replied with some concern, “After all these years, Kiaran and Liviulé still do not get along?”

“They love to butt heads.”

“Oh, my...”

Hara added, “I can definitely see why! Liviulé has a very loose tongue, and it will bite him in the arse one day, and Kiaran is a reckless drunk. I never quite understood what you see in those lads.”

“It is easy for you to judge, Da, yet these lads have always been there for me.”

Hara nodded. “Just you be careful.”

“Careful of what?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

Damyen did not like the swipe his father took at his friends because he knew that they were good men; not to mention, Damyen was always careful of whom he would let into his circle.

“Actually, no I do not. So how about you tell me?”

“I am concerned about who you will be traveling with.”

“And whom might that be? I will be traveling along with the emperor and his court.”

After rolling a chunk of bread in the spot of liquid at the bottom of his bowl, Hara popped the bite into his mouth and wiped the crumbs from his beard with his sleeve. “That old man; the monk. What is his name?”

“Elder Emeral?”

“Yes, I do not trust him. He is an elder with a checkered past.”

If Damyen had not already finished eating, he would have lost his appetite from starting this cyclical argument with his father. “Da, you trust no one because you are afraid of getting hurt. But guess what? Life is about placing faith in others in order for others to place faith in you. These are simple teachings that can be easily heard at the temple.” Damyen paused for a moment then added, “Ah yes, but you refuse to go.”

Hara pounded his fist on the table as Beta stiffened like an arrow, and he shouted, “This is not about me! This is about your life and the consequences of your decisions.”

“Yes, Father. But look at how far my decisions have taken me. And just because you have given up on your dreams does not mean you can destroy mine.”

“Well, when you are married and have children priorities change!”

“I understand, Da, and I appreciate the wonderful job that you have done.” Damyen trimmed down the argument a notch as he calmed his voice and said, “I apologize for arguing with you. You know that I must follow my heart. And right now it is leading me to Theoria.”

While Juvyen ignored their usual arguments by tending to his meal, Hara extolled, “You do understand that Theoria is vastly different from Valoria. You will see other people and cultures, some quite strange to the way we live. These people have a much different perspective on life, which may not include you in it.”

“So, what is wrong with that?”

“It is not right.”

“Whatever it may be, Da, I will not let your ignorance shape my perspective.”

Upset, Hara jumped up from the table and tossed his eldest son a glare. “One day you will learn to respect your father’s age and wisdom. Those of you *educated ones* think you know everything. Yet none of you have experienced the harsh reality of breaking your back everyday just to survive!”

With that, Hara stormed from the room as Damyen leaned back in his chair. After taking a gulp of wine to relieve his tension, Damyen turned to Beta. “Da never has anything positive to say.”

Beta took a sip from her wine and admitted, “He is concerned about

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your well-being.”

“But I am a grown man!”

“Yes, but you will forever be our child. And that is something you must learn to accept.”



### III

## *Heaven's Blanket*

Somewhere beyond his comforting slumber, Damyen imagined hearing a patter of footsteps across his bedroom floor. The sound jarred his eyes open to the sun's piercing rays. Glancing towards the window, he caught his mother opening the shutters before she ambled over to his bed and greeted him joyfully, "Damyen, it is time to get ready. Today is the big day!"

Grunting and groaning, Damyen whined, "Yes, I know, Ma. But did you really have to open the shutters?"

"Yes. Now get moving. Breakfast is almost ready."

As Beta left his bedroom, Damyen rolled out of bed and threw on his clothes left crumpled on the floor beside him. He shrugged the hood of his cloak over his head, hiding his eyes from the sunlight, grabbed his bags that he had packed the night before, then stumbled into the kitchen, and sat down in a rickety chair.

After pouring a cup of peppermint tea from the kettle, Beta handed him a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and hash browns.

"Thank you, Ma," Damyen said before shoving forkfuls of food in his mouth.

He started with the eggs and chased them down with hash browns. Occasionally, he would crunch into a tasty morsel of fried bacon. And although he was quite occupied with fulfilling his appetite, it was not enough to prevent Beta from asking a series of questions, starting with,

“Did you pack enough warm clothes? I noticed that you are leaving quite a few items behind.” With a swipe of her arm, she pushed Damyen’s hood down, as their rule was no hoods at the table.

“I must travel light, Ma. There is no need to carry anything unnecessary.”

Her eyebrows raised with interest. “I suggest that you at least take that other cloak with you. What if the one you are wearing gets wet?”

“Then it gets wet,” Damyen stated simply.

“But if you get wet, you might catch a cold.”

“That is why you make a fire at night—to dry out your gear.”

To Damyen, it was all rather standard, but Beta insisted on making her point with concern etched in her words. “It is not worth the risk. Just take the cloak and when you reach warmer weather get rid of it.”

“Ma, I am fine!” As Damyen tried to gulf down that last of his meal, an idea came to mind. “But you *could* pack me some food...”

Beta’s eyes lit up as she adjusted her shawl and inquired, “And how about your wineskins? Are they full?”

“No.”

“Well, give them to me!”

Damyen reached down and handed his mother his wineskins, and she ran off into the foyer. He could not help but roll his eyes at his mother’s doting.

When Damyen finished his meal, he shouted to his mother fussing with the wineskin, “Where is Da?”

Yelling back, Beta replied, “I believe he is outside!”

Rather than wait for his mother to finish—who knows what else she would do—Damyen got up from the table, flipped up his hood, and went outside. As he walked along the cobbled path, he noticed his father standing behind the barn staring out across the desolate wheat field slightly covered with mist. Just as Damyen approached his father, he saw what Hara was intently observing a family of deer grazing the field for food.

“Mind if I join you?” Damyen asked.

“Not at all,” Hara replied at a whisper while his sight never left the deer. “Do you see that baby calf?”

With a motion, Hara pointed. Damyen followed the invisible line to a baby deer with white spots on its coat, and his father added, "The poor calf injured its hind leg nearly a month ago and could barely walk. I have not seen it since then. But now that I do, it appears as if the baby has fully recovered."

"That is splendid!"

"I know."

The two remained silent for a few moments while watching the deer as Hara puffed on his wooden pipe. Damyen broke the spell, the words tumbling out before he could stop them, "Listen, Da, I apologize for arguing with you last night. I just feel that you are never proud about anything I do."

Hara glanced over at Damyen and replied, "Son, I am very proud of you. It is just tough to watch you grow up and then to see you leave. And never forget, I always told you that you should go and to never let anyone, including us, compromise your dreams because when I was young I did not have that opportunity."

Damyen placed a firm hand on his father's shoulder and added, "I know, Da. And I thank you for all that you have done for me. You have made me who I am today."

Hara's eyes began to slightly bead. "I know, my son. I know."

A high-pitched neighing shook the two from the moment. "I think I shall go and get Stavros ready..."

"I already took care of it," Hara interjected. "I even replaced his horseshoes."

"You did? Thank you!" Damyen enthused.

"Follow me. I will show you."

After Hara showed Damyen his handiwork and a few modifications he made to the saddle, the two of them led Stavros over to the front of the stone villa. With quick steps, Damyen dashed inside and grabbed his belongings; his mother followed him back to the front walkway carrying his full wineskins and a sack packed with rations and chattered on asking him all kinds of questions. Damyen dutifully answered while helping his father tie down his duffle bag, fiddle, and his sword, which was tightly wrapped in

a thick wool blanket.

Once they were finished, Damyen went over, gave his mother a big hug, and said, “I love you, Ma.”

Beta’s eyes began to tear as she replied, “I love you too.”

Parting from his mother’s embrace, Damyen walked over to his father and shook his hand, and Hara replied, “Good luck, son. I shall hope to see you again—sometime soon?”

“Yes. In Spring.” Damyen assured him. He cast a quick glance around him. “Now then, where is Juvyen?”

“He should be—”

Before Hara could reply, Juvyen sauntered outside half dressed and half wrapped in a blanket. Damyen met him in the middle of the yard and rubbed his knuckles into his brother’s head, exclaiming, “I shall miss picking on you, little brother.”

Juvyen grabbed Damyen tightly in a bear hug and rebuked, “Little brother, my arse!”

The two broke into a playful wrestling match before Damyen collapsed underneath his strength and yelled, “Mercy!”

Juvyen finally released him, and the two shook hands.

“You be safe.” Juvyen replied.

“Just have your chariot ready by summer so I can ride it around the Vales.”

“You wish!”

With that, Damyen walked over and mounted Stavros in a swift upward jump. “Well, I am off. God bless!”

As his family waved good-bye, Damyen slapped Stavros’ reins and bolted away towards the center of the village.



Knowing full well that he was running late, Damyen picked up Stavros’ pace to a canter along the narrow trail that ran parallel to the river until he reached the bustling market. Then he patiently led his steed through the

congested road until he arrived at the temple. As he approached, he noticed a suspicious-looking man waiting on horseback near the temple's steps. The hood of the cloak shadowed the man's face, and as he exhaled, smoke from his pipe gave him the appearance of a ghost.

However, it was not enough to fool Damyen. Instead, he found it quite amusing. As he trotted up to the stranger, Damyen leaned back and began to chuckle, saying, "Are you trying to scare the villagers from going to worship? Does the temple not lack attendants already?"

Liviulé slid his hood back to reveal the smirk upon his face as he reprimanded, "You are late. Where is Kiaran?"

Stavros trotted around in a full circle as Damyen eyed the villagers in the street. "I have no idea. I told him to meet us here."

"I assume he was probably out late last night drinking, no?"

Liviulé was absolutely correct, and Damyen knew it. "Well then, let us go and fetch him. His parents' villa is along the way."

The two of them set off towards Townerswoods, and once they crossed the bridge, they followed the river upstream before taking a trail that led them up the northeastern side of the valley.

While passing by Lake Rockwell, Damyen cautioned, "Listen, Liviulé. I am asking you kindly, please try not to antagonize Kiaran."

Liviulé berated, "Ah, but it is so hard not to!"

"Liviulé!" Damyen exclaimed.

"Calm yourself. I am only making light of our odd relationship."

After passing through the dense part of the forest, Damyen and Liviulé arrived at a clearing where a rudimentary stone home with a thatched roof rested amongst a dense tree line. As they approached, they noticed an old woman walking from the nearby field with a basket in hand. Turning to them, she gave the two men on horseback a full view of her pale skin, shiny hair, and bright blue eyes, and then she yelled to her husband who was inside, "Eachann, wake Kiaran! The lads are here!"

When the middle-aged woman approached them, Damyen greeted her, "Good morning, Celeste!"

One could never tell whether Celeste was joking or lecturing when she bantered, "It is absolutely horrible the way that you lads drink. Honestly,

what fun is there in getting drunk when you can no longer stand up or speak properly? Do you think that this will impress the ladies? Oh heavens, no! You lads still have a lot of growing up to do!”

Unwilling to debate a family that loves debating, Damyen acknowledged, “There is no arguing the truth.”

Just then, the wooden front door swung open, and the three of them watched as Kieran stumbled out carrying a hefty bag slung over his shoulder. His tunic was on backwards and his wool pants were falling off his rear—a result of not tying them. Kieran then groaned, “Oh, my head.”

Liviulé forcefully urged, “Will you please hurry! We are losing valuable daylight because of you!”

Kieran threw up his fist as he staggered towards the stable. “Shall I make you a martyr?”

Kieran takes crap from no one, especially, Liviulé. He was the tallest and strongest of the three friends with long curly hair, his mother’s eyes, and freckles on his upper cheeks. His family had emigrated from the Island of Louthlaughn and he was the youngest of five children. He and Damyen grew up as mischievous youths together, and ever since, they had been best friends, moving to the Tree City where he earned his tradesmanship as a carpenter and then moving to the booming city of Brookshire to continue his trade building homes.

While Kieran tended to his horse, the rest of his family wandered outside to greet his friends. His family consisted of two older brothers and a sister who stood in the yard with their spouses and children. Their father, a gray-haired man with a ruddy face, greeted Liviulé and Damyen huskily, “Good morning there, lads!”

“Good morning, Eachann,” they replied in unison.

“You know, lads, it is not Kieran’s fault but that of his two older brothers.” Eachann glanced over at his two sons and ordered, “Hagen? Fionnlagh? Go and help your brother get ready.”

Fionnlagh, who had bullied Damyen and Kieran growing up, refuted, “Why, when Kieran’s lady friends are here to help him?”

“You are not going to get out of this one! Now go!”

Fionnlagh approached Damyen and Liviulé. He pointed his thick

finger and growled, “I will remember this, lads.”

His words were far less intimidating than when they were kids, so Damyen and Liviul  paid Fionnlagh no mind as he stormed angrily over to the stable to assist Kiaran and Hagen.

Celeste offered, “Would you like some tea?”

Eachann interjected, “Celeste, these lads are in no mood for waiting around. They are ready to leave!”

Within moments, Kiaran came rushing over, and after he managed to turn his tunic around correctly, he hurried back inside. His brothers followed shortly after with Kiaran’s Alsatian Sheepherder named Whitey, a name that no one quite understood. How could he give a beautiful steed such a generic name?

Kiaran came back outside wrapped in a thick wool cloak and carrying his Bodhran drum and a smaller duffle bag packed so full that several items hung outside the lip. After handing it over to Hagen to tie down, Kiaran went over and hugged each person in his extended family, leaving his mother for last.

As he hugged Celeste, Kiaran’s eyes began to boil. He tended to be a lush when he drank, even during recovery. “I will miss all of you.”

“All will me fine. Now go and enjoy yourself!”

“I will.”

When Kiaran mounted Whitey, Eachann jokingly announced, “And try to return back in one piece, will you? You will be no good to us otherwise!”

“I will try my best,” Kiaran assured them.

Grabbing Whitey’s reins, Kiaran exclaimed, “Are you lads ready?”

“Let us make haste!” Damyen shouted.

Waving good-bye to Kiaran’s family, the three men took off into the woods galloping south along the trail.



The three friends traveled non-stop through the mountainous terrain, and by late afternoon, they reached the rolling plains southeast of the

Northern Vales. There they met up with Wheat Road and continued on the stretch of dirt late into the evening.

Their first day had gone by smoothly, and more importantly, Kiaran and Liviulé had got along seemingly well after this morning's foray. Damyen was well pleased by this and decided to keep this hidden joy to himself instead of making a mockery out of it and ruining their peace. Nightfall was pressing upon them, and Damyen scanned the area for a suitable place to rest.

"I think we should break for tonight and make a fire. What do you lads think?"

"Why not? We made good progress today." Kiaran replied.

After finding a cleared spot, the men dismounted their steeds and began scouring the area for timber. Once they had an adequate supply stacked in a triangular heap, Kiaran went to work igniting it with his flint. Within a short period, a spark was born, and soon the fire began to billow, providing enough light so the men could tend to their snorting steeds.

The moon hung from a starlit sky as the men settled in around the flickering flames. Kiaran removed his boots and nestled his cold feet near the warmth. Liviulé pulled away his hood to reveal the dark lines beneath his tired eyes; only his sketchbook could provide the relaxation he needed for the moment. As for Damyen, he hooked his wavy blond hair behind his ears before he went to work cleaning the dirt from underneath his nails with a small dagger.

Although the fire was therapeutic in bringing heat and a pleasant crackling sound amidst the chilled breeze, it was not enough for Kiaran. He reached into his duffle bag and pulled out a corked bottle of whiskey—just the thing to warm his bones.

This drew a smirk from Liviulé, who then admonished, "I swear there is nothing that can get between you and a bottle, not even a woman."

"I would not want it any other way!" Kiaran gloated as he removed the cork and took a swig of the whiskey's remedial properties.

"If you are going to have a drink, Kiaran, it is only proper if you share," Damyen said, noting the mist of frozen breath as he spoke.

"Do not encourage his behavior, Damyen."

“I agree. But by me having some only means less for him,” replied Damyen.

“I tell you!” Kiaran pointed the bottle at them and said, “This is the only thing that will get you through the cold night.”

“He has a valid point, Liviulé.”

“A point well taken,” Liviulé concurred. “Now, how about you let us have a drink.”

“Who says I am willing to share?” Kiaran replied as he cradled the bottle in his arms.

“Oh, Kiaran,” Damyen pleaded. “We were only joking with you. Now, hand it over.”

Kiaran at last caved in, and they passed the bottle around the fire. Soon afterwards, their aches and pains from riding were relieved as Damyen distributed some of his mother’s dried meat and bread. As Damyen and Liviulé enjoyed conversing, Kiaran adjusted his blanket and rested his head upon his duffle bag to get some sleep.

The sky twinkled with endless stars, and each was left with his thoughts. A sudden surge of excitement coursed through Liviulé. Amid his ecstasy, Liviulé said, “I cannot believe that we are on our way to Theoria!”

“This does not seem real, no?” Damyen agreed.

“Not at all.”

Damyen grabbed the bottle from Liviulé and took a sip. “I tell you, I am happy to see us united once again after all these years...”

Half asleep, Kiaran grumbled, “Will you please stop reminding us?”

“I am being honest, Kiaran. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. What better way to do that than with friends?”

“He is right, Kiaran.”

Kiaran paid them no mind as he yawned, and Damyen turned to Liviulé. “It must be fate.”

“More importantly, what do we hope to learn from this experience?”

Damyen paused for a moment and then said, “Our purpose.”

“Ha! Let us hope,” Liviulé chided.

A harsh interjection from Kiaran stopped their conversation short. “How about you two get your heads out of each other’s arses and go to sleep.

We have a long week of riding ahead of us.”

“What is this, Damyen?” Liviulé declared loudly. “This lad has a couple sips of whiskey, gets drunk, and passes out? What kind of man does this?”

“Yeah, Kiaran, who do you think you are?”

“I am your fairy godmother!” Kiaran rebuked. “And if you refuse to quiet down, I shall come over and knock your teeth out in the middle of the night!”

Damyen and Liviulé belted out laughter, but out of respect—and weariness—they huddled into their makeshift beds. A hush lulled over them, and eventually each man allowed his heavy eyelids to invite him to slumber beneath the black night sky—heaven’s blanket.



## IV

# *The Last Great Secret*

It was early morning, and standing outside on the balcony in the freezing cold was an elderly man wrapped in a thick wool blanket. His gray hair was oily from sweating the night away, and large bags made crescents beneath his azure eyes. He was of average height with a belly beginning to protrude with age. As he sipped his hot tea, he gave the impression that he was waiting for something to happen.

The hot tea and cold weather offered the perfect remedy to ease Emperor Claudias Nuncio's troubled mind as he observed the Capital of Siviú with great pride. The autumn sun ascended into a dismal gray sky as clouds dropped light snowflakes on the many rooftops. Chimneys puffed squiggly lines of smoke that smelled not only of sulfur but also of roasted meats. Chatter resounded from the town as the Valorians were out in the Main Square and the neighboring streets, preparing the capital for the all-day celebration in honor of those traveling to the Holy Land.

Claudias watched as his people hung banners and their national violet and white flag from windows, while still others began setting up tables around their wagons in order to sell food, alcohol, and merchandise. Barricades provided by the military dotted the foot of the palace steps, a measure to keep unruly and uninvited people from attending the private celebration that would be held inside the palace later that evening.

Just then, an elderly man dressed in a black cassock and miter came onto the balcony gripping his staff. He was of Southern Valorian descent,

evident by his olive skin. His crooked teeth were hidden behind cracked lips, and he fluttered dark eyes of enlightened wisdom. His remaining gray hair was pulled back into a taught ponytail, and his beard caught snowflakes as if it were a net. His gruff voice greeted the emperor, “Good morning, Claudias.”

Claudias raised his mug to his lips before he solemnly replied, “Elder Emeral Lezbeh. Thank you for your coming.”

Elder Emeral was an advisor to the emperor and had been chosen by Claudias because of his objectivity regarding various political matters. He offered expert advice regarding their faith as Credenthians, and it did not hurt that the emperor and elder had been friends since a chance encounter while studying at the seminary.

After years of study, when the two were finally ordained as priests, their paths had taken two very different directions. Claudias spent his early adulthood as a village priest, and after his wife’s death, he took the oath of Hieromonk and spent several years in the wilderness where he wrote a volume of theological books that received critical acclaim. It was not long after that Claudias earned the Reich of bishop, archbishop, and patriarch prior to being elected by the High Council as Holy Emperor to the Kingdom of Valoria.

As for Emeral, his path was wrought with many struggles and setbacks. It all began with the death of his older brother who was also a priest. The gruesome details had managed to seep into the community mere hours after the event. One night a thief broke into his brother’s temple with plans to steal the very artifacts he consecrated, and when his brother caught the thief red-handed, the thief stabbed him so that there would be no eyewitnesses. However, it was not long before a layman found him lying in a pool of blood, still barely alive, when Emeral’s brother described the killer as having scars upon his wrists.

