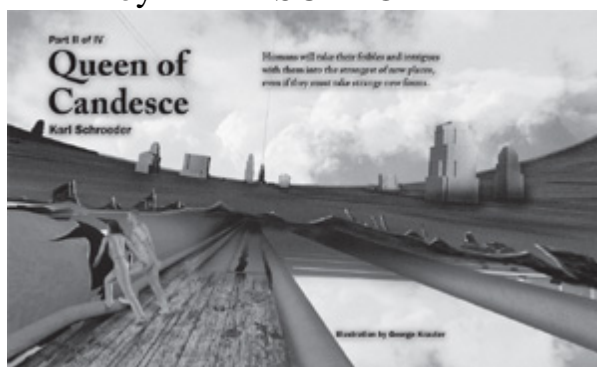


QUEEN OF CANDESCENCE: PART II OF IV by KARL SCHROEDER



Illustrated by George Krauter

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Humans will take their foibles and intrigues with them into the strangest of new places, even if they must take strange new forms.

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The Story So Far

A woman is falling from the sky. She's taking a long time doing it, so Garth Diamandis, aging playboy and exile on Greater Spyre, takes his time in setting up her rescue.

Greater Spyre is circular, a vast open-ended cylinder of metal at least twelve miles in diameter. Spyre is thousands of years old and is slowly falling apart. Its inner surface is paved with dirt and trees and dotted with strange, inward-turned pocket nations. Garth's people have always lived here, either in the paranoid miniature kingdoms of the cylinder, or in the rotating cities that hover in the open air around which Spyre revolves. Few of them have ever taken an interest in the world beyond Spyre; yet this woman has drifted in on the weightless air from that very world.

Garth manages to catch her before she tumbles to death on Spyre's inner surface and takes her home to the damp basement he's called home for the past dozen years or so. It is here that Venera Fanning awakens a day later.

Ah, Venera: sociopath princess, pampered courtier, and spy-mistress; casual murderer, recent savior of the world, and wife of Admiral Chaison Fanning of Slipstream. Garth, ladies-man that he is, is immediately besotted with her. But he can't puzzle out her strange story, which involves pirates, betrayal, and ruin at the very heart of the world.

Some of what she says is familiar. Garth knows that Spyre is one tiny object spinning in the immense artificial world known as Virga. Virga is a hollow sphere—a balloon, essentially—several thousand miles in diameter, orbiting on its own somewhere in deep space. The balloon contains air, water, drifting rocks—all the necessities of life, including man-made fusion suns that light small parts of its

vast volume. Nations coalesce around these suns, and the greatest sun is Candesce, which lies at the very center of Virga. There is no gravity in Virga, save that which you can make using centrifugal force. Spyre is one of the most ancient of the habitats built to take advantage of Virga's strange environment.

It is also a place where, once you have arrived, you may never leave. Garth tries to convince Venera of this fact, but she refuses to believe him. She comes from Slipstream, a nation of mile-wide wood-and-rope town-wheels and free-floating buildings and farms a thousand miles from Spyre. Born to privilege, used to freedom—and ever sure of herself—she sneaks away from Garth to attempt a grand leap off the edge of Spyre. Before she can reach weightless air and escape, however, she is captured by soldiers of the four-acre nation of Liris. Dragged inside the single cube-shaped stone building that makes up the ancient nation, she is forcibly made into a citizen and called on to serve Margit, Liris's "botanist" or ruler.

Serving the botanist is educational. Venera learns that the claustrophobic principalities that dot the cylinder's surface are ancient. Some are so old that they still possess treasures taken from Earth when Virga was first made. Liris, for instance, is the only place in the world where cherry trees grow. Liris and its neighbors sell their rarities in the Great Fair of Spyre, and the botanist intends for Venera to work there until the end of her days.

Margit is going to guarantee Venera's loyalty by injecting her with a drug that will cause madness unless regular doses of an antidote are provided. Venera knows that time is running out, but there are things she must know. She visits the Fair to ask about goings-on in the outside world. Almost immediately she learns that her husband, Admiral Chaison Fanning, has been reported killed in a great battle on the far side of the world.

Overcome with ice-cold grief and outrage, Venera confronts Margit in her bedchamber. The two women fight but Venera gets the upper hand, injecting the botanist with her own diabolical drug and sending her screaming into the night. Then, assembling the stunned citizens of Liris, she declares Margit's most tragic victim to be the nation's new botanist. Then she walks away from Liris, with no plan and no home anymore to escape to. Alone, aimless and hopeless, she returns to the one man in Spyre she can trust: Garth Diamandis.

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Venera didn't really notice the passage of the next few days. She stayed with Diamandis in a clapboard hut near the edge of the world and did little but eat and sleep. He came and went, discreet as always; his forays were usually nocturnal and he slept when she was awake.

Periodically she stepped to the doorway of the flimsy hideout and listened to

the wind. It tore and gabbled, moaned and hissed incessantly, and in it she learned to hear voices. They were of people she'd known—her father, her sisters, sometimes random members of the crew of the *Rook*, whom she had not really gotten to know but had heard all about her during her adventures with that ship.

She strained to hear her husband's voice in the rush, but his was the only voice she could not summon.

One dawn she was fixing breakfast (with little success, having never learned to cook) when Garth poked his head around the doorjamb and said, "You've disturbed a whole nest of hornets, did you know that?" He strolled in, looking pleased with himself. "More like a nest of whales—or capital bugs, even. There's covert patrols crawling all over the place."

She glared at him. "What makes you think they're after me?"

"You're the only piece out of place on this particular board," said Diamandis. He let gravity settle him into one of the hut's two chairs. "A queen in motion, judging by the furor. I'm just a pawn, so they don't see me—and as long as they don't, they can't catch you either."

"Try this." She slammed a plate down in front of him. He eyed it dubiously.

"Mind telling me what you did?"

"Did?" She gnawed her lip, ignoring the stabbing pain in her jaw. "Not very much. I may have assassinated someone."

"*May* have?" He chortled. "You're not sure?" She simply shrugged. Diamandis's expression softened. "Why am I not surprised," he said under his breath.

They ate in silence. If this day were to follow the pattern of the last few, Diamandis would now have fallen onto the cot Venera had just vacated, and would immediately commence to snore in competition with the wind. Instead, he looked at her seriously and said, "It's time for you to make a decision."

"Oh?" She folded her hands in her lap listlessly. "About what?"

He scowled. "Venera, I utterly adore you. Were I twenty years younger you wouldn't be safe around me. As it is, you're eating me out of house and home and having an extra mouth to feed is, well, tiring."

"Ah." Venera brightened just a little. "The conversation my father and I never had."

Hiding his grin, Diamandis ticked points off on his fingers. "One: you can give yourself up to the men in armor who are looking for you. Two: you can make yourself useful by going with me on my nightly sorties. Three: you can leave Spyre.

Or, four—”

“I thought you said I could never leave,” she said, frowning.

“I lied.” Seeing her expression, he rubbed at his chin and looked away. “Well, I had a beautiful young woman in my bed, even if I wasn’t in there with her, so why would I let her go so easily? Yes, there is a way out of Spyre—potentially. But it would be dangerous.”

“I don’t care. Show me.” She stood up.

“Sit down, sit down. It’s daytime, and I’m tired. I need to sleep first. It’s a long trek to the bomb bays. And anyway ... don’t you want to hear about the fourth option?”

“There is no other option.”

He sighed in obvious disappointment. “All right. Let me sleep, then. We’ll visit the site tonight and you can decide whether it’s truly what you want to do.”

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They picked their way through a field of weeds. Lesser Spyre twirled far above. The dark houses of the great families surrounded them, curving upward in two directions to form a blotted sky. Venera had examined those estates as they walked; she’d hardly had the leisure time to do so on her disastrous run to the edge of the world. Now, as the rust-eaten iron gates and crumbling battlements eased by, she had time to realize just how strange a place Spyre was.

On the steep roof of a building half-hidden by century oaks, she had seen a golden boy singing. At first she had taken him for some automaton, but then he slipped and caught himself. The boy was centered in bright spotlights and he held a golden olive branch over his head. Whether there was an audience for his performance in the gardens or balconies below; whether he did this every night or if it were some rare ceremony she had chanced to see—these things she would never know. She had touched Garth’s shoulder and pointed. He merely shrugged.

Other estates were resolutely dark, their buildings choked in vines and their grounds overgrown with brambles. She had walked up to the gate of one such to peer between the leaves. Garth had pulled her back. “They’ll shoot you,” he’d said.

In some places the very architecture had turned inward, becoming incomprehensible, even impossible for humans to inhabit. Strange cancerous additions were flocked onto the sides of stately manors, mazes drawn in stone over entire grounds. Strange piping echoed from one dark entranceway, the rushing sound of wings from another. At one point Venera and Garth crossed a line of strange footprints, all the toes pointed inward and the indentations heavy on the outside as if the dozens of people who had made them were all terribly bow-legged.

It did no good to look away from these sights. Venera occasionally glanced at

the sky, but the sky was paved with yet more estates. After each glance she would hunch unconsciously away, and each time, a pulse of anger would shoot through her and she would straighten her shoulders and scowl.

Venera couldn't hide her nervousness. "Is it much further?"

"You whine like a child. This way. Mind the nails."

"Garth, you remind me of someone but I can't figure out who."

"Ah! A treasured lover, no doubt. The one that got away, perhaps?—Wait, don't tell me, I prefer to wallow in my fantasies."

"...A particularly annoying footman my mother had?"

"Madam, you wound me. Besides, I don't believe you."

"If there really is a way off of Spyre, why haven't you ever taken it?"

He stopped and looked back at her. Little more than a silhouette in the dim light, Diamandis still conveyed disappointment in the tilt of his shoulders and head. "Are you deliberately provoking me?"

Venera caught up to him. "No," she said, putting her fists on her hips. "If this exit is so dangerous that you chose not to use it, I want to know."

"Oh. Yes, it's dangerous—but not that dangerous. I could have used it. But we've been over this. Where would I go? One of the other principalities? What use would an old gigolo be there?"

"—Let the ladies judge that."

"Ha! Good point. But no. Besides, if I circled around and came back to Lesser Spyre, I'd eventually be caught. Have you *been* up there? It's even more paranoid and tightly controlled than this place. The city is ... impossible. No, it would never work."

As was typical of her, Venera had been ignoring what Garth was saying and focusing instead on how he said it. "I've got it!" she said. "I know why you stayed."

He turned toward her, a black cut-out against distant lights—and for once Venera didn't simply blurt out what was on her mind. She could be perfectly tactful when her life depended on it but in other circumstances had never known why one should bother. Normally she would have just said it: *You're still in love with someone*. But she hesitated.

"In there," said Diamandis, pointing to a long, low building whose roof was being overtaken by lopsided trees. He waited, but when she didn't say anything he turned slowly and walked in the direction of the building.

“A wise woman wouldn’t be entering such a place unescorted,” said Venera lightly as she took his arm. Diamandis laughed.

“I am your escort.”

“You, Mr. Diamandis, are why escorts were invented.”

Pleased, he developed a bit of a bounce to his step. Venera, though, wanted to slow down—not because she was afraid of him or what waited inside the dark. At this moment, she could not have said what made her hesitate.

The concrete lot was patched with grass and young trees and they scuttled across it quickly, both wary of any watchers on high. They soon reached a peeled-out loading door in the side of the metal building. There was no breeze outside, but wind was whistling around the edges of the door.

“It puzzles me why there isn’t a small army of squatters living in places like this,” said Venera as the blackness swallowed Diamandis. She reluctantly stepped after him into it. “The pressures of life in these pocket states must be intolerable. Why don’t more people simply leave?”

“Oh, they do.” Diamandis took her hand and led her along a flat floor. “Just a bit further, I have to find the door ... through here.” Wind buffeted her from behind now. “Reach forward ... here’s the railing. Now, follow that to the left.”

They were on some sort of catwalk, its metal grating ringing faintly under her feet.

“Many people leave,” said Diamandis. “Most don’t know how to survive outside of the chambers where they were born and bred. They return, cowed; or they die. Many are shot by the sentries, by border guards, or by the preservationists. I’ve buried a number of friends since I came to live here.”

Her eyes were starting to adjust to the dark. Venera could tell that they were in a very large room of some sort, its ceiling ribbed with girders. Holes let in faint light in places, just enough to sketch the dimensions of the place. The floor...

There was no floor, only subdivided metal boxes with winches hanging over them. Some of those boxes were capped by fierce vortices of wind that collectively must have scoured every grain of grit out of the place. Looking down at the nearest box, Venera saw that it was really a square metal pit with clamshell doors at its bottom. Those doors vibrated faintly.

“Behold the bomb bays,” said Diamandis, sweeping his arm in a dramatic arc. “Designed to rain unholy fire on any fleet stupid enough to line itself up with Spyre’s rotation. This one chamber held enough firepower to carpet a square mile of air with bombs. And there were once two dozen such bays.”

The small hurricane chattered like a crowd of madmen; the bomb bay doors

rattled and buzzed in sympathy. “Was it ever used?” asked Venera.

“Supposedly,” said Diamandis. “The story goes that we wiped out an entire armada in seconds. Though that could all be propaganda—if true, I can see why people outside Spyre would despise us. After all, there would have been hundreds of bombs that passed through the armada and simply kept going. Who knows what unsuspecting nations we strafed?”

Venera touched the scar on her chin.

“Anyway, it was generations ago,” said Diamandis. “No one seems to care that much about us since the other great wheels disintegrated. We’re the last, and ignored the way you pass by the aged. Come this way.”

They went up a short flight of metal steps to a catwalk that extended out over the bays. Diamandis led Venera halfway down the long room; his footfalls were steady, hers slowing as they approached a solitary finned shape hanging from chains above one of the bays.

“That’s a bomb!” It was a good eight feet long, almost three in diameter, a great metal torpedo with a button nose. Diamandis leaned out over the railing and slapped it.

“A bomb, indeed,” he said over the whistling gale. “At least, it’s a bomb casing. See? The hatch there is unscrewed. I scooped out the explosives years ago; there’s room for one person if you wriggle your way in. All I have to do is throw a lever and it will drop and bang through those doors. Nothing’s going to stop you once you’re outside, you can go a few hundred miles and then light out on your own.”

She too leaned out to touch the cylinder’s flank.

“So you’ll go home, will you?” he asked, with seeming innocence.

Venera snatched her fingers back. She crossed her arms and looked away.

