

QUEEN OF CANDESCENCE: PART III OF IV by KARL SCHROEDER



Illustration by George Krauter

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Having too much power in one thing or person carries with it an inherent vulnerability...

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 has been listed as a traitor in her adopted home of Slipstream and cannot return to the court intrigues of her childhood home in Hale. For a while she drifts in a state of numb despair, living like a vagabond with Garth Diamandis in the wilds of Greater Spyre. When she learns there may be a way off of Spyre, though, she's faced with making a choice. Either go home and confront the fact of Chaison Fanning's death; or delay the inevitable. She decides to delay, by telling herself that she needs power to exact revenge on those responsible for Chaison's death. She will stay here in Spyre until she has that power.

Garth knows of a way to get it. Observant as he is, he's seen that she carries an ancient signet ring (taken from the treasure of Anetene in the last book) marked with the symbol of a horse. If the ring is what he thinks it is, vast riches may be theirs for the taking. But it won't be easy: to learn the truth they have to brave the deadly airfall, a region of Greater Spyre where the ground has given way and torrents of wind blast down and out of the world. Garth leads Venera along hidden paths to the gates of a forlorn tower that stands alone in the midst of the airfall. There, her ring turns out to work as a key, letting them in to Buridan Tower, which has not been entered in two hundred years.

*Venera takes the identity of **Amandera Thrace-Guiles**, last heir of Buridan, and rises up the Buridan elevator to Lesser Spyre to claim an inheritance that has been waiting for an heir for centuries. Naturally the great powers of Spyre are skeptical of her claim—none more so than **Jacoby Sarto**, spokesman for the feared nation of Sacrus. Sarto does his best to torpedo Venera's claim, an effort that culminates in a confrontation during her confirmation interview. Sacrus, it turns out, is the homeland of Margit. Sarto knows about the key to Candesce and reveals that Sacrus has it.*

*During these escapades Venera also has a run-in with a local insurgent group, which is led by a young man she finds attractive: **Bryce** is of noble background but has adopted the Cause, which is to reintroduce a form of emergent democracy to Spyre, and eventually Virga itself. Venera thinks he's doomed to fail, but he emerges as a key ally as events unfold.*

*So now she has the wealth and power she craved—even if her hold on it is tenuous. What to do? Venera's not willing to admit the growing sense of affection she feels for Garth, or the equally unfamiliar sense of loyalty she's learning. She decides to leave Spyre. At the same time, Garth is completing his own quest, a search for someone named **Selene Diamandis**. They part ways, two battle-scarred veterans of long emotional wars, with no expectation that they will ever meet again.*

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12

Spyre was awe-inspiring even at a distance of ten miles. Venera held onto netting in a rear-facing doorway of the passenger liner *Glorious Dawn* and watched the vast blue circle recede in the distance. First one cloud shot by to obscure a quadrant of her view, then another, then a small team of them that whirled slowly in the ship's wake. They chopped Spyre up into fragmented images: a curve of green trees here, a glint of window in some tower (Liris?). Then, instead of clouds, it was blockhouses and barbed wire flicking by. They were passing the perimeter. She was free.

She turned, facing into the interior of the ship. The velvet-walled galleries were crowded with passengers, mostly visiting delegations returning from the Fair. But a

few of the men and women were dressed in the iron and leather of a major nation: Buridan. Her retainers, maids, the Buridan trade delegation ... she wasn't free yet, not until she had found a way to evade all of them.

Now that she was undisputed head of the Nation of Buridan, Venera had new rights. The right to travel freely, for example; it had only taken a simple request and a travel visa had been delivered to her the next day. Of course she couldn't simply wave goodbye and leave. Nobody was fully convinced that she was who she said she was. So, it had been necessary for her to invent a pointless trade tour of the principalities to justify this trip. And that in turn meant that she could not be traveling alone.

Still—after weeks of running, of being captured by Liris and made chattel; after run-ins with bombers and bombs, hostile nobility and mad botanists—after all of that, she had simply boarded a ship and left. Life was never like you imagined it would be.

And she could just keep going, she knew—all the way back to her home in Rush. The idea was tempting, but it wasn't why she had undertaken this expedition. It was too soon to return home. She didn't yet have enough power to undertake the revenge she planned against the Pilot of Slipstream. If she left now it would be as a thief, with only what she could carry to see her home. No, when she finally did leave Spyre, it must be with power at her back.

The only way to get that power was to increase her holdings here, as well as the faith of the people in her. So, like Liris and all the other nations of Spyre, Buridan would visit the outer world to find *customers*.

Her smile faltered as the last of the barbed wire and mines swept by to vanish among the clouds. True, if she just kept going she wouldn't miss anything of Spyre, she mused. Yet even as she thought this Venera experienced a little flash of memory: of Garth Diamandis laughing in sunlight; then of Eilen leaning on a wall after drinking too much at the party.

Last night Venera too had drunk too much wine, with Garth Diamandis. Sitting in a lounge that smelled of fresh paint and plaster, they had listened to the night noises of the house and talked.

“You're not kidding either of us,” he'd said. “You're leaving for good. I know that. So let me tell you now, while I can, that you've stripped many years off my shoulders, Lady Venera Fanning. I hope you find your home intact and waiting for you.” He toasted her then.

“I'll prove you wrong about me yet,” she'd said. “But what about you?” she asked. “When all of this really is finished with, what are you going to do? Fade into the alleys of the town wheels? Return to your life as a gigolo?”

He shook his head with a smile. “The past is the past. I'm interested in the

future. Venera ... I found her.”

Venera had smiled, genuinely happy for him. “Ah. Your mysterious woman. Your prime mover. Well, I’m glad.”

He’d nodded vigorously. “She’s sent me a letter, telling where and when we can meet. In the morning, you’ll head for the docks and your destiny, and I’ll be off to the city and mine. So you see, we’ve both won.”

They toasted one another, and Spyre, and eventually the whole world before the night became a happy blur.

She kicked off from the ship’s netting, almost colliding with one of the crew, and began hauling her way up the corridor to the bow of the ship. One of her new maids fell into formation next to her.

“Is there something wrong, lady?” The maid, Brydda, wrung her hands. Her normally sour face looked even more prudish as she frowned. “Is it leaving Spyre that’s upset you so?”

Venera barked a laugh. “It couldn’t happen soon enough. No.” She kept hand-walking up the rope that led to the bow.

“Can I do anything for you?”

She shot Brydda an appraising look. “You’ve traveled before, haven’t you? You were put onto my staff by the council, I’ll bet. To watch me.”

“Madam!”

“Oh, don’t deny it. Just come with. I need a ... distraction. You can point out the sights as we go.”

“Yes, madam.”

They arrived at a forward observation lounge in time for the ship to exit the cloud banks. The *Glorious Dawn* was a typical passenger vessel: a spindle-shaped wooden shell one hundred fifty feet long and forty wide, its surface punctuated with rows of windows and open wicker-work galleries. Big jet nacelles were mounted on short arms at the stern, their whine subdued right now as the ship made a scant fifteen miles per hour through the thinning clouds. The ship’s interior was subdivided into staterooms and common areas and contained two big exercise centrifuges. With the engine sound a constant undertone, Venera could easily hear the clink of glassware in the kitchens, muted conversations, and somewhere, a string quartet tuning up. The lounge smelled of coffee and fresh air.

Such a contrast to the *Rook*, the last ship she had flown on. When she’d left it the Slipstream cruiser had stunk of unwashed men, stale air, and rocket exhaust. Its hull had been peppered with bullet holes and scorched by explosions. The engines’

roar would pierce your dreams as you slept and the only voices were those of arguing, cursing airmen.

The *Glorious Dawn* was just like every vessel she had ever traveled on prior to the *Rook*. Its luxuries and details were appropriate to one of Venera's station in life; she should be able to put the ship on like a favorite glove. In the normal course of affairs she would never have set foot on a ship like the *Rook*, much less would she have seen it through battle and boarding, pursuit and silent running.

Yet the quiet comforts of the *Glorious Dawn* annoyed her. Venera went right up to the main window of the lounge and peered out. "Tell me where we are," she commanded the maid.

There was distraction to be found in this view. Candescence lay directly ahead, its brilliance too intense to be looked at directly. Venera well knew that light, it had burned her as she'd fled from its embrace. She shielded her eyes with her hand and looked past it.

She saw the principalities of Candescence. Although she had spent a week in a charcoal-harvester's cabin perched on a burnt arm of the sargasso of Leaf's Choir, that place had been too close to Candescence; the white air cradling the sun of suns washed out any details that lay past it. Here, for the first time, she had a clear view of the nations that surrounded that biggest of Virga's artificial lights. And the sight was breathtaking.

Candescence lay at the center of the world, a beacon and a heart to Virga. Anything within a hundred miles of the sun of suns simply vanished in flame, a fact that the principalities exploited to dispose of trash, industrial wastes, and the bodies of their dead. This forbidden zone was completely empty, so Venera could see the whole inner surface of the two-hundred-mile-diameter bubble formed by it. On the far side of Candescence that surface was just a smooth speckled blue-green; in the middle distances Venera could make out dots and glitter, and individual beads of leaf color. As she turned to follow the curve of the material toward her the dots became buildings and the glints became the mirrored surfaces of house-sized spheres of water. The beads of green grew filigreed detail and became forests—dozens or hundreds of trees at a time, with their roots intertwined around some buried ball of dirt and rocks.

Candescence presided at the center of a cloud of city whose inner extent was two hundred miles in diameter—and whose outer reaches could only be guessed at. The fog of habitations and farms receded into blue dimness, behind lattices of white cloud. Back in the darkening airs a hundred or two hundred miles away, smaller suns glowed.

"These are the principalities," said Brydda, sweeping her arm to take in the sight. "Sixty-four nations, countless millions of people moving at the mercy of Candescence's heat."

Venera glanced at her. “What do you mean by that? ‘At the mercy of?’”

The maid looked chagrined. “Well, they can’t keep station where they please, the way Spyre does. Spyre is fixed in the air, madam, always has been. But these—” she dismissed the principalities with a wave—”they go where the breezes send them. All that keeps them together as nations is the stability of the circulation patterns.”

Venera nodded. The cluster of nations she’d grown up in, Meridian, worked the same way. Candescence’s prodigious heat had to go somewhere, and beyond the exclusion zone it must form the air into Hadley cells: semi-stable up- and down-drafts. You could enter such a cell at the bottom, near Candescence, and be lofted a hundred miles up, then swept horizontally for another hundred miles, then down again until you reached your starting point. The Meridian Hadley cell was huge—a thousand miles across and twice that in depth—and nearly permanent. Down here in the principalities the heat would make the cells less stable, but quicker and stronger.

“So there’s one nation per Hadley cell?” she asked. “That seems altogether too well organized.”

The maid laughed. “It’s not that simple. The cells break up and merge, but it takes time. Every time Candescence goes into its night cycle the heat stops going out, and the cells falter. Candescence always comes back on in time to start them up again but not without consequence.”

Venera understood what she meant by *consequence*. Without predictable airflow, whole nations could break apart, their provinces drifting away from one another, mixing with neighbors and enemies. It had happened often enough in Meridian, where the population was light and obstacles few. Down here, such an event would be catastrophic.