Eventually, the thief was captured, tried, and found guilty of his brother’s death. The magistrate then left it to Emeral to decide the thief’s fate. Standing before the community and his brother’s killer, Emeral forgave him. However, the result from following the very same principles that he had preached at the temple had shamed him and his family. Soon after, his

wife left him, taking their only child with her. As a result, his own community banished him from their village, never to return.

Emeral then took the blessed vow of Hieromonk and spent the next few decades as a traveling priest. After moving from place to place and gaining all sorts of friends and believers along the way, Emeral's reputation rebounded. It was after he commanded a crowd of ten thousand people to worship with him outside the Capital of Siviou that it came to Claudias' attention that Emeral might serve his country better by assisting him as one of his advisors.

His decision was well received. Thanks to Elder Emeral, it appeared Claudias' reputation was on the rebound too; his credibility had been severely diminished due to the drawn out and costly war to unite the eastern nations with Valoria.

Staring into his cup as he gripped it with both hands, Claudias mentioned, "My favorite morning routine has always been to take an early stroll outside as soon as I would wake up—no matter if it were spring, summer, fall, or winter—unless you take into account me first making a pot of tea!" Claudias gave a slight chuckle and added, "The purpose of it was to awaken my senses and motivate me for the day ahead. It is truly therapeutic, Emeral, especially if you awake from a terrible dream; all would be forgotten once you stepped outside." Claudias grew suddenly contemplative. "But not today."

"What happened, Claudias?"

Claudias looked distraughtly at Emeral and said, "I had a vision."

Shivering from the cold, Emeral requested, "May we speak about this inside?"

"Yes, of course. My apologies."

Emeral followed the emperor inside and into an ornate living room housing a large fireplace. The two sat adjacent to each other in black leather chairs as a Valorian manservant carried in a tray of tea and pastries and placed it on the table before them. And as the young man served Claudias, Emeral took a moment to admire a painting of water lilies that hung above the mantel before he was poured a cup of tea.

After the manservant left, Emeral inquired, "Claudias, would you please

be so kind as to explain to me this dream that you had? As in our holy dogma, one should confess to an elder of the faith to ask for advice and to help one discern whether such a vision is truly from God.”

“Yes, Emeral. Then let me confess to you in the name of our Holy Father.” Claudias then made the sign upon his forehead and chest before continuing. “While I was asleep, I had this vision that revealed unto me that a *Great Reckoning* shall come to pass over mankind and strip us of our innocence, our faith. The vision then showed me that this *reckoning* shall continue forth until we come to understand the *Last Great Secret* hidden within the sacred passage, written by St. Seraphim, called *God’s Love Balanced*. And when this happens, the world will witness God’s unwavering power by stopping this *reckoning* and bringing us into *true* spiritual enlightenment. Whereby, we shall be united, once again, with our Holy Father and brought back into His innocence.”

“Unbelievable!” said a familiar voice, interrupting their privacy.

The sound of light footsteps jarred their attention as Emeral and Claudias pivoted in their seats to see a man standing in the doorway wearing a wide smirk upon his face. Strikingly handsome with short, curly brown hair, he was dressed in his traditional Valorian military fatigues, which consisted of a white tunic, black leather breastplate and kilt, and a violet cape.

“Lord Nico Donyan, welcome! I am so glad you made it,” Claudias exclaimed.

Nico Donyan was Emperor Claudias’ other advisor and also his spiritual son whom he had mentored for over a decade. During that time, Nico excelled through the ranks of the military, and his reputation had grown amongst his comrades after leading several successful battles that had changed the direction of the war out east. Eventually, Claudias titled him Commander of the Valorian Army, and within his second year, Nico had won the war.

As Nico approached to sit down in one of the other two remaining chairs, Emeral asked, “Pardon me, Your Eminence, but I thought this discussion was between you and me?”

Happy to see Nico’s refreshing smile and sense of optimism, Claudias

replied, “Actually, I summoned both of you.”

Claudias leaned over and embraced Nico’s hand, and with sincerity lingering in his words, Claudias said, “I apologize for beginning without you.”

“No apology is necessary.”

Elder Emeral sat and watched the unfolding of a sappy play. And although they had a close relationship, it was apparent that they were using each other to fulfill a need. Claudias needed Nico because he would defend every decision or opinion that he would make without criticism, and Nico needed the emperor to increase his own wealth and power. However, this relationship placed a palpable strain on Emeral’s ability to advise the emperor properly.

“Now then, where were we?” Claudias said.

Elder Emeral politely set his cup of tea on the table and replied, “You just finished telling me about your vision.”

“Yes, indeed.” The emperor leaned back in his chair, let out a deep sigh, and said, “This vision was most profound, and it is a clear indication of the things to come.”

Emeral crossed his leg over his knee and cautioned, “Claudias, I would advise you to disparage from believing in dreams or certain visions of the future without knowing its origin.”

“Why not?” Nico defended.

“For numerous reasons, namely, that we are taught by our faith not to believe in visions received from dreams.”

“But are there not examples in our Holy Book of Credintza where God came to various saints and individuals revealing to us certain prophecies?”

“You are absolutely right, Nico; however, prophecy or visions from God are only revealed to those who are truly pure and innocent, those chosen by Him to fulfill His will.”

“So are you saying that Emperor Claudias is not fit to receive such insight—a man true to the Lord’s commandments?”

“Well, I think that Claudias should already know that answer. In order to be an elder of our faith, one must knowingly accept that they are not worthy to be in the presence of saints or our Heavenly Father. Let me

remind you that we are taught to *walk by our faith and not by our sight.*”

Nico released an irritated sigh. “I understand. But what if God really did appear to you in a dream—are you going to refuse such a sign from Him?”

“Of course not; however, He would not be angered at someone who in their humility would say that they are not worthy to receive such a sign or to look upon Him out of personal sin.”

Nico leaned forward, his eyes flickering with heated irritation. “What if you have no choice?”

“Oh, you have a choice; trust me. And God is watching from above to make sure you choose the right one.”

Emeral could sense Nico’s agitation, and it was not his place to educate him but to assist Claudias. So he redirected his attention to the emperor. “The point I am trying to make to you, Claudias, is that we must discern whether or not this vision is from God. Let me tell you a story about a young man who went off into the wilderness to fast and pray. When he reached the spiritual heights of heaven, a light appeared onto the young man and said, *‘My son, it is I, look upon me.’*”

The young man replied, *‘Who are you?’*

The Light said, *‘I am your Heavenly Father.’*

The young man bowed low to the floor with his eyes closed shut and replied, *‘I am a sinner and not worthy to look upon my Heavenly Father.’*

Within that moment, the sky erupted into flames and the light disappeared, for it was a Demon of the Dark trying to deceive him.”

A moment passed, allowing Claudias to meditate on the story’s meaning. Then his eyes narrowed into slits as he scratched his chin. “So are you saying that I was deceived, Emeral?”

Quick to stifle the mounting tension, Emeral answered, “No. What I am saying is that we should pray to God for guidance in understanding your vision. However, let us not forget that *he who believes in dreams is a fool, and he who distrusts all dreams is a wise man.*”

Claudias nodded with appreciation. “It is always refreshing to hear you speak on faith. But let us put this aside for now and enjoy today’s festivities.”

Emeral and Nico stood up along with Claudias and bowed. And as they

followed him out of the library, Claudias turned to them and said, "I am curious in understanding more about the passage called *God's Love Balanced*. Emeral, when you have a chance, would you please take a look at it for me? My memory is not as good as it used to be."

Emeral concurred. "I will be more than happy too."

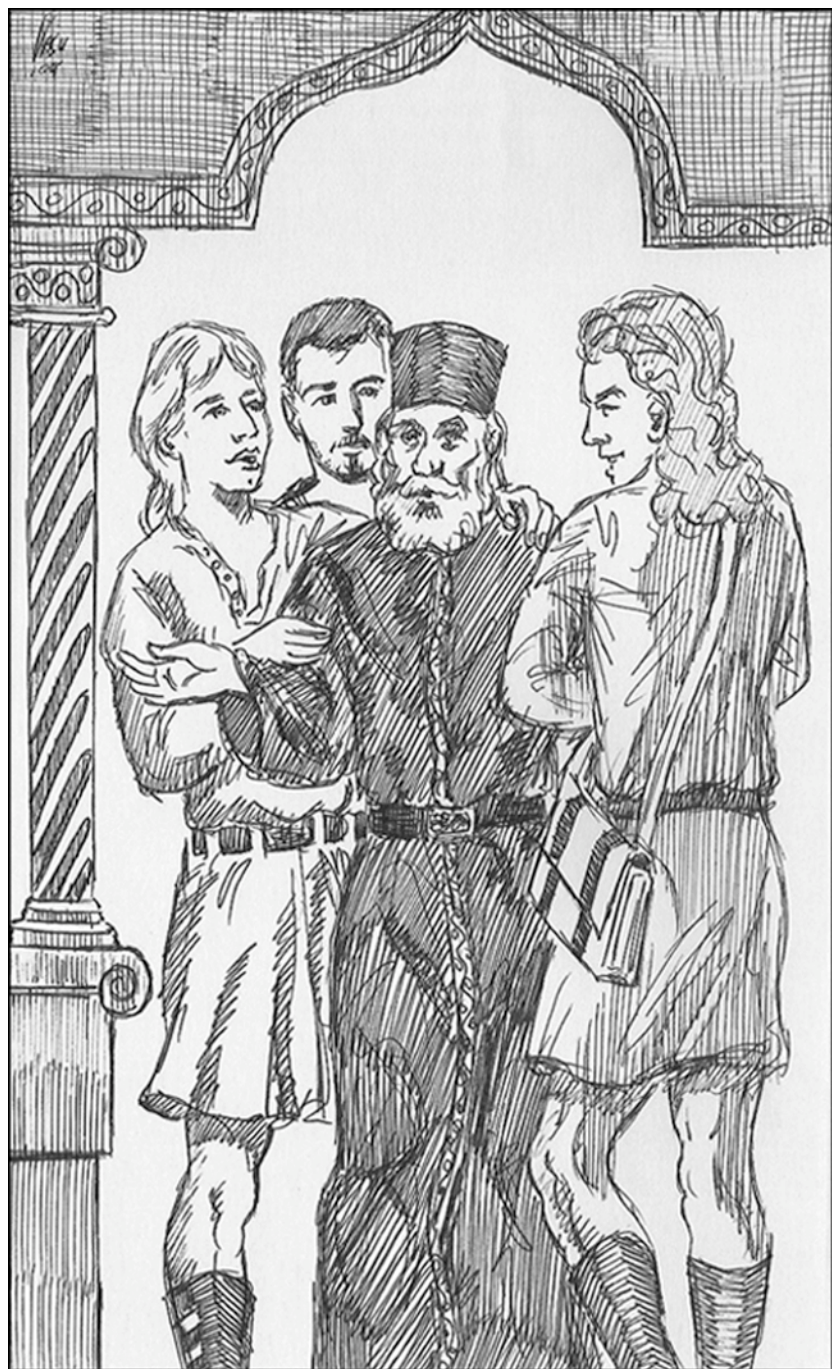
"Splendid!"

The trio exited the emperor's quarters, and Claudias turned to his trusted advisers as they parted. "I shall see you two later. I have a grand announcement to make!"

Both Emeral and Nico's brows raised with interest, for they knew not what declaration the emperor spoke of.

"Very well. I shall look forward to hearing about it!" Nico answered.

Claudias gave him a wink accompanied by a sly grin. "I bet that you will."



## *A Commoner like Ourselves*

Later that morning, on the seventh day of riding, Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé trotted out from the dense forest and into a clearing that overlooked Siviú, the capital of Valoria. Their journey had been long and arduous due to the sudden drop in weather; however, their spirits lifted once they saw the scaling metropolis now buried under a foot-deep layer of snow.

Liviulé enlightened them with his unheeded pessimism. “Delightful city. Now how do you suppose we are going to find Emeral?”

Kiaran stopped him short, insisting, “Let us make haste! My toes are numb.”

Damyen tossed a glare at the two, halting their bickering. “Will you two calm yourselves.”

Damyen opened his satchel and pulled out the letter that Emeral had sent him months prior. At the bottom of the message, Emeral provided the street name and a hand-drawn map of where his residence was located. Damyen looked out over the sprawling capital and easily found the emperor’s palace, which rose up above the center of the city and was topped by a dome. “This way!”

The lads trotted into the city, and when they had neared the emperor’s palace, they were shocked to discover some sort of celebration taking place. They were well aware of their national and religious holidays and none of them fell on today. But the streets were congested with Valorians who were eating, drinking, waving banners, and singing. Everyone was in a festive

mood, and their national flag was draped on every building. And although they were curious, they did not take a moment to ask. Instead, they simply walked their horses through the traffic until they reached Emeral's modest two-story stone home with blue shutters and a slate roof.

After tying their horses to a post in the alley adjacent to the dwelling, Liviulé had an idea. He stopped his friends and bartered, "Listen, I know we came a long way and are tired, cold, and yearning to hurry inside; however, I am feeling compelled to play a joke on our old friend."

"I am not in the mood," Kiaran warned.

"Agh, take it easy. It will make for a good laugh, I swear!"

Before Kiaran could respond, Liviulé held a finger up to his lips and whispered, "Just wait here." He then tiptoed around the front of Emeral's home and up the steps. While trying to hold in his laughter, he suddenly began pounding on the door.

Already disturbed from visiting the emperor this morning, Emeral shouted, "Go away! I am busy! Whatever it is, it can wait until later!"

Amused by this, Liviulé removed his hood, peered over at his friends, and then mouthed, "Watch this..."

All of a sudden, Liviulé began rapping Emeral's door violently screaming in a feminine voice, "Emeral, Emeral! Please, let me in. Hurry! My husband is out to kill me!"

As soon as Liviulé said that, he heard the sound of footsteps hastily approaching from within. In a swift leap, he disappeared from the steps and dashed around to the side of the house to hide. Within moments, Emeral swung the door open and came rushing down the steps and into the middle of the busy street looking frantically for a woman in distress. Just then, Liviulé motioned for Damyen and Kiaran to follow him up and into Emeral's home.

It was not long after that when Emeral realized he was a part of a cruel prank, and he shouted out to the shock of people passing by, "How dare you mock a man of God! Have you no shame?"

Grinding his teeth, Emeral stumped back into his house and slammed the door shut, which was followed by an outburst of laughter. When Emeral saw Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé standing in his welcoming room, his

menacing fury all but vanished as he exclaimed, "I cannot believe my very own eyes! Welcome! What a surprise."

"Good morning, Emerald!"

But before Emerald went to greet them, he took a step back, crossed his arms, and inquired, "Let me guess? It was Liviulé's idea to pull a prank on me?"

The lads innocently exchanged glances amongst themselves, and then Liviulé stepped forward. "Who else would it be?"

"I knew it was you! Now come and give this old man a hug."

Everyone shuffled to greet Emerald, whose eyes ran up and down the lengths of their bodies. "My, my... You lads have grown!"

Kiaran reasoned, "Must be from the alcohol."

"Arguably so!" Emerald chuckled. "And I bet you lads can definitely use a nice warm drink after being out in the cold, right?"

"Is there a need to ask!"

"Very well. As I do that, you lads make yourself comfortable."

As Emerald hurried to the kitchen, the three friends removed their cloaks and sat down on a sofa near the fireplace to warm up. While they waited, Liviulé was quite impressed with how well-furnished Emerald's home was and stated, "I like your place. It is warm and spacious."

Emerald shouted from down the hall, "Thank you! It is a little too much if you ask me."

Within moments, Emerald came out with a tray and placed it on the table. Each one grabbed a filled glass of whiskey and lifted it up high. Emerald announced, "Let us toast to lasting friendships and to the new experiences we are about to share on our pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Cheers!"

"Cheers!" Everyone saluted.

After they sipped their whiskey, Damyen inquired, "So Emerald, tell us. How in heaven's name did you become an advisor to the emperor?"

"Through obedience." Emerald huffed and added, "Or better yet, an oath I had taken as a priest whereby you cannot say no to your superior when they ask you to do something."

"So, basically your position is not enjoyable."

Emeral shook his head in disdain as he recounted his earlier discussion with Claudias. “It is a pain in the arse. I would much rather be the traveling monk that I was.”

“That is because you hate politics!” Liviulé confirmed.

“As much as I hate cold weather, yes!”

A round of laughter passed around the room; then Emeral deferred, “But enough about my woes; so are you lads excited about traveling to the Holy Land?”

“Why else would we be packed?” Kiaran exclaimed.

“I am so thrilled that you lads are here!” He then gestured with his hands. “Do you realize that we are headed to Theoria, the land of our Holy Father? Where civilization began! There is no other place like it in this world, and it is the only place where all nations can gather in peace and celebrate their faith and traditions freely.”

Emeral took a quick gulp of his drink before going on. “I tell you, once you enter inside Theoria’s walls, you will feel God’s presence in everything that you see and do.”

“I cannot wait!” Damyen exclaimed.

Emeral chuckled at Damyen’s boy-like eagerness. “Me neither! Now, how about I go and grab that jug of whiskey.”

After draining his glass, Emeral got up and went to the kitchen to the amusement of his friends. He returned with a large ceramic jug and, while refilling their glasses, mentioned, “Tonight shall be a wonderful time too.”

“Why—what do you mean?” Kiaran probed.

Seeing that his friends were unsure what he was talking about, Emeral ranted, “For heaven’s sake, did you lads ride into the capital with your eyes closed? The Valorians are throwing a celebration today in honor of all those that will be traveling to Theoria tomorrow.”

“Agh...I see!” Damyen gleamed.

“Yes. And this evening you lads shall be joining me as we celebrate within the halls of the emperor’s palace!”

“What?”

Liviulé jumped up out of his seat as Damyen and Kiaran leaned forward with intrigue.

“Yes, there you shall find yourselves amongst the most noticeable names of Valoria as you drink the finest of wines, eat the richest of foods, and dance to enchanting music.”

“This is unbelievable!”

Emeral leaned back in his chair smiling. “Also, I shall hope to introduce you lads to this beautiful woman that I know.”

Caught off guard by the mention of a female, Liviulé sputtered, “Huh? What is her name?”

“Her name is Alessandra.”

Instantly, the lads broke into jokes for their monk friend seemed to be attracting women while wearing the cloth. Together they rallied, “Way to go, Emeral! Still wooing the women!”

“I swear age has not slowed you down!”

“Give us the details,” Kiaran urgently requested. “What does she look like? Is she tall? Short? Does she have good birth-bearing hips?”

“Birth-bearing hips?” Liviulé and Damyen recoiled.

“Now, now, lads!” Emeral shouted as he tossed up his hands. He then realized the mistake of mentioning a female to three young men in their prime and admonished, “Will you please have some manners here!”

When their laughter subsided, Liviulé apologized first. “Sorry, Emeral. We meant you know harm.”

“I know.”

“So how did you meet her?” Damyen asked in all seriousness.

After sipping his drink, Emeral leaned back into his chair, crossed his legs, and said, “I met Alessandra last spring while I was visiting a local hospice to help raise the spirits of those falling closer to God. And when I entered inside, I was met with an over-exuberant hello!” Emeral recalled the memory in vivid detail. “I was surprised! She was the first and only real sign of life that I saw in there. God, forgive me.”

Emeral then made the sign upon his forehead and chest to the amusement of his friends and continued. “So anyways, she offered me a cup of tea, and there we spent the good part of the morning having a delightful conversation as we walked the garden. From then on, she has regularly come to visit me, and we talk for many hours on various subjects, such as her

passions and dreams; love; faith; and also about her troubling childhood.”

“Why—what happened?” Liviulé replied with concern.

“Alessandra’s mother passed away at an early age leaving her with her father who was suffering from depression. Her father then decided to send her to Theoria with her godmother to receive a proper education so that he could disappear into the wilderness to pray for forgiveness. On the day that she left, he promised her that when she finished her education he would return for her. But he never did.”

“That is terrible.”

“So Alessandra remained there deciding never to return home, and why not? She grew up there and now had a wonderful circle of friends that she considered family. But then one day, her father did return and forced her to return home, leaving everything that she had behind.”

“That bastard!” Kiaran replied vengefully. “How dare he!”

“What makes matters worse is that her father is the emperor.”

“What! Alessandra is a princess?”

“Yes. But she prefers to be treated the same as everyone else, and is trying to live a quiet, normal life, here in Siviú.”

“Does she still talk with her father? I would imagine that she hates him.”

“That is something that I am helping her with.” Sensing the conversation heading into much too personal territory, Emeral said, “But the good thing is that she is excited to meet you lads.”

“Really?” Liviulé’s curiosity was piqued. “You told her about us?”

Emeral rose to gather the empty glasses from his visitors. “Of course. And knowing her spirit, I am certain you lads will enjoy her company.”

“I look forward to meeting her!” Damyen replied.

“I like her attitude!” Kiaran defended.

“Her story has me intrigued,” Liviulé conferred.

“Splendid!” Emeral said from the hall near the kitchen. “So tonight, when I introduce you, please treat her with respect. Treat her as a commoner such as ourselves.”