“The people who ran this place,” she said after a while. “It was one of the great nations, wasn’t it? One of the ones that specialize in building weapons. Like Sacrus?”

He laughed. “Not Sacrus. Their export is *leverage*. Means of political control, ranging from blackmail to torture and extortion. They have advisors in the throne rooms of half the principalities.”

“They sell torturers?”

“That’s one of the skills they export, yes. Almost nobody in Spyre deals with them anymore—they’re too dangerous. Keep pulling coups, trying to dominate the Council. The preservationists are still hurting from their own run-in with them. You

met one of theirs in Liris?” She nodded.

Diamandis sighed. “Yet one more reason for you to leave, then. Once you’re marked in their ledgers, you’re never safe again. Come on, I’ll give you a boost up.”

“Wait.” She stared at the black opening in the metal thing. The thought came to her: *this won’t work*. She could not return to Slipstream and pretend that things that had been done had not been done. She could not in silence retire as the shunned wife of a disgraced admiral. Not when the man responsible for Chaison’s death—the Pilot of Slipstream—still sat like a spider at the center of Slipstream affairs.

Thinking this made her fury catch like dry tinder. A spasm of pain shot up her jaw, and she shook her head. Venera turned and walked back along the catwalk.

Diamandis hurried after her. “What are you doing?”

Venera struggled to catch her breath. She would need resources. If she was to avenge Chaison, she would need power. “Yesterday you said something about a fourth choice, Garth.” She rattled down the steps and headed for the door.

“Tell me about that choice.”

* * * *

You must be ready for this, Garth had said. *It is like no place you have ever been or ever imagined*. Near dawn, as they approached the region of Spyre known as the *airfall*, she began to understand what he meant.

The great estates dwindled as they threaded their way through Diamandis’s secret ways; even the preservationists avoided this sector of the great wheel. Ruins dotted the landscape and strange trees lay nearly prone like supplicants.

The ground shook, a constant wavering shudder. The motion reminded her with every step that she stood on thin metal sheeting above an abyss of air. She began to see patches of speed ivy atop broken cornices and walls. And the loose soil thinned until they walked atop the metal of the wheel itself.

Wind pushed at her from behind; Venera had to consciously set her feet down, grinding them into the grit to prevent herself starting to run. Giving into that run would be fatal, Diamandis assured her. The reason why emerged slowly, horribly, from around the collapsed walls and tangled groves of once-great estates.

She clapped Diamandis on the shoulder and pointed. “How long ago?”

He nodded and leaned in so that she could hear him over the roar. “A question important to our enterprise. It happened generations ago, in a time of great unrest in the principalities. Back when the great nations of Spyre still traveled—before they began to hide in their fortresses.”

A hundred yards or so of slick decking extended past the last broken stones,

then the first tears and gaps appeared. Long sheets of humming metal extended out, following the lines of the girders that underlay Spyre's upper skin. Soon even they disappeared, leaving only bright shreds and the girders themselves. A latticework of metal beams was all the ground there was for the next mile.

Below the plain of girders dark clouds shot past with dizzying speed. Propelled by Spyre's centrifugal force, a ceaseless hurricane roared in and down and through the empty windows of the broken ruins and leaped off the edges of the world.

"Behold the airfall!" Diamandis gestured dramatically; but there was no need. Venera stood awestruck at the sheer savagery of the permanent storm that warred about her. If she lifted one foot or straightened her back she might be caught and yanked out and then down, and shot out of Spyre through this screaming, gouting wound.

"This—this is insane!" She hunkered down, clutching a boulder. Her leathers flapped up around her ears. "Am I expected to run into that?"

"No, not run! Crawl. Because up there—do you see it? There is your fourth alternative!" She squinted where he pointed and at first didn't see anything. Then she blinked and looked again.

The skin of Spyre had been stripped away for at least a mile in every direction. The hole must have unbalanced the whole wheel—towers, farms, factories, and even perhaps whole towns being sucked out and flung into the depths of Virga in a catastrophe that threatened to destroy the entire wheel. For some reason the peeling and collapse had propagated only so far and then stopped—but the standing cyclone of exiting air must have shaken Spyre so much as to threaten its immediate destruction.

This, if anything, explained the preservationists and the fierce war they had fought to lay their tracks around Spyre. The unstable wobble of the wheel could only be fixed by moving massive weights around the rim to balance it. There was no patching this hole.

Everything above had been sucked out as the skin peeled away—except in one place. One solitary tower still stood a quarter mile into the plain of girders. It had the great fortune to have been built overtop a main intersection point for Spyre's skeletal system. Also, the place might once have been a factory with its own reinforced foundation, for Venera could see huge pipes and tanks splayed like the roots of a tree below the girders. The tower itself was dark as the clouds that framed it, and it slowly swayed under the force of the winds. The girders bounced it like an acrobat in a net.

Just looking at it made her nauseated. "What *is* that?"

"Buridan Tower," said Diamandis. "It's our destination."

“Why? And how are we going to get there through ... through *that*?”

“Using our courage, Lady Fanning—and my knowledge. I know a way, if you’ll trust me. As to why—that is a secret that *you* will reveal, to both of us.”

She shook her head, but Venera had no intention of backing out now. To do anything else but go forward in this mad adventure would be to invite relaxation—and thought. Grief drove her on, an active refusal to think. She waited, eyes tearing from the wind, and eventually Diamandis nodded sharply and gestured *come on*.

They crept across the last acre of intact skin, grabbing onto every rock and jammed tree branch that might offer purchase. As they approached a great split in the metal sheeting, Venera saw where Diamandis was going, and she began to think that this passage might be possible after all.

Here, a huge pipe ran under Spyre’s topsoil and skin. It was anchored to the girders by rusting metal straps and had broken in places, but extended out below the skinless plain. It seemed to head straight for swaying Buridan Tower.

Diamandis had found a hole in the pipe that was sheltered by a tortured dune. He let himself down into the black mouth and she followed; instantly the wind subsided to a tolerable scream.

“I’m not even going to ask how you found this,” she said after dusting herself off. He grinned.

The pipe was about eight feet across. Sighting down it she beheld, in perspective, a frozen vortex of discolored metal and sedimented rime. Behind her it was ominously dark; ahead, hundreds of gaps and holes let in the welling light of Candescence. In this new illumination, Venera eyed their route critically. “There’s whole sections missing,” she pointed out. “How do we cross those?”

“Trust me.” He set off at a confident pace.

What was there to do but follow?

The pipe writhed in sympathy with the twisting of the beams. The motion was uncomfortable, but not terrifying to one who had ridden warships through battle, walked in gravities great and small throughout Virga, and even penetrated the mysteries of Candescence—or so Venera told herself, up until the tenth time her hand darted out of its own accord to grip white knuckled some peel of rust or broken valve-rim. Rhythmic blasts of pain shot up her clenched jaw. An old anger, born of helplessness, began to take hold of her.

The first gaps in the pipe were small, and thankfully overhead. The ceiling opened out in these places, allowing Venera to see where she was—which made her duck her head down and continue on with a shudder.

But then they came to a place where most of the pipe was simply gone, for a distance of nearly sixty feet. Runnels of it ran like reminders above and to the sides, but there was no bottom anymore. “Now what?”

Diamandis reached up and tugged a cable she hadn’t noticed before. It was bright and strong, anchored here and somewhere inside the black cave where the pipe picked up again. Near its anchor point the line was gathered up and pinched by a huge spring, allowing it to stretch and slacken with the twisting of the girders.

“You did this?” He nodded; she was impressed and said so. Diamandis sighed. “Since I’ve had no audience to brag to, I’ve done many feats of daring,” he said. “I did none in all the years when I was trying to impress the ladies—and none of them will ever know I was this brave.”

“So how do we ... Oh.” Despite her pounding headache, she had to laugh. This was a zip line; Diamandis proposed to clip rollers to it and glide across. Well, at least the great girder provided a wall to one side and partial shelter above. The wind was not quite so punishing here.

“You have to be fast!” Diamandis was fitting a pulley-hold onto the cable. “You can’t breathe in that wind. If you get stranded in the middle you’ll pass out.”

“Wonderful.” But he’d strapped her into the harness securely, and falling was not something that frightened people who lived in a weightless ocean of air. When the time came she simply closed her eyes and kicked off into the white flood.

They had to repeat this process six times. Now that he had someone to give up his secret to, Diamandis was eager to tell her how he had used a powerful foot-bow to shoot a line across each gap, trusting to its grip in the deep rust on the far side to allow him to scale across once. After stronger lines were affixed it was easy to get back and forth.

So, walking and gliding, they approached the black tower.

In some places its walls fell smoothly into the abyss. In others, traces of ground still clung tenaciously where sidewalks and outbuildings had once been. They clambered out of the pipe onto one such spot; here, thirty feet of gravel and plating stretched like a splayed hand up to the tower’s flank. Diamandis had strung more cables along that wall, leading toward a great dark shadow that opened halfway around the wall’s curve. “The entrance!” Battered by wind, he loped over to the nearest line.

The zip lines in the pipe had given Venera the false impression that she was up for anything. Now she found herself hanging onto a cable with both hands—small comfort to also be clipped to it—while blindly groping for purchase on the side of a sheer wall, above an infinite drop now illuminated by full daylight.

Only a man with nothing to lose could have built such a pathway. She

understood, for she felt she was in the same position. Gritting her teeth and breathing in shallow sips in vortices of momentary calm caused by the jutting brickwork, she followed Diamandis around Buridan Tower's long curve.

At last she stood, shaking, on a narrow ledge of stone. The door before her was strapped iron, fifteen feet tall, and framed with trembling speed ivy. Rusting machine guns poked their snouts out of slits in the stone walls surrounding it. A coat of arms in the ancient style capped the archway. Venera stared at it, a brief drift of puzzlement surfacing above her apprehension. She had seen that design somewhere before.

"I can't go back that way. There has to be another way!"

Diamandis sat down with his back to the door and gestured for her to do the same. The turbulence was lessened just enough there that she could breathe. She leaned on his shoulder. "Garth, what have you done to us?"

He took some time to get his own breath back. Then he jabbed a thumb at the door. "People have been pointing their telescopes at this place for generations, all dreaming of getting inside it. Secret expeditions have been mounted to reach it, but none of them ever came via the route we just took. It's been assumed that this way was impossible. No..." He gestured at the sky. "They always climb down the elevator cable that connects the tower to Lesser Spyre. And every time they're spotted and shot by Spyre sentries."

"Why?"

"Because the Nation of Buridan is not officially defunct. There are supposed to be heirs, somewhere. And the product of Buridan still exists, on farms scattered around Spyre. No one is legally allowed to sell it until the fate of the nation is determined once and for all. But the titles, the deeds, the proofs of ownership and provenance..." He thumped the iron with his fist. "They're all in here."

Her fear was beginning to give way to curiosity. She looked up at the door. "Do we knock?"

"The legend says that the last members of the nation live on, trapped inside. That's nonsense, of course; but it's a useful fiction."

It began to dawn on her what he had in mind. "You intend to play on the legends."

"Better than that. I intend to prove that they are true."

She stood up and pushed on the door. It didn't budge. Venera looked around for a lock, and after a moment she found one, a curious square block of metal embedded in the stone of the archway. "You've been here before. Why didn't you go in?"

“I couldn’t. I didn’t have the key and the windows are too small.”

She glared at him. “Then why...?”

He stood up, smiling mysteriously. “Because now I do have the key. You brought it to me.”

“I...?”

Diamandis dug inside his jacket. He slid something onto his finger and held it up to gleam in the light of Candesce.

One of the pieces of jewelry Venera had taken from the hoard of Anetene had been a signet ring. She had found it in the very same box that had contained the Key to Candesce. It was one of the pieces that Diamandis had stolen from her when she first arrived here.

“That’s mine!”

He blinked at her tone, then shrugged. “As you say, Lady. I thought long and hard about playing this game myself, but I’m too old now. And anyway, you’re right. The ring is yours.” He pulled it off his finger and handed it to her.

The signet showed a fabulous ancient creature known as a “horse.” It was a gravity-bound creature and so none now lived in Virga—or were they the product that Buridan had traded in? Venera took the heavy ring and held it up, frowning. Then she strode to the lock-box and placed the ring into a like-shaped indentation there.

With a mournful grating sound, the great gate of Buridan swung open.

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8

Gunner Twelve-Fifteen wrapped his fingers around the dusty emergency switch and pulled as hard as he could. With a loud snap, the red stirrup-shaped handle came off in his hand.

The gunner cursed and half-stood to try and retrieve the end of the emergency cord that was now poking out of a hole in his canopy. He banged his head on the glass and the whole gun emplacement wobbled causing the cord to flip out into the bright air. Meanwhile, the impossible continued to happen outside; the thing was now a quarter mile above him and almost out of range.

Gunner Twelve-Fifteen had sat here for sixteen years now. In that time he had turned the oval gun emplacement from a cold and drafty purgatory into a kind of nest. He’d stopped up the gaps in the metal armor with cloth and, later, pitch. He’d snuck down blankets and pillows and eventually even took out the original metal seat, dropping it with supreme satisfaction onto Greater Spyre two miles below.

He'd replaced the seat with a kind of reclining divan, built sun-shades to block the harsher rays of Candescence, and removed layers of side armor to make way for a bookshelf and drinks cabinet. The only thing he hadn't touched was the butt of the machine gun itself.

Nobody would know. The emplacement, a metal pod suspended above the clouds by cables strung across Greater Spyre, was his alone. Once upon a time there had been three shifts of sentries here, a dozen eyes at a time watching the elevator cable that ran between the town wheels of Lesser Spyre and the abandoned and forlorn Buridan Tower. With cutbacks and rescheduling, the number had eventually gone down to one: one twelve-hour shift for each of the six pods that surrounded the cable. Gunner Twelve-Fifteen had no doubt that the other gunners had similarly renovated their stations; the fact that none were now responding to the emergency meant that they were not paying any attention to the object they were here to watch.

Nor had he been; if not for a random flash of sunlight against the beveled glass of a wrought-iron elevator car he might never have known that Buridan had come back to life—not until he and the other active sentries were hauled up for court-martial.

He pushed back the bulletproof canopy and made another grab at the frayed emergency cord. It dangled three inches beyond his outstretched fingers. Cursing, he lunged at it and nearly fell to his death. Heart hammering, he sat down again.

Now what? He could fire a few rounds at the other pods to get their attention—but then he might kill somebody. Anyway, he wasn't supposed to fire on *rising* elevators, only objects coming down the cable.