Brydda continued her monologue, pointing out border beacons and other sights of interest. Venera half listened, musing at something she’d known intellectually but not grasped until this moment. She had been inside—had for one night been *in control of*—the most powerful device in the world. Whole cities rose and fell in a slow majestic dance driven by Candescence—as did forests, mists of green food-crops, and isolated buildings, clouds and ships and factories, supply nets a mile across, whale and bird paddocks. Ships and dolphins and ropeways and flapping, foot-finned humans threaded through it all.

She’d had ultimate power in her hands, and had let it go without a thought. Strange.

Venera turned her attention back to Brydda. As the *Glorious Dawn* turned, however, she saw that Spyre lay in a kind of dimple in the surface of the bubble. The giant cylinder disrupted the smooth winds of the cells that surrounded it. Wrapped in its own weather, Spyre was an irritant, a mote in the gargantuan orb of the principalities.

“How they must hate you,” she murmured.

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Slipstream had an ambassador at the Fitzmann States, an old and respected principality near Spyre. So it was that Buridan’s trade delegation made its first stop there.

For two days Venera feted the local wealthy and talked horses—horses as luxury items, horses as tourist draws, as symbols of state power and a connection to the lost origins of Virga. She convinced no one, but since she was hosting the parties, her guests went away entertained and slightly tipsy. The arrangement suited everyone.

There was nothing scheduled for the third morning, and Venera awoke early with a very strange notion in her head.

Leave now.

She could do it. Oh, it would be so simple. She imagined her marriage bed in her chambers in Rush, and a wave of sorrow came over her. She was up and dressed before her thinking caught up to her actions. She hesitated, while Candescence and the rest of the capital town of Fitzmann still slept. She paced in front of her rented apartment’s big windows, shaking her head and muttering. Every now and then she would glance out the window at the dark silhouette of the Slipstream ambassador’s residence. She need only make it there and claim asylum, and Spyre and all its machinations would lie behind her.

Slowly, as if her mind were on something else, she slipped a pistol into her bag and reached for a set of wings inside the closet. At that moment there came a knock on her door.

Venera came to herself, shocked to see what she had been doing. She leaned against the wall for a moment, debating whether to step into the closet and shut herself in it. Then she cursed and walked to the door of the suite. “Who’s there?” she asked testily.

“It’s Brydda, ma’am. I’ve a letter for you.”

“A letter?” She threw open the door and glared at the maid, who was dressed in a nightgown and clutched a white envelope in one hand. She saw Brydda’s eyes widen as she took in Venera’s fully-dressed state. Venera snatched the letter from her and said, “Lucky thing that I couldn’t sleep. But how dare you come to disturb me in the middle of the night over this!”

“I’m sorry!” Brydda curtsied miserably. “The man who delivered it was very insistent that you read it now. He says he needs a signed receipt from you saying you’ve read it—and he’s waiting in the foyer...”

Venera flipped the envelope over. The words *Amandera Thrace-Guiles* were

written on it. There was no other seal or indication of its origin. Uneasy, Venera retreated into the room. “Wait there a moment.” She went over to the writing desk; not seeing a letter opener anywhere handy, she slit the envelope open using the knife she’d been keeping in her vest. Then she unfolded the single sheet under the green desk lamp.

TO: Venera Fanning

FROM:—

SUBJECT: Master Flance, otherwise known as Garth Diamandis

We have arrested your accomplice (above-named). As an exiled criminal, he has no rights in Greater or Lesser Spyre. If you want him to continue living, you will return immediately to Spyre and await our instructions.

She swore and knocked over the writing desk. The lamp broke and went out. “My lady!” shouted Brydda from the doorway.

“Shut up! Get out! Don’t disturb me again!” She slammed the door in the maid’s face and began pacing, the letter mangled in her fist.

How *dare* they! This was obviously Sacrus asserting their hold over her—but in the most clumsy and insulting manner possible. There was a message in their bluntness and it was simple: They had neither the need nor the patience to treat her carefully. She would do as they asked, or they would kill Garth.

Like Garth, they must have thought she was going to run. So why not let her do it? They didn’t appear to be concerned that she might alert Slipstream to the theft of the Key to Candesce because they had let her get this far. That was odd—or not so odd, when you considered that the leaders of Sacrus must be as insular and decadent as any of the other pocket nations on the wheel. But why not just let her go?

They must have decided that they needed Buridan’s stability. She probably shouldn’t read too much into the decision. They could just as easily change their minds and have her killed at any moment.

Anyway, the reasons didn’t matter. They had Garth—she had no reason to doubt that—and if she didn’t return to Spyre immediately, his death would be her fault.

As her initial anger wore off, Venera sat down on a divan and, reaching in her jacket, brought out the bullet that nestled there. She turned it over in her hands for half an hour and then as Candesce began to ignite in the distant sky, she made her decision.

She slid the dagger back into her vest.

She took the wings from inside the closet and stepped into the hallway. Brydda was asleep in a wing chair under a tall leaded-glass window. Venera walked past her to the servant's stairs and headed for the roof.

Gold-touched by the awakening sun of suns, she took flight in the high winds and lower gravity of the rooftop.

Venera rose on the air, losing weight rapidly as the wind disengaged her from the spin of the town wheel. High above the buildings, among turning cables and hovering birds, she turned her back on the apartment and on the trade delegation of Buridan. She turned her back on Garth Diamandis, and flew toward the residence of the ambassador of Slipstream.

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Various scenarios had played themselves out in her mind as she flew. The first was that she could pretend to be the estranged wife of one of the sailors on the *Rook*. Wringing her hands, she could look pathetic and demand news of the expedition.

Venera wasn't good at looking pathetic. Besides, they could legitimately ask what she was doing here, thousands of miles away from Slipstream.

She could claim to be a traveling merchant. Then why ask after the expedition? Perhaps she should say she was from Hale, not Slipstream, a distant relative of Venera Fanning needing news of her.

These and other options ran through her mind as Venera waited next to the tall scrolled doors of the ambassador's office. The moment the door lock clicked, she pushed her way inside and said to the surprised secretary, "My name is Venera Fanning. I need to talk to the ambassador."

The man turned white as a sheet. He practically ran for the inner office and there was a hurried, loud conversation there. Then he stuck his head out the door and said, "You can't be seen here."

"Too late for that, if anyone's watching." She closed the outer door and walked to the inner. The secretary threw it open and stepped aside.

The ambassador of Slipstream was a middle-aged woman with iron-gray hair and the kind of stern features usually reserved for suspicious aunts, school principals, and morals crusaders. She glared at Venera and gestured for her to sit in one of the red leather wing chairs that faced her dark teak desk. "So you're alive," she said as she lowered herself heavily on her side.

"Why shouldn't I be?" Venera was suddenly anxious to the point of panic. "What happened to the others?"

The ambassador sent her a measuring look. "You were separated from your husband's expedition?"

“Yes! I’ve had no news. Just ... rumors.”

“The expeditionary force was destroyed,” said the ambassador. She grimaced apologetically. “Your husband’s flagship apparently rammed a Falcon dreadnaught, causing a massive explosion that tore both vessels apart. All hands are presumed lost.”

“I see...” She felt sick, as though this were the first time she’d heard this news.

“I don’t think you do see,” said the ambassador. She snapped her fingers and her secretary left, returning with a silver tray and two glasses of wine.

“You’ve shown up at an awkward time,” continued the ambassador. “One of your husband’s ships did make it back to Rush. The *Severance* limped back into port a couple of weeks ago, and her hull was full of holes. Naturally, the people assumed she was the vanguard of a return from the battle with Mavery. But no—the airmen disembarked and they were laughing, crying, claiming a great victory, and waving away all talk of Mavery. ‘No,’ they say, ‘we’ve beaten *Falcon*! By the genius of the Pilot and Admiral Fanning, we’ve forestalled an invasion and saved Slipstream!’

“Can the Pilot deny it? If Fanning himself had returned, with the other ships ... maybe not. If the airmen of the *Severance* hadn’t started throwing around impossible amounts of money, displaying rich jewels and gold chains and talking wildly about a pirate’s hoard ... Well, you see the problem. *Falcon* is supposed to be an *ally*. And the Pilot’s been caught with his pants below his knees, completely unaware of a threat to his nation until after his most popular admiral has extinguished that threat.

“He ordered the crew rounded up, on charges of treason. The official story is that Fanning took some ships on a raid into *Falcon* and busted open one of their treasuries. He’s being court-martialed in absentia, as a traitor and pirate.”

“Therefore,” said Venera, “if I were to return now...”

“You’d be tried as an accessory, at the very least.” The ambassador steeped her hands and leaned forward minutely in her chair. “Legally, I’m bound to turn you over for extradition. Except that, should I do so, you’d likely become a lightning rod for dissent. After the riots...”

“What riots?”

“Well.” She looked uncomfortable. “The Pilot was a bit ... slow, to act. He didn’t round up all of the *Severance*’s airmen quickly enough. And he didn’t stem the tide until a good deal of money had flowed into the streets. Apparently, these were no mere trinkets the men were showing off—and they’re not treasury items either, they’re *plunder*, pure and simple, and ancient to boot. And the people, the people believe the *Severance*, not the Pilot.

“Our last dispatch—that was two days ago—says that the bulk of the crew and officers made it back to the *Severance* and bottled themselves up in it. It’s out there now, floating a hundred yards off the admiralty. The Pilot ordered it blown up, and that’s when rioting started in the city.”

“If you returned now,” said the secretary, “there’d be even more bloodshed.”

“—And likely your blood would be spilled as an example to others.” The ambassador shook her head. “It gets worse, too. The navy’s refused the Pilot’s command. They won’t blow up the *Severance*, they want to know what happened. They’re trying to talk the crew out, and there’s a three-way standoff now between the Pilot’s soldiers, the navy, and the *Severance* herself. It’s a real mess.”

Venera’s pulse was pounding. She wanted to be there, in the admiralty. She knew Chaison’s peers, she could rally those men to fight back. They all hated the Pilot, after all.

She slumped back in her chair. “Thank you for telling me this.” She thought for a minute, then glanced up at the ambassador. “Are you going to have me arrested?”

The older woman shook her head, half smiling. “Not if you make a discreet enough exit from my office. I suggest the back stairs. I can’t see how sending you home in chains would do anything but fan the flames at this point.”

“Thank you.” She stood and looked toward the door the ambassador had pointed at. “I won’t forget this.”

“Just so long as you never tell anyone that you saw me,” said the ambassador with an ironic smile. “So what will you do?”

“I don’t know.”

“If you stay here in the capital, we might be able to help you—set you up with a job and a place to stay,” said the ambassador sympathetically. “It would be below your station, I’m afraid, at least to start...”

“Thanks, I’ll consider it—and don’t worry, if I see you again, I won’t be Venera Fanning anymore.” Dazed, she pushed through the door into a utilitarian hallway that led to gray tradesmen’s stairs. She barely heard the words “Good luck,” before the door closed behind her.

Venera went down one flight, then sat on a step and put her chin in her hands. She was trembling but dry eyed.