Certainly, it could not be that difficult a request.



## VI

# *The Lady with Black Hair*

By mid-afternoon, Emeral and his friends set out from his home and joined in the festivities erupting out in the streets. They bought ale, bread, and smoked turkey legs that they carried around like clubs as they trampled through the slush, looking for entertainment. It was during their wanderings that they found a good folk band, and Emeral watched the three friends rush out into the circle and join hands with their fellow countrymen while singing along to traditional folk tunes. Their celebrating continued until the sun began to wane, and then Emeral grabbed his friends and guided them through the crowd towards the emperor's palace.

The emperor's palace sat on top a lonely hill. The building was made of white granite, and its several floors extended up to the heavens. Twelve massive columns supported the roof's overhang, and its three bronze doors were large enough for a giant to enter through. The hundreds of windows were topped with relief work, and barely noticeable from below was the palace's magnificent marble dome.

As soon as they neared the palace footsteps, a large crowd vying to catch a glimpse of the dignitaries that were making their way up to the private event met them. Using his brute strength, Kiaran led the charge and pushed his way through as his friends easily followed in his wake, but when he reached the wooden barricade, he was confronted by a large soldier who demanded, "Where do you think you are going?"

Kiaran playfully replied, "I am going to the palace to celebrate."

“The same as everyone else—now stand back before I make an example out of you!”

“Just a moment there!” All of a sudden, Emeral slipped between his overly tall friends and stood defiantly before the soldier with his staff in hand. The soldier then realized his error in judgment and with shamed downcast eyes conceded, “Agh... Elder Emeral? Welcome.”

Emeral padded his chest and declared, “Is that how you treat your fellow countrymen?”

“I am sorry, Emeral. I am just following orders.”

“Then do it with some dignity, for heaven’s sake, and let us through!”

Embarrassed, the soldier pulled back the wooden barricade just enough for Emeral and his friends to squeeze past. As the soldier continued his apologies, Emeral paid him no mind as they ascended the steps. Then to everyone’s amusement, Liviulé joked, “Emeral, you speak with such authority. I love it!”

However, Emeral cautioned, “The sad thing about it is that our country’s citizens are becoming more and more indifferent towards one another.”

The four friends tiredly ascended the endless well of steps until they found themselves underneath the palace’s massive stone columns. There they were met by another cluster of people trying to enter through a small entrance within the bronze door to the right of them. But fortunately Kiaran did not have to make an entrance this time because within moments everyone recognized Emeral and moved aside as they greeted him. The lads were exacerbated by this; so they too played along as if they were nobility. And as they made their way towards the entrance, they smiled, nodded, and waved with dignity and flare.

Once inside, they found no opportunity to brag to one another about what just happened because their breaths were suddenly taken away when they saw themselves standing in a massive space of openness dubbed *The Grand Atrium*. The Grand Atrium was the largest enclosed space of its time. It boasted several floors with walk-around balconies that were draped with their national flag and banners, and the roof was arched underneath to eliminate the need for columns. Hundreds of candle-lit chandeliers hung

from the ceiling, and dozens of tapestries covered the walls, depicting the history of their people. The celebration was so spectacular that even some of the statues were decorated for tonight's festivities.

"I have never witnessed such a feat!" Kieran gleamed as he followed his friends while staring upwards.

"Start getting used to it!" Emeral chided.

Moments later, Emeral came to an abrupt stop when he was confronted by two beautiful young ladies dressed in flowing white dresses. He grabbed a silver goblet from one of their trays, looked over to his friends, and offered, "Lads, help yourself."

Wide-eyed and eager like a ravaging wolf, Liviulé exploited the situation. "Very well! I will take the brunette!"

Emeral shook his head in disbelief. "I meant a drink."

"Oh?"

One by one, the lads inched closer and began flirting with the ladies as they grabbed a silver goblet full of wine; however, once they each had a goblet, the women scurried away, but not without giggling. Emeral deterred their lustfulness by proposing a toast, and when each one lifted up their goblets, they all shouted, "Cheers!"

After they satisfied their thirst, Emeral waved them forward. "Follow me. I have someone I want to introduce you to before you lads run off with the next lass that passes by."

Figuring that he meant Alessandra, the lads allowed Emeral to guide them across the expansive floor, weaving around various groups of people and plowing through oncoming traffic. A couple of times, Liviulé had to scold Damyen and Kieran for stopping along the way to listen to the various folk bands playing nearby. Kieran exclaimed, "We must come back here, lads!"

When they reached the other side of the Grand Atrium, Emeral stopped before a large staircase and spoke to one of the soldiers guarding it. The soldier gestured for Emeral and his friends to pass, and they ascended the steps as it rounded up to the mezzanine. There the lads looked out over the hundreds of people celebrating below, and Emeral acknowledged, "This is usually where the holy emperors give their speeches."

“Interesting...”

“Now, if you will...”

Behind them was a singular flight of steps that led them up to the second floor and down a long hall lit by torches and carpeted with a crimson rug. When they came out of the other side, they entered the underside of the *Grand Valorian Dome*, of which the emperor held court.

The Grand Valorian Dome was the highest point of the palace, and it could be seen from faraway distances. The dome was built using the rarest violet marble exhumed from the Northern Vales, and the circular walls were constructed from white marble found near the Metagulant Sea. The top of the chamber had narrow stained glass windows, and colorful banners hung down between the towering columns. As the gigantic statues of some of the greatest emperors lined the walls, they all faced the golden and gem-encrusted throne where the Holy Emperor was seated directly across from where the lads limply stood.

Again, the lads were speechless, and not even Emeral could garner their attention. But as soon as they felt their silver goblets being swiped from their hands, they looked down to see three beautiful maidservants replacing them with goblets made out of gold. Before they had a chance to thank the doting maidservants, they were gone.

Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé followed Emeral, passing notable dignitaries and some of the most gorgeous women they had ever laid eyes on, until they were un-expectantly brought before Emperor Claudias Nuncio. The lads were not prepared for this introduction and were unsure how to act. All this time, they thought Emeral was taking them to meet Alessandra.

Claudias was dressed in sharp white robes with violet trim, and his wavy hair was brushed to the side and adorned with a crown of olive branches. His face was clean-shaven, and the bags usually hovering beneath his eyes from his inability to sleep had disappeared. He jovially conversed with Nico Donyan while leaning over the arm of his throne; however, as Emeral approached, Nico gestured to Claudias that he had arrived.

As soon as Claudias saw Emeral, he rose from his seat, walked down the steps, and greeted his old friend, saying, “Elder Emeral, I have been looking

all over for you!"

Emeral bowed before the emperor and responded full-heartedly, "Forgive me, Your Eminence."

Just as Nico Donyan approached dressed in a crimson robe with gold armbands, Claudias responded jubilantly, "Do you have a moment? I must speak with you."

Emeral obediently nodded. "Of course. But before we do so, I want to introduce you to my friends Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé."

"Oh, yes! I remember you telling me about them."

The emperor approached the trio, and the shaking anxiety within them caused the lads to bow down on one knee as they set their goblets to the side.

Nico mocked, "Emeral, I see you have a thing for young men?"

Emeral refuted, "If you are speaking of friendship, then yes, Nico, because friendship is not limited by age but by ignorance."

Paying them no mind, Claudias greeted, "Welcome, lads! You may stand."

The three friends stood up before the emperor, and Claudias graciously acknowledged, "Emeral has told me many interesting stories about each one of you." Claudias rubbed his chin absentmindedly. "However, I am not so good with remembering names, only one's characteristics. So I ask, which one of you is the carpenter?"

Kiaran stepped forward and bowed. "I am the carpenter."

"And what is your name?"

"I am Kiaran of Louthlaughn, Your Eminence."

"The people from Louthlaughn are a resilient people and are well known for their craftsmanship, if not their whiskey. Many blessings to you!"

"Thank you."

The emperor then blessed Kiaran by touching his head, and as Kiaran giddily stepped back, the emperor inquired, "And who is the musician?"

Damyen stepped forward and bowed. "I am the musician...by passion." Then he humbly conceded, "However, I am a merchant by trade."

"And what is your name?"

"I am Damyen from the Northern Vales."

Claudias remarked, “Although you might wish it otherwise, it is better that you keep it that way. Music is a difficult way in which to make a living. And in some cases, I have heard it only hurts your creative abilities.”

“I have been told the same.”

“Well, good luck to you, Damyen. Hopefully, this trip shall inspire you to write some new songs.”

“Thank you, Your Eminence.”

After blessing Damyen on the forehead, Claudias approached Liviulé and extolled, “And you must be the painter?”

“Yes, Your Eminence.”

Liviulé stepped forward and bowed, and Claudias Nuncio added, “It appears as if you have not slept for days. And it comes as no surprise to me, for artists have the hardest time accepting the prominent views of the world. The ways of the real world conflict with their own and hardly do the two ever meet. And I tell you now that if you do not bring some sort of balance between the two, your life shall be met with hardship.” Claudias then asked, “So tell me, what is your name?”

Although Liviulé stood before the Holy Emperor, he could not forget the atrocities that were long ago committed against his people of Roznovia, so he only said, “My name is Liviulé.”

“And where are you from?”

“I am from the Kingdom of Valoria.”

Perplexed by his response, Claudias inquired, “Yes. But from what particular country in Valoria?”

Feeling a sense of unease, Emeral gave Liviulé a defiant look to remember his place unless he would like to see himself jailed. Liviulé professed, “Roznovia—The gateway to the East.”

With an arched eyebrow, Claudias challenged, “So is it true that a master painter such as yourself can reveal the most intimate secrets of a person just by painting their portrait?”

“Yes, that is true, Your Eminence.”

“Then by all means you shall not be painting me!”

Everyone gave a forced laugh, and Claudias applauded. “Good luck to you and your creative endeavor.”

“Thank you.”

After blessing Liviulé on the head, Claudias concluded, “Now, if you lads will excuse us, Emeral and I have some matters to discuss.”

As Emeral, Nico, and Claudias left the three men and walked up towards the throne, the lads bent over and picked up their goblets before huddling around each other. “Can you believe that—we just met the emperor!” Damyen exclaimed.

“I know!” Kiaran gleamed.

“Well, believe it!” Liviulé decried. “I just stood before the very man that crippled my nation with war. He does not deserve to be bowed to; he deserves to be spit at.”

Kiaran rebuked, “But you did bow, did you not?”

Liviulé shot arrows with his eyes at him. “I did what I had to for Emeral.”

“Right...” Kiaran sneered.

“Come on, lads. Enough with the bickering already!” Damyen said, hoping to calm the group. “Let us go and find ourselves some nice women?”

“I agree with Damyen,” Kiaran said.

Liviulé then chugged the rest of his wine and shouted, “This way!”

After having their goblets replaced with new ones, the lads set out across the chamber and ended up joining a group of bystanders listening to a naval captain recount one of his maritime battles. Next, they found a pair of minstrels performing a comedy, after which they went over to listen to a beautiful redhead playing classical tunes on her violin.

However, as the lads were enjoying themselves, they were ignorant of the figure traipsing closely behind them. Their discreet follower was tall and slender with long black hair, fair skin, and bright blue eyes that remained fixed on the trio. Dressed in a modest white strapless gown, she would occasionally blend into the nearest group in order to avoid being spotted.

When the violinist finished playing, Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé started ambling through the hall, searching for the next festivity to partake in. They eventually stopped to listen to what a very streamline conservative politician had to say. The Politician (whose name bears no importance) was a controversial character of sorts and always spoke about strengthening the

government by limiting the freedoms given to its people. The jaw muscles in his stern face clenched with each biting word as he stood there in his decadent midnight-blue tunic and matching pants before a crowd of supporters ranting, “My fellow patriots, I stand before you tonight to declare, once again, that I am proud to be Valorian and that I am here to support and serve our Holy Emperor Claudias Nuncio and our faith as Credentians.

And as we honor the very best and brightest people that shall be traveling to Theoria to uphold and protect our way of life, I want to remind you of what brought us here to this day; it all began during the darkest days of our kingdom. You see, we were once a secular democracy and had everything we ever desired except for one thing: God. And over time, because of this, our ancestors became lazy in their ways and blind to the threats that lingered both within and outside of our borders. And when war broke out, our country collapsed because our leaders were too slow to act and the senators were unable to agree.”

His voice thundered amidst the mutterings of his listeners.

“But when all hope appeared lost, there came an elder named Feodoros, who not only returned God to the forefront of our lives, but also returned God to the forefront of our government. Since then, we have lived by the laws of God rather than the secular laws derived by men. And thanks to him, we are and will forever be a theocracy ruled by God’s divine hand who is seated as the Holy Emperor.”

“Therefore...” the Politician continued, “upon Emperor Claudias’ arrival to Theoria, we must remember that we are the one and only *true faith* that has descended from the Old Theorianic Lines of Tradition. And we Valorians must continue to protect His teachings and uphold His divine laws. Our country must continue to be looked upon as the forerunner to theocracy, just as God ruled Theoria as stated in the Book of Credintza. So I ask all of you, pray for Claudias and all those who will be making their pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And God bless Valoria!”

As everyone cheerfully applauded, the three friends looked at each other with dissatisfaction, recalling that nowhere in the Book of Credintza did it say that God’s teachings should be used for anything else except for

becoming a better Credenthian.

Suddenly, a female voice behind them spoke out, remarking with confidence, “I suggest boarding every politician onto a boat and cast them out to sea. Then we shall destroy every oar and sail onboard and watch them from a distance. Then we shall watch *these* politicians switch from the divine Laws of God to the divine Laws of Animals as they slaughter each other for survival!”

Befuddled by such a defiant statement, the lads turned to find a beautiful blue-eyed brunette standing among them, a woman whose poise matched her articulate words. Damyen met her eyes. “There is nothing more fascinating than hearing a woman speak her mind.”

The woman turned to acknowledge Damyen and sweetly said, “Thank you.”

Damyen offered his hand. “My name is Damyen, and you are?”

“I am Allessandra of Ariescelle.”

“Oh, you are Allessandra?”

Allessandra blushed while shaking his hand and added, “Yes! Emeral has told me all about you lads, as I am quite certain he has already told you a lot about me?”

“He has!”

Kieran folded his arms and looked disconcertedly at her. “On the contrary...”

“Pardon me?” Allessandra prodded.

“Emeral failed to tell us how beautiful you are.”

Allessandra chuckled and asked, “And you are?”

“Kieran of Louthlaughn.”

The two shook hands, and Allessandra joked, “Yes, and Emeral failed to mention how handsome you are!”

Brightening Kieran’s spirits, she then turned her attention to Liviulé whose face was flushed white, and kindly acknowledged, “And you must be Liviulé of Roznovia?”

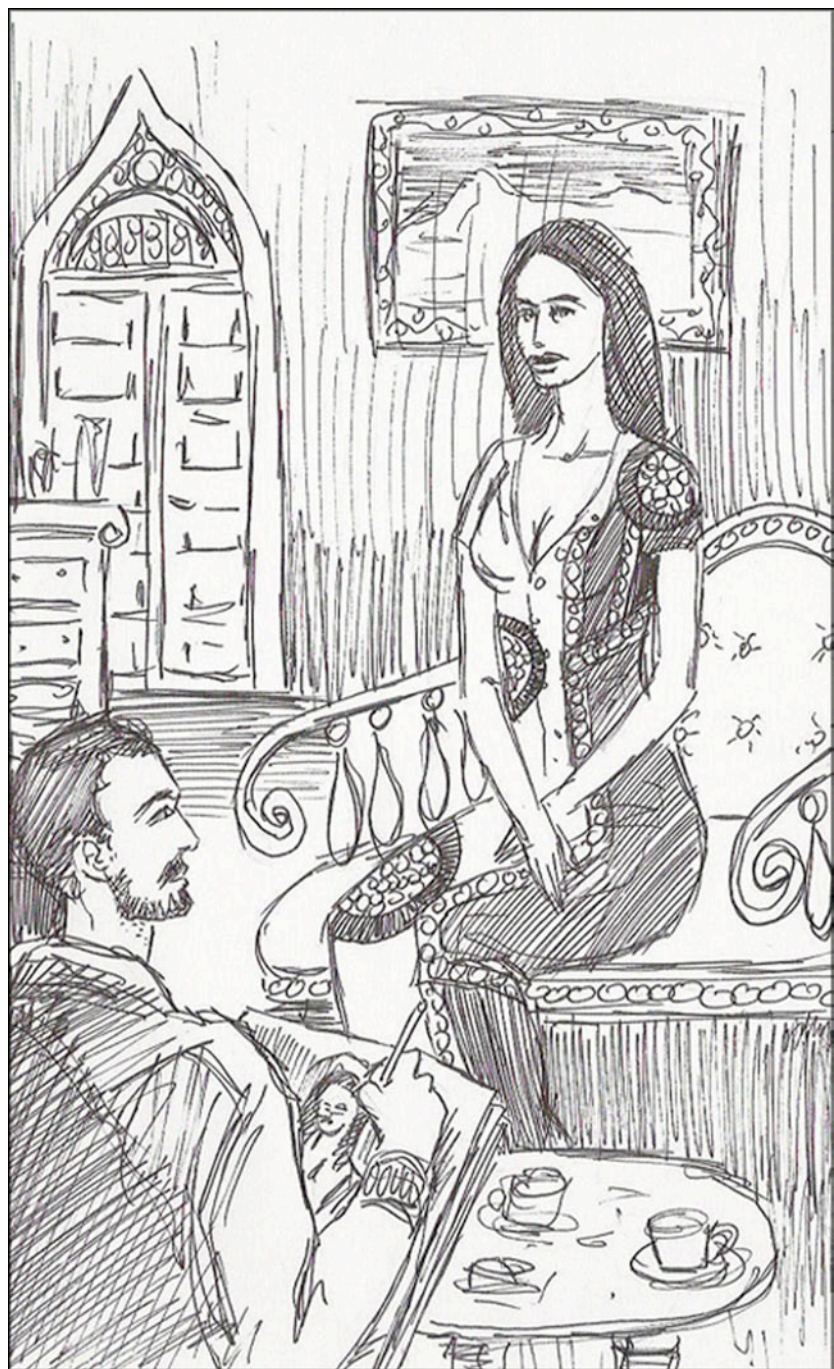
Kieran and Damyen watched with surprised amusement as Liviulé failed in his womanizing ways to greet her and then gasped, “You are the lady with black hair?”

“Yes, but I prefer to go by the name Alessandra if that is alright with you.”

Alessandra then switched her attention back to Damyen and Kieran and said, “So are you lads ready to have some fun?”

“Yes! Of course.”

“Very well!” Alessandra sparkled. “Shall we go dance?”



## VII

### *Her Portrait*

The pulse of anticipation spurred the men into action. Kieran grasped Alessandra's hand and led her towards the hallway, shouting to the other two in his wake, "This way!"

Damyen slapped Liviulé on the back as he moved to chase after them, urging, "Come, Liviulé!"

But as Damyen set off, he looked back to see that Liviulé had not moved. With brisk strides, he retraced his steps and tugged Liviulé's arm, reprimanding, "What is wrong with you?"

In a swift twist, Liviulé freed his arm and angrily declared, "Do you understand? She is the lady with black hair!"

Damyen brushed Liviulé's warning aside and joked, "Of course, I would not have it any other way."

"Have you forgotten the dream that I told you in Townerswoods where I meet my sworn love?"

After a moment of thought, Damyen recalled their conversation. "Agh, so that is why you are acting strange."

"Yes!"

Damyen then wagered with all seriousness, "Well, my friend, what are you going to do? Let her run off with Kieran?"

Hearing Alessandra's name mentioned along with his friend brought Liviulé to his senses, and he refuted, "Heavens, no!"

"Then, what are you waiting for?"

“Let us make haste!” With a nod, Liviulé was gone, leaving Damyen struggling to catch up.

Once Damyen and Liviulé exited the Grand Valorian Dome, they sprinted down the hallway until they saw Alessandra and Kieran waiting for them up ahead beneath an ornate archway wrapped with stone-carved ivy.

“Wait for us!” Liviulé called after them as he breathlessly neared the pair.

“Pardon my friend here. He is a little slow, if you know what I mean.” Kieran mercilessly mocked Liviulé to Alessandra’s amusement.

“I thought that was a trait you need in order to become a carpenter?” Liviulé shot back.

“No, you just need to be good at pounding things into the wall. Shall I teach you a lesson?”

Alessandra cut through the mounting testosterone with a worried plea. “Please, lads. There is no reason to get angry.”

“Alessandra, you must understand that this is their way of being nice to each other!” Damyen said with a chuckle.

“Oh my.”

Liviulé leaned over, nudged Alessandra on the shoulder, and joked, “That is what Kieran’s mother said when she gave birth to him!”

Kieran played it down with a farce laugh. “Ah, ha. Very funny.” He then motioned toward the Grand Atrium. “Now, may we continue forth?”

Liviulé gave Kieran a wink and then blew him a kiss, saying, “Anything for you, handsome.”