The gunner watched in frozen indecision until the elevator car pierced another layer of cloud and disappeared. He was doomed if he didn't do something right now—and there was only one thing to do.

He reached for the other red handle and pulled it.

In the original design of the gun emplacements, the ejection rocket had been built into the base of the gunner's seat. If he was injured or the pod was about to explode, he could pull the handle and the rocket would send him, chair and all, straight up the long cable to the infirmary at Lesser Spyre. Of course, the original chair no longer existed.

The other gunners were startled out of their dozing and reading by the sudden vision of a pillowed divan rising into the sky on a pillar of flame. Blankets, books and bottles of gin twirled in its wake as it vanished into the gray.

The daywatch liaison officer shrieked in surprise when Gunner Twelve-Fifteen burst in on her. The canvas she had been carefully daubing paint onto now had a broad blue slash across it.

She glared at the apparition in the doorway. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” said the trembling soldier. “But Buridan has reactivated.”

For a moment she dithered—the painting was ruined unless she got that paint off it right now—then was struck by the image of the man standing before her. Yes, it really *was* one of the sentries. His face was pale and his hair looked like he’d stuck it in a fan. She would have sworn that the seat of his leather flight suit was smoking. He was trembling.

“What’s this about, man?” she demanded. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“B-Buridan,” he stammered. “The elevator. It’s rising. It may already be here!”

She blinked, then opened the door fully and glanced at the rank of bellpulls ranked in the hallway. The bells were ancient and black with tarnish and clearly none had moved recently. “There was no alarm,” she said accusingly.

“The emergency cord broke,” said the gunner. “I had to eject, ma’am,” he continued. “There was, uh, cloud, I don’t think the other sentries saw the elevator.”

“Do you mean to say that it was cloudy? That you’re not sure you *saw* an elevator?”

He turned even more pale; but his jaw was set. As the liaison officer wound up to really let loose on him, however, one of the bellpulls moved. She stared at it, forgetting entirely what she had been about to say.

“...Did you just see ... ?” The cord moved again and the bell jiggled slightly. Then the cord whipped taut suddenly and the bell shattered in a puff of verdigris and dust. In doing so it managed to make only the faintest *tinking* sound.

She goggled at it. “That—that’s the Buridan elevator!”

“That’s what I was trying to—” But the liaison officer had burst past him and was running for the stairs that led up to the elevator stations.

Elevators couldn’t be fixed to the moving outer rim of a town-wheel; so the gathered strands of cable that rose up from the various estates met in knotlike collections of buildings in freefall. Ropes led from these to the axes of the towns themselves. The officer had to run up a yin-yang staircase to get to the top of the town (the same stairway that the gunner had just run down); as her weight dropped the steps steepened and the rise became more and more vertical. Puffing and nearly weightless, she achieved the top in under a minute. She glanced out one of the blockhouse’s gun slits in time to see an ornate cage pull into the elevator station a hundred yards away.

The gunner was gasping his way back up the steps. “Wait,” he called feebly. The liaison officer didn’t wait for him, but stepped to the round open doorway and launched herself across the empty air.

Two people were waiting by the opened door to the Buridan elevator. The liaison officer felt an uncanny prickling in her scalp as she saw them, for they looked every bit as exotic as she’d imagined someone from Buridan would be. Her first inclination (drummed into her by her predecessor) that any visitation from the lost nation must be a hoax, faded as one of the pair spoke. Her accent wasn’t like that of anyone from Upper Spyre.

“They sent only you?” The woman’s voice dripped scorn. She was of medium height, with well-defined brows that emphasized her piercing eyes. A shock of pale hair stood up from her head.

The liaison officer made a mid-air bow and caught a nearby girder to halt herself. She struggled to slow her breathing and appear calm as she said, “I am the designated liaison officer for Buridan-Spyre relations. To whom do I have the honor of addressing myself?”

The woman’s nostrils flared. “I am Amandera Thrace-Guiles, heir of Buridan. And you? You’re nobody in particular, are you ... but I suppose you’ll have to do,” she said. “Kindly direct us to our apartments.”

“Your...” The Buridan apartments existed, the officer knew that much. No one was allowed to enter, alter or destroy Buridan property until the nation’s status was determined. “This way, please.”

She thought quickly. It was years ago, but one day she had met one of the oldest of the watch officers in an open gallery on Wheel Seven. They had been passing a broad stretch of crumbling wall and came to a bricked-up archway. “Know what that is?” he’d asked playfully. When she shook her head he smiled and said, “Almost nobody does, nowadays. It’s the entrance to the Buridan estate. It’s all still there—towers, granaries, bedrooms and armories—but the other nations have been building and renovating around and over it for so long that there’s no way in anymore. It’s like a scar, or a callous maybe, in the middle of the city.

“Anyway, this was the main entrance. Used to have a sweeping flight of steps up to it, until they took that out and made the courtyard yonder. This entrance is the official one, the one that only opens to the state key. If you ever get any visitors from Buridan, they can prove that they are who they say they are if they can open the door behind that wall.”

“Come with me,” said the officer now. As she escorted her visitors along the rope that stretched toward Wheel Seven, she wondered where she was going to get a gang of navvies with sledgehammers on such short notice.

The demolition of the brick wall made just enough of a delay to allow Lesser

Spyre's first ministers to show up. Venera cursed under her breath as she watched them padding up the gallery walk: five men and three women in bright silks, with serious expressions. Secretaries and hangers-on fluttered around them like moths. In the courtyard below, a crowd of curious citizens was growing.

"This had better work," she muttered to Diamandis.

He adjusted his mask. It was impossible to read his expression behind it. "They're as scared as we are," he said. "Who knows if there's anything left on the other side of that?" He nodded to the rapidly falling stones in the archway.

"Lady Thrace-Guiles!" One of the ministers swept forward, lifting his silk robes delicately over the mortar dust. He was bejeweled and balding, with a fan of red skin across his nose and liver spots on his lumpish hands. "You look just like your great-great-great grandmother, Lady Bertitia," he said generously. "Her portrait hangs in my outer office."

Venera looked down her nose at him. "And you are...?"

"Aldous Aday, acting chairman of the Lesser Spyre Committee for Public Works and Infrastructure," he said. "Elected by the Upper House of the Great Families—a body that retains a seat for you, kept draped in velvet in absentia all these years. I must say, this is an exciting and if I do say so, surprising, day in the history of Upper—"

"I want to make sure our estate is still in one piece," she said. She turned to Diamandis. "Mister Flance, the hole is big enough for you to squeeze through. Pray go ahead and tell me that our door is undamaged." He bowed and edged his way past the workmen.

He and Venera wore clothing they had found preserved in wax paper in the lockers of Buridan Tower. The styles were ancient, but for all that they were more practical than the contraptions favored by Spyre's present generation. Venera had on supple leather breeches and a black jacket over a bodice tooled and inscribed in silver. A simple belt held two pistols. On her brow rested a silver circlet they had found in an upstairs bedchamber. Diamandis was similarly dressed, but his leathers were all a deep forest green.

"It's a great honor to see your nation again after so many years," continued Aday. If he was suspicious of her identity, he wasn't letting on. She exchanged pleasantries with him through clenched teeth, striving to stay in profile so that he and the others could not see her jaw. Venera had done her best to hide the scar and had bleached her hair with some unpleasant chemicals they'd found in the tower; but someone who had heard about Venera Fanning might recognize her. Did Aday and his people keep up with news from the outside world? Diamandis didn't think they did, but she had no idea at this point how far her fame had spread.

To her advantage was the fact that the paranoid societies of Spyre rarely

communicated. “Sacrus won’t want anyone to know they had you,” Diamandis had pointed out one evening as they sat huddled in the tower, an ornate chair burning merrily in the fireplace. “If they choose to unmask you, it’s at the expense of admitting they have connections with the outside world—and more importantly, they won’t want to hint that they have the Key to Candesce. I don’t think we’ll hear a peep out of them, at least not overtly.”

The workmen finished knocking down the last bricks and stepped aside just as Diamandis stuck his head around the corner of the archway. “The door is there, ma’am. And the lock.”

“Ah, good.” Venera stalked past the workers, trying to keep from nervously twisting the ring on her finger. This was the proverbial moment of truth. If the key didn’t work...

The brick wall had been built across an entryway that extended fifteen feet and ended in a large iron-bound door similar to the one at Buridan Tower. The ministers crowded in behind Venera, watching like hawks as she dusted off the lockbox with her glove. “Gentlemen,” she said acidly, “there is only so much air in here—though I suppose you have some natural skepticism about my authenticity. Put that out of your minds.” She held up the signet ring. “I am my own proof—but if you need crass symbols, perhaps this one will do.” She jammed the key against the inset impression in the lockbox.

Nothing happened.

“Pardon.” Diamandis was looking alarmed and Venera quashed the urge to make some sort of joke. She must not lose her air of confidence, not even for a second. Bending to examine the lock, she saw that it had been overgrown with grit over the years. “Brush, please,” she said in a bored tone, holding out one hand. After a long minute someone placed a hairbrush in her palm. She scrubbed the lock industriously for a while, then blew on it and tried the ring again.

This time there was a deep click and then a set of ratcheting thumps from behind the wall. The door ground open slowly.

“You are the council for ... infrastructure, was it not?” she asked, fixing the ministers with a cold eye. Aday nodded. “Hmm,” she said. “Well.” She turned, preparing to sweep like the spoiled princess she had once been, through the opened door into blackness.

A loud *bang* and fall of dust from the ceiling made her stumble. There was sudden pandemonium in the gallery. The ministers were milling in confusion while screams and shouts followed the echoes of the explosion into the air. Past Aday’s shoulder Venera saw a curling pillar of smoke or dust that hadn’t been there a second ago.

With her foot hovering over the threshold of the estate, Venera found herself

momentarily forgotten. Sirens were sounding throughout the wheel and she heard the clatter of soldiers' boots on the flagstones. In the courtyard, someone was crying; somebody else was screaming for help.

Expressionless, she walked back to the gallery and peered over Aday's shoulder. "Somebody bombed the crowd," she said.

"It's terrible, terrible," moaned Aday, wringing his hands.

"This can't have been planned," she said reasonably. "So who would be walking around on a morning like this just carrying a bomb?"

"It's the rebels," said Aday furiously. "Bombers, assassins ... This is terrible!"

Someone burst into the courtyard below and ran toward the most injured people. With a start Venera realized it was Garth Diamandis. He shouted commands to some stunned but otherwise intact victims; slowly they moved to obey, fanning out to examine the fallen.

It hadn't occurred to Venera until this moment that she could also be helping. She felt a momentary stab of surprise, then ... was it anger? She must be angry at Diamandis, that was it. But she remembered the mayhem of battle aboard the *Rook* when the pirates attacked, and the aftermath. Such fear and anguish, and in those moments the smallest gesture meant so much to men who were in pain. The airmen had given of themselves without a moment's thought—given aid, bandages, and blood.

She turned to look for the stairs, but it was too late: the medics had arrived. Frowning, Venera watched their white uniforms fan out through the blackened rubble. Then she lit her lantern and stalked back to the archway.

"When my manservant is done, send him to me," she said quietly. She strode alone into the long-sealed estate of Buridan.

* * * *

In an abandoned bedchamber of the windswept tower, while the floor swayed and sighs moaned through the huge pipes that underlay the place, Diamandis had told Venera histories of Buridan, and more.

"They were the horse masters," he said. "Theirs was the ultimate in impractical products—a being that required buckets of food and endless space to run, that couldn't live a day in freefall. But a creature so beautiful that visitors to Spyre routinely fell in love with them. To have a horse was the ultimate sign of power, because it meant you had gravity to waste."

"But that must have been centuries ago," she'd said. Venera was having trouble hearing Diamandis, even though the room's door was tightly closed and there were no windows in this chamber. The tower was awash with sound, from the

creaking of the beams and the roaring of the wind to the basso-profundo chorus of drones that reverberated through every surface. Even before her eyes had adjusted to the darkness inside the building, before she could take in the clean-stripped smell of chambers and corridors scoured by centuries of wind, the full-throated scream of Buridan had nearly driven her outside again.

It had taken them an hour to discover the source of that basso cry: the nest of huge pipes that jutted from the bottom of Buridan Tower acted like a giant wind instrument. It hummed and keened, moaned and ululated unceasingly.

Diamandis slapped the wall. This octagonal chamber was filled with jumbled pots, pans and other kitchen utensils; but it was quiet compared to the bedchambers and lounges of the former inhabitants. “Buridan’s heyday was very long ago,” he said. He looked almost apologetic, his features lit from below by the oil lamp they’d brought. “But the people of Spyre have long memories. Our records go all the way back to the creation of the world.”

He told her stories about Spyre’s ancient glories that night as they bedded down, and the next day as they prowled the jumbled chaos of the tower. Later, Venera would always find those memories entwined within her: the tales he told her accompanied by images of the empty, forlorn chambers of the tower. Grandeur, age, and despair were the setting for his voice; grandeur, age and despair henceforth defined her impressions of ancient Virga.

He told her tales of vast machines, bigger than cities, that had once built the very walls of Virga itself. Those engines were alive and conscious, according to Diamandis, and their offspring included both machines and humans. They had settled the cold black spaces of a star’s outskirts, having sailed for centuries from their home.

“Preposterous!” Venera had exclaimed. “Tell me more.”

So he told her of the first generations of men and women who had lived in Virga. The world was their toy, but they shared it with beings far more powerful and wiser than themselves. It was simple for them to build places like Spyre—but in doing so, they used up much of Virga’s raw materials. The machines objected. There was a war of inconceivable ferocity; Virga rang like a bell, its skin glowed with heat, and the precarious life forms the humans had seeded inside it were annihilated.

“Ridiculous!” she said. “You can do better than that.”

Spyre was the fortress of the human faction, he told her. From here, the campaign was launched that defeated the machines. Sulking, they left to create their own settlement on the farside of the sun—but some remained. In faraway, frozen, and sunless corners of the world, forgotten soldiers slept. Having accumulated dust and fungus over the centuries, they could easily be mistaken for asteroids. Some hung like frozen bats from the skin of the world, icebergs with sightless eyes. If you could waken them, you might receive powers and gifts beyond mortal desire; or you

could unleash death and ruin on the whole world.

The humans slowly rebuilt Virga's ecology, but they were diminished from their original, godlike power. The sons and daughters of those who had built Virga forgot their history, and wove their own myths to explain the world. Nations were spawned by the dozen, hot new suns springing into life in the black abyss. They turned their backs on the past.