Now what? The news about the *Severance* had been electrifying. She should board the next ship she could find that was headed for the Meridian countries, and ... But it might take weeks to get there. She would arrive after the crisis was resolved, if it hadn’t been already.

There was one man who could have helped her. Hayden Griffin was flying a fast racing bike, a simple jet engine with a saddle. She'd last seen him at Candesce as the sun of suns blossomed into incandescent life. He was opening the throttle—racing for home—and surely by now he was back in Slipstream. If she'd gone with him when he offered her his hand, none of her present troubles would have happened.

Yet she couldn't do it. Venera had killed Hayden's lover not ten minutes before and simply could not believe that he wouldn't murder her in return if he got the chance.

She hadn't wanted to kill Aubri Mahallan. The woman had lied about her intentions; she had joined the Fanning expedition with the intention of crippling Candesce's defenses. She worked for the outsiders, the alien Artificial Nature that lurked somewhere beyond the skin of Virga. Had Venera not prevented it, Mahallan would have let those incomprehensible forces into Virga and nothing would now be as it was.

Once again Venera took out the bullet and turned it over in her fingers. She had killed the captain of the *Rook* and his bridge crew—shot them with a pistol—in order to save the lives of everyone aboard. Captain Sembry had been about to fire the *Rook*'s scuttling charges during their battle with the pirates. She had shot several other people in battle and killed Mahallan to save the world itself. Just like she'd shot the man who had been about to kill Chaison, on the day they'd met...

Either she had killed those people because of a higher purpose, or from naked self-interest. She could admit to being ruthless and callous, even heartless, but Venera did not see herself as fundamentally selfish. She had been bred and raised to be selfish, but she didn't want to be like her sisters or her father. That was the whole reason why she'd escaped life in Hale at her first opportunity.

Venera cursed. If she flew away from Garth Diamandis and the key to Candesce now, she would be admitting that she had killed Aubri Mahallan not to save the world but out of pure spite. She'd be admitting that she'd shot Sembry in the forehead solely to preserve her own life. Could she even claim to have been trying to save Chaison too?

All her stratagems collapsed. Venera returned the bullet to her pocket, stood, and continued down the steps.

When she reached the street she looked around until she spotted the apartment where at this moment Brydda and the rest of the Buridan trade delegation must be frantically searching for her. Leaden with defeat and anger, she let her feet carry her in that direction.

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There were plenty of people waiting for Venera at the docks, but Garth was not among them—oh, she had accountants aplenty, maids and masters of protocol, porters and reporters and doctors, couriers and dignitaries from the nations of Spyre that had decided to conspicuously ally with Buridan. There was lots to do. But as she signed documents and ordered people about, Venera felt the old familiar pain radiating up from her jaw. Today's headache would be a killer.

She had to provide some explanation for why she'd returned early from the expedition, if only for the council representatives with their clipboards and frowns. "We were successful beyond expectations," she said, pinioning Brydda with a warning glare. "A customer has come forward who will satisfy all of our needs for quite some time. There was simply no need to continue with an expensive journey when we'd already achieved our goal."

This was far more information than most nations ever released about their customers, so the council would have to be content with it.

The return of the ruler of Buridan was a hectic affair, and it took until near dinnertime before Venera was able to escape to her apartment to contemplate her next move. There had been no messages from Sacrus, neither demands nor threats. They thought they had her in their pocket now, she supposed, so they could turn their attention to more important matters for a while. But those more important matters were her concern too.

She had a meal sent up and summoned the chief butler. "I do not wish to be disturbed for any reason," she told him. "I will be working here until very late." He bowed impassively, and she closed and locked the door.

In the course of renovations, some workmen had knocked a hole in one of her bedroom walls. She had chastised them roundly for it then discovered that there was an airspace behind it—an old chimney, long disused. "Work in some other room," she told the men. "I'll hire more reliable men to fix this." But she hadn't fixed it.

Ten minutes after locking the door, she was easing down a rope ladder that hung in the chimney. The huge portrait of Giles Thrace-Guiles that normally covered the hole had been set aside. At the bottom of the shaft, she pried back a pewter fireplace grate decorated with dolphins and naked women and dusted herself off in a former servant's bedroom that she'd recast as a storage closet.

It was easy to nip across the hall and into the wine cellar and slide aside the rack on its oiled track. Then she was in the rebels' bolthole and momentarily free of Buridan, Sacrus, and everything else—except, perhaps, the nagging of her new and still unfamiliar conscience.

* * * *

The insane organ music from Buridan Tower's broken pipeworks had ceased. Not that it was silent as Venera stepped out of the filigreed elevator; the whole place still hummed to the rush and flap of wind. But at least you could ignore it now.

“Iron lady’s here!” shouted one of the men waiting in the chamber. Venera frowned as she heard the term being relayed away down the halls. There were three guards in the elevator chamber and doubtless more lurking outside. She clasped her hands behind her back and strode for the archway, daring them to stop her. They did not.

The elevator room opened off the highest gallery of the tower’s vast atrium. It was also the smallest, as the space widened as it fell. The effect from here was dizzying: she seemed suspended high above a cavern walled by railings. Venera stood there looking down while Bryce’s followers silently surrounded her. Echoes of hammering and sawing drifted up from below.

After a while there was a chattering of footsteps, and then Bryce himself appeared. He was covered in plaster dust and his hair was disarrayed. “What?” he said. “Are they coming?”

“No,” said Venera with a half smile. “At least not yet. Which is not to say that I won’t need to give a tour at some point. But you’re safe for now.”

He crossed his arms, frowning. “Then why are you here?”

“Because this tower is mine,” she said simply. “I wanted to remind you of the fact.”

Waving away the makeshift honor guard, he strode over to lean on the railing beside her. “You’ve got a nerve,” he said. “I seem to remember the last time we spoke, you were tied to a chair.”

“Maybe next time it’ll be your turn.”

“You think you have us bottled up in here?”

“What would be the use in that?”

“Revenge. Besides, you’re a dust-blood—a noble. You can’t possibly be on our side.”

She examined her nails. “I haven’t got a side.”

“That *is* the dust-blood side,” said Bryce with a sneer. “There’s those that care for the people; that’s one side. The other side is anybody else.”

“I care for my people,” she said with a shrug, then, to needle him, “I care for my horses too.”

He turned away, balling his hands into fists. “Where’s our printing press?” he asked after a moment.

“On its way. But I have something more important to talk to you about. *Only* to you. A ... job I need done.”

He glanced back at her; behind the disdain, she could see he was intrigued. “Let’s go somewhere better suited to talking,” he said.

“More chairs, less rope?”

He winced. “Something like that.”

* * * *

“You can see Sacrus from here,” she said. “It’s a big sprawling estate, miles of it. If anybody is your enemy, I’d think it was them.”

“Among others.” The venue was the tower’s library, a high space full of gothic arches and decaying draperies that hung like the forelocks of defeated men from the dust-rimmed window casements. Venera had prowled through it when she and Garth were alone here, and—who knew?—some of those dusty spines settling into the shelves might be priceless. She hadn’t had time to find out, but Bryce’s people had tidied up and there were even a few tomes open on the side tables next to several cracked leather armchairs.

Evening light shone hazily through the diamond-shaped windowpanes. She was reminded of another room, hundreds of miles away in the nation of Gehellen, and a gun battle. She had shot a woman there before Chaison’s favorite staffer shattered the windows and they all jumped out.

Bryce settled himself into an ancient half-collapsed armchair that had long ago adhered to the floor like a barnacle. “Our goals are simple,” he said. “We want to return to the old ways of government, from the days before Virga turned its back on advanced technologies.”

“There was a reason why we did that,” she said. “The outsiders—”

He waved a hand dismissively. “I know the stories, about this ‘artificial nature’ from beyond the skin of the world that threatens us. They’re just a fairy tale to keep the people down.”

Venera shook her head. “I knew an agent from outside. She worked for me, betrayed me. I killed her.”

“Had her killed?”

“Killed her. With my sword.” She allowed her mask to slip for a second, aiming an expression of pure fury at Bryce. “Just who do you think you’re talking to?” she said in a low voice.

Bryce nodded his head. “Take it as read that I know you’re not an ordinary courtier,” he said. “I’m not going to believe any stories you tell without some proof, though. What I was trying to say was that our goal is to reintroduce computation machines into Virga and spread the doctrine of emergent democracy everywhere, so that people can overthrow all their institution-based governments, and emergent

utopias can flourish again. We're prepared to kill anybody who gets in our way."

"I'm quite happy to help you with that," she said, "because I know you'll never be able to do it. If I thought you could do what you say..." She smiled. "But you might accomplish much, and on the way you can be of assistance to me."

"And what do you want?" he asked. "More power?"

"That would help. But let's get back to Sacrus. They—"

"They're *your* enemies," he said. "I'm not interested in helping you settle a vendetta."

"They're your enemies, too, and I have no vendetta to settle," she said. "In any case I'm not interested in making a frontal assault on them. I just want to visit for an evening."

Bryce stared at her for a second, then burst into laughter. "What are you proposing? That we hit Sacrus?"

"Yes."

He stopped laughing. He shook his head. "Might as well just march everybody straight into prison," he said. "Or a vivisectionist's operating room. Sacrus is the last place in Spyre any sane person would go."

Venera just looked at him for a while. Finally, she said, "Either you or one of your lieutenants works for them."

Bryce looked startled, then he scowled at her. "You've said ridiculous things before, but that one takes the prize. Why could you possibly—"

"Jacoby Sarto said something that got me thinking," she interrupted. "Sacrus's product is control, right? They sell it, like fine wine. They practice it as well; did you know that many, maybe most of the minor nations of Spyre are under their thumb? They make a hobby of pulling the strings of people, institutions—whole countries. I'm not so big a fool as to believe that a band of agitators like yours has escaped their attention. One of you works for them—for all I know, your whole organization is a project of theirs."

"What proof do you have?"

"My ... lieutenant, Flance, whom you have yet to meet, has spent many nights walking the fields and plazas of Greater Spyre. He knows every passage, hedgerow, and hiding-place on that decrepit wheel. But he's not the only one. There's others who creep about at night, and he's followed them on occasion. Many times, such parties either started or ended up at Sacrus."

Bryce scoffed. "I've seen a nation that was controlled by them," Venera continued. "I know how they operate. Look, they have to train their people

somehow. To them, Greater Spyre is a ... a paddock, like the one where I keep my horses. It's their school. They send their people out to take over neighbors, foment unrest, create scandals, and conduct intrigues. I'd be very surprised if they didn't do that up in the city as well. So tell me I'm wrong. Tell me you're not working for them. And if not, look me in the eye and tell me that you're impervious to infiltration and manipulation."

He shrugged, but she could tell he was angry. "I'm not a fool," he said after a while. "Anything's possible. But you're still speculating."

"Well, I *was* speculating ... but then I decided to do some research." She held up a sheaf of news clippings. "The news broadsheets of Lesser Spyre are highly partisan, but they don't disagree on facts. On the run-up to my party I spent a couple of afternoons reading all the news from the past couple of years. This gave me a chance to check on the places and properties that your group has targeted since you first appeared. Quite an impressive list, by the way—but every single one of these incidents has hurt a rival of Sacrus. Not one has touched them."