Liviulé’s comment drew a smile from Alessandra—a smile so perfect and so pleasant that it shot a thrill up his spine. Liviulé took the initiative to snatch her away from Kieran by locking arms with her. He merrily said, “Shall we?”

“Why not?” Alessandra graciously accepted.

The four of them slipped out of the dimly lit hall, down the steps past the mezzanine, and entered onto the floor. Once there, and slightly out of breath, Kieran led the pack into the center of the Grand Atrium where the folk band he had heard earlier performed an energetic piece. The musicians, consisting of a couple of drummers, fiddlers, and pipers, played a catchy

tune that caused Kiaran to stomp his foot and gulp down his goblet of wine. He handed the empty glass to a maidservant passing by while his eyes followed the square dancing going on in the center. "Are you lads ready?"

"As ready as we will ever be!"

"Good! Then let us dance!"

Damyen followed Kiaran out onto the floor, and within moments, they split up a pair of sisters and began rowdily dancing with them. However, Liviulé stayed back with Alessandra, praying for the courage to be so bold.

She beat him to the punch. "I hope you can keep up with me. I have a lot of energy!"

"I think I may have you beaten."

"Is that so?"

"You will find out soon enough!"

Liviulé grabbed Alessandra's waist, and the two skipped their way into the dance circle until they found an open space. There the duel hooked arms and began spinning themselves around in rhythm to the music as the folk band played a fiery tune that increased in momentum with each beat. They continued dancing together throughout the set, with the occasional split when the dance required switching pairs. Yet even throughout these moments, their eyes always found one another. During the last song, everyone joined hands in three interlocking circles as they danced a four-step to the right.

When the climax of the finale ended, everyone erupted into hearty cheers. Liviulé whistled while Alessandra clapped; however, to their amusement, from across the way, they could hear Damyen and Kiaran chanting, "More! More! More! More!"

It was not long before the crowd joined them in chanting, and soon afterwards, the bandleader caved into playing another round of songs to the crowd's delight. However, Liviulé was tired and terribly out of breath. He turned to Alessandra and admitted, "I am finished. I cannot dance anymore."

Alessandra berated him. "I thought you had all this energy?"

"Well, maybe you are right. I do smoke a lot."

"Agh, I see."

“But it does help me with my creativity.” Liviulé then suggestively added, “And so does a good bottle of wine!”

“Indeed!” Alessandra chuckled.

As they stood beside each other, glistening with fresh droplets of sweat, Liviulé could not help but notice Alessandra’s glowing smile and her striking beauty. It took a minute before he garnered the nerve to ask, “So, have you ever been drawn before?”

“No, why? Do you wish to draw me, Liviulé?”

“I would love to, if that is alright with you. I think you would make for an excellent study.”

“Thank you.”

Alessandra, tenderly biting her lip, dauntingly challenged him. “So...when do you want to draw me?”

Liviulé shrugged his shoulders as casually as he could feign. “How about now?”

“Now?”

“Yes, why not?”

Alessandra glanced across the way and saw Damyen and Kieran talking with the two sisters. “What about your friends?”

“They appear to be quite occupied at the moment.”

Unsure, Alessandra scuffed the floor; however, an overwhelming yearning overcame her, and with a shy grin, she said, “Alright then, Liviulé. Follow me.”

Alessandra clasped Liviulé’s hand and tugged him out of the dance circle just as the band started to play. She led him to the right side of the Grand Atrium and over to a hall that was guarded by alert soldiers.

Seeing Alessandra, the soldiers allowed them to easily pass through, and they ascended the nearby steps.

“So where are you taking me?” Liviulé queried.

“You will see.”

After they arrived on the third floor, Alessandra led Liviulé quietly down a faintly lit hallway until she reached an oak door. She inserted a key into the lock, and when the door opened, she gestured for Liviulé to enter.

Once they were inside, Alessandra locked the door and watched Liviulé

examine the room. The room had two plush white leather sofas that faced the fireplace and a large animal skin sprawled across the marble floor. Several beautifully designed quilts brought color to the walls, and religious artifacts sat on top of the mantel.

Liviulé went over and knelt down beside the fireplace, and while throwing a couple logs onto the fire, he asked, “So whose place is this?”

“Who do you think?”

Liviulé jumped to his feet, smashing his head on the cedar mantel. “Ouch!”

Allessandra raced over to his aid. “Are you alright?”

“Agh!”

“Let me have a look.”

At Allessandra’s request, Liviulé bowed his head so that she could examine his injury. However, as she probed his scalp, Liviulé was no longer focused on the pain; he was focused on Allessandra’s hands as they gently examined what appeared to be a small swollen bump. Then out of nowhere, she pressed her soft lips upon his wound. “There! All is healed.” She gleamed at him.

Looking up at her bright blue eyes, Liviulé mumbled, “Thank you.”

“Now how about I go and pour you a glass of wine to ease the pain?”

“Splendid.”

As she ambled over to the cabinet on the other side of the room, Liviulé went for his bag. “While you do that, I will fetch my sketchbook.”

Liviulé picked up the small wooden table next to the sofa and placed it on top of the animal hide. He then removed his satchel and pulled out his leather-bound sketchbook and sack of charcoal. From across the room, Allessandra uncorked a bottle of wine.

When Allessandra returned, she handed Liviulé a glass, and then the two held up their drinks and clinked them together. “To our newfound friendship.”

After taking a sip of her wine, Allessandra noticed a rectangular-shaped object on the small table and pointed to it. “What is this?”

Liviulé set down his glass, picked up his book, and opened it for her. “It is my sketchbook.”

“I have never heard of such a thing.”

As Liviulé thumbed through some of his sketches, Alessandra’s eyes took in the graphics with wide-eyed admiration. “These are really beautiful.”

“Thank you. Now if you will kindly take a seat, I shall begin.”

Liviulé escorted Alessandra to the sofa and positioned her to sit forward with her hands on her lap. He then went over by the fire and pondered whether he liked the way that she posed. Perhaps a few adjustments were in order. “Could you perhaps show me a little cleavage? Not too much though.”

“Pardon me?” Alessandra said, baffled.

“Trust me. You will come to understand once I am finished.”

Placing faith in this stranger’s words, she huffed, “Very well.” She then loosened the top two buttons of her dress to slightly reveal the crevice of her bust.

Liviulé took a few moments to eye his study before kneeling behind the small table, and as he pulled out a piece of charcoal from his sack, he mentioned, “And lastly, I request that you remain still so that I do not disproportion anything. There can be no exaggerations.”

“What?”

“Shh... I am starting”

Although Alessandra terribly wanted to say something because she was enjoying the way that he flirted with her, she decided to keep patiently silent as she watched Liviulé begin to sketch her. However, after a long while of remaining quiet as Liviulé drew her portrait, she broke the truce and inquired, “So why did you call me the *Lady with Black Hair*?”

As Liviulé sketched the folds of her dress in greater detail, he replied, “Because I had this dream where I would meet someone that had dark hair; nothing more.”

Intrigued by his all-too-brief explanation, she said, “A dream that has now come true, no?”

“I believe so.”

“Then tell me, do you think it was fate or luck that brought us together?”

Fully focused on his sketch, Liviulé missed what she said. “Huh?”

“The dream that you had of meeting me—do you think that it was fate or luck?”

“Fate, of course!”

“Explain.”

As Liviulé began to shade his sketch, he answered, “I was raised in Roznovia during a time of war, poverty, and famine, and the only thing we had to help us through these hard times was faith. And through faith, fate brought my family to migrate west to the Northern Vales to start anew. There my parents were able to buy their own land so that they could grow crops in order to make an honest living.

It was also through faith that fate brought me to meet Damyen, which brought us to a monastery where we met Elder Emeral. And because of Emeral inviting me to join him on his journey to the Holy Land, I am now kneeling before you.”

Each word sent goose bumps crawling across Alessandra’s skin. It took everything within her not to shift under his penetrating gaze. Luckily, Liviulé applied the finishing touches to her sketch and blew the excess charcoal away, exclaiming, “Finished!”

“You are done?”

“Yes! Come and see.”

Allessandra buttoned the top of her dress and came over to stand behind Liviulé.

“So what do you think?”

The lines of her body were perfectly drawn. Yet something masterfully deep caught her attention. Somehow, he had managed to capture her soul in the image’s eyes. As Alessandra examined Liviulé’s sketch, she realized that it hauntingly expressed her innermost secrets. In barely a whisper, she said, “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“Everything that you expressed about me in your sketch!”

“I am only interpreting what you are feeling.”

“But how? I have shown you no such signs.”

“I can sense this angst in your spirit.”

Allessandra was left bewildered as she looked upon her portrait. “I look so sad in your sketch, and look at my breasts!” She blessed herself and quickly added, “You should have made me appear more joyful and modest?”

“It would not be real then.”

“I am confused and a little embarrassed.”

“Please, let me explain.”

Liviulé pushed himself to his feet and held out the sketch before them. “You see, this sketch expresses to me a very strong woman who is yearning for something more in life. However, your passion and will are held back by the confines of society, namely because of your nobility and the lack of respect that women are given.” Liviulé caressed the portrait’s face with his fingers as if it were really Allessandra’s flesh and encouraged her. “But this portrait *also* reveals to me your sense of eagerness to overcome these odds so that you *can* continue forth in pursuing your dreams. Understand?”

Allessandra nodded with appreciation even though she was not expecting a piece of art so dramatic and close to her heart. As her eyes began to bead salty tears from the truth behind her portrait, she realized what she needed to do—and that was to start standing up for herself and what she believed in like she did while living independently in Theoria, far away from her father. She resonated with what Liviulé had said earlier—that it was indeed fate that brought the two of them together.

Just as these thoughts crossed her mind, a knock at the door jarred her back to the present. A voice boomed from outside the door, “Allessandra, are you there?”

Staring wide-eyed at Liviulé, she whispered, “Hide!”

Liviulé grabbed his sketchbook and his sack of charcoal and tossed it into his satchel; however, instead of hiding, he joined Allessandra over at the door.

“Hello—who is it?”

“It is Théodan, humble servant to the emperor.”

Allessandra turned to Liviulé and whispered, “Why are you still here? I asked you to hide.”

“And I will.”

Allessandra turned her attention to Théodan, and just as she

responded, Liviulé poked her in the side causing her to hit a higher octave while saying, “Just one—moment!”

Instantly, Alessandra turned around, smacked Liviulé on the chest, and narrowed her eyes in warning. “Stop it or we are both going to get in trouble.”

“What? I thought that you said it was alright for me to be in here.”

Alessandra was indeed being truthful and had hoped to scare him; however, Liviulé’s flirting had gotten the best of her, and she chuckled while saying, “Quiet!”

“Is everything alright?” Théodan inquired.

“Yes. I am just trying to tidy up the place.”

However, when Alessandra attempted to open the door, Liviulé lightly jabbed her again, causing her to jump. Alessandra returned with a pinch, causing him to squirm away before she unlocked and opened the door. “Good evening, Théodan! I apologize for the wait.”

Théodan, a scrawny old man with a bowl haircut, was dressed in servant’s clothes. “Good evening, my lady. There is no need to apologize. May I come inside?”

Placed in an odd predicament, she conceded, “Agh, as you wish.”

Alessandra led Théodan further into her quarters than what was usual in order to allow Liviulé a chance to escape. Hoping to distract him, she grabbed her wine and said, “So, what brings you here?”

Not willing to take her up on her offer of an easy departure, Liviulé started to make funny gestures with his hands and face behind Théodan’s back in order to get her to laugh, and then Théodan responded, “Your father requests your presence immediately.”

Fighting to contain her laughter, she replied, “For what?”

Just as Liviulé began to imitate the aloof servant’s hunched-over walk, Théodan responded, “He would not say. All he mentioned was tonight would be a momentous occasion for you.”

“Oh, really?”

Blowing Alessandra a kiss, Liviulé waved good-bye as he finally slipped out the door.

“Yes,” Théodan replied.

Damian M. Salo

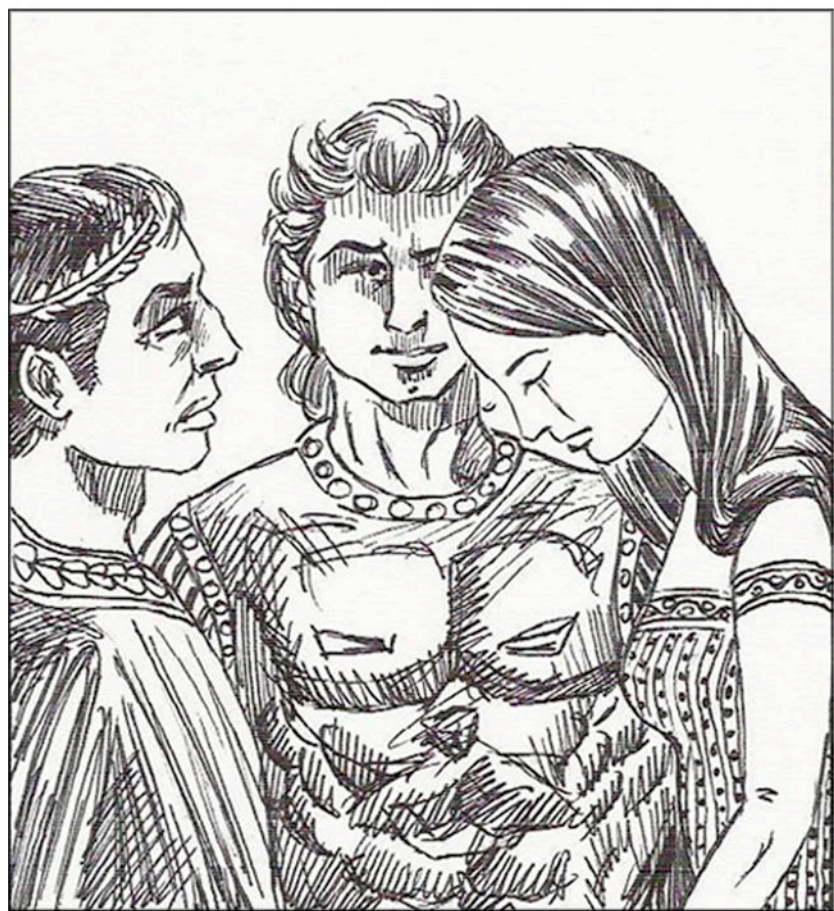
Figuring that her entertainment had successfully left unnoticed, she concluded, “Very well. Please inform him that I will be on my way.”

“Will do, my lady. Good night.”

When the servant left, Alessandra shut the door behind him and leaned against the wall. She was ecstatic and could not stop thinking about Liviulé and how much fun they had together. Indeed, tonight was a night to remember.



However, as Liviulé dashed merrily down the long hallway before cutting left into the stairwell, a shadowy figure observed him from behind a door that was cracked open.



## VIII

# *In a Perfect World*

Everything appeared much brighter that evening. Was it the rush of adrenaline or the thrill of meeting the black-haired beauty? Something told Liviulé it was something more.

Excited to tell Damyen and Kiaran the good news about what just happened, Liviulé hopped down the steps, rushed past the soldiers, and headed to where he had last seen his friends. By now, a new folk band was performing, and just as he started to scope out the dance circle, Damyen and Kiaran skipped by with two new women. But before he even had a chance to wave them down, they were already lost in the crowd. Liviulé anxiously waited until they came back around, and then he shouted, “Damyen!”

Just as Damyen passed by, he caught a glimpse of his eagerly waving friend and merrily replied, “Liviulé!”

Damyen excused himself from his lady friend and skipped back against the traffic until suddenly Liviulé attacked him with an embracing hug, causing Damyen to demand, “What in heaven’s name happened to you? And where is Alessandra?”

Liviulé proclaimed without further ado, “All you need to know is that I am in love!”

“Well, congratulations. Now how about letting me go.”

Just as Liviulé released Damyen, Kiaran sidled over to them. His clothes were doused in sweat, and holding his hips to catch his breath, he admonished, “What is the meaning of all this?”

Liviulé enthusiastically expressed, “I am in love with the lady with black hair!”

“With whom—Alessandra?”

“Yes. She is the one!”

Kiaran threw up his arms and ranted, “You mean to tell me that I stopped dancing with a beautiful lass just to come over and hear this crack of shite? I swear, are you that desperate to confess your love to someone you just met? I can guarantee that she will leave you quicker than a nosebleed once you start babbling nonsense about how wonderful you are. Farewell!” Giving Liviulé no chance for a rebuttal, Kiaran turned and slipped into the dance circle, rejoining the woman he fancied.

Damyen apologetically patted Liviulé on the shoulder. “I am happy for you.”

“I know you are. And hopefully you will be next.”

Thinking back to the woman who had stolen his heart long ago, Damyen’s eyes momentarily glazed over as the memory captured him off guard. “If it were only as easy as you said, then I would agree.”

“Well, what happened to those two sisters you and Kiaran were dancing with?”

Damyen recalled how the sisters were reprimanded shortly after joining him on the dance floor. “Unfortunately, their father was not too happy when he saw them with us.”



No longer willing to sit next to Nico Donyan while listening to her father’s decree, Alessandra stood up before Claudias and retorted, “How could you do this to me?”

Claudias, sitting ramrod in his black leather chair adjacent to the fireplace in his palace suite, matter-of-factly replied, “Alessandra, this is the way of our forefathers.”

“I do not love this man!”

“Alessandra, would you please just listen to me for a moment—”

But Alessandra refused to hear him out. “Listen to you? Oh, no! The last time that I listened to you, you sent me off to another country so that you could do what—wallow in your misery? When you should have been there to support your very own daughter!”

“Alessandra—”

“Oh, I remember, Father. I also remember our last conversation before you left me with Madam Edith. You told me that by sending me to learn in Theoria, it would teach me how to speak for myself rather than to be spoken for.”

“Alessandra, please?”

Nothing her father said would get through to her; the threat of marrying Nico was more than she could stand. Alessandra thought back to Liviulé’s portrait and how it made her realize that she had to start standing up for herself once again. The memory of his words fueled her fire. “And I tell you now, I will not let this marriage happen.”

With finality in her voice, Alessandra rushed towards the door as Claudias begged with open arms, “Will you stop for one moment!”

She could not bear this burden. Holding tight onto the door handle, Alessandra broke into uncontrollable sobs. She had no one, not even her father, to turn to for comfort. Recalling the times before and after her mother’s passing, she whispered, “Ever since Ma passed away, all you have brought me is anguish.”

Claudias approached his daughter, only hearing part of what she had said, and then he replied, “What did you just say?”

Alessandra released the handle and turned to acknowledge her father. Her words held defiant scorn. “Ever since Ma passed away, all that you have brought to my life is anguish!”

No one expected the red-flushed emperor to smack his own daughter in the face, but the rage bubbling inside him exploded in that instant. “How dare you disrespect me!”

Breaking down in a wave of emotion, she wailed, “Look at me! Look at your only daughter!”

Claudias was resistant, and when he finally did, Alessandra extolled, “Do not push me further away. I am begging you!”

Claudias was angry and unremorseful. When it became apparent that he had nothing more to say to her, Alessandra flung the door open and sped off down the hall. As his daughter fled, Claudias crumbled against the wall, shaking his head in disbelief. Nico came over to the emperor's aid, offering comfortless words. "Everything will be alright, Claudias. Her heart is still young. But I can assure you that as her loving husband, I will help mold her into a loving and obedient wife."

"Let us hope." But the dismal reply held little surety.



Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé were out dancing and enjoying the moment well into the evening. They had not one care in the world but for good music, wine, and laughter. It reminded them of their youth where irresponsibility ran reckless and adulthood was a lifetime away; however, this joyous feeling came to an abrupt end when they heard the overbearing cry of trumpets sounding from the second floor and along the steps leading to the mezzanine. Within moments, everyone fell silent as the trumpeters welcomed Emperor Claudias and his court into the Grand Atrium.

The emperor steadily descended the steps until he reached the mezzanine, and standing before his people, he raised his hands to the ceiling and was greeted with cheers. At this time, the Politician (whose name bears no importance) announced, "Hail, Claudias Nuncio! Holy Emperor of the Kingdom of Valoria."

As the crowd cheered, Damyen noticed Elder Emeral standing beside Claudias with a grimly unpleasant frown. He passed a warning to his friends. "Lads, something is not right. Look at Emeral!"

The three men looked up and saw the disdain in Emeral's eyes, which was shockingly different from Nico Donyan's cocky grin as he stood to the left of Claudias. It was readily apparent that someone had told Emeral something that did not sit well with him. Liviulé concurred, "He appears troubled."

But just then Liviulé caught a glimpse of Alessandra standing behind her father with the rest of his court, and he added, “Look at Alessandra! What in heaven’s name happened?” Liviulé could not help but notice the emptiness in Alessandra’s eyes...as if she had lost a part of herself. He felt compelled to go up there and steal her away so that he could comfort her from whatever it was that ailed her, but his better judgment held his feet firm in place.