Then, rumors began of something strange approaching across the cold interstellar wastes ... a new force, spreading outwards like ripples in a pond. It came from their ancient home. It had many names, but the best description of it was *artificial nature*.

"Ah," said Venera. "I see."

They made their rounds as Diamandis talked. Each foray they made began and ended in the central atrium of the old building. Here, upward sweeping arches formed an eight-sided atrium that rose fifteen stories to the glittering stained-glass cupola surmounting the edifice. Lozenges of amber and lime, rose and indigo light outlined the dizzying succession of galleries that rose to all sides.

On the second day, as they were exploring the upper chambers, they came across traces of a story Garth Diamandis did not know. As Venera was poking her head in a closet she heard him shout in alarm. Running to his side she found him kneeling next to the armored figure of a man. The corpse was ancient, wizened and dried by the wind. A sword lay next to it. And in the next chamber were more bodies.

Some dire and dramatic end had come to the people here. They found a dozen mummified soldiers, all lying where they had fallen in fierce combat. Guns and blades were strewn among long-dried pools of black liquid. The disposition of the bodies suggested attackers and defenders; curious now, Venera followed the path the interlopers must have taken.

High in the tower, behind a barricaded door, a blackened human shape lay on the moldering covers of a vast four-poster bed. The white lace dress the mummy wore still moved in the wind, causing Venera to jump in startlement whenever she glanced at it.

She systematically ransacked the room while Diamandis stood contemplating the body. Here, in desk drawers and cabinets, were all the documents and letters of marque Venera needed to establish her identity. She even found a genealogy and photos. The best of the clothes were stored here as well, and that evening, rather than listening to a story, Venera began to make up her own—the story of a generations-long siege, a self-imposed exile broken finally by the last member of the nation of Buridan, Amandera Thrace-Guiles.

* * * *

The darkness yielded detail slowly. Venera stood in what had once been a cobblestoned courtyard overlooked by the pillared facade of the Buridan estate. Black windows looked down from the edifice; once, sunlight would have streamed through them into whatever grand halls lay beyond. At some point in the past dark buttresses had been leaned onto the smooth white flanks of the building to support neighboring buildings—walls and arches that had swathed and overgrown it in layers, like the accumulating scales of some vast beast. For a while the estate would have still had access to the sky, for windows looked out from many of the encircling walls. All were now bricked up. Stone and wrought-iron arches had ultimately been lofted over the roofs of the estate, and at some point a last chink must have let distant sunlight in to light a forlorn cornice or the eye of a gargoyle. Then that too had been sealed and Buridan encysted, to wait.

It was understandable. There was only a finite amount of space on a town-wheel like this; if the living residents couldn't demolish the Buridan estate, they'd been determined to reach other accommodations with it.

Two glittering pallasite staircases swept up from where Venera stood, one to the left, one right. She frowned, then headed for the dark archway that opened like a mouth between them. Her feet made no sound in the deep dust.

Certainly the upstairs chambers would be the luxurious ones; they had probably been stripped. In any case she was certain she would learn more about the habits and history of the nation by examining the servants' quarters.

In the dark of the lower corridor, Venera knelt and examined the floor. She drew one of her pistols and slid the safety off. Cautiously she moved onward, listening intently.

This servants' way ran on into obscurity, arches opening off it to both sides at regular intervals. Black squares that might once have been portraits hung on the walls, and here and there sheet-covered furniture huddled under the pillars like cowering ghosts.

Sounds reached her, distorted and uncertain. Were they coming from behind or ahead? She glanced back; silhouettes were moving across the distant square of the entranceway. But that sliding sound ... She blew out the lantern and sidled along the wall, moving by touch.

Sure enough a fan of light draped across the disturbed dust of the corridor, and a shadow-play of figures moving against the opposite wall. Venera crept up to the open doorway and peered around the corner in time to meet the eye of someone coming the other way.

"Hey! They're here already!" The woman was younger than Venera, and had prominent cheekbones and long stringy hair. She was dressed in the dark leathers of the city. Venera leaped into her path and leveled the pistol an inch from her face.

“Don’t move.”

“Shills!” somebody else yelled.

Venera didn’t know what a shill was, but yelled, “No!” anyway. “I’m the new owner of this house.”

The stringy-haired woman was staring cross-eyed at the gun barrel. Venera spared a glance past her into a long low chamber that looked like it had originally been a wine cellar. Lanterns burned at strategic points, lighting up what was obviously somebody’s hideout: there were cots, stacks of crates, even a couple of tables with maps unrolled on them. Half a dozen people were rushing about grabbing up stuff and making for an exit in the opposite wall. Several more were training guns on Venera.

“Ah.” She looked around the other side of the stringy-haired head. The men with the guns were glancing inquiringly at one of their number. Though of similar age, with his flashing eyes and ironic half-smile he stood out from the rest of these youths as a professor might stand out from his students. “Hello,” Venera said to him. She withdrew her pistol and holstered it, registering the surprise on his face with some satisfaction.

“You’d better hurry with your packing,” she said before anyone could move. “They’ll be here any minute.”

The guns were still trained on her, but the confident-looking youth stepped forward, squinting at her over his own weapon. He had a neatly trimmed mustache and what looked like a dueling scar on his cheek. “Who are you?” he demanded in an amused upper-class drawl.

She bowed. “Amandera Thrace-Guiles, at your service. Or perhaps, it’s the other way around.”

He sneered. “We’re no one’s servants. And unfortunate for you that you’ve seen us. Now we’ll have to—”

“Stow it,” she snapped. “I’m not playing your game, either for your side or for Spyre’s. I have my own agenda, and it might benefit your own goals to consider me a possible ally.”

Again the sense of amused surprise. Venera could hear voices outside in the hall now. “Be very quiet,” she said, “and snuff those lights.” Then she stepped back, grabbed the edges of the doors, and shut them.

Lanterns bobbed down the corridor. “Lady Thrace-Guiles?” It was Aday.

“Here. My lantern went out. In any case there seems to be nothing of interest this way. Shall we investigate the upper floors?”

“Perhaps.” Aday peered about himself in distaste. “This appears to be a commoner’s area. Yes, let’s retrace our steps.”

They walked in silence, and Venera strained to hear any betraying noise from the chamber behind them. There was none; finally, Aday said, “To what do we owe the honor of your visit? Is Buridan rejoining the great nations? Are you going to restart the trade in horses?”

Venera snorted. “You know perfectly well there was no room to keep such animals in the tower. We had barely enough to eat from the rooftop gardens and nets we strung under the world. No, there are no horses anymore. And I am the last of my line.”

“Ah.” They began to climb the long-disused steps to the upper chambers. “As to your being the last of the line ... lines can be rejuvenated,” said Aday delicately. “And as to the horses ... I am happy to say that you are in error in that case.”

She cast a sidelong glance at him. “What do you mean? Don’t toy with me.”

Aday smiled, appearing confident for the first time. “There *are* horses, my lady. Raised and bred at government expense in paddocks on Greater Spyre. They have always been here, all these years. They have been awaiting your return.”

* * * *

9

Venera was nine-tenths asleep and imagining that the pillow she clutched was Chaison’s back. Such feelings of safety and belonging were so rare for her that by contrast the rest of her life seemed a wasteland. It was as though everything she had ever done, every school lesson and contest with her sisters, every panicky interview with her father, all the manipulations and lies, had been erased by this: the quiet, his breathing, his scent, and his neck against her chin.

“Rise and shine, my lady!”

Garth Diamandis threw back the room’s curtains, revealing a brick wall. He glowered at it as scraps of velvet tore away in his fingers. Dust pillared around him in the lantern-light.

Venera sat up and a knife-blade of pain shot up her jaw. “Get out!” She thrashed about for a second, looking for a weapon. “Get *out!*” Her hands fell on the lantern and—not without thinking, but rather with malicious pleasure—she threw it at him as hard as she could.

Garth ducked and the lantern broke against the wall. The candle flame touched the curtains and they caught fire instantly.

“Oh! Not a good idea!” He tore down the curtains and, fetching a poker from

the fireplace, began beating the flames.

“Did you not *hear* me?” She cast the musty covers aside and ran at him. Grabbing up a broken splinter of chair-leg, she brandished it like a sword. “Get *out!*”

He parried easily and with a flick of the wrist sent her makeshift sword flying. Then he jabbed her in the stomach with the poker.

“Ooff!” She sat down. Garth continued beating out the flames. Smoke was filling the ancient bedchamber of the Buridan clan.

When Venera had her breath back she stood up and walked to a side-table. Returning with a jug of water, she upended it over the smoldering cloth. Then she dropped the jug indifferently—it shattered—and glared at Garth.

“I was asleep,” she said.

He turned to her, a muscle jumping in his own jaw. She saw for the first time that his eyes were red. Had he slept?

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

With a heavy sigh he turned and walked away. Venera made to follow, realized she was naked and turned to don her clothing. When she found him again he was sitting in the antechamber, fiddling with his bootstraps.

“It’s her, isn’t it?” she asked. “You’ve been looking for her?”

Startled, he looked up at her. “How did you—”

“I’m a student of human nature, Garth.” She turned around. “Lace me up, please.”

“You could have burned the whole place down,” he grumbled as he tugged—a little too hard—on her corset strings.

“My self-control isn’t good when I’m surprised,” she said with a shrug. “Now you know.”

“Aye.” He grabbed her hips and turned her around to face him. “You usually hide your pain as well as someone twice your age.”

“I choose to take that as a compliment.” Conscious of his hands on her, she stepped back. “But you’re evading the question—did you find her? Your expression suggests bad news.”

He stood up. “It doesn’t concern you.” He began to walk away.

Venera gnawed her lip, thinking about apologizing for attacking him. It got no further than thinking. “Well,” she said after following him for a while, “for what

reason did you rouse me at such an ungodly..." She looked around. "What time is it?"

"It's midmorning." He glanced around as well; the chambers of the estate were cast in gloom save where the occasional lantern burned. "The house is entombed, remember?"

"Oh! The appointment!"

"Yes. The horse masters are waiting in the front hall. They're mighty nervous, since neither in their lifetimes nor those of their line stretching back centuries, has anyone ever audited their work."

"I'm not auditing, Garth, I just want to meet some horses."

"And you may—but we have a bigger problem."

"What's that?" She paused to look at herself in a faded mirror. Somewhere downstairs she heard things being moved; they had hired a work gang to clean the building, just before fatigue had caught up with her and forced her to take refuge in that mildewed bed-chamber.

"There's a second delegation waiting for you," Diamandis explained. "A pack of majordomos from the great families."

She stopped walking. "Ah. A challenge?"

"In a manner of speaking. You've been invited to attend a Confirmation ceremony. To formally establish your identity and titles."

"Of course, of course..." She started walking again. "Damn, they're a step ahead of us. We'll have to turn that around." Venera pondered this as they trotted down the sweeping front steps. "Garth, do I smell like smoke?"

"Alas, my lady, you have about you the piquant aroma of a flaming curtain."

"Well, there's nothing to be done about it, I suppose. Are those the challengers?" She pointed to a group of ornately dressed men who stood in the middle of the archway. Behind them, a motley group of men in workclothes milled uncertainly. "Those would be the horsemen, then."

"Gentlemen," she said with a smile as she walked past the officials. "I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting," she said to the horsemen.

"Ahem," said an authoritative voice behind her. Venera made herself finish shaking hands before she turned. "Yes?" she said with a sweet smile. "What can I do for you?"

The graying man with the lined face and dueling scars said, "You are summoned to appear—"

“I’m sorry, did you make an appointment?”

“—to appear before the—what?”

“An appointment.” She leaned closer. “Did you make one?”

Unable to ignore protocol, he said, “No,” with sarcastic reluctance.

Venera waved a hand to dismiss him. “Then take it up with my manservant. These people have priority at the moment. *They* made an appointment.”

An amused glint came into his eye. Venera realized, reluctantly, that this wasn’t some flunky she was addressing, but a seasoned veteran of one of the great nations. And since she had just tried to set fire to her new mansion and kill her one and only friend in this godforsaken place, it could be that her judgment wasn’t quite what it should be today.

She glanced at Diamandis, who was visibly holding his tongue.

With a deep sigh she bowed to the delegation. “I’m sorry. Where are my manners? If we conduct our business briefly, I can make my other appointment without ruffling feathers on that end as well. Who do I have the honor of addressing?”

Very slightly mollified, he said, “I am Jacoby Sarto of the nation of Sacrus. Your ... return from the dead ... has caused quite a stir amongst the great nations, lady. There are claims of proof that you must provide, before you are accepted for who you are.”

“I know,” she said simply.

“Thursday next,” he said, “at four o’clock in the Council offices. Bring your proofs.” He turned to go.

“Oh. Oh dear.” He turned back, a dangerous look in his eye. Venera looked abjectly apologetic. “It’s a very small problem—more of an opportunity, really. I happen to have become entangled in ... a number of obligations that day. My former debtors and creditors ... but I’m not trying to dodge your request! Far from it. Why don’t we say, eight o’clock P.M., in the main salon of my home? Such a date would allow me to fulfill my obligations and—”

“Whatever.” He turned to confer with the others. The conference was brief. “So be it.” He stepped close to her and looked down at her, the way her father used to do when she was young. Despite herself, Venera quailed inside—but she didn’t blink, just as she had never reacted to her father’s threats. “No games,” he said very quietly. “Your life is at stake here.” Then he gestured sharply to the others and they followed him away.

Garth leaned in and muttered, “What obligations? You have nothing planned

that day.”

“We do now,” she said as she watched Sarto and his companions walk away. She told Garth what she had in mind, and his eyes widened in shock.

“In a week? The place is a shambles!”

“Then you know what you’re going to be doing the rest of the day,” she said tartly. “Hire as many people as you need—cash a few of my gems. And Garth,” she said as he turned to go, “I apologize for earlier.”

He snorted. “I’ve had worse reactions first thing in the morning. But I expected better from you.”

For some reason those parting words stung far more than any of the things she’d imagined he might say.

* * * *

“You haven’t talked about the horses,” he said late that evening. Garth was pushing the far end of a hugely heavy wine rack while Venera hauled on the near side. Slowly, the wooden behemoth grated another few inches across the cellar floor. “How—oof!—what did you think of them?”