Bryce looked genuinely rattled for the first time in their brief acquaintance. Venera savored the moment. "I haven't been deliberately neglecting them," he said. "This must be a coincidence."

"Or manipulation. Are you so sure that you're the real leader of this rabble?"

Bryce began to look slightly green. "You don't think it's me."

Venera shook her head. "I'm not *totally* sure that you aren't the one working for them. But you're not—" she almost said *competent*, but turned it into—"ruthless enough. You don't have their style. But you don't make decisions without consulting your lieutenants, do you? And I don't know them. Chances are, you don't really know them either."

"You think I'm a puppet." He looked stricken. "That all along ... So what—"

"I propose that we flush out their agent, if he exists."

He leaned forward and now there was no hesitation in his eyes. "How?"

She smiled. "Here, Bryce, is where your interests and mine begin to converge."

* * * *

"I'll speak only to Moss," said the silhouetted figure. It had appeared without warning on the edge of the rooftop of Liris, startling the night guard nearly out of his wits. As he fumbled for his long-neglected rifle, the shape moved toward him with a lithe, half-remembered step. "This is urgent, man!"

"Citizen Fanning! I—uh, yes, let me make the call." He ran over to the speaking tube and hauled on the bell cord next to it. "She's back—wants to talk to

the botanist,” he said. Then he turned back to Venera. “How did you get up here?”

“Grappling hook, rope...” She shrugged. “Not hard. You should bear that in mind. Sacrus may still hold a grudge.”

Shouts and footsteps echoed up through the open shaft of the central courtyard. “Tell them to be quiet!” she hissed. “They’ll wake the whole building.”

The watchman nodded and spoke into the tube again. Venera walked over to look down at the tree-choked courtyard far below. She could see lanterns hurrying to and fro down there. Finally, the iron-bound rooftop door creaked open and figures gestured to her to follow.

Moss was waiting for her in a gallery on the third floor. He was wrapped in a vast purple nightgown, and his hair was disheveled. His desperate, unfocused eyes glinted in the lantern light. “W-what is the m-meaning of this?”

“I’m sorry for rousting you out of bed so late at night,” she said, eyeing the absurd gown. *We must look quite the couple*, she mused, considering her own efficient black and the sword and pistols at her belt. “I have something urgent to discuss with you.”

He narrowed his eyes, then glanced at the watchman and soldiers who had escorted her down here. “L-l-leave us. I, I’ll be all right.” With a slight bow he turned and led her to his chamber.

“You could have taken over Margit’s apartments, you know,” said Venera as she glanced around the untidy, tiny chamber with its single bed, writing desk, and wardrobe. “It’s your right. You are the botanist, after all.”

Moss indicated for her to take the single wooden chair; he managed one of his mangled smiles as he plunked himself down on the bed. “Wh-who says I w-w-won’t?” he said. “H-have to get the sm-smell out first.”

Venera laughed, then winced at the shards of pain that shot through her jaw and skull. “Good for you,” she said past gritted teeth. “I trust you’ve been well since I left?” He shrugged. “And Liris? Made any new sales?”

“W-what do you want?”

Tired and in pain as she was, Venera would have been more than happy to come to the point. But, “First of all, I have to ask you something,” she said. “Do you know who I am?”

“Of c-course. You are V-Venera F-Fanning, from—”

“Oh, but I’m not—at least, not anymore.” She grimaced at his annoyed expression. “I have a new name, Moss. Have you heard of Amandera Thrace-Guiles?”

His reaction was comically perfect. He stared, his eyes wide and his mouth open, for a good five seconds. Then he brayed his difficult laugh. “Odess was r-right! And h-here I thought he was m-mistaking every new face for s-somebody he knew.” He laughed again.

Venera examined her nails coolly. “I’m glad I amuse you,” she said. “But my own adventures hardly seem unique these days.”

The grin left his face. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“Not that you have any obligation to tell me anything,” she said, “but ... surely you’ve seen that there are odd things afoot in Greater Spyre. Gangs of soldiers wandering in the dark ... backroom alliances being made and broken. Something’s afoot, don’t you agree?”

He sat up straight. “Th-the fair is full of rumors. Some of the l-lesser nations have been losing people.”

“Losing them? What do you mean?”

“When the f-first of our people v-vanished, we assumed M-Margit’s supporters were leaving. I th-thought it was o-only us. But others have also lost people.”

“How many of yours have left?” she asked seriously.

He held up one hand, fingers splayed. Five, then. For a miniature nation like Liris, that was too many.

“Do you have any idea where they went?” she asked.

Moss stood up, walked to the door, and listened at it for a moment. Then he turned and leaned on it. “Sacrus,” he said flatly.

“It can’t be a coincidence,” she said. “I came here to talk to you about them. They ... they have one of my people. Moss, you know what they’re capable of. I have to get him back.”

Her words had a powerful effect on Moss. He drew himself up to his full height, and for a moment his face lost its devastated expression; in that moment she glimpsed the determined, intelligent man who hid deep inside his ravaged psyche. Then his features collapsed back to their normal, woebegone state. He raised shaking hands and pressed his palms against his ears.

He said something, almost unintelligibly; after a moment Venera realized he’d said, “Are they toying with th-these recruits?”

“No,” she countered hastily. “My man is a prisoner. The recruits or whatever they are ... Moss, Sacrus has a reason to want an army of its own, possibly for the first time. They’ve finally discovered an ambition worth leaving their own doorstep.”

She said this with contempt, but in her imagination she saw the vast glowing bubble of nations that made up the principalities of Candescence. “They don’t have the population to support what I think they’re planning. But it wouldn’t surprise me if they’ve been recruiting from the more secretive nations. Maybe they’ve always done it but never needed them all before. Now they’re activating them.”

Puzzlement spread slowly across Moss’ face. “An a-army? What for?”

Venera took a deep breath, then said, “They believe they have the means to conquer the principalities of Candescence.”

He stared at her. “A-and do they?”

“Yes,” she admitted, looking at her hands. “I brought it to them.”

He said nothing; Venera’s mind was already racing ahead. “Their force must be small by my standards,” she said. “Maybe two thousand people. They’d be overwhelmed in any fair fight, but they don’t intend to fight fair. If we could warn the principalities, they could blockade Spyre. But we’d need to get a ship out.”

“Uh-unlikely,” said Moss, with a sour expression. “One thing I d-do know about Sacrus is that they have been buying ships.”

“What else can we do?” she asked tiredly. “Attack them ourselves?”

“Y-you didn’t come to ask me to h-help you do that?”

She laughed humorlessly. “Buridan and Liris against Sacrus? That would be suicidal.”

He nodded, but suddenly had a faraway look in his eye. “No,” Venera continued. “I came to ask you to help me break into Sacrus’s prison and extract my man. I have a plan that I think will work. Margit told me where they keep their ‘acquisitions.’ I believe they view people as objects, too, so he’s likely to be in that place.”

“Th-they guard their lands on the ground and a-above it,” said Moss skeptically. But Venera smiled at that.

“I don’t intend to come in by either route,” she said. “But I need a squad of soldiers, at least a score of them. I have some of the forces I need, or I will,” she half smiled. “But I need others I can trust. Will your people do it?”

Now it was his turn to smile. “S-strike a blow against Sacrus? Of c-course! But once the other nations who’ve l-lost people find out it was S-Sacrus stole them, y-you’ll have more allies. A d-dozen at least.”

Venera hadn’t considered such a possibility. *Allies?* “I suppose we could count on one or two of the countries whose debts we forgave,” she said slowly. “A couple of others might join us just out of devilment.” She was thinking of Pamela

Anseratte as she said this. Then she shook her head. “No—it’s still not enough.”

Moss gave his damaged laugh. “Y-you’ve f-forgotten the most important faction, Venera,” he said. “And they have no l-love for Sacrus.”

Venera rubbed her eyes. She was too tired and her head hurt too much to guess his meaning. “Who?” she asked irritably.

Moss opened the door and bowed slightly as he held it for her. “You c-came in s-secret. You should return before Candescence l-lights. We will assemble a force f-for you.

“And I will t-talk ... to the preservationists.”

* * * *

14

“This is the window she was signaling from,” said Bryce. He had his arms folded tightly to his chest and a muscle jumped in his jaw. Long tonguelike curls of wallpaper trembled over his shoulder in the constantly moving air. “I watched her send the whole message, clicking the little door of her lantern like she’d been doing light codes her whole life. She didn’t even bother to encrypt the message.”

Venera had gotten the story out of him in fits and starts, as memory and anger distracted him in turn. Cassia had been one of Bryce’s first recruits. They had argued with their foreheads together in the dark bars that peppered Lesser Spyre’s red-light district, and defaced buildings and thrown rocks at council parades. It was her urging that had led him down the path to terrorism, he admitted. “And all along, I was a project of hers—some kind of entrance exam to the academy of traitors in Sacrus!” He slammed his fist against the wall.

“Well.” Venera shaded her eyes with her hand and peered through the freshly-installed glass. “In the end, you were the one who fooled her. And she’s the one pent up in a locker downstairs.”

He didn’t look mollified. The false attack plan had been Venera’s idea, after all; all Bryce had done was bring his lieutenants together to reveal the target of their next bombing, a Sacrus warehouse in Lesser Spyre. All three of the lieutenants had expressed enthusiasm, Cassia perhaps most of all. But as soon as the planning meeting broke up she had come down to this disused pantry midway up the side of Buridan Tower—and had started signaling.

Venera could see why she would have favored this room for more than its writhing, peeled wallpaper. From here you had a clear line of sight to the walls of Sacrus, which ran in uneven maze-like lines just past a hedge of trees and a preservationist siding. From the center of the vast estate, a single monolithic building rose hundreds of feet into the afternoon air. Venera imagined a tiny flicker of light appearing somewhere on the side of that edifice—the rapid *blink blink* of a message

or instruction for Cassia. Bryce was having the place watched round the clock, but so far Sacrus had not responded to Cassia's warning.

"'Target is Coaver Street warehouse in two days,' she told them." Bryce shook his head in disgust. "'Urge evac of assets unless I can change target.'"

"You've done well," said Venera. She turned and sat hip-wise on the window casement. "Listen, I know you're upset—you feel unmanned. Fair enough, it's a humiliation. No more so than this, though." She held out a sheet of paper—a letter that had arrived for her this morning. She watched Bryce unfold it sullenly.

"'Vote for Proposition forty-four at Council tomorrow,'" he read. "What's that mean?"

She grimaced. "Proposition forty-four gives Sacrus control of the docks at Upper Spyre. Supposedly it's a demotion, since the docks aren't used much. Sacrus has modestly agreed to take that job and give up a plum post in the exchequer that they've held for decades. Nobody's likely to object."

Bryce managed a grim smile. "So they're ordering you around like a lackey now?"

"At least they respected you enough to manipulate you instead," she said. "And don't forget, Bryce: your people follow *you*. Cassia recognized the leader in you, otherwise she wouldn't have singled you out for her attention. She may have been manipulating you all this time—but she was also training you."