“Well, there is nothing we can do at the moment. So how about we just listen to what the emperor has to say,” Kieran said.

As the emperor lowered his hands, the crowd fell silent, and from the depths of his lungs, Claudias resounded, “In the name of our Heavenly Father, let us pray.”

Every head in the room bowed in reverence for the Holy Emperor’s blessing—all except for Nico Donyan’s. “Dear Lord, I ask You to continue forth in guiding and protecting the Valorian people throughout the coming winter season and to lead them on the path that shall bring us ever more closer to You. Also, watch over those that shall be making their pilgrimage to the Holy Land. May God grant us safe travels and temperance as we conduct and promote the best interests of our nation. I give you thanks.”

The people then blessed themselves and ended with, “Forever and anon.”

Claudias then spoke openly, “My people! Tradition holds that every five years I must travel to Theoria to attend the Summit Councils where I shall sit as an equal amongst the leaders from the kingdoms of Chin Dao, Unathi, Sachapuya, and Khalil. Let it be known that although we are united, we are not without our differences. And such differing ideologies may or may not affect our way of life. That is why we must take these Summit Councils seriously because much is at stake. And if we were ever to lose our focus or direction, there are nations out there waiting for our very own demise.

Some of these nations are controlled by rogue fundamentalist regimes that use religion as a means to control. And when I say religion, I mean a religion that does not flow from the Old Theorianic Lines of Tradition. Therefore, it is our duty not only to protect our peoples’ best interests but also to educate those that are suppressed by these regimes in order to

eradicate the heresies that impregnate their lands—all in the hope of returning them into communion with our Holy Father. Remember, we must always continue to press our ideals to the ends of the world just as our forefathers did. Not only because it is the right way, but because it is the Credenthian way!”

The crowd threw up their hands in agreement and cheered vehemently while Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé smirked at such a contradictory message. First, Claudias singled out that certain regimes use religion as a means of control, but was not Valoria a theocracy ruled by religious law? And also, who decided that Valoria was the only correct faith that descended from the Old Theorianic Lines of Tradition? As Emeral once said, this was nothing more than early church dogma used by the Credenthians as a way to protect and promote their faith and culture—which was no different from what the other kingdoms did throughout the ages.

The second part of Claudias’ message, which was to promote Valorian ideals to the ends of the world, was just another justifiable excuse for Valoria to expand its powers outside of its borders, sometimes using force. Kiaran and Liviulé were easily reminded of what happened back in their homelands of Louthlaughn and Roznovia when the Valorians pushed their countries into civil war. The Valorians’ objective was never to educate the people nor bring them back into communion with their Holy Father, but to supply the rogue factions with the necessary resources to overthrow the government so that the new regime would support Valoria’s annexation.

Feeling compelled within his spirit, Claudias continued, “Before I leave you to enjoy the rest of tonight’s festivities, I have one final announcement to make.”

Tears of joy sprung from Claudias’ eyes as Emeral stepped aside in order to allow Alessandra to come forth and hold her father’s hand. Yet the joy behind the emperor’s words did not match the look of misery inscribed on Alessandra’s face. Her skin was as pale as her white dress, and her long black hair was adorned with a thinly made silver crown that sparkled unlike the void in her eyes.

Claudias reached over, embraced Nico Donyan with his left hand, and

brought him forth. Admittedly, Nico looked stunning in his crimson robes and gold armbands. As his curly brown hair bobbed above his eyebrows, he gave Claudias an enduring smile. At this, Claudias placed Alessandra and Nico's hands together and proclaimed, "Because of Lord Nico Donyan's unceasing love towards our country and a love he has displayed to me unceasingly as a friend and a trusted confidant, I, Emperor Claudias Nuncio, offer him the hand of my beloved daughter, Alessandra of Ariescelle, whereby they shall be married upon our return from Theoria in the spring." With hands raised high, Claudias shouted, "Until then, good night and God bless!"

As the crowd gallantly cheered, Alessandra's eyes caught sight of a quarrel happening towards the far right side of the Grand Atrium. It appeared as if a handful of people were struggling to subdue someone; however, just as Claudias and his court began heading upstairs, Nico interrupted her by suggesting, "My lady, shall we head back with the company of your father or would you rather spend some time alone together?"

Alessandra shrugged her hand free and rebuked, "Leave me alone. I want nothing to do with you."

Relaxing his clenched fist, Nico sniggered, "Sleep well, Alessandra. For we have a long journey ahead of us."

Paying Nico no mind as he ascended the steps, Alessandra averted her attention back to the floor of the Grand Atrium as she propped her sapped body against the marble railing. There she saw several Valorian soldiers closing in upon the action. Suddenly, the unruly dissident managed to free himself before he dashed through the crowd, at last reaching the center of the Grand Atrium whereby he stopped to stare up at Alessandra.

It was Liviulé, and his eyes spoke of a terrible anguish that was too unbearable for her to comprehend. Before she even had a chance to react, Liviulé flipped his hood over his face and disappeared into the crowd just before the soldiers caught up to him.



## IX

### *Cold Morning*

The next morning a frosty breeze crept up off the stone floor causing Damyen and Kiaran to shiver and moan. While Damyen adjusted his blanket and snuggled in an upright chair, Kiaran hazily noticed Emeral coming in from outside as he rolled halfheartedly into a fetal position for warmth on the sofa.

Kiaran groggily said, "Would you mind shutting the door?"

Carrying a handful of logs, Emeral used his foot to slam the door shut and tossed the wood into the fireplace. Afterwards, he went over and ripped Kiaran's blanket away, replying, "Well, good morning to you too!"

"Agh, it is freezing!" Kiaran cried.

"I suggest then that you get moving. I let you lads sleep in late enough."

Tiredly, the lads rolled to their feet, and as they stretched their limbs, Damyen noticed that he could only see his reflection in the dark window. "Late? The sun has not even risen."

"I am not going to let you argue with this old man. Now come have breakfast. I have water boiling in the kettle."

Damyen and Kiaran obediently grabbed their blankets and wrapped them around their shoulders; then they unwillingly staggered into the kitchen and sat down at the worn table. The gloomy kitchen engulfed most of the light emanating from the fireplace so that only the pots and pans that hung over their heads could be seen along with the nearby shelves adorned with colorful jars filled with vegetables preserved in vinegar.

After setting four bronze cups on the table, Emeral grabbed a thick piece of cloth and unhooked the kettle from above the flame. He brought the kettle over, and as he poured everyone a cup of tea, he noted, "I see that you lads could not make it to the beds that I had prepared for you."

Mid-yawn, Damyen added, "Let us be thankful that we found our way home last night after all we drank."

"Which reminds me, would one of you lads mind going upstairs and waking Liviulé?"

"I will." Damyen headed back into the welcoming room to climb the stairs.

Emeral placed the kettle on a granite slab, sat down across from Kiaran, and asked, "So how are you feeling?"

Kiaran shook his head with disdain. "My head aches terribly."

"May I get you a medicinal to ease the pain?"

"No, thank you."

"Are you certain?"

Then an idea popped in Kiaran's head. "Well there is something that you could get me."

"And that is?"

"Some alcohol."

"Really?"

"Believe it or not, drinking is the most fitting way to cure a hangover."

Emeral chuckled and replied, "May I suggest to you then, Caiman's Crème Liqueur? It goes really well in hot tea."

"Why, thank you."

Emeral tinkered with a few bottles until he retrieved the crème liqueur, and just as he handed it to Kiaran, Damyen entered the room...without Liviulé.

"So did you manage to wake the Roznovian?"

Damyen scratched his head and replied, "Agh, Liviulé is not upstairs."

A little concerned, Emeral replied, "Did you check the other rooms?"

"Yes."

Tossing up his hands, Emeral lambasted them. "Well, where in heaven's name is he? Was he not with you lads when you left last night?"

After taking a sip of his tea with sweet *crème liqueur*, Kiaran pardoned himself. “Umm.”

“Umm, what?”

Kiaran rested his arms on the table, blinking back the now subsiding throbbing as if searching for his memory of last night. “You see, Liviulé supposedly has a thing for Allessandra, and after finding out that she was to be wed, he got all in a tizzy.”

“Oh my.”

“Then he started yelling all kinds of profanities, and not longer after, his loud mouth got him into a fight with a few angry men. We tried stopping it, but when Liviulé continued to infuriate matters, I said the hell with him; let him get his arse kicked for all I care.”

Damyen tried to downplay Kiaran’s lack of remorse, saying, “Anyways, Liviulé managed to get away, and we are quite certain he escaped before he could have been arrested. We tried looking for him, but when we could not find him, we just assumed that he came back here to sleep.”

“So you simply returned to celebrating, no? Unbelievable!”

“I was not going to let him ruin my night, especially after what he did.”

Understanding Kiaran’s point of view regarding Liviulé’s outlandish behavior, Emeral took the *crème liqueur* and poured a dose into his own tea. After taking a hearty sip, he set down his cup and vented his frustration, “I agree with you, Kiaran; however, I also know quite well what Liviulé must be feeling. I was pretty upset myself after last night’s turn of events. Not only did Claudias hide this secret from me, his close confidant, but he hid it from the very person most affected by it—Allessandra. What in heaven’s name convinced Claudias to offer his daughter’s hand to that man? It is beyond me!”

“So where do you think Liviulé might be?” Damyen replied with concern.

Mentally placing himself in Liviulé’s boots, Emeral contemplated this. “Knowing Liviulé, I suppose he is probably praying in a temple somewhere, but I guess I shall also pay a visit to the prison...just to be safe.”

“What a great way to start our journey,” Kiaran groaned. And it was only the beginning.



Dawn had arrived, and warm sunlight was beginning to melt the packed snow as everyone traveling to Theoria lined up in an orderly fashion at the bottom of the palace steps. They anticipated setting off that morning but had to wait until Nico's men were finished performing their routine headcount of those traveling while they double-checked to ensure they had appropriate rations and gear. While all this took place, Damyen and Kieran remained huddled within their cloaks near the back of the procession waiting for their friends to arrive.

Not long afterwards, Emeral was seen trotting towards his friends on his red Coral Warmblood named Clarion. When his horse slowed to a walk, joining the two men, Kieran inquired, "Any luck?"

Emeral pulled his scarf down from around his face, but his expression foretold an uneventful search. "Well, Liviulé is not in jail."

"Maybe he is dead in the street somewhere?"

"My intuition tells me otherwise."

"So how much longer do we have to wait?" Damyen inquired.

Just as Emeral was about to respond he heard a voice say, "Good morning."

To their surprise, they saw Alessandra sitting atop her gray Grissom Noble named Mulberry. She wore a violet wool cloak hooked closed by a silver broach, and a few strands of black hair blew in the cool breeze.

"Alessandra! What a pleasant surprise," Emeral greeted.

"Thank you."

Emeral then encouraged, "I just want you to know that my prayers are with you, and if you ever need to talk to someone, I am here."

"I know you are."

Mulberry whinnied readiness, which caught Kieran's attention. "Alessandra, why do you appear dressed to travel?"

"Because I am going to Theoria too."

"Are you really? How wonderful!" Damyen gleamed.

Still troubled by last night and not feeling in the most pleasant of moods, Alessandra got to the point and asked, "Where is Liviulé? I wish to speak with him."

"He kind of ran off last night after..." Realizing that he had said too much, Kiaran cut himself short and concluded, "Well, you know..."

A sad melancholy fell over Alessandra, and she pulled out a rolled piece of parchment that was tied with a red ribbon and said, "Yes, that is why I am here. I have to explain to him what happened last night."

"My dear," Emeral interjected, "you owe no one an explanation, including..."

Just then, their conversation was jarred to a halt as they heard someone shouting at his horse to canter faster. When they turned to see who caused the commotion, it became readily apparent by his buzzed head and graven demeanor that it was Liviulé. When Liviulé neared the procession, he brought his steed to a trot before he aggressively circled his friends, and then he rebuked, "Cold morning to all of you. For the feeling is similar to that of my heart!"

Liviulé's harsh words caused Alessandra's weakened spirit to collapse, and as her eyes began to brim with tears, she threw the rolled piece of parchment at Liviulé. "I am sorry to have brought this upon you. Good-bye!"

Catching the twirling piece of parchment in his lap, Liviulé watched as Alessandra slapped Mulberry's reins and trotted away towards the front of the procession.

"You selfish bastard!" Kiaran shouted.

"You have a lot of nerve," Damyen fumed.

Acting like he did nothing wrong, Liviulé innocently replied, "What?"

Just as Liviulé unfurled the parchment, Emeral joined in the admonishment. "Kiaran is right! You are selfish. Here you are worried about yourself rather than the fact that this innocent woman had no knowledge or choice in what happened last night. After all that she went through, you felt it was necessary to take your anger out on her! Shame on you."

However, it was not his friends that made him realize that he was

indeed an arrogant prick but Alessandra's kind words, which simply read:

*My Lord, My Lord,  
I wish you well,  
For you are my strength,  
And my Passionate Will.  
— Alessandra*

As Emeral continued on with his tirade, Liviulé stuffed the parchment into his satchel and dug his heels into the girth of his Northern Surefoot, causing him to jolt forward in pursuit of Alessandra. Liviulé galloped at full speed and forced loitering fellow travelers to quickly dodge out of the way. When he was at last within range of her, he shouted, "Alessandra, wait!"

Within moments, Alessandra brought her horse to a halt near the front of the procession and lowered her head in thought. Liviulé came to her side, unsure of what to say. "Aye—"

"What?"

Seeing the defeated look in her eyes, Liviulé pleaded, "I am sorry. I should not have taken my anger out on you. It is just...I mean, last night was so magical, so special. But then your father made his announcement, and it crushed my heart! I like you, Alessandra. I do not want last night to be it."

"And neither do I. That is why I wrote you that small poem—to let you know that my heart is with you and that I will do everything in my power to stop this marriage. But to do this, I need your support. I need you to work with me, Liviulé, not against me."

"Very well."

"Then let us put aside what happened last night and try to enjoy the moments that we do have together."

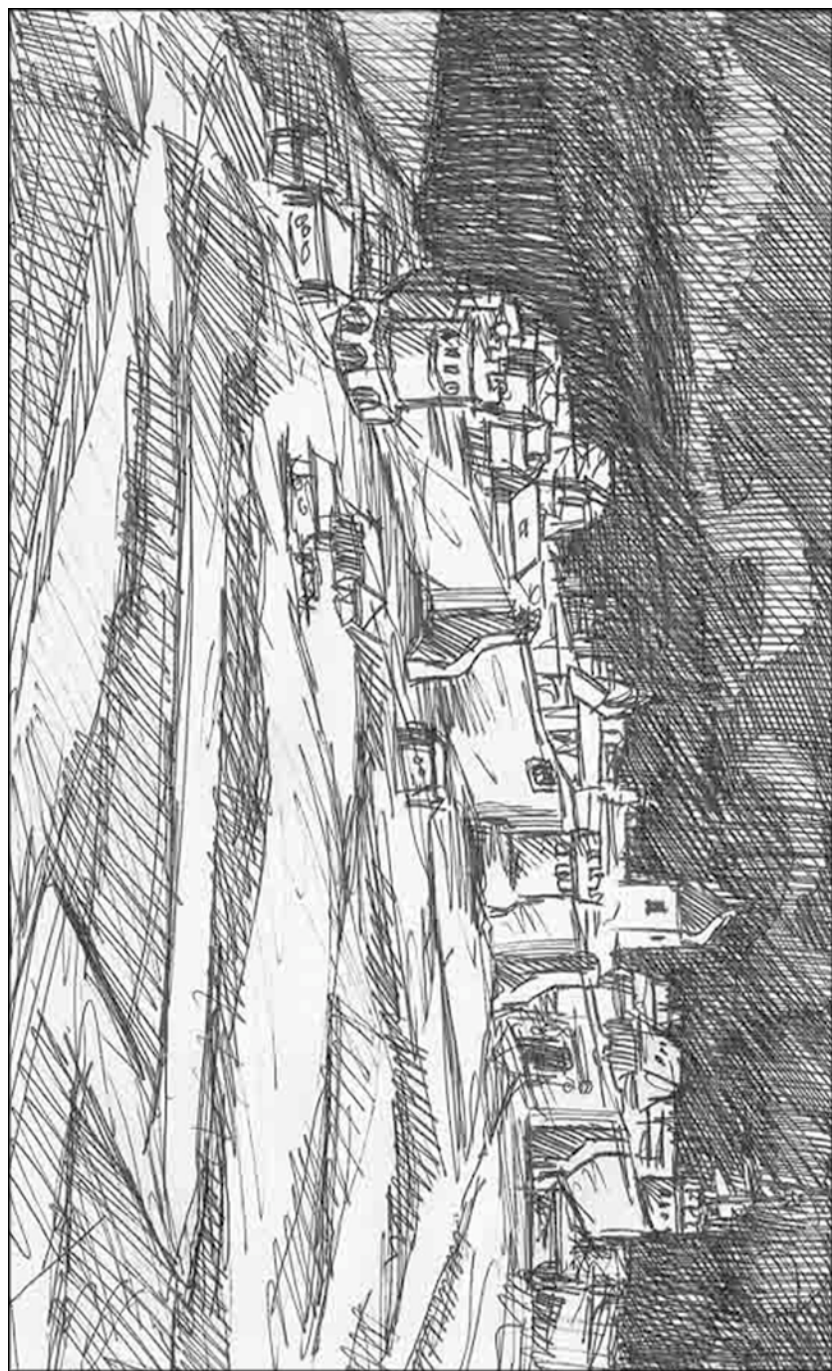
Falling back into his normal self, Liviulé said, "Very well. And while we apart, may I dream of you? It is the only other way of keeping you close to my heart."

Liviulé was finally able to prod a thin grin from Alessandra. "As long as my clothes must remain on!"

Damian M. Salo



Not long after Liviulé rejoined his friends and apologized to them for his coarse demeanor, the soldiers blew their trumpets, and the Valorians that lined the streets waved farewell to their fellow countrymen as they marched south out of the capital.



## X

# *Bacilly*

For the next few weeks, the Valorians traveled through the San Victor Plains and the Hemlock Forest during heavy snowfall and near-freezing conditions, weather which was unusual this early in the year. Although their pace was slow, it was not without such enjoyments as the many breathtaking views of the countryside and glimpses of the various wildlife that grazed these lands.

The trek gave Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé the chance to inform Emeral what they had been up to these last several years. Damyen and Kiaran spoke about life in Brookshire and how its vibrant and diverse culture both inspired and infuriated them. As for Liviulé, he spoke at lengths about revisiting his homeland and how upset he was to realize that Roznovia was in far worse condition than he remembered as a boy. All the while Emeral would listen, contemplate their words, and then provide valuable insight and advice regarding their subject matters. To the lads, this was like old times. With each passing day, they felt their circle renewed and their relationship unbreakable.

However, despite all of their sharing, one thing remained persistently on Liviulé's mind—Alessandra. Ever since the morning that he apologized to her, he had only seen her but for a few moments here and there when he was in the presence of Emeral, and even then, it was a mere polite greeting and nothing more. Every time he attempted to pay her a more extensive visit, she was always preoccupied with some old woman or Nico Donyan. So

Liviulé spent the better part of his time watching her from afar. However, through his apt eavesdropping, he was able to answer his greatest concern—Alessandra had no interest in her betrothed.



Late one evening, the Valorians had entered into the last major city south of Siviú called Bacilly. Before the procession neared the gates of the castle, Emeral turned left down a village road and yelled back to his trailing friends, “Follow me!”

Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé cantered their weary horses after Emeral, but something did not seem quite right. Glancing around the town, Liviulé noted, “Where are you taking us? The castle is the other way.”

“We are not staying at the castle,” Emeral blandly replied.

“Why not?”

“Because the castle is going to be overrun with too many people and too little space. I would much rather pay a visit to the quiet and spacious home of an old friend where I can finally catch a full night of sleep.”

“You mean to tell us that our journey from Siviú has not been pleasant?”

“Aside from the cold and everything else that puts wear on an old man’s back, yes!”

The road they traveled east towards the outskirt of the city was pitch black, save for the snowy fields radiating with the moon’s glow. When Emeral pointed out a small villa set back amongst a field of withered grape vines, they turned left and trotted up to a decrepit barn crookedly set to the right side of the home.

Once they tethered their steeds inside, the lads grabbed their belongings and followed Emeral around to the front of the stone villa where they heard the melody of a lute. The two-floor villa was topped with a slate roof and icicles dangling haphazardly from the eaves. Several small, frosted windows led to a narrow oak door that came up to the height of Kiaran’s shoulders.

Gently, Emeral tapped his staff against the door. Instantly the music

stopped. Within moments, the door was pulled open, and out popped the head of a middle-aged man with shaggy hair and a pointy nose. His greeting echoed, "Elder Emeral! Welcome. What a pleasant surprise!"

"Good evening, Ballian! May we come inside?"

"Yes, of course. Please, watch your head."