“I’m still sorting it out in my own mind,” she said, pausing to set her feet better against the riveted iron decking that underlay her estate. “They were beautiful, and grotesque. *Dali* horses the handlers called them. Apparently, a Dali is any four-legged beast raised under lower gravity than it was evolved to like.”

Garth nodded and they pushed and pulled for a while. The rack was approaching the wall where the little cell of rebels had made their entrance—a hole pounded in the brickwork that led to an abandoned airshaft. Garth had explored a few yards of the tunnel beyond; Venera was afraid the rebels might have left traps behind.

“It was the smell I noticed first,” she said as they took another break. “Not like any fish or bird I’d ever encountered. Foul but you could get used to it, I suppose. They had the horses in a place called a paddock—a kind of slave pen for animals. But the beasts ... they were huge!”

Voices and loud thuds filtered in from the estate’s central hallway. Two of the work gangs Garth had hired that day were arguing over who should start work in the kitchens first.

Shadows flickered past the cellar door. The estate was crawling with people now. Lanterns were lit everywhere and shouted conversations echoed down, along with hammering, sawing, and the rumble of rolling carts. Venera hoped the racket would keep the neighbors up. She had a week to make this place fit for guests and that meant working kitchens, a ballroom with no crumbling plasterwork and free of the smell of decay—and of course, a fully stocked wine cellar. The rebel gang had

removed all evidence of themselves when they retreated, but had left behind the hole by which they'd gained entrance. Because the mansion only had one entrance—the back doors had not yet been uncovered—Venera had decided it prudent to keep this bolthole. But if she was going to have a secret exit, it had to *be* secret; hence the wine rack.

“Okay,” she said when they had it about three feet from the wall. “I’m going to grease the floor under the hole, so we can slide the rack to one side if we need to get out in a hurry.” She plonked down the can she’d taken from one of the workmen and rolled up her sleeves.

“We’ll have to survey for traps some time,” he said reasonably.

Venera squinted up at him. “Maybe, but not tonight. You look like you’re about to collapse, Garth. Is it the gravity?”

He nodded, wincing. “That, and simple age. This is more activity than I’ve had in a long while, when you factor in the new weight. I thought I was in good shape, but...”

“Well, I hereby order you to take two days off. I’ll manage the workmen. Take one day to rest up, and maybe on the second you tend to the ... uh, that matter that you won’t talk to me about.”

“What matter?” he said innocently.

“It’s all right.” She smiled. “I understand. You’ve been in exile for a long time. Plenty of time to think about the men who put you there. Given that much time, I’d bet you’ve worked out your revenge in exquisite detail.”

Garth looked shocked. “Revenge? No, that’s not—oh, I suppose in the first few months I thought about it a lot. But you get over anger, you know. After a few years, perspective sets in.”

“Yes, and that’s the danger, isn’t it? In my family, we were taught to nurture our grudges lest we forget.”

“But why?” He looked genuinely distressed for some reason.

“Because once you forgive,” she said, as if explaining something to a small child, “you set yourself up for another betrayal.”

“That’s what you were taught?”

“Never let an insult pass,” she said, half-conscious that she was reciting lines her father and sisters had spoken to her many times. She ticked the points off on her fingers. “Never let a slight pass, never forget, build realistic plans for your revenges. You’re either up or down from other people and you want always to be up. If they hurt you, you *must* knock them down.”

Now he looked sad. “Is that why you’re doing all this?” He gestured at the walls. “To get back at someone?”

“To *get back*, at all,” she said earnestly, “I must have my revenge. Else I am brought low forever and can never go home. For otherwise—” Her voice caught.

For otherwise, I have no reason to return.

His expression, of compassion, would have maddened her on anyone else. “You were telling me about the horses,” he said quietly.

“Ah. Yes.” Grateful of the distraction, she said, “Well, they have these huge barrel-shaped bodies and elegant long necks. Long heads like on my ring.” She held it up, splaying her fingers. “But their legs! Garth, their legs are twice the length of their bodies—like spider’s legs, impossibly long and thin. They stalked around the paddock like ... well, like spiders! I don’t know how else to describe it. They were like a dream that’s just tipping over to become a nightmare. I’m not sure I want to see them again.”

He nodded. “There are cattle loose between some of the estates. I’ve seen them, they look similar. You have to understand, there’s no room on the city wheels to raise livestock.”

Venera pried open the lid of the grease can and picked up a brush. “But now that the nation of Buridan has returned, the horses are our responsibility. There are costs ... it seems a dozen or more great nations have acted as caretakers for one or another part of the Buridan estate. Some are tenants of ours who haven’t paid rent in centuries. Others are like Guinevera, who’ve been tending the horses. There’s an immense web of relationships and dependencies here, and we have a little under a week to figure it all out.”

Garth thought about it for a while. “First of all,” he said eventually, “you need to bring a foal or two up here and raise it in the estate.” He grimaced at her expression. “I know what I just said, but it’s an important symbol. Besides, these rooms will just fill up with people if you give them a chance. Why not set some aside for the horses now?”

“I’ll think about that.”

They cleared out the space behind the rack, and slid it against the wall. It fit comfortably over the exit hole. As they stood back to admire their work, Garth said, “It’s a funny thing about time, you know. It sweeps away anger and hate. But it leaves love untouched.”

She threaded her hand through his arm. “Ah, Garth, you’re so sentimental. Did it ever occur to you that’s why you ended up scabbling about on Greater Spyre for the past twenty years?”

He looked her in the eye. “Truthfully, no. That had never occurred to me. If

anything, I'd say I ended up there because I didn't love well enough, not because I ever loved too well."

She sighed. "You're hopeless. It's a good thing I'm here to take care of you."

"And here I thought it was I taking care of you."

They left the cellar and re-entered the bedlam of construction that had taken over the manor.

* * * *

The headache began that night.

Venera knew exactly what it was, she'd suffered these before. All day her jaw had been bothering her; it was like an iron hand was inside her throat, reaching up to clench her skull. Around dinner a strange pulsating squiggly spot appeared in her vision and slowly expanded until she could see nothing around it. She retired to her room, and waited.

How long was this one going to last? They could go on for days, and she didn't have days. Venera paced up and down, stumbling, wondering whether she could just sleep it off. But no, she had mounds of paperwork to go through and no time.

She called Garth. He exclaimed when he saw her and ran to her side. "You're white as a new wall!"

"Never mind," she said, detaching herself from him and climbing into bed. "Bring in the accounts books. It's just a headache, I get them. I'm sick but we need to go through these papers."

He started to read the details of Buridan's various contracts. Each word was like a little explosion in her head. Venera tried to concentrate, but after ten minutes she suddenly leaned over the edge of the bed and retched.

"You need to sleep!" His hands were on her shoulders. Garth eased her back on the bed.

"Don't be ridiculous," she mumbled. "If we don't get this stuff straight, we won't convince the council and they'll cart us both away in chains." A blossom of agony had unfurled behind her left eye. Despite her brave words Venera knew she was down for however long the migraine decided to hold her.

Garth darkened the lamps and tiptoed around while she lay sprawled like a discarded doll. Distant hammering sounded like it was coming from inside her own head, but she couldn't hold up the renovations.

Sleep eventually came, but she awoke to pain that was abstract only until she moved her head and opened one eye. *This is how it's going to be.* These headaches

were the bullet's fault; when it smashed her jaw it had tripped some switch inside her head and now agony ambushed her at the worst times. Always before, she'd had the safe haven of her bedroom at home to retreat to—her time on the *Rook* had been mercifully free of such episodes. She used such times to indulge in her worst behavior: whining, accusing, insulting anyone who came near her, and demanding that her every whim be catered to. She wallowed in self-pity, letting everyone know that she was the sad victim of fate and that no one, ever, had felt the agonies she was enduring so bravely.

But she really was going to die if she let the thing rule her this time. It wasn't that there was nobody around to indulge her; but all the sympathy in the world wasn't going to save her life if she didn't follow through on the deception she and Garth had planned. So, halfway through morning, Venera resolutely climbed out of bed. She tied a silk sash over her eyes, jammed candle wax in her ears, and picked up an empty chamber pot. Carrying this, she tottered out of the room. "Bring me a dressing gown," she said in reply to a half-heard question from a maid. "And fetch Master Flance."

Blindfolded, half deaf, she nonetheless managed to make her rounds of the work crews, while Garth followed her and read from the books. She told him what points to underline for her to look at later; inquired of the work and made suggestions; and, every now and then, she turned aside to daintily vomit into the chamber pot. Her world narrowed down to the feel of carpet or stone under her feet, the murmur of words in her ear, and the cataclysmic pounding that reverberated inside her skull. She kept going by imagining herself whipping, shooting, stomping on, and setting fire to Jacoby Sarto and the rest of this self-important council who had the temerity to oppose her will. This interior savagery was invisible from without, as she mumbled and queried politely, and let herself be led about passively.

All of this busywork seemed to be getting her somewhere, but that evening when she collapsed onto her bed, Venera realized that she had no memory of anything she had said or done today. It was all obscured by the angry red haze of pain that had followed her everywhere.

She was doomed. She'd never be ready in time for the interrogation the council had planned. Venera rolled over, cried into her pillow, and finally just lay there, accepting her fate. The bullet had defeated her.

With that understanding came a kind of peace, but she was in too much pain to analyze it. She just lay there, dry eyed, frowning, until sleep overcame her.

* * * *

10

"What is *this*?" Jacoby Sarto glared at the rickshaws clustering in the courtyard below the Buridan estate's newly-rebuilt entrance. It was seven P.M. and Candescence was extinguishing itself, its amber glories drenching the building-tops.

Down in the purpled courtyard the upstart princess's new footmen were lighting lanterns to guide in dozens of carts and palanquins from the crowded alley.

Someone of a minor noble nation had heard him and turned, smirking. "You didn't receive an invitation?" asked the impertinent youth. "It's a gala reception!"

"Bah!" Sarto turned to his companion, the Duke of Ennersin. "What is she up to? This is a feeding frenzy. I'll wager half these people have come to gawk at the legendary Buridans, and the other half to watch us drag her out of the place in chains. What does she gain out of such a spectacle?"

"I'm afraid we'll find out shortly," said the duke. He was as stocky as Sarto, with similar graying temples and the sort of paternal scowl that could freeze the blood of anyone under forty. Together the two men radiated gravitas, to such an extent that the crowds automatically parted for them. True, most of those assembling here knew them, by sight and reputation at least. The nations of Sacrus and Ennersin were feared and respected by all—all, it seemed, save for newly reborn Buridan. These two were here tonight to make sure that this new situation didn't last.

"In any case, such entertainments as this are rare, Jacoby," continued Ennersin. "It's sure to attract the curious and the morbid, yes. But it's the third audience that worries me," Duke Ennersin commented as they strode up the steps to the entrance.

Sarto glared at a footman who had the temerity to approach them at the entrance. "What third audience?"

"Do you see the Guineveras there? They've been keeping Buridan's horses for generations. Make no mistake, they'd be happy to be free of the burden—or to own the beasts outright."

"Which they will after tonight."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Ennersin. "Proof that this Amandera Thrace-Guiles is an imposter is not proof that the real heirs aren't out there."

"What are you saying, man? She's been in the tower! Clearly it's empty after all. There are no heirs to be had."

"Not there, no ... But don't forget there are sixteen nations that claim to be related by blood to the Thrace-Guileses. The moment this Amandera's declared a fake the other pretenders will pounce on the property rights. It'll be a legal free-for-all—maybe even a civil war. Many of these people are here to warn their nations the instant it becomes a possibility."

"Ridiculous!" Sarto forgot what he was going to say next, as they entered the lofting front hall of the Buridan estate.

It smelled of fresh paint and drying plaster. Lanterns and braziers burned

along the pillared staircases, lighting a frescoed ceiling crawling with allegorical figures. The painted blues, yellows, and reds were freshly cleaned and vibrant to the point of being nauseating, as were the heroic poses of the men and half-clad women variously hanging off, riding, or being devoured by hundreds of ridiculously-posed horses. Sarto gaped at this vision for a while, then shuddered. “The past is sometimes best left buried,” he said.

Ennersin chuckled. “Or at least strategically unlit.”

Sarto had been expecting chaos inside the estate; after all, nobody had set foot in here in centuries, so Thrace-Guiles’s new servants would be unfamiliar with the layout of their own home. They would be a motley collection of rejects and near-criminals hired from the dregs of Lesser Spyre, after all, and he fully expected to see waiters spilling drinks down the décolletage of the ladies when they weren’t banging into one another in their haste to please.

There was none of that. Instead, a string quartet played a soothing pavane in the corner, while men and women in black tails and white gloves glided to and fro, gracefully presenting silver platters and unobtrusively refilling casually tilted glasses. The wait staff were, in fact, almost mesmerizing in their movements; they were better than Sarto’s own servants.

“Where did she get this chattel?” he muttered as a man with a stentorian voice announced their arrival. Lady Pamela Anseratte, who had known Sarto for decades and was quite unafraid of him, laughed and trotted over in a swirl of skirts. “Oh, she’s a clever one, this Thrace-Guiles,” she said, laying her lace-covered hand on Sarto’s arm. “She’s hired the acrobats of the Spyre Circus to serve drinks! I hear they rehearsed blindfolded.”

Indeed, Sarto glanced around and realized there was a young lady with the compact muscled body of a dancer standing at his elbow. She held out a glass. “Champagne?” Automatically, he took it, and she vanished into the crowd without a sound.

“Well, we’ll credit the woman with being a genius in domestic matters,” he growled. “But surely you haven’t been taken in by her act, Pamela? She’s an imposter!”

“That’s as may be,” said the lady with a flick of her fan. “But your imposter has just forgiven Virilio’s debt to Buridan. It seems that with interest it would now be worth enough to outfit a small fleet of merchant ships! And she’s just erased it! Here, look! There’s August Virilio himself, drinking himself into happy idiocy under that stallion statue.”

Sarto stared. The limestone stallion appeared to be sneering over Virilio’s shoulder at the small crowd of hangers-on he was holding forth to. He was conspicuously unmasked, like most of the other Council representatives. The place was crowded with masked faces, though—some immediately identifiable, others

unfamiliar even to his experienced eye. “Who are all these people?” he wondered aloud.

“Debtors, apparently,” said Lady Pamela with some relish. “And creditors ... everyone who’s taken care of Buridan’s affairs, or profited by their absence, over the past two hundred years. They all look ... happy, don’t you think, Jacoby?”

Ennersin cleared his throat and leaned in to say, “Thrace-Guiles has clearly been doing her homework.”