He grumbled, but she could see her words had pleased him. At that moment, though, they heard rapid footsteps in the hall outside. Gray-haired Pasternak, one of Bryce's remaining two lieutenants, stuck his head in the doorway and said, "They're here."

Venera spared a last glance out the window. From up here the airfall was an insubstantial mesh of fabric where ground should be. Rushing clouds spun by beneath that faint skein, which she knew was really a gridwork of I-beams and stout cable—the tough inner skeleton of Spyre, visible now that the skin was stripped away. A small jumble of gantries and cranes perched timidly at the edge of the ruined land. The official story was that Amandera Thrace-Guiles was trying to build a bridge across the airfall to rejoin Buridan Tower to the rest of Spyre.

She followed Bryce out of the room. The truth was that the bridge site was a ruse, a distraction to cover up the real link between Buridan and the rest of the world. In the few days that had passed since Venera's conversation with Moss, a great deal of activity had taken place in the pipeworks that Venera and Garth had used to reach Buridan Tower the first time. A camouflaged entrance had been built near the railway siding a few hundred yards back from the airfall's edge. A man, or even a large group of men, could jump off a slow-moving train and after a sprint under some trees be in a hidden tunnel that led all the way to the tower. True, there

were still long sections where men had to walk separated by thirty feet or more lest the pipe give way ... but that would be fixed.

As she and Bryce strode down the long ramp that coiled from the tower's top to its bottom, they passed numerous work sites, each comprising half a dozen or more men and women. It was much like the controlled chaos of her estate's renovation, except that these people weren't fixing the plaster. They were assembling weapons, inventorying armor and supplies, and fencing in the ballrooms. Bryce's entire organization was here, as well as gray-eyed soldiers from Liris and exotics from allies of that country. They had started arriving last night, after Bryce gave the all-clear that he'd found his traitor.

Bryce's people were still in shock. They watched the newcomers with mixed loathing and suspicion; but the trauma of Cassia's betrayal had been effective, and their loyalty to him still held. Venera knew they would need something to do—and soon—or their natural hatred of the status quo would assert itself. They were born agitators, cutthroats and bomb-builders, but that was why they would be useful.

A new group was just tromping up from the stairs to the pipeworks as Venera and Bryce reached the main hall. They wore oil-stained leathers and outlandish fur hats. Venera had seen these uniforms at a distance, usually wreathed in steam from some engine they were working on. These burly men were from the Preservation Society of Spyre, and they were sworn enemies of Sacrus.

For the moment they were acting more like overawed boys, though, staring around at the inside of Buridan Tower like they'd been transported into a storybook. In a sense, they had; the preservationists were indoctrinated in the history of the airfall, which remained the greatest threat to Spyre's structural integrity and which all now knew had been caused partly by Sacrus. Buridan Tower had probably been a symbol to them for centuries of defiance against decay and treachery. To stand inside it now was clearly a shock.

Good. She could use that fact.

"Gentlemen." She curtsied to the group. "I am Amandera Thrace-Guiles. If you'll follow me, I'll show you where you can freshen up, and then we can get started."

They murmured amongst themselves as they walked behind her. Venera exchanged a glance with Bryce, who seemed amused at her formality.

The preservationists headed off to the washrooms and Venera and Bryce turned the other way, entering the tower's now familiar library. Venera had ordered some of the emptied armor of the tower's long-ago attackers mounted here. The holed and burned crests of Sacrus and its allies were quite visible on breastplate and shoulder. As a pointed message, Venera'd had the suits posed like sentries around the long map table in the middle of the room. One even held a lantern.

Bryce's lieutenants were already at the table, pointing to things and talking in low tones with the commander of the Liris detachment. As the preservationists tramped back in, the other generals and colonels entered from a door opposite. Moss had exceeded Venera's wildest expectations: at the head of this group were generals from Carastant and Scoman, old allies of Liris in its war with Vatoris—and they had brought friends of their own. Most prominent was the towering, frizzy-haired Corinne, Princess of Fin. Normally, Venera didn't like women who were social equals—in Hale they always represented a threat—but she'd taken an instant liking to Corinne.

Venera nodded around at them all. "Welcome," she said. "This is an extraordinary meeting. Circumstances are dire. I'm sure you all know by now that Sacrus has recruited an army, plundering its neighbors of manpower in the process. So far the council at Lesser Spyre is acting like it never happened. I think they're in a tailspin. Does anyone here believe that the council should be the ones to deal with the situation?"

There were grins round the table. One of the preservationists held up a hand. He would have been handsome were it not for the beard—Venera hated beards—that obscured the lower half of his face. "You're on the council," he said. "Can't you bring a motion for them to act?"

"I can, but the next morning I'll receive the head of my man Flance in the mail," she said. "Sacrus has him. So I'm highly motivated, though not in the ways that Sacrus probably expect. Still ... I won't act through the council."

"Sacrus blocked one of our main lines," said the preservationist. "All of Spyre is in danger unless we can get a counterbalance running through their land. Beyond that, we don't give a damn who they conquer."

It was Venera's turn to nod. The preservationists were dedicated to keeping the giant wheel together. Most of their decisions were therefore pragmatic and dealt with engineering issues.

"Are you saying they could buy your loyalty by just giving you a siding?" she asked.

"They could," said the bearded man. There were protests up and down the table, but Venera smiled.

"I applaud your honesty," she said. "Your problem is that you'd need to give them a reason before they did that. They've never had any use for you and you've never been a threat to them. So you've come here to buy that leverage?"

He shrugged. "Or see them destroyed. It's all the same to us."

Bryce leaned out to look at the man. "And the fact that they used poison gas to kill twenty-five of your workers a generation ago .. ?"

“...Gives us a certain bias in the *destroy* direction. Who are you?” added the bearded man, who had been briefed on the identities of the other players.

With obvious distaste, Bryce said what they’d decided he would say: “Bryce. Chief of Intelligence for Buridan,” and he nodded at Venera.

“You’ve a *spy network*?” The preservationist grinned at her ironically.

“I do, Mister...?”

“Thinblood.” It could have been a name or a title.

“I do, Mister Thinblood—and *you’ve* got a secret warehouse full of artillery at junction sixteen,” she said with a return smile. Thinblood turned red; out of the corner of her eye Venera saw Princess Corinne stifle a laugh.

“We are all to be taken seriously,” Venera went on. “As is Sacrus. Let’s return to discussing them.”

“Hang on,” said Thinblood. “What are we discussing? War?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. But clearly, Sacrus needs its wings clipped.”

The lean, cadaverous general from Carasthant made a violent shushing gesture that made everyone turn to stare at him. “What can little guppies like us do?” he said in a buzzing voice that seemed to emanate from his bobbing Adam’s apple. “Begging your pardon, Madam Buridan, Mister Preservationist sir. Do you propose we take down a shark by worrying at its gills?”

His compatriot from Scoman waggled his head in agreement. The thousand and one tiny clocks built into his armor all clicked ahead a second. “Sacrus is bounded by high walls and barbed wire,” he said over the quiet snicking of his clothing, “and they have sniper towers and machine-gun positions. Even if we fought our way in, what would we do? Piss on their lawn?”

That was an expression Venera had never heard before.

Venera had thought long and hard about what to say when this question came up. These men and women were gathered here because their homes had all been injured or insulted by Sacrus—but were they here merely to vent their indignation? Would they back down in the face of actual action?

She didn’t want to tell them that she knew what Sacrus was up to. The key to Candescence was a prize worth betraying old friends for. If they knew Sacrus had it, half these people would defect to Sacrus’s side immediately, and the other half would proceed to plan how to get it themselves. It might turn into a night of long knives inside Buridan Tower.

“Sacrus’s primary assets lie inside the Gray Infirmary,” she said. “Whatever it is that they manufacture and sell, that is its origin. At the very least, we need to know

what we're up against, what they're planning to do. I propose that we invade the Gray Infirmary."

There was a momentary, stunned silence from the new arrivals. Princess Corinne's broad sunburnt face was squinched up in a failed attempt to hide a smile. Then Thinblood, the Carasthant general, and two of the minor house representatives all started talking at once.

"Impossible!" she heard, and "suicide!" through the general babble. Venera let it run on for a minute or so, then held up her hand.

"Consider the benefits if it could be done," she said. "We could rescue my man Flance, assuming he's there. We could find out what Sacrus trades in—though I think we all know—but in any case find out what its tools and devices are. We might be able to seize their records. Certainly we can find out what it is they're doing.

"If we want, we can blow up the tower.

"And it *can* be done," she said. "I admit I was pretty hopeless myself until last night. We'd talked through all sorts of plans, from sneaking over the walls to shimmying down ropes from Lesser Spyre. All our scenarios ended up with us being machine-gunned, either on the way in or on the way out. Then I had a long talk with Princess Corinne, here."

Corinne nodded violently; her hair followed her head's motion a fraction of a second late. "We can get into the Gray Infirmary," she brayed. "And out again safely."

There was another chorus of protests and again Venera held up her hand. "I could tell you," she said, "but it might be more convincing to *show* you. Come." And she headed for the doors.

* * * *

The roar from the airfall was more visceral than audible here in the lowest of Buridan's pipes. Bryce's people had lowered ladders down here when they came to cut away the maddening random organ that had been accidentally created in Buridan's destruction. The corroded metal surface gleamed wetly and as Venera stepped off the ladder, she slipped and almost fell. She stared up at the ring of faces twenty feet above her.

"Well, come on," she said. "If I'm brave enough to come down here, you can be too."

Thinblood ignored the ladder and vaulted down, landing beside her with a smug thump. Instantly, the surface under their feet began swaying, and little flakes of rust showered down. "The ladder's here to save the pipe, not your feet," Venera said loudly. Thinblood looked abashed; the others clambered down the ladder

meekly.

The ladder descended the vertical part of the pipe and they now stood where it bent into a horizontal direction. This tunnel was ten feet wide and who knew what it might originally have carried? Horse manure, Venera suspected. Whatever the case, it now ended twenty feet away. Late afternoon sunlight hurried shadows across the jagged circle of torn metal. It was from there that the roar originated.

“Come.” Without hesitation Venera walked to within five feet of the opening, then went down on one knee. She pointed. “There! Sacrus!”

They could barely have heard her over the roar of the thin air; it didn’t matter. It was clear what she was pointing at.

The pipe they stood in thrust forty or fifty feet into the airstream below the curve of Spyre’s hull. Luckily, this opening faced away from the headwind, though suction pulled at Venera relentlessly and the air was so thin she was starting to pant already. The pipe hung low enough to provide a vantage point from which a long stretch of Spyre’s hull was visible—miles of it, in fact. Way out there, near the little world’s upside-down horizon, a cluster of pipes much like this one—but intact—juttied into the airflow. Nestled among them was a glassed-in machine-gun blister, similar to the one Venera had first visited underneath Garth Diamandis’s hovel.

“That’s the underside of the Gray Infirmary,” she yelled at the motley collection of generals and revolutionaries crowding at her shoulder. Someone cupped hand to ear and looked quizzical. “Infirmary! In! *Firm!*” She jabbed her finger at the distant pipes. The quizzical person smiled and nodded.