Ducking their heads as they entered, the four friends found themselves standing before a skinny man of significant height. Emeral burst with excitement. "Lads, it is my pleasure to introduce you to Ballian. He is a well-known artist and musician in Southern Valoria."

"Thank you for having us!" Kiaran charmed.

The lads all shook Ballian's hand, and he ushered them further into the entryway. "Feel free to hang your cloaks to the right of the door. A warm fire is waiting for you in the social room."

The lads set down their gear alongside the wall and then went to work at removing all their protective layers of clothing. They grabbed any wet garments and followed Ballian into the social room boasting a gigantic Bacillic stone fireplace, several benches and chairs, and an array of paintings hanging on the walls. The paintings depicted various landscapes of the countryside during the spring and summer seasons, and they consisted of vibrant blues and greens, colors that were already greatly missed in late fall.

As the lads hung their clothes on the mantel and hopped around to remove their boots, Ballian was already making his way toward the kitchen. "Would everyone care for a drink?"

"Why, certainly!" Emeral accepted as he plopped down in a rocking chair.

While Ballian went off to retrieve the drinks, Damyen sat beside Kiaran who leaned back in his chair with his feet propped close to the fire. Liviulé, on the other hand, began walking the circumference of the room to examine the paintings.

Shortly after, Ballian returned with two loaves of Bacillian bread and a large cut of aged goat cheese. He then returned to the kitchen and came back carrying in his thick, calloused fingers several ceramic cups and a large glass bottle that he set down next to him on the bench.

"Are these yours?" Liviulé asked about the paintings.

“Yes, they are.”

“They are really good. I like how you textured the paintings with your brush.”

“Thank you.”

As Ballian poured their drinks, the alcohol’s potent smell caused Kiaran’s nose to violently twitch. “What do you have there?”

Knowing full well what Kiaran was inferring, Ballian played stupid and replied, “Agh, just some aged cheese and bread.”

Leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head, Kiaran continued to pry. “No, I mean, what is that you have in the bottle?”

“This? It is a surprise!”

“A surprise?”

Ballian chuckled at his own humor. “Yes, because I would much rather have you find out for yourself.”

After everyone was handed a drink, they held their cups up high and toasted, “Salute!”

When Kiaran brought the drink close to his nose and sniffed its contents, his eyes grew large as he related the drink to some wonderful times he had in the past. After swallowing it in one large gulp, it became clearly evident what the drink was. “There is only one place that this type of whiskey comes from, and no one can make it unless you come from...”

“Louthlaughn,” Ballian interjected.

“What!” Kiaran jolted. “You?”

“Yes, me!”

“I would have never known!”

“I must admit that my accent has soften from living abroad for so many years.”

“But still,” Liviulé said in wonder, “aside from the hair, you two look strikingly similar!”

Kiaran stood up and took a couple steps toward Ballian, all the while trying to identify any resemblance, when he at last admitted, “Well, they do say us Louthlaughners are known for our striking beauty!”

“You are absolutely right!” Ballian laughed.

Damyen then grabbed the bottle and went around refilling everyone’s

cup. As Ballian picked up his lute, Kiaran asked, “So what made you decide to leave the isle?”

Sitting down on the bench to tune his strings, Ballian recalled a troubling part of his past. “I left because I had no other choice.”

“My apologies for asking.”

“No, no. It is quite alright. You see, I was raised an orphan, and when I came of age, I was forced to join the army. There they trained me as an assassin because my upbringing taught me how to be indifferent to love and emotion. But then there came a summer where I fell in love with this beautiful lady, only to have her stripped away from me when war erupted in the north. It was then that I decided I was never going to let this happen again, which meant that I could no longer be a soldier.” Ballian’s fingers strummed the strings absentmindedly for a moment before he continued.

“However, leaving the army was not an option, and when my general received word of my displeasure, he decided to make an example out of me.” Ballian took a deep breath and sighed. “And he did this by kicking the living shite out of me.”

“It is a crying shame, I tell you” Kiaran comforted him.

“It truly was.” Ballian shook his head in disbelief. “He continued on this way for over a year. But then one night he decided to attack me while drunk and it became his last; exile became my only option.”

“Why? What happened?”

“He tried to drown me in a trough of water. As I held on for dear life, this intense rage consumed me, and instinctively I pulled my dagger from my boot and stabbed him repeatedly in the stomach until he released me.”

“Oh my,” Emeral muttered.

“Thankfully, my fellow comrades were there and knew of my ordeal, so they helped me to escape undetected. It was then that I met a captain of a ship sailing west and she offered me work. Over the next few years while swabbing the deck during the day she taught me how to play the lute at night. The captain told me that music would help me overcome such a traumatizing past because it would re-ignite this love and appreciation for life that was wrongfully denied from me all those years. So now, whenever I strum this lute, I am reminded of her and how she changed me from a

deadly assassin to a peaceful musician.”

Seeing the surprised looks on their faces, Ballian inquired lightheartedly, “And speaking of music, do any of you play an instrument?”

“Actually, both Damyen and I,” Kiaran answered.

“What instrument do you lads play?”

“Well, I play the drum, and Damyen plays the fiddle.”

“Really?” Ballian pondered as he plucked his tuned strings. “Do you think you lads might be interested in joining me and some other fellow musicians as we perform tomorrow at the castle?”

“By all means!” They exclaimed.

“This shall truly be a splendid experience for you lads!”

Emeral then cut in, “Yes, because not only will you be playing in front of Bacillians but you will also be playing for the emperor himself.”

“No pressure,” Damyen said with a chuckle. “Thank you, Ballian!”

Suddenly feeling left out, Liviulé muttered from across the room as he continued scanning the wall of images, “And what about me?”

“What about you?” Kiaran argued.

Ballian took note of Liviulé’s interest in the artwork. “And, you must be an artist? Why else would you question the form in which I paint?”

“Precisely.”

Ballian pondered this. “Well, come to think of it, I am a little overwhelmed with managing all the entertainment tomorrow, and I could definitely use someone to oversee the art show. I have about ten artists needing some assistance with bringing in and arranging their paintings and also organizing some art activities for the children. Are you interested?”

“Interested?” Liviulé gleamed. “Of course I am interested! How could I not be?”

“Very well!” Ballian wagered, “Now that everyone is happy, how about you lads grab your instruments so we can make some music?”

“Alright!”

As Damyen and Kiaran dashed into the other room, Liviulé stood up and said, “And while you do that, I will do some sketches!”

“Brilliant!”

Perhaps Emeral’s detour was not going to be such a bad idea after all.



Late into the evening, while Emeral relaxed with his eyes closed slowly shifting back and forth in his rocking chair, Damyen, Kiaran, and Ballian filled the room with intricate melodies and scales. Most of the songs were improvisational but a few were common folk tunes. Each musician played along harmoniously, and at different intervals, each played his own solo. With each melodic composition, it was as if they were having a conversation through their instruments as they traded scales back and forth. The solos spoke of jubilant tales of love while others echoed more deeply about times of sadness. However, the music was all too pleasant as they huddled around the orange fire while enjoying gulps of tasty Louthlaughn whiskey between their breaks.

While the musicians played well into the night, Liviulé leaned back in his chair while sketching them with charcoal. His still-life portrait was as clean lined as it could be with them moving around merrily. Not to mention, the alcohol did a number on his ability to focus, but the concept of three men playing their instruments while standing around the Bacillic-style fireplace was enough for him to draw inspiration. Finally, when everyone's yawns became louder than their instruments, Ballian and Emeral's friends called it a night.



## XI

### *Torn*

One wintry day, a wearied father beckoned his son to speak with him by the fireplace, a stone-lain hearth reminiscent of Ballian's villa. The young adolescent, naïve to the world ahead of him, sat down beside his father not sure what to expect. The father mustered a faint smile but could not hide the fear in his eyes. He was torn about his son's future.

Turning towards his child, the father said, "My dear son, there is something I must tell you because I fear that if I do not, I shall place your life in great peril."

The son urgently pressed, "Da, what is it?"

Weighing the difficulty in his heart, the father said, "Before I tell you, understand the meaning of the word *love*. Remember it, feel it, hold it, give it, and express it. Most importantly, never lose sight of it. Love is what brought you into this world. Love is what makes people strive onward, and love is what makes people live. Understand there will come a time when the only thing left to fight for is love, and it will be love that shall overcome all."

The son nodded innocently.

Clenching his son's hand, the father looked at him with grave concern. "Yesterday an angel of grace appeared to me while I was plowing the field, and she said unto me that I must take my firstborn son regularly to the temple to pray in order that it may remind you of where the seed of love is born from. For one day, you will deny God's love, and because of it, you shall come to face a great many tribulations."

The son jumped to his feet, inquiring with panic in his trembling voice, “Da, am I at harm? Why me? Tell me now! What have I done to deserve this?”

The father stood to embrace his son in his thick arms and replied comfortingly, “Now, now, lad. Everything will be alright.”

Yet the son, refusing such consolation, pushed away from his father, shouting, “No, everything is not!”

As the son stared teary eyed into the crackling flames, the father explained, “Do you understand why the angel appeared unto me? The angel came in an effort to protect you.”

“How will I be protected if I am destined to deny Him anyways?”

The father was at a loss for words. There was no explanation, no logic to offer—only words of sorrow. “For that, I do not know. I am truly sorry.”

With steady steps, the father met his son before the fire and hugged him from behind as they both stood in wordless thought.

The father’s husky voice broke the silence. “What does our faith tell us about handling uncertainty? We are taught that we should place our unyielding trust in God in order for Him to make everything right.”

The son did not respond but remained quietly in his father’s embrace.

“The angel also said unto me that you do not walk this journey alone, for you shall soon come to meet your spiritual brother.”

Turning around, the son looked up to his father, meeting his unusually bright smile. The father exclaimed, “He will be your best friend.”

“Really?”

Wiping away the tears from his son’s cheek, he said, “Yes!”

The son’s lips parted in a slow approaching grin. The father embraced his son once again. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Da.”

As the memory began to fade away, the father whispered words that lingered in his son’s ear, “When you return, go to your brother, for he is uncertain of your fate.”

“Fate...”

“Liviulé, wake...”

Clasping Liviulé’s shoulder, Damyen urged, “Liviulé! Wake up; it is

getting late.”

Liviulé flinched as his eyes opened wide with panic. Frantically, he jostled around on his cot trying to figure out where he was, pleading, “Where am I?”

As Liviulé’s eyes began to focus, Damyen chuckled. “Bacilly. Why—have you forgotten?”

Liviulé pushed a heavy blanket aside as his lungs mildly hyperventilated. His tunic was soaked with sweat, and in his anger, he struggled to remove it. After pulling the tunic over his head, he thrashed it far across the room. Bare-chested and burning up, Liviulé dropped back down on the bed, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead and grumbling, “This was the first night in many nights that I was finally able to sleep, and this is how God repays me—by bringing up chilling memories of my past.”

Grabbing his boots and sitting down on the cot across from his distraught friend, Damyen asked, “Did you have that dream about your father again?”

“Yes!” Liviulé shook his head in disbelief and added, “No matter what, I will never forget that night and what he said to me, particularly about love and my own demise. It just tears at my soul, Damyen. I am torn knowing that I will deny God!”

Damyen slid his right foot into his boot. “I think we have been torn in our own ways. In my case, I am reminded of the necklace that my ex-girlfriend, Mallelin of Mantua, continued to wear after I broke her heart.”

“You never quite got over that.”

“Never.”

“I remember the origins of that necklace and how it came into her possession,” Liviulé stated. “It all began when she fell terribly ill and no one, not even the best physicians or medicinals, could cure her.”

“And you did what you had to do.”

“Agreed.”

The conversation was beginning to brighten Liviulé’s spirit, and he agreed, “So that night I secretly came to her bedside while she was asleep bringing holy oil from the relics of Saint Ioan. I then dabbed my fingers with it and blessed her on the forehead while saying the Healing Prayer.

When I was finished, I placed the holy oil in the palm of her hand and then I left.”

As Damyen finished putting on his left boot, he continued the conversation where Liviulé left off, saying, “And that was the last time any of us had either seen or heard from her...until months later, when we discovered that Mallelin was miraculously healed.” Damyen exhaled a chuckle. “Her parents were inviting everyone over for a grand celebration.” Then Damyen’s voice grew hushed. “I remember the very first time I saw her that night. She was so beautiful, so angelic. She was wearing a glimmering gown that matched her green eyes, and her ash-blond hair brushed the crevice of her lower back. Her thin lips gave way to that full smile of hers. And who could forget her quirkiness and how she does that thing where she bounces on the back of her heels when she gets excited.” Damyen’s eyes glazed over as his mind traveled back in time.

“And for some reason that night when I saw Mallelin, I found myself having these undeniable feelings toward her. I remember telling her how much I prayed for her well-being and how much I missed her. Later, when I was leaving, she gave me a passionate hug and a kiss, telling me that she thought often of me and wanted to see me again. I was left speechless, and I could not stop thanking God for bringing me there that night!”

Liviulé stood up to stretch his limbs and said, “But this is where the story becomes interesting. I remember on our way home as you were expressing your feelings for Mallelin I had this vision of a holy pendant that I needed to find for you. Although *find* is not the exact word to describe how painstakingly long it actually took to find it. I must have traveled to every temple and monastery to find this pendant; and when someone asked for me to describe it, I could only say that the pendant had an image of a saint on it. But every saint is on its own pendant! And after digging through chests of religious artifacts from across the Northern Vales, I was just about to quit.

Then one day as I was passing by our village temple, my gut told me to go in and ask about this pendant one last time. When I entered, I was introduced to a traveling monk who intuitively asked me what it was that I was trying to find for my friend. I told him that I was looking for a holy pendant and vaguely described it to him. The monk then disappeared for a

while, only to return with something shining in his hand. I recall our conversation as if it happened yesterday...

The traveling monk opened his palm and asked me, 'Is this it?'

I looked at the necklace sparkling against his wrinkled skin, and there I saw the image of the saint I had envisioned, emblazoned on this silver pendant. I shouted, 'This is it! This is the pendant that I have been searching for!' The monk inquired the name of the friend that I was giving this to, and I told him that it was for my friend Damyen."

Liviulé grew nostalgic as the details flooded back. "The monk looked at me with intrigue and said, 'Damyen?' And I remember saying, 'Yes, why do you look so surprised?' The elder then asked me if I knew who the saint was on this pendant; I replied no. The elder told me that it was the Holy Pendant of Saint Damyen, the patron saint of the terminally ill. I could not believe what he had just told me, so I gave him a hug and thanked him. Then I ran off to find you! It was truly amazing!" Liviulé said with a flourish.

Damyen then continued the story from there. "I remember the day when you gave it to me. You were explaining everything that had happened to you on your quest. And from that day, I wore the pendant of the saint, which bares my name, up until—"

"You left it upon Mallelin's windowsill after a night of making passionate love," Liviulé interjected.

Standing up to adjust his belt, Damyen chided, "Agh, did you have to remind me?"

"And she still wears your necklace to this day, even after you broke her heart."

"Yes, I was young and stupid then."

Damyen recalled how he had broken Mallelin's heart when he left her for another woman. "But after all these years and the women I have dated, I still think of her. I have not seen Mallelin in ages, but when we did cross paths, she was always wearing my pendant. And still, I question whether or not she wears it because of me or for spiritual reasons."

Liviulé pondered aloud, "I wonder how she is?"

Damyen, secretly hoping that she thought of him as he did of her,

sighed. “Me too.”

Angered by the apparent disrespect of not speaking quietly while someone was still in the room sleeping, Kiaran rolled onto his side and growled, “Will you two quit wallowing in your self pity! I swear, you lads moan more than a woman during childbirth! So how about shutting your mouths so I can sleep a little more.”

The outburst caused his friends to chuckle; Damyen admitted, “Maybe Kiaran is right, Liviulé? How about we put this aside and focus on the day ahead?”

“Very well,” Liviulé agreed as he grabbed a towel. “I shall go freshen up, and I shall meet you downstairs.”

“Thank you!” Kiaran snickered as he rolled over and stuffed his head underneath the pillow.



## XII

# *God's Love Balanced*

Elder Emeral sat outside the emperor's chamber door in Lord Audric's castle waiting for the physician to finish seeing him. He was feeling quite impatient as he played with his staff recalling how a Valorian soldier interrupted him while Emeral breakfasted with his friends at Ballian's villa. The soldier had an urgent message from Claudias Nuncio requesting his presence, and Emeral could easily bet that the emperor had another bad dream.

After an hour of waiting outside, the oak door clunked open and an elderly man came out and greeted Elder Emeral. The gentleman's receding hairline met his bowl haircut halfway down his shiny scalp; he was carrying a wooden case with various small jars, vials, and instruments that were of importance to his trade as a physician.

The physician shook Emeral's hand and greeted him, "Good morning, Elder Emeral. I apologize for having you wait. The emperor requested that I perform a full examination of his health."

"And what is your prognosis?"

"Stress."

"I am not surprised, to say the least. And what is your recommendation?"

"Claudias must eat regularly and have ample rest. And more importantly, he must not allow the heaviness of politics to weigh down on his mind."

“It is easier said than done, I am afraid.”

“Emeral, if Claudias ignores such symptoms, this kind of stress will make him more susceptible to catching a real illness of the flesh.”

Emeral nodded in understanding. “I shall try my best to convince the emperor.”

“Very well then. Good day to you, Emeral!”

“Good day!” Emeral replied.

The physician sped off down the hall while the items in his wooden case jingled as it bumped against his leg. Emeral took a moment to gather his thoughts then slipped through the cracked door. The room was dim but for the lingering sunlight peeking in through the dressed windowpanes. The stonewalls were decorated with paintings and tapestries, and various styles of rugs covered the floor. To Emeral’s right was an oversized bed with thin white linen drapes that were tied halfway down on the lengthy bedposts, and sitting up in bed was Claudias Nuncio sipping a cup of hot tea.

As Emeral approached Claudias, he could smell the pungent sweat of a man who had not washed in days. His face was grimy, and his gray hair was matted and greasy. After taking a sip of tea and resting the cup on his belly, Claudias kindly acknowledged his visitor. “Emeral. Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it.”

“Anything for an old friend.” Emeral humbly nodded and politely asked, “So how may I be of assistance?”

“You may be of assistance by pulling a chair over here so that I may speak with you.”

Emeral set his staff against the wall and walked to a nearby table with two lush chairs. “Shall I bring over another chair for Lord Nico Donyan?”

Claudias graciously declined. “No, no. That will not be necessary. I met with Nico earlier this morning and instead I have asked him to take my place at breakfast with Lord Audric. I figured I could use this morning to collect myself.”

Feeling relieved that Nico would not be joining them, Emeral carried the wooden chair over beside Claudias’ bed and sat down. He pulled his pipe from his black leather satchel and began packing it with hash.

As Emeral lit his pipe, Claudias swallowed a mouthful of hot tea and

recalled, "I remember the days when you and I were but young lads at the seminary. We thought we knew everything. Oh, and how that philosophy bit us in our arses!" Claudias grimaced. "There is indeed a difference between a student's knowledge and a teacher's wisdom. Knowledge can be gained through study; yet wisdom can only be gained through age and practice. Without attaining the latter, knowledge is like having a cup of tea leaves without hot water; the properties in the tea leaves cannot be released to provide its remedial benefits."

Emeral nodded in agreement as he puffed his pipe.

Claudias looked gravely over at Emeral and said, "Therefore, I am willing to admit that when I do not know the answer I at least turn to those that do. And if it pertains to the dreams that keep me up at night then I should be able to turn to those whom I trust for their unyielding support in helping me address my concern."

As Emeral stroked his beard in thought, Claudias continued, "And regardless of whether you believe that these visions are holy, Emeral, we are not addressing the fact that these visions are becoming more persistent." Claudias held out an open palm towards Emeral. "So please, Emeral, do not dissuade me, but help me."

Emeral understood his concern and acknowledged, "I agree, Claudias. If the visions you are receiving are growing more persistent and are causing you not to sleep, than maybe it is best not to ignore them."

"Precisely!"

Emeral chewed on the end of his pipe as he asked the Lord for guidance, and then he inquired, "Then let me ask you, are you having the same recurring vision as you had while in Siviui?"

"Yes." Claudias paused for a moment and then rendered, "Well, not exactly."

"Explain."

Claudias rested his head against the bed frame, closing his eyes in deep thought. "Usually, I am revisited by the vision foretelling of the reckoning that shall come to pass unless the secret contained within the passage, *God's Love Balanced*, is revealed. But last night I heard this voice saying unto me: *I am right here, but you cannot see me. Must I take your breath away in order for*

*you to breathe Me?”*

Claudias shook his head with disdain. “In that moment, I felt the air sucked right out of my lungs, and suddenly I awoke out of my dream gasping for air!”

Emeral remained cautious as he proceeded, saying, “If these visions are truly from God, then why are they so threatening?”

“It is another sign, Emeral! God is angry with me for questioning Him and the Last Great Secret!”