Despite himself, Sarto was impressed. This woman had confounded his expectations. Was it possible that she might continue to do so? The thought was unexpected—and nothing unexpected had happened in Jacoby Sarto’s life in a very long time.

He resisted where this line of thought led; after all, he had his instructions. Sarto dashed his champagne glass on the floor. Heads turned. “Let her enjoy her little party,” he said in his darkest voice. “Amandera Thrace-Guiles, or whatever her real name is, has about one hour of freedom left.

“And no more than a day to live.”

* * * *

Venera strode through the crowd, nodding and smiling. She felt unsteady and vulnerable, and though her headache had finally faded she had to rein in an automatic cringe-reaction to bright lights and loud sounds. She felt hideously unready for the evening, and had overdressed to compensate. Most of the people in Spyre wore dark colors, so she had chosen to dress in red—her corset was a glossy crimson inset with designs sewn in scarlet thread, with a wide-shouldered, open jacket atop that. She wore a necklace from the Anetene hoard. Her skin was still recovering from the burns she’d suffered near Candesce, but the contrasts were still effective. To hide the scar on her chin she’d adopted one of the strange local skullcaps, this one of black feathers. It swept up behind her ears and down to a point in the middle of her forehead, where a single red Anetene gem glowed above her heavily drawn eyebrows—but it also thrust two small wings along her jawline. They tickled her chin annoyingly, but that was a small distraction compared with the sensations that the ankle-length skirt gave her. Dresses and skirts were considered obscene in most of Virga, where one might become weightless at any time. Back home, the prostitutes wore them. Venera wore a pair of breeches under the thing, which made her feel a bit better, but the long heavy drape still moved and turned like it had a mind of its own.

The one spot of white in her apparel was the fan she held before her like a shield. Nobody but Garth would know that its near side was covered with names and family trees, drawn in tiny spikéd letters. She hadn’t had time to read the complicated genealogies and financial records of Buridan and its dependents; this fan was her lifeline.

As she recovered from her migraine in the last day or so, the reconstruction

work had caught up and the servants learned where everything was. To her relief Garth had orchestrated the ball without supervision, making sometimes brilliant decisions—twenty years of pent-up social appetite, she supposed. The estate’s pantries had been cleared of rats and spiders and restocked; the ancient plumbing system had been largely replaced (not without messy accidents) and the gas lines to the stoves reconnected.

In a way, she was grateful for having been laid low these past few days. This afternoon she’d had a brief moment with nothing to do, and into her mind had drifted memories of Chaison. Standing in her chambers, her hand half lifted to her hair, she was suddenly miserable. Pain and anxiety had masked her grief until now.

She had to battle through it all—play her part. So now she marched up to a tight knot of masked nobles from the mysterious nation of Faddeste and bowed. “Welcome to my house. Speaking as someone who has seen few human beings in her life, outside her immediate family, I know how much it must cost you to attend a crowded event such as this.”

“We find it ... hard.” The speaker could be a man or a woman, it was impossible to tell. Its accent was so thick she had to puzzle out the words. Tall and thickly robed, this ambassador from a ten-acre nation flicked a finger at the sweeping dancers now beginning to fill up the center of the hall. “Such frivolity should be banned. How are you so calm? Not raised to this, crowds should frighten.”

Venera bowed. “I lived in my imagination as a girl.” That much was true. “Lacking real people to talk to, I invented a whole court—a whole nation!—who followed me everywhere. I was never alone. So perhaps this isn’t so strange for me.”

“Doubtful. We don’t believe you are of Buridan.”

“Hmm. I could say the same—how do I know you’re really from Faddeste?”

“Sacrilege!” But the robed figure didn’t turn away.

“Whether either of us is who they say they are,” said Venera with a smug smile, “it remains a fact that Buridan owes Faddeste twenty thousand Spyre sovereigns. Imposter or not, I am willing to repay that debt.”

Now she stepped in close, raising one black eyebrow and glancing around at the crowd. “Do you trust the pretenders in the crowd to do the same, if they acquire the title to Buridan? Think hard on that.”

The ambassador reared back as though afraid Venera would touch it. “You have money?”

“Go see Master Flance.” She pointed at Garth who, despite being masked, had characteristically surrounded himself with women young and old. All were laughing at some story he was telling. Seeing this, for a moment Venera forgot her

worries and felt a pulse of warmth for the aging dandy. She turned back to the Faddestes, but they were already maneuvering across the dance floor like a frightened but determined flock of crows.

She blew out a held breath. Seven or eight more minor nations to bribe, and only half an hour to do it in. All the members of the Spyre Council were here now. It would all be decided soon, one way or another.

Before she could reach her next target a majordomo in the livery of the Council approached and bowed. “They are ready for you upstairs, madam,” he said coolly.

She kept her gaze fixed on the top of his head as she bowed in return. All eyes were on her, she was certain. This was the moment when all would be decided.

As she clattered up the marble she tried to remember the lines and gambits she had crammed into her head over the past day or so. It hadn’t been enough time, and the hangover of her migraine had interfered. She was not ready; she just had herself, the passing lanterns, the looming shadows above, and the single rectangle of light from a pair of doors in the upstairs hall. She told herself to slow down, control her breathing, count to ten—but finally just cursed and strode down the newly laid crimson carpet to pivot on one heel and step into the room.

Jacoby Sarto’s leonine features crinkled into something like a smirk as he saw her. He was placing the final chair behind the long conference table in the high-ceilinged minor reception hall. Damn him, he’d moved everything!—Where Venera had contrived a single long table with chairs along two sides, with her at the end, Sarto—or somebody, but it sure looked like him from his posture—had turned the table sideways, crammed all the seats on one side of it (behind it, now) and left one solitary chair in the center of the carpet. What had been a conference room was now a court, with her as the defendant.

The rest of the council was standing around behind Sarto as the servants finished the new placement.

She had an overwhelming urge to pick a seat behind the table and put her feet up, then point to the solitary position and ask, “who sits there?” Only memory of how badly her recent outbursts had gone stopped her.

Well, he had won this round, but she wasn’t going to let him revel in it. Venera stopped one of the servants and said, “Bring me a side table, and a bottle of wine and a glass. Some cheese might be good too.” She sat graciously in the exposed chair and draped her skirts as she’d seen the other ladies do. Then she locked eyes with Sarto, and smiled.

The others began to take their places. There were twelve of them. Jacoby Sarto of Sacrus, who was rumored to be merely an errand boy to the true heads of the family, sat on the far left. The arch-conservative duke Ennersin, who had

conspicuously arrived with Sarto, sat next to him, frowning in disapproval at Venera. She could count on those two to oppose her confirmation. Of the others...

Pamela Anseratte was smiling at something, but wouldn't meet Venera's eye. Principe Guinevera *was* trying to meet her eye, and apparently attempting to wink; he took up two spaces at the table and his fleshy hands were planted on the tabletop as if he were, at any second, about to leap to his feet and proclaim something. Next to him sat August Virilio, who looked contented, half asleep even—and probably was, after the heroic drinking he'd gotten up to after she forgave his nation's debt. These three were on her side—or so she hoped.

The other great families were represented by minor members and, in three cases, by ambassadors. Two of the ambassadors were cloaked and masked; the families in question, Garrat and Oxorn, were mysterious, isolate and paranoid as only the ancients of Greater Spyre could be. Nobody knew what their nations produced—only that it went for fabulous prices and threat of death on exposure in the outside world.

Three out of twelve for sure. Maybe three others if her reckless divestment of Buridan's wealth had done what she hoped. But it was a big if. She was going to need every ounce of cunning and every resource to get through the evening free and intact.

The Council all sat and waited while Venera's new servants placed decanters of wine and tall glasses on the table. Then Pamela Anseratte stood and smiled around the table. "Welcome, everyone. I trust the nations are well and that the hospitality of our host has been sampled and appreciated by all? Yes? Then let's begin. We're gathered here tonight to decide whether to reinstate Buridan as an active nation, in the person of the woman who here claims to be Amandera Thrace-Guiles, heir of said nation. I—"

"Why are you alone?" Duke Ennersin was speaking directly to Venera. "Why are we to take this one person's word for who she is? Where is the rest of her nation? Why has she appeared here, now, after an absence of centuries?"

"Yes, yes, we're going to get to those questions," soothed Lady Anseratte. "First, however, we have some formalities to clear away. Amandera Thrace-Guiles's claim is pointless and instantly void if she cannot produce documents indicating her paternity and ancestry, as well as the notarized deeds and titles of her nation, plus the key." She beamed at Venera. "You have all those things?"

Silently, Venera rose and walked to the table. She placed the thick sheaf of papers she'd brought in front of Anseratte. Then she unscrewed the heavy signet ring from her finger and placed it atop the stack.

This was her opening move, but she couldn't count on its effect.

"I see," said Lady Anseratte. "May I examine the ring?" Venera nodded,

returning to her seat. Lady Anseratte took a flat box with some lights on it and hovered it over the ring. The box glowed and made a musical *bonging* sound.

“Duly authenticated,” said the lady. She carefully placed the ring to one side and opened the sheaf. Much of its contents were genuine. Venera had found the deeds and titles in the tower. It had been the work of several careful days to extend the family tree by several centuries and insert herself at its end. She had intended to use her own not-inconsiderable talents at forgery but had been indisposed, but Garth had come through, displaying surprising skills. He was not just a gigolo in his previous life, evidently. As the papers were passed up and down the table Venera kept a bland expression on her face. She tried the wine, and adjusted the fall of her skirt again.

“Convincing,” said Jacoby Sarto after flipping through the papers. “But just because something is convincing that doesn’t mean it’s true. It’s merely convincing. What can you do to establish the *truth* of your claim?”

Venera tilted her head to one side. “It would be impossible to do so to everyone’s satisfaction, sir, just as it would be impossible for you to prove that you are, without doubt, Jacoby Sarto of Nation Sacrus. I rather think the onus is on this council to disprove my claim, if they can.”

August Virilio opened one eye slightly. “Why don’t we start with your story? I always like a good story after supper.”

“Excellent idea,” said Pamela Anseratte. “Duke Ennersin asked why it is that you are here before us now, of all times. Can you explain why your nation has hidden away so thoroughly for so long?”

Venera actually knew the answer to that one—it had been written in the contorted bodies of the soldiers inside the tower, and in the scrawled final confessions of the dead woman in the bedchamber.

Steepling her hands, Venera smiled directly at Jacoby Sarto and said, “The answer is simple. We knew that if we left Buridan Tower, we would be killed.”

This was gambit number two.

The council members expressed various shades of surprise, shock, and satisfaction at her revelation. Jacoby Sarto crossed his arms and sat back. “Who would do this?” asked Anseratte. She was still standing and now leaned forward over the table.

“The isolation of Buridan Tower wasn’t an accident,” said Venera. “Or, at least, not entirely. It was the result of an attack—and the attackers were two of the great nations present at this table tonight.”

August Virilio smiled sleepily, but Principe Guinevera leapt to his feet, knocking his chair over. “*Who?*” he raged. “Name them, fair lady, and we will see

justice done!”

“I did not come here to open old wounds,” said Venera. “Although I recognize that my position here is perilous, I had no choice but to leave the tower. Everyone else there is dead—save myself and my manservant. Some bird-borne illness took the last five of our people a month ago. I consigned their bodies to the winds of Virga, as we have been doing for centuries now. Before that we were dwindling, despite careful and sometimes repugnant breeding restrictions and constant austerity ... We lived on birds and airfish we caught with nets, and supplemented our diets with vegetables we grew in the abandoned bedrooms of our ancestors. Had I died in that place, then our enemies would truly have won. I chose a last throw of the die and came here.”

“But the war of which you speak ... it was centuries ago,” said Lady Anseratte. “Why did you suppose that you would still be targeted after so long?”

Venera shrugged. “We had telescopes. We could see that our enemies’ nations were thriving. And we could also clearly see that sentries armed with machine-guns ringed the tower. I was raised to believe that if we entered the elevator and tried to reach Lesser Spyre, those machine gunners would destroy us before we rose more than a hundred meters.”

“Oh, no!” Guinevera looked acutely distressed. “The sentries were there for your protection, madam! They were to keep interlopers *out*, not to box you in!”

“Well.” Venera looked down. “Father thought so, but he also said that we were so reduced that we could not risk a single soul to find out. And isolation ... becomes a habit.” She looked pointedly at the ambassadors of Oxorn and Garrat.

Sarto guffawed loudly. “Oh, come on! What about the dozens of attempts that have been made to contact the tower? Semaphore, loudspeakers, smoke signals, for God’s sake. They’ve all been tried and nobody ever responded.”

“I am not aware that anyone has tried to contact us during my lifetime,” said Venera. This was true, as she’d learned in the past days. Sarto would have to concede the point. “And I can’t speak to my ancestors’ motives for staying silent.”

“That’s as may be,” Sarto continued. “Look, I’ll play it straight. Sacrus was involved in the original atrocity.” He held up a hand when Guinevera protested loudly. “But gentlemen and ladies, that was centuries ago. We are prepared to admit our crime and make reparations to the council when this woman is exposed for the fraud that she is.”

“And if she’s not?” asked Guinevera angrily.

“Then to the Nation of Buridan directly,” said Sarto. “I just wanted to clear the air. We can’t name our co-conspirators because, after all this time, the records have been lost. But having admitted our part in the affair, and having proposed that

we pay reparations, I can now continue to oppose this woman's claim without any appearance of conflict."

Venera frowned. Her second gambit had failed.

If Sacrus had wanted to keep their involvement a secret, she might have had leverage over Sarto. Maybe even enough to swing his vote. As it was he'd adroitly sidestepped the trap.

Lady Anseratte looked up and down the table. "Is the other conspirator's nation similarly honorable? Will they admit their part?" There was a long and uncomfortable silence.

"Well, then," said Pamela Anseratte. "Let us examine the details of your inheritances."

From here the interview deteriorated into minutiae as the council members pulled out individual documents and points of law and debated them endlessly. Venera was tired, and every time she blinked to clear her vision, she worried that a new migraine might be reaching to crush her. Pamela Anseratte conducted the meeting as if she had boundless energy, but Venera—and everyone else—wilted under the onslaught of detail.

Sarto used sarcasm, wit, guile, and bureaucracy to try to torpedo her claim, but after several hours it became clear that he wasn't making headway. Venera perked up a bit. *I could win this*, she realized—simultaneously realizing just how certain she'd been that she wouldn't.