Venera backed up cautiously, and the others scuttled ahead of her. At the pipe’s bend, where breathing was a bit easier and the noise and vibration not so mind-numbing, she braced her rump against the wall and her feet in the mulch of rust lining the bottom of the pipe. “We brought down telescopes and checked out that machine-gun post. It’s abandoned, like most of the hull positions. The entrance is probably bricked up, most likely forgotten. It’s been hundreds of years since anybody tried to assault Spyre from the outside.”

She could barely make out the buzzing words of Carasthant’s general. “You propose to get in through that? How? By jumping off the world and grabbing the pipes as they pass?”

Venera nodded. When they all stared back uncomprehending, she sighed and turned to Princess Corinne. “Show them,” she said.

Corinne was carrying a bulky backpack. She wrestled this off and plunked it down in the rust. “This,” she said with a dramatic flourish, “is how we will get to Sacrus.

“It is called a *parachute*.”

* * * *

She had to focus on her jaw. Venera’s face was buried in the voluminous shoulder of her leather coat; her hands clutched the rope that twisted and shuddered in her grip. In the chattering roar of a four-hundred mile per hour wind there was no room for distractions, or even thought.

Her teeth were clenched around a mouthpiece of Fin design. A rubber hose led from this to a metal bottle that, Corinne had explained, held a large quantity of squashed air. It was that ingredient of the air the *Rook*’s engineers had called *oxygen*; Venera’s first breath of it had made her giddy.

Every now and then the wind flipped her over or dragged her head to the side and Venera saw where she was: wrapped in leathers, goggled and masked, and hanging from a thin rope inches below the underside of Spyre.

All she had to do was keep her body arrow-straight and keep that mouthpiece in. Venera was tied to the line, which was being let out quite rapidly from the edge of the airfall. Ten soldiers had already gone this way before her, so it must be possible.

It was night, but distant cities and even more distant suns cast enough light to silver the misty clouds that approached Spyre like curious fish. She saw how the clouds would nuzzle Spyre cautiously, only to be rebuffed by its whirling rotation. They recoiled, formed cautious spirals and danced around the great cylinder, as if trying to find a way in. Dark speckles—flocks of piranhawks and sharks—browsed among them, and there in great black formations were the barbedwire and blockhouses of the sentries.

To be among the clouds with nothing above or below seemed perfectly normal to Venera. If she fell, she only had to open her parachute and she’d come to a stop long before hitting the barbed wire. It wasn’t the prospect of falling that made her heart pound—it was the savage headwind that was trying to snatch her breath away.

The rope shuddered, and she grabbed it spasmodically. Then she felt a hand touch her ankle.

The soldiers hauled her through a curtain of speed ivy and into a narrow gun emplacement. This one was dry and empty, its tidiness somehow in keeping with Sacrus’s fastidious attention to detail. Bryce was already here, and he unceremoniously yanked the air line from Venera’s mouth—or tried; she bit down on it tenaciously for a second, glaring at him, before relenting and opening her mouth. He shot her a look of annoyance and tied it and her unopened parachute to the line. This he let out through the speed ivy, to be reeled back to Buridan for its next user.

Princess Corinne’s idea had sounded insane, but she merely shrugged, saying,

“We do this sort of thing all the time.” Of course, she was from Fin, which explained much. That pocket nation inhabited one of Spyre’s gigantic ailerons, a wing hundreds of feet in length that jutted straight down into the airstream. Originally colonized by escaped criminals, Fin had grown over the centuries from a cold and dark sub-basement complex into a bright and independent—if strange—realm. The Fins didn’t really consider themselves citizens of Spyre at all. They were creatures of the air.

Over the years they had installed hundreds of windows in the giant metal vane, as well as hatches and winches. They were suspected of being smugglers, and Corinne had proudly confirmed that. “We alone are able to slip in and out of Spyre at will,” she’d told Venera. And, as their population expanded, they had colonized five of the other twelve fins by the same means they were using to break into Sacrus.

To reach Sacrus, one of Corinne’s men had donned a parachute and taken hold of a rope that had a big three-barbed hook on its end. He had stepped into the howling airfall and was snatched down and away like a fleck of dust.

Venera had been watching from the tower and saw his parachute balloon open a second later. Instantly, he stopped falling away from Spyre and began curving back toward the hull. *Down* only operated as long as you were part of the spinning structure, after all; freed of the high speed imparted by Spyre’s rotation, he’d come to a stop in the air. He could have hovered there, scant feet from the hull, for hours. The only problem was the rope he held, which was still connected to Buridan.

The big wooden spool that was unreeling it was starting to smoke. Any second now it would reach its end, and the snap would probably take his hands off. Yet he calmly stood there in the dark air, waiting for Sacrus to shoot past.

As the pipes and machine-gun nest leaped toward him he lifted the hook and, with anticlimactic ease, tossed it ahead of the rushing metal. The hook caught; the rope whipped up and into the envelope of speeding air surrounding the hull; and Corinne’s man saluted before disappearing over Spyre’s horizon. They’d recovered him when he came around again.

Now, brilliant light etched the cramped gun emplacement with the caustic sharpness of a black-and-white photograph. One of the men was employing a welding torch on the hatch at the top of the steps. “Sealed ages ago, like we thought,” shouted Bryce, jabbing a thumb at the ceiling. “Judging from the pipes, we’re under the sewage stacks. There’s probably toilets above us.”

“Perfect.” They needed a staging ground from which to assault the tower. “Do you think they’ll hear us?”

Bryce grimaced. “Well, there could be fifty guys sitting around up there taking bets on how long it’ll take us to burn the hatch open. We’ll find out soon enough.”

Suddenly, the ceiling blew out around the welder. He retreated in a shower of

sparks, cursing, and a new wind filled the little space. Before anybody else could move, Thinblood leaped over to the hole and jammed some sort of contraption up it. He folded, pulled—and the wind stopped. The hole the welder had made was now blocked by something.

“Patch hatch,” said Thinblood, wiping dust off his face. “We’d better go up. They might have heard the pop or felt the pressure drop.”

Without waiting, he pressed against his temporary hatch, which gave way with a rubbery slapping sound. Thinblood pushed his way up and out of sight. Bryce was right behind him.

Both were standing with their guns drawn when Venera fought her way past the suction to sprawl on a filthy floor. She stood up, brushing herself off, and looked around. “It is indeed a men’s room.”

Or was it? In the weak light of Thinblood’s lantern, she could see that the chamber was lined in tiles that had once been white but which had long since taken on the color of rust and dirt. Long streaks ran down the wall to dark pools on the floor. Venera expected to see the usual washroom fixtures along the walls, but other than a metal sink there was nothing. She had an uneasy feeling that she knew what sort of room this was, but it didn’t come to her until Thinblood said, “Operating theater. Disused.”

Bryce was prying at a metal chute mounted in one wall. It creaked open, and he stared down into darkness for a second. “A convenient method of disposal for body parts or even whole people,” he said. “I’m thinking more like an autopsy room.”

“Vivisectionist’s lounge?” Thinblood was getting into the game.

“Shut up,” said Venera. She’d gone over to the room’s one door and was listening at it. “It seems quiet.”

“Well it *is* the middle of the night,” the preservationist commented. More members of their team were meanwhile popping up out of the floor like jack-in-the-boxes. *Minus the wind-up music*, Venera mused.

Soon there were twenty of them crowded together in the ominous little room. Venera cracked the door and peered out into a larger, dark space full of pipes, boilers, and metal tanks. This was the maintenance level for the tower, it seemed. That was logical.

“Is everyone clear on what we’re doing?” she asked.

Thinblood shook his head. “Not even remotely.”

“We are after my man Flance,” she said, “as well as information about what Sacrus is up to. If we have to fight, we cause enough mayhem to make Sacrus

rethink its strategy. Hence the charges.” She nodded at the heavy canvas bag one of the Liris soldiers was toting. “Our first order of business is to secure this level, then set some of those charges. Let’s do it.”

She led the soldiers of half a dozen nations as they stepped out of their bridgehead and into the dark of enemy territory.

* * * *

15

Everything in the Gray Infirmary seemed designed to promote a feeling of paranoia. The corridors were hung with huge black felt drapes that swayed and twitched slightly in the moving air, giving the constant impression that there was someone hiding behind them. The halls were lit by lanterns fixed on metal posts; you could swivel the post and aim the light here and there, but there was no way to illuminate your entire surroundings at any point. The floors were muffled under deep crimson carpet. You could sneak up on anybody here. There were no signs, doors were hidden behind the drapery, and all the corridors looked alike.

It reminded Venera unpleasantly of the palace at Hale. Her father’s own madness had been deepening in the days before she succeeded in escaping to a life with Chaison. The king had all the paintings in the palace covered, the mirrors likewise. He took to walking the hallways at night, a sword in his hand, convinced as he was that conspirators waited around every corner. These nocturnal strolls were great for the actual conspirators, who knew exactly where he was and so could avoid him easily. Those conspirators—almost entirely comprising members of his own family—would bring him down one day soon. Venera had not received any letters bragging of his downfall while she lived in Rush; but there could well be one waiting when or if she ever returned to Slipstream.

That was the madness of one man. Sacrus, though, had done more than generalize such paranoia: it had institutionalized it. The Gray Infirmary was a monument to suspicion and a testament to the idea that distrust was to be encouraged. “Don’t pull on the curtains to look for doors,” Venera cautioned the men as they rounded a corner and lost sight of the stairs to the basement. “They may be rigged to an alarm.”

Thinblood scoffed. “Why do something like that?”

“So only the people who know where the doors are can find them,” she said. “People trying to escape—or interlopers like us—set off the bells. Luckily, there’s another way to find them.” She pointed at the carpet. “Look for worn patches. They signify higher traffic.”

The corridor they were in seemed to circle some large inner area. Opposite the basement stairs they found the broad steps of an exit, and next to it stairs going up. It wasn’t until they had nearly circled back to the basement stairs that they found a door letting into the interior. Next to a patch of slightly worn carpet, Venera eased

the curtains to the side and laid her hand on a cold iron door with a simple latch. She eased the door open a crack—it made no sound—and peered in.

The room was as big as an auditorium, but there was no stage. Instead, dozens of long glass tanks stood on tables under small electric lights. The lights flickered slightly, their power no doubt influenced by the jamming signal that emanated from Candescence.

Each tank was filled with water, and lying prone in them were men—handcuffed, blindfolded, and with their noses and mouths just poking out of the water. Next to each tank was a stool, and perched on several of these were women who appeared to be reading books.

“What is it?” Thinblood was asking. Venera waved at him impatiently and tried to get a better sense of what was going on here. After a moment she realized that the women’s lips were moving. They were reading to the men in the tanks.

“...I am the angel that fills your sky. Can you see me? I come to you naked, my breasts are full and straining for your touch.”

Bryce put a hand on her shoulder and his head above hers. “What are they doing?”

“They seem to be reading pornography,” she whispered, shaking her head.

“...Touch me, oh touch me exalted one. I need you. You are my only hope.

“Yet who am I, this trembling bird in your hand. I am more than one woman, I am a multitude, all dependent on you ... I am Falcon Formation, and I need you in all ways that a man can be needed...”