“Claudias, you must be careful what you believe as truth or you may find yourself deceived by the Evil One.”

“Well then, what am I to do?”

Emeral posed a question. “Where is your Holy Book of Credintza?”

Following Claudias’ pointed finger in the direction of the window, Emeral got up and went over to a cherry oak desk. On the left side, three candles neared the end of their lives, and on the right sat the Holy Book of Credintza. Emeral picked up the large green leather-bound book with gold trim and returned to his chair. As Emeral opened the book and started delicately flipping through the pages, the smell of frankincense from all the years of it being blessed saturated the air, masking the emperor’s fetid odor. When he finally found the correct page, Emeral read aloud:

*God’s Love Balanced*

*Written by the Holy Saint Seraphim of Safroy*

*By the Will of God,  
Take hold of life,  
Unless  
Life takes hold of you.  
Praise the Lord  
For the mystery is revealed.  
Supplement your life,  
For His love,  
For He does not come  
Out of torment,*

*But through it  
He shall come out of compassion.  
Bind my soul to you,  
O' Lord.  
I praise you with reverence and awe.  
Balanced by God's Love,  
The two shall become one,  
And Ye shall overcome.*

The two remained silent for a few moments as they considered the passage's intrinsic meaning, and then Claudias graciously acknowledged, "I tell you, Emeral, what I love most about reading the Holy Book of Credintza is that every passage was written with a sense of mystery to it; that makes it not only enchanting but enlightening. Even though this book has been studied and analyzed throughout the ages, the fact still remains that even this brief passage may still withhold some valuable truths that have yet to be revealed."

Emeral resounded with similar enthusiasm. "I think that if we were to study this passage within the spirit, maybe it shall help us ascertain whether your visions are holy."

"Indeed, Emeral. You never cease to surprise me." Claudias spoke light-heartedly. "Sometimes I wonder if it should be you in my stead?"

"As emperor?" Emeral guffawed. "No thank you! I am perfectly happy where I am."

"Honest words from an honest man." Claudias placed his empty teacup on the nearby table and ripped off the covers. He pivoted around and slipped his feet off the bed and onto the cold floor. Sluggishly standing up, Claudias said, "I apologize for jumping to conclusions. I am just tired and stressed, and my patience for answers is running thin. However, I applaud your idea, and hopefully it will help me catch a better night's sleep."

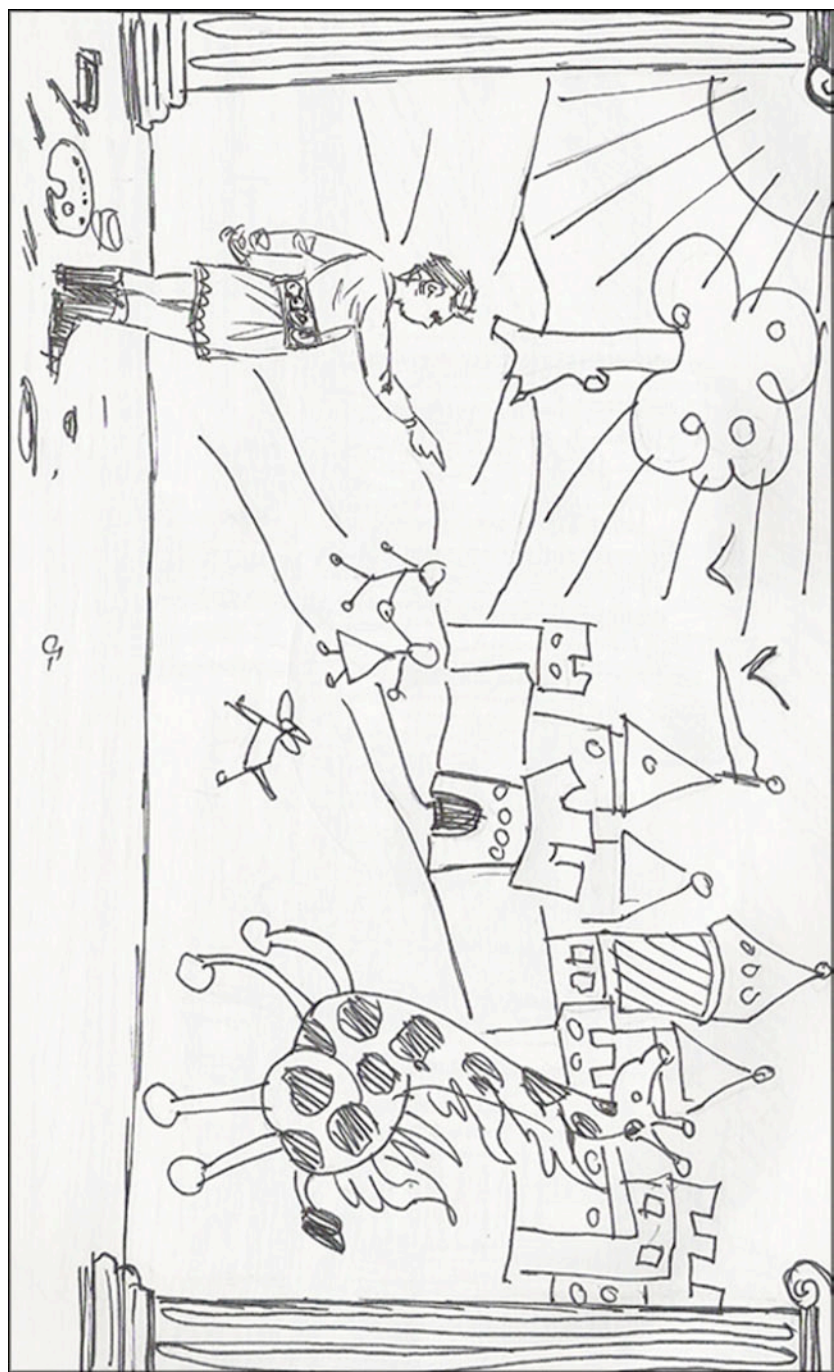
Understanding that some things are not attained without God's permission, Emeral replied, "I shall discover what God intends."

As Emeral stood to bid the emperor farewell, Claudias offered a warm

Damian M. Salo

smile. “Emeral, you are one of the wisest and most spiritually gifted elders of our faith. I know that you have a long and controversial past; however, without your past, you would not have attained the spiritual enlightenment that you have today. I have faith in you.”

“Thank you, Your Eminence.”



## XIII

# *Mutual Collectivism*

After breakfast the following morning, Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé helped Ballian load his wagon with artwork, instruments, and supplies. Once they were finished, they boarded the wagon as Ballian ushered his oxen onward towards the city. The weather promised a mildly warm day, and the melting snow created a swampy mess of the roads until they passed through the gates of the outer wall.

At one time the asymmetrical outer wall was heavily guarded, and all the early inhabitants of Bacilly lived inside the wall for protection; however, with the increase in population and decline in neighboring threats, the wealthier residents eventually expanded and built grand homes far outside its original borders, leaving this older district to young artists and the less fortunate. Yet this economic divide allowed the talented and innovative young people to turn the area around into a utopia of cafés, galleries, restaurants, and pubs for all to visit and enjoy.

By the time Ballian was finished explaining this bit of history, they had at last reached Lord Audric's castle. The castle loomed above the fortified curtain wall with four towering bastions at each corner, and it had a drawbridge that Ballian used to cross over the frozen moat. Once they crossed the watery fortification, they followed the wave of traffic until they stopped before the Banquet Hall. As the lads jumped over the sides of the wagon, Ballian was suddenly approached by a number of friends and artists who shouted, "Ballian! Good morning!"

“Good morning!” Ballian replied jubilantly as he went around greeting everyone. “It is my pleasure to introduce you to my friends from the north, who also happen to be artists.”

“Welcome!” said a jolly man, his protruding belly jiggling and poufy gray hair sprouting up from all sides of his head.

After everyone formally introduced themselves, the jolly man wobbled over to the wagon with Ballian and offered assistance. “Let us help you with this.”

“Thank you, Troilus!”

Once everyone grabbed something, they followed Ballian through a set of wide doors and down a short corridor until they entered into the Banquet Hall. The lads placed Ballian’s belongings on top of a table and took a moment to admire the hall. The elongated Banquet Hall earned its prestige from mammoth wooden beams that ran across its narrow width to support the cathedral roof, and from it hung chandeliers with hundreds of lit candles. Several long oak tables ran parallel with its length, and the walls were empty save for an array of paintings that leaned against them.

Within moments, everyone who was preparing the Banquet Hall for today’s celebration came over to greet Ballian. He jumped up onto a bench and whistled a piercing call to attention. “Good morning, everyone! I know that you are all terribly busy, but I have a quick announcement to make.”

As everyone quietly listened, Ballian continued, “As we are all aware, Lord Audric has not been pleased with our last several art shows. And in our efforts to please our greatest patron and supporter of the arts, I have decided to place an outsider at the helm of today’s art exhibition to share with us not only his knowledge and expertise but also to shed some new light on our creative endeavors. So without ado, I introduce to you, Liviulé the Roznovian!”

Ballian yanked Liviulé up onto the bench as everyone applauded and added, “I, on the other hand, will remain in charge of the music and will accompany the band tonight with two new additions.” He waved for his two new friends to stand with him on his makeshift stage and announced, “They come all the way from the Northern Vales. So please welcome Damyen and Kiaran!”

As everyone exuberantly clapped, Ballian slapped Liviulé on the back and said, “Good luck!” Turning to Damyen and Kiaran, he said, “Ready?”

Ballian hopped off the bench, and once he gathered the musicians, he had them follow him to the other side of the hall where they could begin practicing. As he did this, Troilus gathered the artists before Liviulé, who offered his own introduction. “Welcome. My name is Liviulé. But if you prefer, you may call me the Roznovian!”

To everyone’s amusement, he continued, “Now, before we begin I shall like to take a look at everyone’s paintings so I can decide how best to showcase your work.”

“Follow me,” Troilus directed as he led everyone to the first set of paintings.

Liviulé took a moment to examine the artist’s collection of landscapes, and then he asked Troilus, “How is everyone’s artwork usually organized?”

Scratching his uncombed pouf, Troilus replied, “Our work is always organized by artist, and it is usually up to the artist to decide how they want to exhibit their paintings.”

Liviulé pondered this notion as he looked up to see how badly one artist had begun to display his own paintings. Some of them were placed too high or low, and many were crooked and out of sequence. Having a good feeling as to the basis of Lord Audric’s dissatisfaction, Liviulé was just about to make a comment when he felt a harsh kick to his ankle. “Ouch!”

Spinning around, Liviulé came face to face with a little boy who could not have been more than ten years of age. Lips pouting, the boy had a bowl haircut and freckles that dotted his nose. The lad stood defiantly with his arms crossed, demanding, “Who awe you!”

“Who are you?” Liviulé shot back.

“I do not like you,” the boy fumed.

“Well then, we have something in common, because I do not like you either.”

“Why awe you here?”

With his natural affinity for children, Liviulé sparked in response, “I am here to make your life exciting. So are you ready to have some fun?”

“Yes, I am boawed.”

“I love children and their honesty.” Liviulé tossed the words to his onlookers’ amusement, and then he returned his gaze to the boy. “Would you be interested in being my personal assistant and helping me decide which paintings to put up and where?”

“Why, not?”

“Splendid! Then we have a deal.”

Liviulé shook the boy’s tiny hand and asked, “So what is your name?”

“Dax!”

“I am Liviulé.”

In a playful wrestle, Liviulé locked Dax into a headlock, and turning to his fellow artists, he beckoned while Dax grunted. “If everyone will please excuse us for a moment, Dax and I have some matters to discuss.”

“Let go of me!” the boy squeaked from beneath the head grip.

While Liviulé toyed with his new friend, Troilus ushered the bewildered artists away. In a matter of minutes, Liviulé led the boy along the outskirts of the room, perusing the line of paintings until he caught sight of a series of paintings depicting desert life using thick brush strokes of orange, brown, and blue pastels. He then inquired, “What do you think of these paintings?”

“I think they are weally nice,” Dax said. “But not the other awtists.”

“Why is that?”

“Because they say that hew awt is diffewent than theiws.”

“What is the artist’s name?”

“Isa.”

Taking a liking to her paintings, which depicted strange animals and nomads, he proudly admitted, “If anything, she is probably the best artist here—besides me, of course.” With a laugh, Liviulé decided to test his little friend. “You mentioned that the other artists think that her work is different, no? Then tell me, what is another word to describe something that is different?”

Dax paused for a moment as he scuffed his boot against the floor, “Umm.”

“If you are to be my assistant, I am going to need answers, alright?” At that, Dax looked mildly disappointed, and then Liviulé answered for him.

“The word that I was searching for is *unique*.”

“I was just about to say that!” Dax said pointedly.

“I believe you.” Liviulé rolled his eyes.

“Now then, since each show should have some sort of theme, I ask you, what should our theme be? I will give you a hint—it is the reason why us *northerners* are passing through Bacilly.”

“Because you awe twaveling to Theowia?”

“Yes! And why do people go on pilgrimages to Theoria in the first place?”

“To seek God?”

“Precisely! People go on these pilgrimages to return to God, which means we are going to organize these paintings in such a way that describes the story of us traveling from Valoria to the Holy Land. So what do you think?”

“Does it matter?” Dax questioned.

Liviulé laughed. “Of course not, but that is alright!”

“You awe not funny.”

“To you, maybe.” Liviulé continued to chuckle, and then he demanded in his most professional tone, “Now go and fetch me the artists!”

“What?”

“You heard me, now go!”

“I weally do not like you.”

“Neither do I. I guess that is why we are friends!”

Dax ran off to gather the artists as he shook his head in disbelief.



Tired from doing Liviulé’s bidding, Dax plopped on the floor in front of the artists as Liviulé announced, “Alright! After speaking with Dax, we have decided that this art exhibit needs a theme, and our theme tonight will be *The Return to Innocence*. It will entail me telling a story through your paintings of us Valorians making our pilgrimage to the Holy Land. But in order to do this, we are going to try something that has never been done

here before in Bacilly.” A wave of “oohs” rose from the crowd. “Therefore, I will display your paintings in logical order to tell a story rather than grouping it by artist.”

Troilus’ mouth dropped, and then he agitatedly replied, “This is absurd! Some of us have earned our respected spots on these walls from years of experience. I am not going to allow my artwork to be displayed where Lord Audric cannot see it. I mean...” Troilus’ eyes mockingly darted to Isa’s paintings. “Who wants to view paintings of desert life?”

Liviulé was utterly shocked as the artists turned to stare at Isa, who could only avert her gaze to the ground in her stitched-up, well-worn dress. Liviulé came to her defense, saying, “Troilus, every artist has his or her own unique perspective on the world and so do those who come to view our artwork. Someone might like your work while others may not; that is just how it is. And although you think her work is not good, I think it is brilliant!”

Everyone’s eyes grew in shock including Isa’s, which appeared from underneath her wavy blond hair. “We must remember, most importantly, that we are artists. And true *artists* follow the unwritten code of supporting one another, whether good or bad, friend or foe, because in the end we are all trying to succeed and make a name for ourselves.”

Liviulé started noticing a few nods of agreement among his listeners. “Now, Ballian has asked me to help you regain Lord Audric’s confidence, and I am determined to do so. I promise you that once the paintings are up you will have a change in heart. And if not, you can return to how you usually display your artwork at the next event. So is everyone with me?”

Isa stepped forward and said, “I am!”

Soon everyone followed Isa in agreement...all except for Troilus. Liviulé went over, placed a comforting hand on Troilus’ shoulder, and reassured him. “Are you with me?”

Unable to bare Liviulé’s undivided attention, Troilus wobbled his head back and forth in agreement.



For the rest of the morning and into the afternoon, Liviulé instructed the artists to hang the paintings as he had envisioned, and once they were finished, he had the artists walk with him along the perimeter of the Banquet Hall as he told his story. The paintings went on to depict the various landscapes that they had passed on their way from Siviu and what they were expecting to see on their way to Theoria, making sure it encompassed adventure, faith, and love.

Liviulé concluded his tour with a note of thanks. “I just wanted to say thank you for allowing me to try something new. I hope this will not only show Lord Audric our individuality but also our mutual collectivism, our overall appreciation for the arts. Not to mention that two of Troilus’ paintings remained in the same place anyways!”

Impressed by his ability to shed new light on their artwork, the artists, including Troilus, heavily applauded him. Waving the praise aside, Liviulé turned his attention to the children’s activities he needed to develop. “Now, it is time to figure out what we are going to do for Dax and his little friends?”

Dax sputtered angrily, “I am not little!”

Troilus wobbled over and grabbed Liviulé’s arm. “This way. Lord Audric has set aside a separate chamber for the children.”

Troilus led the artists out of the Banquet Hall, and just as they were cutting across an adjacent hallway, Liviulé noticed that the walls were covered with magnificent murals. He stopped mid-stride and inquired, “What is this?”

Isa stepped forward and noted, “This is the hall that leads to Lord Audric’s Throne Room. About ten years ago, he decided that he wanted to liven up this space with colorful murals instead of typical tapestries. So every year he has asked one of us to paint a section of the wall depicting Bacilly. However, Lord Audric has grown tired of our work and has told us that no more murals shall be painted unless we can present an idea that is both new and invigorating.”

Liviulé took a moment to walk past a few of the murals that stretched to the ceiling, each separated by columns. As he pondered Isa’s words, Liviulé could not stop thinking about Dax and the children. So Liviulé turned

towards the artists and said, "If Lord Audric wants something new and invigorating, why not have the children paint this year's mural?"

Everyone exchanged bewildered glances, and Troilus answered for them, "You cannot be serious!"

"Of course I am."

"Lord Audric will have our heads if he saw a mural on his wall that was far from perfect."

Liviulé then posed, "That is it! Maybe Lord Audric has grown tired of perfection. So what would it hurt if we had the children paint a mural that is not perfect, but not without any less love or passion?"

As Troilus pondered this notion, Isa admitted, "Lord Audric does have an affinity for children. He might actually enjoy the idea of having them paint a mural."

Troilus' uncertainty stretched into a frown as he scratched his head, but a moment later, he conceded with a shrug. "Very well. Who will do the honors and ask for Lord Audric's permission?"

"Permission?" Liviulé sparked. "I do not want his permission. I want him to be surprised!"

"And surprise you will get!"

"Again, I take full responsibility, Troilus. And if anything happens, I can assure you that I have Elder Emeral and Emperor Claudias' support." Although Liviulé was only correct in stating his friend Emeral, he was willing to take that risk to reassure them that everything would be alright.

Perplexed, Troilus could only bob his head with disdain. "As long as you are willing to take the blame for whatever it is that may go wrong, I guess..." Troilus looked at his fellow artists and conceded, "I shall go fetch the paints."

"And I, the children!" Isa beamed a large gleaming smile.



Over the next few hours, the adults assisted the children in painting an abstract mural of the countryside. Some perched upon scaffolding while

painting the bright blue sky with white clouds and a yellow sun, and others stood tiptoe on the ground or sat upon another's shoulders while painting the colorful animals and plant life across a green field. Most notably, Liviulé's favorite brat began to paint Lord Audric's castle over another kid's distorted animal, and over by Isa, the children were painting imaginary creatures and an enormously large giraffe, which was reminiscent of her artwork.

When a majority of the mural was complete, Liviulé took a few steps back to gain a better view of the whole of it, and to his surprise, he nearly bumped into Alessandra standing a pace behind him. "I see you are making quite the impression!" she said.

"Indeed, I am!" Excited to see her, he joked, "So are you impressed?"

With a telling grin, she replied, "Possibly."

"Wonderful. Then I accomplished what I set out to do."

"You are such the charmer, no?"

"I am." Liviulé leaned over and gently nudged her shoulder. "Have you seen what I did in the Banquet Hall?"

"Yes. It is brilliant; however, it is lacking the artistic work of the organizer himself. I really think that you should display a few of your sketches, including my portrait. Your style is most unique, and I am quite certain a lot of people, including myself, will enjoy them."

Pondering that notion, he replied, "Maybe; we will see."

The two of them stood quietly admiring the mural, until Liviulé mustered the courage to speak his thoughts. "It is good to finally see you again."

"Again? You make it sound as if it has been forever."

"It has! Every time I see you it is but a brief hello. And you are always with that scumbag, Nico Donyan. I am beginning to think that you have taken a liking to him."

Alessandra gloated, "Are you jealous, Liviulé?"

"Heavens no! I have already won your heart."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really."

"But you are still jealous, are you not?"

“When it means not sharing enough time with you, then yes!”

“You are so cute!” Alessandra said with a giggle.

Liviulé pulled her towards him and said breathlessly, “I am being serious, Alessandra. I am mad about you, and I hate not being able to see you.”

Alessandra hushed him with her finger pressed to his lips. The touch sent warmth through him, and she met his longing eyes. “My feelings are similar, but there is not much I can do at the moment. I, too, have grown annoyed of spending my free time with someone I cannot stand. But until then, I need you to be patient.”