Finally Lady Anseratte said, "Any further points?" and nobody answered. "Well," she said brightly, "we might as well proceed to a vote."

"Hang on," said Sarto. He stood heavily. "I've got something to say." Everyone waited.

"This woman is a fraud. We all know it. It's inconceivable that this family could have sustained themselves and their retainers for centuries within a single tower, cut off from the outside world—"

"Not inconceivable," said the ambassador of Oxorn from behind her griffin mask. "Quite possible."

Sarto glared at her. "What did they do for clothes? For even the tiniest item of utility, such as forks or pens? Do you really believe they have an entire industrial base squirreled away in that tower?" He shook his head.

"It's equally inconceivable that someone raised in such total isolation should, upon being dropped into society and all its machinations, conduct herself like a veteran! Did she rehearse social banter with her *dolls*? Did she learn to dance with her rocking horse? It's preposterous on the face of it.

“And we all know why her claim has any chance of success. It’s because she’s bought off everyone who might oppose it. Buridan has tremendous assets—estates, ships, buildings, and industries here and on Greater Spyre that have been administered by other nations in absentia, for generations. She’s promised to give those nations the assets they’ve tended! For the rest, she’s proposing to beggar Buridan by paying all its debts here and now. When she’s done Buridan will have nothing to its name but a herd of gangly equines.”

“And this house,” said Venera primly. “I don’t propose to give that up.” There was some stifled laughter around the table.

“It’s a transparent fraud!” Sarto turned to glare at the other council members. “Forget about the formal details of her claim—in fact, let it be read that there’s nothing to criticize about it. That doesn’t matter. We all know the truth. She is insulting the name of a great nation of Spyre! Do you actually propose to let her get away with it?”

He was winning them over. Venera had one last hand to play, and it was her weakest. She stood up.

“Then who am I?” She strode up to the table and leaned across it to look Sarto in the eye. “If I’m a fraud I must have come from somewhere. Was I manufactured by one of the other nations, then? If so, which one? Spyre is secretive, but not so much so that we don’t all keep tabs on one another’s genealogies. Nobody’s missing from the rosters, are they?”

“And yet!” She turned to address the rest of the council. “Gaze upon me and tell me to my face that you don’t believe I am noble born.” She sneered at Sarto. “It’s evident in my every gesture, in how I speak, how I address the servants. Jacoby Sarto says that he *knows* I am a fraud. Yet you know I am a peer!”

“So then where did I come from?” She turned to Sarto again. “If Jacoby Sarto believes I did not come from Buridan Tower, then he must have some idea of where I did. What do you know, Sir Sarto, that you’re not telling the rest of us? Do you have some proof that you’re not sharing? A name, perhaps?”

He opened his mouth—and hesitated.

They locked eyes and she saw him realize what she was willing to do. The Key to Candescence was almost visible in the air between them; it was the real subject of tonight’s deliberations.

“Sacrus has many secrets, as we’ve seen tonight,” she said quietly. “Is there some further secret you have, Sir Sarto, that you wish to share with the Council? A name, perhaps? One that might be recognized by the others present? A name that could be tied to recent events, to rumors and legends that have percolated through the principalities in recent weeks?” She saw puzzled frowns on several faces—and Sarto’s eyes widened as he heard her tread the edge of the one revelation Sacrus did

not want made public.

He looked down. “Perhaps I went too far in my accusations,” he said almost inaudibly. “I retract my statements.”

Duke Ennersin leaned back in his chair, openmouthed. And Jacoby Sarto meekly sat down.

Venera returned to her seat. *If I lose, everyone learns that you have the key*, she thought as she settled herself on the velvet cushion. She took a sip of wine and kept her expression neutral as Pamela Anseratte stood again.

“Well,” said the lady in a cautious tone, “if there are no more outbursts ... let us put it to a vote.”

Venera couldn't help but lean forward a bit.

“All those who favor this young lady's claim, and who wish to recognize the return of Buridan to Spyre and to this Council, raise your right hand.”

Guinevera's hand shot up. Beside him, August Virilio languidly pushed his into the air. Pamela Anseratte raised her own hand.

Oxorn's hand went up. Then Garrat's ambassador raised his.

That made five. Venera let out the breath she'd been keeping. It was over. She had failed—

Jacoby Sarto raised his hand.

His expression was exquisite—a mixture of distaste and resignation that you might see in a man who's just volunteered to dig up a grave. Duke Ennersin was staring at him in total disbelief, and slowly turning purple.

Lady Anseratte's only show of surprise was a minute frown. “All those opposed?” she said.

Ennersin threw his hand in the air. Five others went up.

“And no abstentions,” said Anseratte. “We appear to have a tie.”

Jacoby Sarto slumped back in his chair. “Well, then,” he said quietly. “I move we take the matter to the Council investigative team. Let them visit the tower and conduct a thorough—”

“Don't I get a vote?”

They all turned to stare at Venera. She sat up straighter, clearing her throat. “Well, it seems to me...” She shrugged. “It's just that this meeting was called to confirm my identity and claim to being head of Buridan. Confirmation implies a presumption that I am who I say I am. I *am* Buridan unless proven otherwise. And

Buridan is a member of the Council. So I should have a vote.”

“This is outrageous!” Duke Ennersin had had enough. He threw back his chair and stalked around the table. “You have the temerity to suggest that you—”

“She’s right.”

The voice was quiet and languid, almost indifferent—but it stopped Ennersin in his tracks. His head ratcheted around slowly, as if pulled by unwilling forces to look at the man who had spoken.

August Virilio was lounging back in his chair, his hands steepled in front of him. “Article five, section twelve, paragraph two of the Charter,” he said in a reasonable tone. “Identity is presumptive if there is no other proven heir. And Buridan *is* a member of the Council. Its title was never suspended.”

“A mere formality! A courtesy!” But Ennersin’s voice had lost its certainty. He appealed to Pamela Anseratte, but she simply spread her hands and smiled.

Then, looking around him at Venera, she said, “It appears you are right, dear. You do get a vote. Would you care to...?”

Venera smiled and raised her right hand. “I vote in favor,” she said.

* * * *

She was sure you could hear Ennersin outside and down the street. Venera smiled as she shepherded her guests to the door. She was delirious with relief, and was sure it showed in her ridiculous grin. Her soiree was winding down, though naturally the doors and lounges would be open all night for any stragglers. But the council members were tired; no one would criticize them for leaving early.

Ennersin was yelling at Jacoby Sarto. It was music to Venera’s ears.

She looked for Garth but couldn’t see him at first. Then—there he was, sidling in the entrance. He’d changed to inconspicuous street clothes. Had he been preparing to sneak away? Venera pictured him leaving through the wine cellar exit to avoid the council’s troops. Then he could have circled around to stand with the street rabble who were waiting to hear the results of the vote. She smiled; it was what she might have done.

There went Ennersin, sweeping by Garth without noticing him. Diamandis watched him go in distaste, then turned and saw Venera watching him. He spread his hands and shrugged. She made a dismissive gesture and smiled back.

Time to mingle; the party wasn’t over yet and her head felt fine. It felt good to reinforce her win with a gracious turn about the room. For a while everything was a blur of smiling faces and congratulations. Then she found herself shaking someone’s hand (the hundredth, it must have been) and looked up to find it was Jacoby Sarto’s.

“Well played, Ms. Fanning,” he said. There was no irony in his voice.

She glanced around. They were miraculously alone for the moment. Probably a single glance from under Sarto’s wiry brows had been enough to clear a circle.

All she could think of to say was, “Thank you.” It struck her as hopelessly inadequate for the situation, but all her strategies had been played out. To her surprise, Sarto smiled.

“I’ve lost Ennersin’s confidence,” he said. “It’s going to take me years to regain some allies I abandoned today.”

“Oh?” The mystery of his reversal during the vote deepened. Not one to prevaricate, Venera asked, “Why?”

He appeared puzzled. “Why did I vote for you?”

“No—I know why.” The key was again unspoken of between them. “I mean,” she said, “why did you come out so publicly against me in the first place, if you knew I had that to hang over you?”

“Ah.” It was his turn to look around them. Satisfied that no one was within earshot, he said, “I was entrusted with the safety of Sacrus’s assets. You’re considered one of them. If I could acquire you, I was to do that. If not, and you threatened to reveal ... certain details ... well, I was to contrive a murderous rage.” He opened his jacket slightly and she saw the large pistol he had holstered there. “You would not have had a chance to say what you know,” he said with a slight smile.

“So why didn’t you...”

“It is useful to have an acknowledged heir of Buridan controlling that estate. This way we avoid a nasty succession conflict, which Sacrus would view as an unnecessary ... distraction, right now. Besides,” Sarto shrugged. “There are few moments in a man’s life when he has the opportunity to make a choice on his own. I simply did not want to shoot you.”

“And why tell me this now?”

His mouth didn’t change from its accustomed frown, but the lines around Sarto’s eyes might have crinkled a little bit—an almost smile.

“It will be easy for me to tell my masters that the pistol was taken from me at your door,” he said. “Without an opportunity to acquire or silence you, letting you win was the expedient option. My masters know that.” He turned away, then looked back with a scowl. “I hope you won’t give me reason to regret my decision.”

“Surely not. And my apologies for inconveniencing you.”

He laughed at the edge in her voice.

“You may think you’re free,” he said as the crowd parted to let him through, “but Sacrus still owns you. Never forget that.”

Venera kept her smile bright, but his parting words worried at her for the rest of the evening.

* * * *

11

Muscles aching, Venera swung down from the saddle of her horse. It was two weeks since the confirmation and she had lost no time in establishing her rule over Buridan—which, she had decided, had to include becoming a master rider.

She’d knocked down two walls and walled up the ends of one of the high-ceilinged cellar corridors, forming one long narrow room where her steed could trot. There were stalls at one end of this, and two workmen were industriously scattering straw and sand over the plating. “Deeper,” Venera told them. “We need several inches of it everywhere.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The men seemed unusually enthusiastic and focused on their task. Maybe they had heard that the new foals were to arrive later today. Probably it was just being in proximity with the one horse now residing here. Venera hadn’t yet met anyone who didn’t share that strange, apparently ancient love for horses that seemed inbuilt to humans.

Venera herself wasn’t immune to it. She patted Domenico and walked down the length of the long room, trailing one hand along the low fence that bisected it lengthwise. Her horsemaster stood at the far end, a clipboard clutched in his hand; he was arguing quietly with someone. “Is everything all right, gentlemen?” Venera asked.

The other man turned, lamplight slanting across his gnomish features, and Venera said, “Oh!” before she could stop herself.

Samson Odess screwed his fishlike face up into a smile and practically lunged over to shake her hand.

“I’m honored to meet you, Lady Thrace-Guiles!” His eyes betrayed no recognition, and Venera realized that she was standing in heavy shadow. “Liris is honored to offer you some land to stable your horses. You see, we’re diversifying and—”

She grinned weakly. It was too soon for this! She had hoped that the men and women of Liris would be consumed by their own internal matters, at least long enough for her new identity to become fixed. If Odess recognized her the news would be bound to percolate through the Fair. She didn’t believe in its vaunted secrecy any more than she believed that good always triumphed.

She let go of Odess’s hand before he could get entirely into his sales pitch,

and turned away. “Charmed, I’m sure. Flance! Can you deal with this?”

“Oh, but Master Flance was unable to resolve one little matter,” said the horse master, stepping around Odess.

“Deal with it!” she snarled. She glimpsed a startled look in Odess’s eye before she swept by the two men and into the outer hallway.

Well, *that* had been an unexpected surge of adrenalin! She laughed at herself as she strode quickly through the vaulted, whitewashed spaces. In the half-minute it took her to slow down to a stroll, Venera took several turns and ended up in an area of the cellars she didn’t know.

Someone cleared his or her throat. Venera turned to find a man in servant’s livery approaching. He looked only vaguely familiar but that was hardly surprising considering the number of people she’d hired recently.

“Ma’am, this area hasn’t been cleaned up yet. Are you looking for something in particular?”

“No. I’m lost. Where did you just come from?”

“This way.” The man walked back the way they had both come. He was right about the state of the cellars; this passage hadn’t been reconstructed and was only minimally cleaned. Black portraits still hung on the walls, here and there an eye glaring out from behind centuries of dust and soot. The lanterns were widely spaced and a few men visible down a side way were reduced to silhouettes, their backdrop some bright distant doors.

“Down this way.” Her guide indicated a black stairwell Venera hadn’t seen before. Narrow and unlit, it plummeted steeply down.

Venera stopped. “What the—” Then she saw the pistol in his hand.

“Move,” grated the man. “Now.”

She almost called his bluff. One of those quick sidesteps Chaison had taught her, then a foot sweep ... he would be on the floor before he knew it. But she hesitated just long enough for him to step out of reach. Caught unprepared for once, Venera stumbled into the blackness with him behind her.

* * * *

“You’re in a lot of trouble,” she said.

“We’re not afraid of the authorities,” said her kidnaper contemptuously.

“I’m not talking about the authorities, I’m talking about *me*.” The stairs had ended on a narrow shelf above an indistinct, dark body of water. It was dank and cold down here; looking left and right she saw that she was standing on the edge of large tank—a cistern, no doubt.

“We’ve been watching you,” said the shadowy figure behind her. “I assure you we know what you’re capable of.” The pistol was in her back again and he was pushing her hard enough that she had trouble keeping her feet. Angrily she hurried ahead and emerged onto the iron plating next to the water. “I didn’t know I had this,” she commented as she turned right, toward the source of the light.

“It’s not yours, this is part of the municipal water supply,” said a half-familiar voice up ahead.

She eyed the black depths. Jump in? There might be a culvert she could swim through, the way heroes did in romance novels. Those heroes never drowned in the dark, though, and besides even if she made it out of here her appearance, soaking wet, in the streets of the city was bound to cause a scandal. She did not need that right now.

There was an open area at the far end of the tank. The same tables and crates she’d seen in the wine cellar were set up here, and the same young revolutionaries were sitting on them. Standing next to a lantern-lit desk was the youth with straight black hair and oval eyes. He was dressed in the long coat and tails she’d seen fashionable men wearing on the streets of the wheel; with his arms crossed the coat belled out enough for her to see the two pistols holstered at his waist. She was suddenly reminded of Garth’s apparel, which was like a down-at-heel version of the same costume.

“What’s the meaning of this?” she snapped, even as she counted people and exits (there was one of the latter, a closed iron door). “You’re not being very neighborly,” she added more softly.