Venera fell back, landing on her elbows on the deep carpet. “Shut it!” Bryce raised an eyebrow at her reaction, but eased the door closed. He twitched the curtain back into place.

“What was that all about?” asked Thinblood.

Venera got to her feet. “I just found out who one of Sacrus’s clients is,” she said. She felt nauseated.

“Can we seal off this door?” she asked. “Prevent anyone getting out and coming at us from behind?”

Bryce frowned. “That presents its own dangers. We could as easily trap ourselves.”

She shrugged. “But we have *grenades*, and we’re not afraid to use them.” She squinted at him. “Are we?”

Thinblood laughed. “Would a welding torch applied to the hinges do the

trick? We'll have to leave a tiny team behind to do that."

"Two men, then."

They went back to the upward-leading stairs. The second level presented a corridor identical to the one below. The same muffled silence hung over everything here. "Ah," said Venera, "such delicate decorative instincts they have."

Thinblood was pacing along bent over, hands behind his back. He stared at the floor mumbling "hmmm, hmmm." After a few seconds he pointed. "Door here."

Venera twitched back the curtain to reveal an iron-bound door with a barred window. She had to stand on her tip-toes to see through it to the long corridor full of similar doors beyond. "This looks like a cell block." She rattled the door handle. "Locked."

"*Hello?*" The voice had come from the other side of the door. Venera motioned for the others to get out of sight, then summoned a laconic, sugary voice and said, "Is this where I can find my little captain?" She giggled.

"Wha—?" Two eyes appeared at the door, blinking in surprise at her. Just in time, Venera had yanked off her black jacket and shirt, revealing the strategic strappery that maximized her figure. "Who the hell are you?" said the man on the other side of the door.

"I'm your present," whispered Venera. "That is, if you're Captain Sendriks.... I'd like it if you were," she added petulantly. "I'm tired of tromping around these stupid corridors in nothing but my assets. I could catch a cold."

A moment later the latch clicked and seconds after that Venera was inside with a pistol under the chin of the surprised guard. Her men flowed around her like water filling a pipe; as she gestured for her new prisoner to kneel Thinblood said, "It's clear on this end, but there's another man around the corner yonder."

"Level a pistol at him and he'll fall into line." She watched one of the soldiers from Liris tying up her man, then said, "It *is* cold in here. Bryce, where's my jacket?"

"Haven't seen it," he said innocently. Venera glared at him, then went to collect it herself.

The new corridor held a faint undertone of coughing and quizzical voices, which came from behind the other doors. This was indeed a cell block. Venera raced from door to door. "Up! Yes, you! Who are you? How long have you been here?"

There were men and women here. There were children as well. They wore a wide mix of clothing, some familiar from her days in Spyre, some foreign, perhaps of the principalities. Their accents, when they answered her hesitantly, were similarly

diverse. All seemed well fed, but they were haggard with fear and lack of sleep.

Garth Diamandis was not among them.

Venera didn't hide her disappointment. "Tell me where the rest of the prisoners are or I'll blow your head off," she told the guard. She had him on his knees with his face pressed against the wall, her pistol at the back of his head. "Bear in mind," she added, "that we'll find them ourselves if we have to, it'll just take longer. What do you say?"

He proceeded to give a detailed account of the layout of the tower, including where the night watch was stationed and when their rounds were. So far Venera hadn't seen any sign of watchmen; for a nation gearing up for war, Sacrus seemed extremely lax. She said so and her prisoner laughed, a tad hysterically.

"Nobody's ever gotten in or out of here," he mumbled against the plaster. "Who would break in? And from where?" He tried unsuccessfully to shake his head. "You people are insane."

"A common enough trait in Spyre," she sniffed. "Your mistake, then."

"You don't understand," he croaked. "But you will."

She had already noted that he wore armor that was light and utilitarian, and his holstered weapons had been similarly simple. This functionalism, which contrasted dramatically with the outlandish costumes of most of her people, made her more uneasy about Sacrus's abilities than anything he'd said.

They spent some time trying to get more out of him and his companion. Neither they nor the prisoners they spoke to knew what Sacrus's plan was—only that a general mobilization was underway. The prisoners themselves were from all over the principalities; some had recently gone missing within Spyre itself.

"They're enough evidence to haul Sacrus before the high court on crimes against the polity," crowed Bryce. "If we can just get some of these people out of here."

Venera shook her head. "They may be enough to get the rest of Spyre up in arms. But until we can come up with a decent plan for getting them out alive, they're safer where they are. Let them loose now and they'll give us away, and probably try to run the gauntlet of machine guns and barbed wire on their way to the outer walls. At least let's find them some weapons and a direction to run in."

Bryce and Thinblood exchanged glances. Then Bryce quirked his irritating smile. "I have an idea," he said. "Let's strike a compromise...."

* * * *

There were plenty of cells in the block, but Garth was in none of them. While Venera searched for him, Thinblood took the bulk of the team to look for the night

watch. Nearly fifteen minutes had passed before he reappeared.

Thinblood was jubilant. “Both floors are secure,” he said. “We left the watchmen in a closet we found. And my welder has sealed off the main doors and a side entrance. He’s a model of efficiency, that one.”

Bryce put a hand on Venera’s arm. “Your man doesn’t seem to be here. We have to look to our other objectives.”

She shrugged him off, gritting her teeth so as not to snap some withering retort. “All right, then,” she said. “There’s more to this tower upstairs. Let’s find out what Sacrus is up to.”

The next floor was different. Here the velvet-covered walls and darkness gave way to marble and bright, annoyingly uneven electric light. Venera heard the sound of voices and chatter of a mechanical typewriter coming from an open door about thirty feet to the left. Crouching under the lee of the steps with the others, she scowled and said, “The time for subtlety may be past.”

“Wait.” Thinblood pointed the other way. Venera craned her neck and saw the heavy vault-style door even as Thinblood said, “Sacrus is reputed to keep their most secret weapons in this place. Do you think...?”

“I think I saw some of those weapons being made downstairs,” she said, thinking of the fish-tank room. “But you’re right. It’s just too tempting.” The door was surrounded by big signs saying VALID PERSONNEL ONLY, and two men with rifles slouched in front of it. “How do we get past them?”

One of Corinne’s men cleared his throat quietly. He drew something from his backpack and after a moment his companions did likewise. They strung the small compound bows with quick economical movements. Seeing this, Venera and the other leaders climbed back down and out of the way.

“Count of three,” said the man at the top. “You take the one on the right, we’ll do the one on the left. One, two—”

All four of Corinne’s soldiers jumped out of the stairwell and rolled into crouches. Their shoulder muscles creased in unison as they drew back, and Venera heard an intake of breath and “What the—” from off to the right, and then they let loose.

There was a grunt, a thud, then another. The archers whirled around, looking for another target.

The sound of typing continued.

“Take out that office,” Venera instructed the archers as she stepped into the hallway. “We’ll go for the vault.”

The heavy door had a thick glass window in it. Venera shaded her eyes with her hands and stared through for a few seconds. She whistled. “I think we’ve found the mother lode.”

The chamber beyond was large—it must take up most of this level. There were no windows, and its distant walls were draped in black like the corridors downstairs. Its brick floor was crisscrossed by red carpets; in the squares they defined, pedestals large and small stood under cones of light. Each pedestal supported some device—brass canisters here, a fluted rifle-like weapon there. Large jars full of thick brown fluid gleamed near things like bushes made of knives. There was nothing in there that looked innocuous, nothing Venera would have willingly wanted to touch. But all were on display as if they were treasures.

She supposed they were that; this might be the vault that held Sacrus’s dearest assets.

The view was obscured suddenly. Venera found herself staring into the cold gray eyes of a soldier, who mouthed something she couldn’t hear through the glass.

Deception wasn’t going to work this time. “We’ve been seen,” she said even as a loud alarm bell suddenly filled the corridor with jangling echoes.

“Can we blow this?” Thinblood was asking one of his men. The soldier shook his head.

“Not without taking time to figure out the vulnerable points ... maybe doing some drilling...”

Thinblood looked at Venera, who shrugged. “It’s going to be a firefight from now on,” she said. “Better get downstairs and free those prisoners. Then we can—” Something bright and sudden flashed in her peripheral vision and there was a loud *clang!*

She stared in dumb surprise at the metal bars that now blocked the way to the stairwell. “Blow them!” she shouted, pulling out her preservationist-built machine-pistol. “This is no time for subtlety!”

At that moment there was an eruption of noise from the far end of the corridor. Venera dove to the floor as impacting bullets sprayed marble dust and plaster at her. The others either flattened as well or staggered back against the wall. Blood spattered over the threaded stonework.

Now a smoke grenade was tumbling toward her, each end-over-end bounce sending a gout of black into the air. It stopped just outside the bars then disappeared in a growing pyramid of darkness. Past that Venera heard shouted orders, gunshots.

“You will lie facedown on the floor and put your hands behind your necks! Anyone we do not find in that position will be shot! You have five seconds and then we will shoot everything that sticks up more than a foot off the floor.”

All she could hear after that was machine-gun fire.

* * * *

The commandant held the mimeographed picture of Venera next to her head and compared the two. “You look older in real life,” he said in apparent disappointment. She glared at him but said nothing.

“Really,” he continued in apparent amazement, “what did you think you were going to achieve? Invading *Sacrus*? We’ve forgotten more tricks of incursion and sabotage than you people ever knew.”

Twelve of Venera’s people knelt around her on the floor of a storage room that opened off the third-floor corridor. Mops and brooms loomed over her; a single flickering bulb illuminated the three men with machine guns who were standing over the prisoners. Two more soldiers had been tying their hands behind their backs, but the process had stalled out briefly as they ran out of rope. The commandant, who had at first seemed flustered and shocked, had soon recovered his poise and now appeared to be genuinely enjoying himself.

“You did a good job of sealing off the front doors, but my superiors were able to slip this through the crack.” He waggled the mimeograph at Venera. He was a beefy man with an oddly asymmetrical face; one of his eyes was markedly higher than the other, and his upper lip lifted on the left giving him a permanent look of incredulity. “They also slipped in some instructions on how we’re to proceed while they cut through your welding job. It seems we had a...” He flipped the sheet over to read the back. “...a certain Garth Diamandis in our custody, as guarantor of your good behavior. Our arrangement was very clear. Should you fail to obey our orders, we were to kill this Diamandis. I’d say that your little incursion tonight constitutes disobedience, wouldn’t you?”

Venera drew back her lips in a snarl. “Someday they’re going to name a disease after you.”

The commandant sighed. “I just wanted you to know that I’ve issued the order. He’s being terminated, oh, even as we speak. And—” he laughed heartily, “I had an inspiration! The manner of his passing is quite hideous, you’ll be impressed when you see—”

A soldier clattered to a stop at the door to the office. “The lower floors are secure, sir,” he said. “They had tied up the night watch and the guards in the prison. In addition, we found ten of these in the basement.” He handed the commandant one of the charges Venera’s people had set.

Venera exchanged a glance with Bryce, whose hands were still untied.