“Patience is a horrible virtue.”

“I know.”

Alessandra turned her attention to the children painting the wall and the adults who were giving them encouragement. Everyone appeared to be thoroughly enjoying themselves when Alessandra asked, “May I paint something on the wall?”

“Absolutely.”

Liviulé led Alessandra over by Dax and handed her a used brush and palette. Alessandra dipped the brush into a blob of white paint while examining the wall, and Liviulé, standing behind her, asked, “So what are you going to paint?”

“Us.”

Liking her idea, Liviulé quietly observed Alessandra as she lifted up her brush and began painting two white-stick figures holding hands next to Dax’s castle. She embellished her simplistic picture by giving the stick figures bottomless eyes, sprouts of hair, and large smiley faces.

When she was done, she took a step back and found herself in Liviulé’s embrace. “I love it,” he whispered in her ear.

“I knew you would.”

“No, I meant Dax’s castle,” he teased with a laugh.

“Huh? How dare you!”

Not expecting such a comment, Alessandra spun around and stroked Liviulé’s cheek with her paintbrush, sending Dax into laughing hysterics.

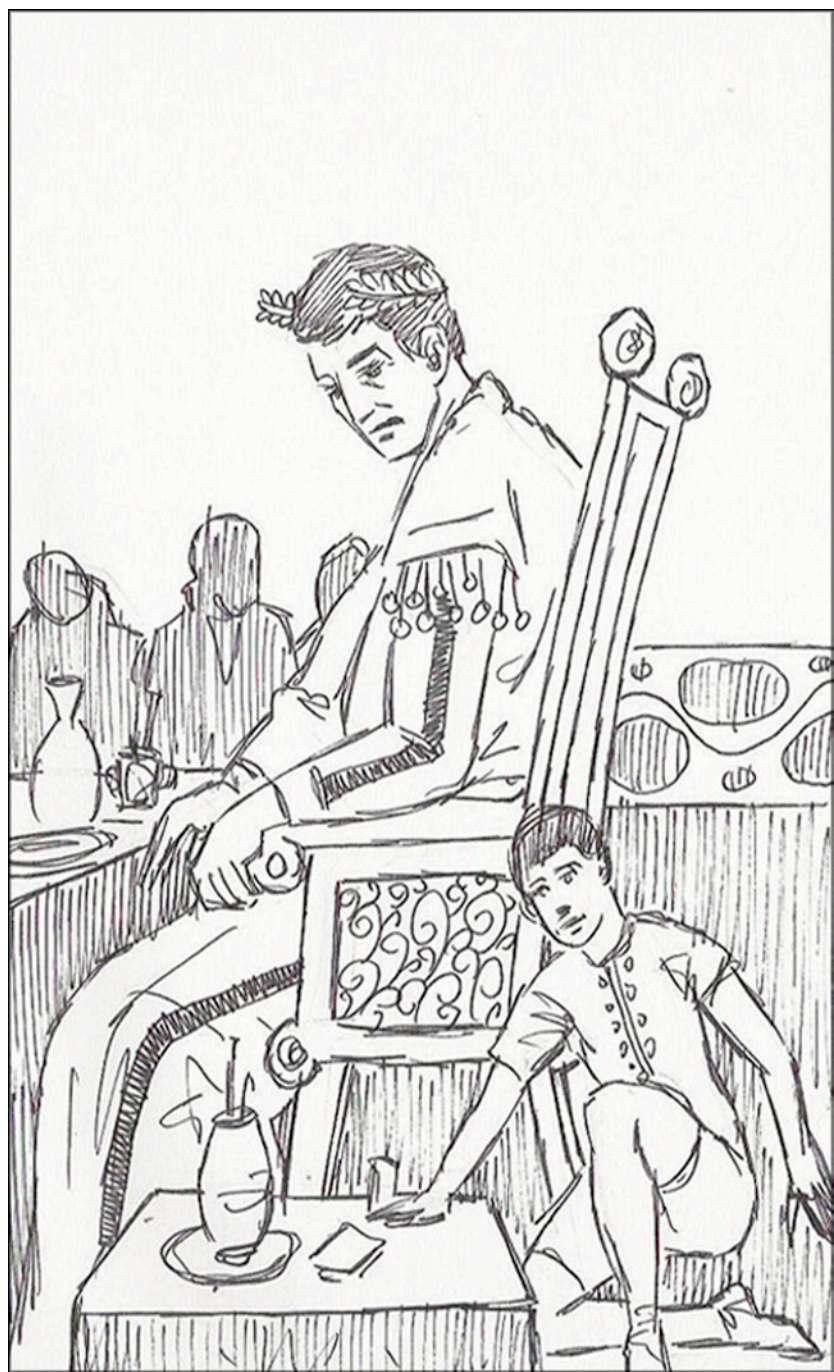
“Ha! Ha! She got you,” Dax exclaimed.

“No, I got you!”

Liviulé smacked Dax’s arm upward, causing his wet paintbrush to hit the boy in the forehead. Instantly, Dax went to wipe the paint away; however, he only made it worse as it smeared from one side to the other. Hearing Liviulé chuckling at his expense, Dax lifted up his brush and shouted, “This means waw!”

“Oh, shite. Be right back, Allessandra!”

Allessandra could not stop laughing as Dax chased Liviulé down the hall, and it was then that she came up with another creative concept for the children that would hopefully impress Liviulé. It was the perfect compliment to his idea.



## XIV

# *The Return to Innocence*

Later that afternoon, Damyen, Kiaran, and Liviulé regrouped with Emeral back at Ballian's home where they enjoyed a bottle of wine while catching up on what they did that day. Damyen and Kiaran discussed the joys of learning traditional Bacillian tunes, and Emeral ranted about his hectic morning with Claudias Nuncio. All the while, Liviulé remained patiently mum about what he had planned for that evening.

After freshening up, Ballian and his friends returned to a packed Banquet Hall. Everyone enjoyed casual conversations as wine and finger foods abounded. Not a glass was empty nor a plate vacant as servers dished out delicacies and topped off drinks. A din crescendoed in the massive hall as people perused the paintings, posing questions to Troilus and the other artists as the musicians huddled near the front of the hall tuning their instruments.

A group of children skittered past Liviulé's legs with their faces painted in colorful designs. Liviulé was impressed but at the same time shocked to discover that someone else planned an activity for the children without telling him. But then Alessandra approached with a woman close to her side, Isa, and flanked by a dozen or so children. Some of them had flowers or butterflies painted on their cheeks, while others had their entire faces painted to resemble an animal or bird.

Alessandra greeted the guests, "Good evening!"

Before Emeral, Damyen, and Kiaran had a chance to say hello, Liviulé

rebuked them. “Aye! Whose idea was it to paint the children’s faces?”

Allessandra and Isa looked at each other and started giggling, and then Allessandra admitted, “It was I. Are you impressed?”

Mesmerized by her creative idea, Liviulé could only reply, “Possibly...” Not only was he struck speechless by her imagination but also by her beauty. She was dressed in a light sleeveless dress with thick silver armbands.

Her voice broke his gawking stare. “Wonderful! Then I accomplished what I set out to do.”

Liking how she spun his comment around from earlier in the day, Liviulé was about to say something when he heard the sound of trumpets. To the right of them, he watched as Lord Audric, Emperor Claudias, and their court entered the Banquet Hall. The conversation stopped abruptly, and everyone turned and fell down to one knee as they watched Lord Audric step forward. Lord Audric’s stout form—with graying hair and a swollen red nose—hardly commanded respect, but his velvety blue coat atop of his plush white blouse set him apart from the masses, along with his white stockings, polished shoes, and fine jewelry.

Lord Audric raised his arms and boldly announced, “My dear people, please welcome Emperor Claudias Nuncio!”

The audience graciously applauded the emperor, and Lord Audric praised, “May you enjoy tonight, and in God’s name, we pray that He will guide and protect you on your way to Theoria. Forever and anon.”

After the crowd repeated his closing words, Lord Audric led the emperor into the center of the hall where they were greeted by Ballian, Elder Emeral, and friends.

“Good evening, everyone!” Claudias exuberantly replied.

Lord Audric acknowledged him and said, “Emperor Claudias, I am pleased to introduce you to Ballian; he is the organizer of tonight’s festivities.”

“Greetings to you, Your Eminence.” Ballian bowed.

As Nico swiftly sidled beside him, Claudias rubbed his hands with excitement and curiously asked, “And what is it that you have planned for tonight?”

“Tonight while you feast, I shall keep you ears splendidly filled with

delightful Bacillian music and poetry. And before you take your seat, we have prepared a most excellent art exhibit for your viewing, compliments of Liviulé of Roznovia.”

Puzzled, Lord Audric shook his head and prodded, “What? Who?”

“Pardon me, my lord.” Ballian continued, “Since you have not been pleased with our last several art shows, I decided to place a dear friend of mine at the helms of tonight’s exhibit whose vision will hopefully interest you in our art once again.”

Lord Audric was not sure whether he liked this idea even though he did not care for the way that things had been handled in the past. Skepticism showed on his wrinkled brow. “Where is he? I wish to meet him.”

Liviulé stepped forward and bowed, saying, “My lord, I am Liviulé.”

Recognizing that it was Emeral’s friend, Claudias joked, “Be careful, Lord Audric. This lad can reveal your most intimate secrets just by painting your portrait!”

“If you are that good, then I am curious to see what you have done with tonight’s exhibit.”

“Very well. Now if everyone is ready, I shall begin.” Lord Audric nodded and Liviulé led them over to the first set of paintings, which depicted landscapes of the forest during the fall season.

When everyone gathered round, Liviulé cupped his hands and announced, “Emperor Claudias, Lord Audric, and esteemed patrons, I give to you *The Return to Innocence*.”

Curious of the title’s meaning, Lord Audric inquired, “Would you mind telling me the reason for your title?”

“Why, of course.” Liviulé began, “The Return to Innocence is a term that was based on a late-night conversation that I had with my friend Damyen.”

Damyen appreciatively smiled as Liviulé continued, “He discussed how our faith is being led astray in this age of lost innocence and what it is that we must do to bring ourselves back into communion with our Holy Father. Soon after we found our answer; Elder Emeral sent us word to join him on this most spiritual pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And so, that is the story that I wish to convey as we venture around the Banquet Hall—how our

journey to Theoria will return us to God's innocence."

"Very insightful," Claudias replied.

"Thank you."

Annoyed by Claudias' praise, Nico urged, "Shall we continue?"

Liviulé then took them around the Banquet Hall as he described what it was in each painting that conveyed the return to God's innocence. At first, Lord Audric was not too impressed; however, as Liviulé told his story, it evoked a renewed sense of interest in their paintings. This was especially true when Liviulé discussed Isa's artwork pertaining to desert life. Lord Audric had always felt there was nothing he could relate to in her artwork, but the reality was that her paintings conveyed the same messages as the other artists, just in another context.

At last, when Liviulé finished his presentation, Lord Audric stepped forward and exclaimed, "Brilliant work! Thank you!"

Hearing his words of affirmation, everyone applauded Liviulé, and when the clapping subsided, Liviulé said, "I thank you all. However, before we take to our seats, I have one last thing to show you; if you all would please be so kind as to follow me."

Liviulé directed everyone out of the Banquet Hall and into the hallway that led towards Lord Audric's throne room. But to Lord Audric's dismay, he noticed Troilus and a group of children waiting patiently in front of a large white drape that covered a portion of the wall. He had specifically told them that he wanted no more murals unless they came up with a new idea, which required his approval. Folding his arms as he stood across from the drape, he narrowed his eyes toward Ballian in a look of death that made Ballian cringe. He was ultimately responsible for Liviulé's actions.

Just as Lord Audric was about to voice his grave displeasure, Liviulé stepped between the audience and the children, recalling, "Earlier in the day I asked myself what exactly is Lord's Audric's displeasure with Bacillian art? As I looked at all the paintings in the Banquet Hall and at these beautiful murals, I realized that you have some truly amazing and talented artists in this city that can paint the world around them with complete perfection, where it appears so real that you feel as if you can simply walk into their paintings. And I realized that was the problem—maybe Lord Audric is

seeking perfection through another means that may be more abstract. And so, I decided that in order to achieve this, why not have the children paint this year's mural."

The crowd looked disconcertingly at one another, but to discredit popular opinion, Liviulé proposed, "And although this painting might be different and out of the ordinary, the word that I choose to describe this youthful masterpiece is... help me out, Dax!"

Dax chirped from beside Liviulé, "Unique!"

"Precisely! For you shall see your beautiful city through the eyes of your children. Cut the drape!"

Troilus untied the rope, and the drape fell to the floor displaying a two-dimensional Bacillian countryside with an array of elementary colors. The flat landscape had a large gray castle, which was surrounded by square-brown homes and various types of colorful animals that grazed the bright green land. An odd-looking yellow giraffe appeared to be on fire, and two stick people waved to the audience.

Everyone in the hallway stood there silently with gaping mouths as Nico Donyan covered his uncontrollable laugh with his hand. It was completely rude, and as Liviulé glanced over at the innocent children, he hopelessly defended the mural. "I ask each of you to look at these children and tell me that their work was not made with any less love or effort?"

By the look of Lord Audric's glaring red nose, Liviulé knew his goose was about to be cooked, but just then Dax shuffled over and grabbed Lord Audric's hand. He tugged the old man forward, and as he pointed to what he did, Dax exclaimed, "Lowd Audwic, I painted youw castle. Do you like it?"

Lord Audric was wrought with emotion. He was perplexed by the hideousness of the painting but was also moved by the children's attempt to please him. And as he nodded in agreement, he witnessed the other children running over and bringing the adults, including Emperor Claudias, to show them what they had painted.

The response was daunting. First, the adults quietly observed the mural out of politeness, but after a while, the children's enthusiasm caught on like a cold. They soon found themselves enthralled by the children's work as

they continued to ask more and more questions about the *Little World* that they had created.

In the end, the children had finally won over Lord Audric. He was seen laughing and smiling as the children clung to his sides while explaining to him each detail. Seeing his earned endorsement, Liviulé heaved a sigh of relief and wrapped an arm around his assistant's neck. "Thank you, Dax! I think you saved the show."

"Who else was would it have been?"

"Ha, ha! I taught you well!" Liviulé chuckled.

Lord Audric came forth and embraced Liviulé for finding the cure to his dissatisfaction, saying, "Thank you, thank you! Liviulé, you have inspired me once again!"

"So are you pleased by the children's mural?"

"Am I pleased? I love it! Thank you."

When Claudias and the others heard Lord Audric's admission, they felt relieved and somewhat apologetic for their first impressions. There was indeed an overall warm reception for this mural, and everything appeared to be more spectacular than anyone could have ever imagined. Lord Audric announced, "May I have everyone's attention!"

As everyone shuffled quietly around him, he said, "I want to thank the children for this most wonderful mural that you have painted for me and all the artists who participated in tonight's exhibition. You have made me proud."

After everyone applauded, Lord Audric concluded, "Now, let us return to the Banquet Hall and celebrate."

With that, the children raced down the hallway towards the dining area as the adults went over and thanked Liviulé.

"Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Your Eminence," Liviulé said to Claudias as his bow was followed up by a smirk from Nico.

Just then Ballian approached with Troilus and Isa and said, "Although, I would have wished you had told me about your plans, you did well!"

"Thank you for restoring Lord Audric's faith in us," Troilus added.

"You are very welcome."

Emeral then passed by, though his demeanor was not that of enthusiasm. “I shall hope that there will be no more surprises from you until we are back in Sivi.”

Allessandra, however, approached Liviulé, her hand trailing his arm. “Liviulé, you followed your heart. And that is all that matters.”

Pleased by her comment, Liviulé nodded appreciatively. “Thank you for believing in me!”



Lord Audric, Emeral, Nico, and Allessandra joined Emperor Claudias at the head of the table as they enjoyed roasted beef, pork, chicken, and smoked fish, soaking up their vegetable stew with freshly baked bread. While they ate and socialized, they listened to the band perform traditional Bacillian songs at the other end of the Banquet Hall.

At one point while strumming his lute, Ballian had the audience singing along with him as they leaned back and forth with their drinks held high. Then Damyen would follow it up with a solo as Kiaran rapped his drum while stamping his foot against the ground.

As for Allessandra, she observed from the corner of her eye how much fun Liviulé was having with Dax as they sat at the children’s table far off in the corner. She wished she could join them because she was getting increasingly annoyed with the heated conversation she was barely enduring with Nico Donyan at the head table.

With his curls bobbing against his forehead as he sipped his glass of wine, Nico expounded, “I tell you, Allessandra, I have been many places. And nothing quite compares to our culture—even Theoria.”

“You cannot compare cultures, because each one is different and celebrates life in its own distinct way.”

“You are missing my point. What I meant is that we are truly the first modern society, technologically superior to the rest.”

“We are also a country that is losing our faith in the process.”

“On the contrary! Our people’s faith is strong; we come from the Old

Theorianic Lines of Tradition.”

Allessandra rebuked, “And what does that mean, precisely—that we are the only culture favored by God?”

“Yes!”

“That is absurd.”

Taking her sarcasm with a bit of humor, Nico watched as Allessandra adjusted the shawl that was given to her by Isa for warmth, and then he inquired, “Are you cold, my lady?”

“No. I am alright.”

“No. It is drafty.”

Nico leaned closer to Allessandra so that Lord Audric could not hear, and then he ridiculed, “I swear, the builders had no idea what they were doing when they built this place.”

“Are you serious? This castle is beautiful.”

“From outside, this castle resembles a heap of piled stones.”

“Well, I still think it is beautiful.”

“If you want beautiful, wait until you see my castle, which is being built along the coastline of Avaranche!”

Allessandra shook her head with disdain as she reached across the table and grabbed a chicken leg. But just when she brought it toward her lips, Nico firmly grabbed her wrist and admonished, “My lady, I think you have eaten too much tonight.”

The pressure around her wrist alarmed Allessandra, and she snapped herself free and placed the chicken leg on her plate, harshly excusing herself.

Nico sought her pardon. “Allessandra, I am concerned for your well-being.”

A glare told him exactly where he stood as Allessandra rebuked, “You are not concerned about anyone but yourself—never touch me again.”

While Allessandra and Nico continued bickering, Claudias was thoroughly enjoying his conversation with Lord Audric as he bit into another piece of tender steak. After washing it down with some wine, Lord Audric asked, “Are you enjoying the food?”

Wiping his lips with a napkin, Claudias replied, “It is delicious!”

“And the wine?”

“Nothing compares!”

Lord Audric leaned contentedly back in his chair and let out a deep chuckle that enflamed his nose. “Well, when you return from your journey, I will have several wagons waiting for you, stocked with barrels of my finest reds!”

“That will be most appreciated, thank you.”

Just then, a little boy inexcusably bumped Claudias’ chair as he went to hide beside it, and as the emperor glanced down at the distraction, he noticed an older girl who appeared to be seeking the boy out. However, the boy could not stop giggling so he made himself known by taunting, “Ha. Ha! I can see you, but you cannot see me!”

Amidst this game of hide-and-seek, the little boy got up and was chased away, but the child’s words sent a shutter up Claudias’ spine, reminding him of last night’s haunting dream. A breathless moment sent Claudias stumbling out of his chair, which caused Lord Audric to rush to his aid, saying, “Claudias!”

Just as the emperor regained full balance, Nico and Emeral came over to assist, but Claudias warily backed away from them and frantically dispelled any further help. “I think it is time for me to call it a night.”

“Are you alright?” Nico urged.

“Yes. Yes! I just need some time to myself.”

“Are you certain?” Emeral asked.

“I must go. Good night.”

Disturbed, the three men watched Claudias rush past the corner of the table and fled out of the Banquet Hall without further explanation.

With that, Madusaudi blessed the battered soldier on the forehead and said, “You have done a great service to your country. The Lord’s kingdom awaits your honor.”

Standing upright, Madusaudi signaled his chief interrogator to approach. The interrogator slipped up behind the soldier and snapped his neck, saving him from a slow and miserable death. Then the two soldiers lifted their comrade up from the steps and carried him out of the chamber.

As Madusaudi paced the thrown contemplating the recent transpiring of events, Gabel defiantly shouted, “It is only a matter of time now before

they find out what you did!”

Quickly Madusaudi descended the steps and rushed over to Gabel who remained shackled and declared, “Because of you, I was able to play Claudias and Hanan at their own game. And regardless of what happened last night, everyone that traveled here for the Summit Councils will soon be heading home, unaware that my whole army is stationed outside Theoria’s walls awaiting my command to overthrow the capital. It is a shame that you will not be around to witness it!”

“Huh?”

Within a blink of an eye, Madusaudi unsheathed his sword and stabbed Gabel through the stomach. And just as his enemy dropped to the floor, Madusaudi bowed and said, “I bid you good-bye and a sad farewell.”

# Ending Credits



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