“Sit her down and tie her up,” said the black-haired youth. He had a high tenor voice, not unmanly but refined, his words very precise. His eyes were gray and cold.

“Yes, Bryce.” The man who’d led her here sat her down on a stout wooden chair next to the table, and pulling her arms back proceeded to tie a clumsy knot around her wrists.

Venera craned her neck to look back. “You obviously don’t do this much,” she said. Then, spearing this Bryce fellow with a sharp eye, she added, “Kidnapping is precision work. You people don’t strike me as being organized enough to pull it off.”

Bryce’s eyebrows shot up, that same look of surprise he’d shown in the cellar. “If you’d been following our escapades you’d know what we’re capable of.”

“Bombing innocent crowds, yes,” she said acidly. “Hero’s work, that.”

He shrugged, but looked uncomfortable. “That one was meant for the council members,” he admitted. “It fell back and killed the man who threw it. That *was* a soldier’s death.”

She nodded. “Like most soldiers’ deaths, painfully unnecessary. What do you want?”

Bryce spun another chair around and sat down in it, folding his arms over its back. “We intend to bring down the great nations,” he said simply.

Venera considered how to reply. After a moment she said, “How can kidnapping me get you any closer to doing that? I’m an outsider, I’m sure nobody cares much whether I live or die. And nobody will ransom me.”

“True,” he agreed with a shrug. “But if you go missing, you’ll soon be declared a fraud and the title to Buridan will go up for grabs. It’ll be a free-for-all, and we intend to make sure that it starts a civil war.”

As plans went, it struck Venera as eminently practical—but this was not a good time to be smiling and nodding.

She thought for a while. All she could hear was the slow *drip drip* of water from rusted ceiling pipes; doubtless no one would hear any cries for help. “I suppose you’ve been following my story,” she said eventually. “Do you believe that I’m Amandera Thrace-Guiles, heir of Buridan?”

He waved a hand negligently. “Couldn’t care less. Actually, I think you are an imposter, but why does it matter? You’ll soon be out of the picture.”

“But what if I *am* an imposter?” She watched his face closely as she spoke. “Where do you suppose I came from?”

Now he looked puzzled. “Here ... but your accent is foreign. Are you from outside Spyre?”

She nodded. “Outside Spyre, and consequently I have no loyalty for any of the factions here. But I do have one thing—I’ve come into a great deal of money and influence, using my own wits.”

He leaned back, laughing. “So what are you saying?” he asked. “That you’re a sympathizer? More like an opportunist; so why should I have anything but contempt for that?”

“Because this power ... is only a means to an end,” she said. “I’m not interested in who governs or even who ends up with the money I’ve gained. I have my own agenda.”

He snorted. “How vague and intriguing. Well, I’m sure I can’t help you with this ill-defined ‘agenda.’ We’re only interested in people who *believe*. People who know that there’s another way to govern than the tyrannies we have here. I’m talking about emergent government, which you as a barbarian have probably never even heard of.”

“Emergent?” Now it was Venera’s turn to be startled. “That’s just a myth. Government emerging spontaneously as a property of people’s interactions ... it doesn’t work.”

“Oh, but it does.” He fished inside his jacket and came out with a small, heavily worn black book. “This is the proof. And the key to bringing it back.” He held the book up for her to see; with her limited mobility, Venera could just make out the title: *Rights Currencies, 29th Edition*.

“It’s the manual,” he said. “The original manual, taken from the secret libraries of one of the great nations. This book explains how currency-based emergent government works, and provides an example.” He opened the book and withdrew several tightly folded bills. These he unfolded on the table where she could see them. “People have always had codes of conduct,” said Bryce as he stared lovingly at the money, “but they were originally put together hit or miss, with anecdotal evidence to back them up, and using armies and policemen to enforce them. This is a system based on the human habit of buying and selling—only you can’t use this money to buy *things*. Each bill stands for a particular *right*.”

She leaned over to see. One pink rectangle had the word JUDGEMENT printed on it above two columns of tiny words. “The text shows which other bills you can trade this one for,” said Bryce helpfully. “On the flip side is a description of what you can do if you’ve got it. This one lets you try court cases if you’ve also got some other types of bill, but you have to trade this one to judge a trial. The idea is you can only sell it to someone who doesn’t have the correct combination to judge and hopefully whoever they sell it to sells it back to you. So the system’s not static, it has to be sustained through continual transactions.”

She looked at another bill. It said GET OUT OF JAIL FREE. The book Bryce was holding, if it was genuine, was priceless. People had been looking for these lost principles for longer than they’d been trying to find the last key to Candesce. Venera had never believed they really existed.

Pointedly, she shrugged. “So?”

The young revolutionary snatched up the bills. “Currencies like this can’t just be *made*,” he proclaimed, exhibiting a certain youthful zeal that she would have found endearing in other circumstances. “The rights, the classifications, number of denominations, who you can trade to—all of those details have to be calculated with the use of massive simulations of whole human societies. Simulate the society in a computing machine, and test different interactions ... then compile a list of ratios and relations between the bills. Put them in circulation, and an ordered society emerges from the transactions—without institutions getting in the way. Simple.”

“Right,” said Venera, “And I’m betting that this book wasn’t designed for a world like Virga, was it? Isn’t this a set of rules for people who live on a flat-world—a ‘planet’? The legend says that’s why the emergent systems were

lost—because their rules didn't apply here.”

“Not the old ratios, it's true,” he admitted. “But the core bills ... they're sound. You can at least use them to minimize your institutions even if you can't eliminate them completely. We intend to prove it, starting here.”

“Well, that's very ambitious.” Venera suddenly noticed the way he was looking at her. She was tied with her arms back and her breasts thrust at this young man and he was obviously enjoying her predicament. For the first time since being brought down here, she found herself genuinely off balance.

She struggled to regain her line of thought. “Anyway, this is all beside the point. Which is, that I am in a greater position to help you as a free woman than as a social pariah—or dead. After all, this civil war of yours probably won't happen. As you say, the great nations have too big a stake in stability. And if it doesn't happen, then what? It's back to the drawing board, minus one hideout for you. Back to bombing and other ineffectual terrorist tactics.”

Bryce closed the book and restored it to his jacket. “What of it? We've already lost this place. If the war doesn't happen there's no downside.”

“But consider what you could do if you had an ally—a patroness—with wealth and resources, and more experience than you in covert activities?” She looked him straight in the eye. “I've killed a number of men in my time. I've built and run my own spy organization—no, I'm not Amandera Thrace-Guiles. I'm someone infinitely more capable than a mere heir to a backwards nation on this backwards little wheel. And with power, and wealth, and influence ... I can help you.”

“No deal.” He stood up and gestured to the others to follow him as he walked to the metal door.

“A printing press!” she called after him. He looked back, puzzled. “In order for that money to work,” she continued, “don't you need to mint thousands of copies of the bills and put them into circulation? It has to be used by everybody to work, right? So where's your printing press?”

He glanced at his people. “It'll happen.”

“Oh? What if I offered you your own mint—delivery of the presses in a month—as well as a solid budget to print your money?”

Bryce appeared to think about it, then reached for the door handle.

“And what if you had an impregnable place to house the press?” she called, frantically reaching for the only other thing she could think to offer. “*What if Buridan tower was yours?*”

One of his lieutenants put a hand on Bryce's arm. He glared at the man, then

made a sour face and turned. “Why on Spyre would we trust you to keep your end of the bargain?”

“The tower contains proof that I’m an imposter,” she said quickly. “The council is going to want to visit it, I’m sure of it—but how can I clean it up and make it presentable? None of my new servants could be trusted with the secret. But you could—and you could take photographs, do what you need to do to assemble proof that I’m not the heir. So you’ll have that to hold over me. You’ll have the tower, you’ll have money, and as much influence as I can spare for you.”

He was thinking about it, she could tell—and the others were impressed as well. “Best of all,” she added before he could change his mind, “if my deception is ultimately revealed, you may get your civil war anyway. What could be better?”

Bryce walked slowly back to her. “Again I say, why should we trust you? If there’s proof as you say in Buridan tower ... if you’d even let us get there before the police descended on us ... Too many ifs, Ms. Thrace-Guiles.”

“I’ll draft you a note right now,” she said. “Made out to the night watch at the elevators, to let your people ride the elevator down to Buridan Tower. You can do it right now, and release me after you’re sure I’m right.”

“And be trapped there when your charade is exposed?”

That was just too much for Venera. “Then forget it, you bastard!” she yelled at him. “Go on, get out! I’m sure you’re far too busy playing the romantic revolutionary leader. Go and sacrifice the lives of a few more of your friends to convince the rest of them that you’re actually doing something. Oh, and blow up a few women and babies for good measure, I’m sure that’ll make you feel better—or start your damned war and kill ten thousand innocents, I don’t care! Just get out of my sight!”

Bryce’s face darkened with anger, but he didn’t move. Finally he stalked over and scowled at her. Venera glared back.

“Bring this woman some paper,” he said. “You’ll write that note,” he said in a low voice, “and we’ll see what we can find in Buridan Tower.”

* * * *

The streets had not changed since his childhood. Garth Diamandis strode familiar ways, but after such a long absence it was as if he saw them with new eyes. His town-wheel, officially known as Wheel 3, had been called Hammerlong for centuries. Its riveted iron diameter spanned nearly a mile, and the inside surface on which the buildings were set was nearly half that wide. It had spun for five hundred years. In that time, the layout of Hammerlong’s gargoyle buildings had been rearranged—or not where they accommodated stubborn holdouts—dozens of times. New edifices had hiked their buttresses over the shoulders of older ones as the population grew, then shrank, then grew again. The wheel had been fixed, reinforced,

rejigged, and thrown out of whack by weight imbalances so often that its constant creaking and groaning was like background music to the citizens who lived there. The smell of rust permeated everything.

With finite space, the citizens of the wheel had jammed new buildings in between existing ones; corkscrewed them inward and outward from the rim; overgrown what was original with the new. Streamlined towers hung like knife blades below the rim, their bottom-most floors straining under nearly two gravities while the stacked apartments overhead converged to shadow the streets and a second layer of avenues, then a third, were built up where weight diminished. Yin-yang stairs, elevator cables, ancient rust-dribbling spokes, and leaking pipes all knotted together at the smoke-wreathed axis. Ships and shuttles clustered there like grazing flies.

Hammerlong seemed designed for skulking and the population did just that. Most were citizens of nations based on Greater Spyre, after all, so they brought the paranoia of that realm with them to the city. Those born and raised in Hammerlong and the other wheels were more open, but they formed a separate class and had fewer rights in their own towns. Left to their own devices, they cultivated a second economy and culture in the alleys, air-shafts and crawlspaces of the layered city.

Garth was on a third-level street when the full force of nostalgia hit him. He had to stop, his imagination filling in gaps in the crowds that scurried to and fro like so many black-clad ants. He saw the young dandies of his youth, swaggering and hipshot to display their pistols; the ingenues leaning on their balconies high above, their attention apparently elsewhere. He had walked or run or fled down these ways dozens of times.

Some of his old compatriots were dead, he knew, some had moved on to build prosperous families and deny their youths. Others ... the prisons were still full, one of Venera Fanning's new carpenters had told him this morning. And, if one knew where to look, and how to read ... there, yes he saw a thin scrawl of graffiti on a wall ten feet beyond the parapet. Made with chalk, it was barely visible unless you knew to look for it. *Repeal Edict 1*, said the spiky letters.

Garth smiled. Ah, the naivete of youth! Edict 1 had been passed so long ago that most citizens of Spyre didn't even know it existed, nor would they have understood its significance if it were described to them. The hotheaded youth of Spyre were still political, it seemed, and still as incompetent at promoting their politics as in his day. Witness that appalling bomb attack yesterday.

The memory chased all sentimentality out of Garth's mind. His mouth set in a stoic frown, he continued on down the street, digging his hands deep in his coat pockets and avoiding the glances of the few women who frequented the walkway. His aching feet carried him to stairs and more stairs, and his knees and hips began to protest at the labor. The last time he'd gone this way he'd been able to run all the way up.

Hundreds of feet above the official street level of Hammerlong, a bridge had been thrown between two buildings back in the carefree Reconstructionist period. Culture and art had flourished here before the time of the preservationists, even before the insular paranoia that had swallowed all the great nations.

The bridge was two stories tall and faced with leaded glass windows that caught the light of Candesce. It wasn't used by occupants of either tower; the forges of one had little use for the paper-making enterprise in the other. For decades, the lofting, sunlit spaces of the bridge had been used by bohemian artists—and the agitators and revolutionaries who loved them.

Garth's heart was pounding as he took the last few steps up a wrought-iron fire escape at the center of the span. He paused to catch his breath next to the wrought-iron curlicues of the door, and listened to the scratchy gramophone music that emanated from it. Then he rapped on the door.

The gramophone stopped. He heard scrambling noises, muffled voices. Then the door cracked open an inch. "Yes?" a man said belligerently.

"Sorry to disturb you," Garth said with a broad smile. "I'm looking for someone."

"Well, they're not here." The door started to close.

Garth laughed richly. "I'm not with the secret police, young pup. I used to live here."

The door hesitated. "I painted this iron about ... oh, twenty years ago," Garth said, tracing his finger along the curves of metal. "It was rusting out, just like the one in the back bathroom. Do the pipes still knock when you run the water?"

"What do you want?" The voice held a little less harshness.

Garth withdrew his hand from the remembered metal. With difficulty he brought his attention back to the present. "I know she doesn't live here now," he said. "Too much time has passed. But I had to start somewhere and this was the last place we were together. I don't suppose you know ... any of the former occupants of the place?"

"Just a minute." The door closed, then opened again, widely this time. "Come in." Garth stepped into the sunlit space and was overwhelmed by memory.

The factory planks paving the floor had proven perfect for dancing. He remembered stepping into and out of that parallelogram of sunlight—though there had been a table next to it and he'd banged his hip—while she sang along with the gramophone. That same gramophone sat on a windowsill now, guarded by twin potted orange trees. A mobile of candles and wire turned slowly in the dusty sunlight, entangling his view of the loft behind it. Where he'd slept, and made love, and played his dulcimer for years...

“Who are you after?” A young woman with cropped black hair stood before him. She wore a man’s clothing and held a tattoo needle loosely in one hand. Another woman sat at the table behind her, shoulder bared and bleeding.

Garth took a deep breath and committed the name to speech for the first time in twenty years. “Her name is Selene. Selene Diamandis...”

To be continued.

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