“Well, look at this.” The commandant knelt in front of Venera. “A little clockwork bomb. Why, it’s so intricately made, I can only think of one place it might have come from.” He arched an eyebrow at the knot of prisoners. “Are any of

you from Scoman, by any chance?" He didn't wait for an answer, but turned the mechanism over under Venera's nose. "How does it work? Is it a timer?"

She said nothing; he shrugged and said, "I think I can figure it out. You turn this dial to give yourself ... what? Ten minutes? If you don't reset it before it winds down to zero it explodes."

A muffled report sounded from somewhere in the building. A gunshot? The commandant glanced at his men; one turned and left the room. "I suppose one or two of your compatriots might still be loose," he admitted. "But we'll round them up soon enough."

He was just opening his mouth to add something else when the lights went out. The building rocked to a distant blast.

Instant pandemonium—somebody stepped on Venera and crumpled her to the floor while some sort of struggle erupted just to her right; one of the machine guns went off, apparently into the ceiling, lighting the space with a momentary red flicker. All she saw was people rearing up, falling down, tumbling like scattered chessmen. She strained but couldn't get free of the ropes that bound her hands behind her.

Another explosion, then another—how many of those bombs had they said they'd found? She was sure they'd planted at least twelve.

Now somebody fell on her in a horrifyingly limp tangle and she screamed, but nobody could hear her over the shouts, screams, and shots.

More machine-gun fire, terrifyingly close but apparently directed out the door. Venera wormed out from under the wet body and found a corner to huddle in, hands jammed into the spot where walls and floor met. She cursed the dark and chaos and expected to receive a bullet in the head any second.

Silence and heavy breathing. Distant shouts. Somebody lit a match.

Bryce and Thinblood stood back to back. Each held a machine gun. Another gun lay under the body of the commandant, whose lopsided face was frozen in an expression of genuine surprise. The room was awash with men who were holding one another by the throat, or feet, or wrists, all atop the tiled bodies of the soldiers who were still tied up. Dark blood was splattered up the wall and over everybody. Venera looked down at herself and saw that her own clothes were glistening with the stuff.

"Get them untied!" Somebody flipped a knife into his hand and began bending and slashing at the ropes. When he reached Venera, she saw that it was one of the archers. Venera leaned forward knocking her forehead against the floor as he roughly grabbed her arms and cut.

"The prisoners are loose!" Bryce hauled her to her feet just as the match went

out. “Somebody find a bloody lantern! We’ve got to get out of here!” They burst into the corridor just as the lights resumed a dim glow. There were bodies all over the place, bullet holes in the walls, and she heard shots and shouts coming from the stairwell.

“Good idea to leave those men in the cells,” she said to Bryce. “A command decision.”

He grinned. They had given two men some spare weapons and grenades and, out of sight of the tied-up guards, put them in a cell with a broken lock. They were to free the prisoners and arm them if the rest of the team didn’t return in good time.

The soldiers recovered their guns and armor from a pile outside the storage room and one by one loped toward the T-intersection next to the stairwell. A firefight had broken out down there. Venera had her pistol in her hand but ended up in the rear, down on all fours as bullets sprayed overhead.

For a few minutes there was shouting and shooting. When it became clear that the men in the stairwell were of Sacrus, somebody threw a grenade at them, but more shots were coming from the side—the top right arm of the T from Venera’s perspective. That was the direction the commandant’s men had originally come from. The stairwell was at the very top of the T, the storage room behind her.

Now it was chaos and shooting again. Venera crawled to the left, to the spot where the metal cage had descended earlier. It was gone. She raised her head slightly and saw, through smoke and dim light, that the great metal door to the treasure room was open.

Bryce and the others had made it into the now cleared stairwell, but Venera had been too slow. Soldiers of Sacrus emerged from clouds of gunsmoke, faceless in the faint light. Venera scrambled to her feet, slipped on blood, and half fell through the doorway into the treasure room. Her feet found purchase on the carpet, and she pressed her whole body against the cold door. It slowly creaked shut, ringing from bullet impacts at the last instant.

She spun the wheel in the center of the portal and turned around to lean on it. A sound hangover echoed through her head for a few seconds, or was she still hearing the battle, but muffled by iron and stone?

Stepping forward she lifted her arms, saw blood all over them. Something caught her foot and she stumbled. Looking down she saw that it was another body—a soldier of Sacrus, maybe the very one with whom she’d locked eyes through the little glass window in the door. He lay on his back, arms flung about, and blood pooling behind his head.

His abdomen had been cut wide open and his entrails trailed along the floor.

A new wash of fear came over Venera. She backed against the door and

brought up her pistol to check it. Wouldn't do to have a misfire due to blood in the barrel. For a few moments she stood perfectly still, listening and, finally, looking about at the place she had come to.

The huge square room was lit better than the hallway had been, by small electric spotlights that hung over dozens of pedestals. She had glimpsed those earlier, the canisters and boxes atop them now glowing in surreal majesty. There was nobody else in sight, but she thought she could see another door opposite the one through which she'd entered.

A woman chuckled somewhere; the chuckle turned into a laugh of childish delight.

Venera made her way around the room's perimeter in quick sprints, ducking from pedestal to pedestal. It was hard to tell where the laughter was coming from because sounds echoed off the high ceiling. Faintly through the floor she could still hear the noise of battle.

The laugh came again—this time from only a few yards away. Venera rounded a broad pedestal surmounted by some kind of cannon and stopped dead, pistol forgotten in her hand.

A big clockwork mechanism had been shoved off the next pedestal and now lay shattered on the floor. Little wisps of smoke rose from it. The pedestal itself was covered with the remains of a man.

Somebody was kneeling in the gore and viscera that dripped over the edges of the pedestal. It was a woman, completely nude, and she was bathing—no, wallowing—in the blood and slippery things she was hauling out of the man's torso. She stroked her skin with something, squeezing it as if it were a wet sponge, and gave a little mewl of delight.

Venera raised the pistol and aimed carefully. "Margit! What have you done?"

The former botanist of Liris cocked her head at Venera. She grinned, holding up two crimson hands.

"Don't you get it?" she said. "It's cherries! Red, red cherries, full and ripe."

"Wh-who—" Venera had suddenly remembered the commandant's boast. He had found a hideous death for Garth, he'd said. She stepped forward, staring past a haze of nausea at the few scraps of clothing she could recognize. Those boots—they were Sacrus army issue.

"They trusted me," said Margit as she lowered herself into the sticky mass she was massaging. "These two knew me—so they let me in. When the bombs went off, the wall and door parted a bit—the hinges sprung! I just pushed it open and ran right out of my little room! Nobody there to stop me. So I came here and brought him with me."

“Brought who?”

Margit raised a hand to point at something lying in the shadows of another pedestal. “The one they’d just given to me. My present.”

“Garth!” Venera ran over to him. He was on his side, unconscious but breathing. His hands were tied behind his back. Venera knelt to undo the knots, putting her pistol down when she decided Margit was too far into her own delusions to notice.

Far gone she might be, but she’d killed at least two men in this room. “You must have ambushed them,” said Venera, making it into a question.

“Oh yes. I was dressed oh so respectably and had my prisoner with me. They were staring out the window, you people were shooting and thrashing about somewhere out of sight and I just popped up there in front of them. ‘Let me in!’ Oh, I looked so scared. As soon as their backs were to me I mowed them down.”

“There were only two?”

Margit clucked reproachfully. “How many people do you put inside a locked vault? Two was overkill, but you see the doors don’t open from the outside. That’s a *precaution*.” She enunciated the word cheerfully.

Venera slapped Garth lightly; he groaned and mumbled something, batting feebly at her hand.

She looked up at Margit again. “Why come here?”

Margit stood up, dripping. “You know why,” she said, suddenly serious. “For *that*.” She pointed, straight-armed, at something on the floor.

It was crimson now, but there was no mistaking the cylindrical shape of the key to Candescence. When Venera saw it she gasped and raised the pistol again, cocking it as she tried to haul Garth to his feet with her other hand.

Margit frowned. “Don’t deny me my destiny, Venera. Behold!” She struck one of her poses, throwing her arms out in the spotlight. “You gaze upon the Queen of Candescence!”

“V-Venera?” Garth blinked at her, then focused past her at Margit. “What the—”

“Quickly now, Garth.” She half carried him over to the blood-smeared stones where the key lay. She let go of him and reached to scoop it up, still keeping a bead on Margit.

The botanist simply stood there, awash in light and gore, and watched as Venera and Garth backed away.

She was still watching when they made it to the chamber's other door and spun the wheel to open it.

* * * *

16

Venera's parachute yanked viciously at her shoulders. All the breath drove out of her, the world spun, and then a sublime calm seemed to ease into the world: the savage wind diminished, became gentle, and the roar of gunfire faded. Weight, too, slackened and in moments she found herself come to a stop in dawn-lit air that was crisp but hinted at a warm day to come.

All around her other parachutes had bloomed like night flowers. There were shouts, screaming—but also laughter. Corinne's people were taking charge; the air below Spyre was their territory. "Catch this rope!" one of them commanded, tossing a length at Venera. She grabbed it, and he began to draw her in.

The knot of people waited a hundred feet from the madly spinning hull of Spyre. Twenty had arrived here in the early morning hours, but more than seventy were leaving. There hadn't been enough parachutes, but Sacrus had helpfully decorated its corridors with heavy black drapes. Many of these were now held by former prisoners. Having belled with air to brake them, the black squares were now twisting like smoke and were starting to get in the way as people tried to grab one another by wrist, fingertip, or foot.

She pulled herself up Garth's leg, hooked a hand in his belt, and met him at eye level. "Are you okay?" He still seemed disoriented, and for a moment he just stared back at her.

"Did you come for me?" His voice was hoarse and she didn't like to think why. There were burn marks on his cheeks and hands and he looked thinner and older than ever.

Venera smoothed the backs of her fingers down the side of his face. "I came for you," she said, and was surprised to see tears start in his eyes.

"Listen up!" It was the leader of Corinne's troupe. "We've just passed Fin, and I let out the signal flare. In a couple of minutes it's going to come by again, and they'll have lowered a net! We're going to land in that net, all of us. Then we'll be drawn up into Fin. We need to stick together or people will get left behind."

"Isn't Sacrus going to pass us first?" somebody asked.

"Yes. So everybody with a gun get to the top. And unravel those drapes, we can use them to hide behind."

As Spyre rotated, first Buridan, then Sacrus would go by before Fin came around again. The soldiers of Sacrus had been right on their heels as Venera's group crowded into the basement. Doubtless they would be bringing heavy machine guns

down, or grenades or—it didn't bear thinking about because there was nothing to be done. For a few seconds at least, Venera and her people were going to be helpless targets.

“Ouch!” said a woman near Venera's feet. “I—*ouch!* Hey, ohmigod—” She screamed suddenly, a frantic yelp that grew into a wail.

Venera spun around to look. Dark shapes flickered around the woman's silhouette, half seen but growing in number. “Piranhawks!” someone shouted.

A second later there were thousands of them, a swirling cloud that completely enveloped the screaming woman. Her cries turned to horrible retching sounds and then stopped. Buzzing wings were everywhere, caressing Venera's throat and tossing her hair, but so far nothing had bitten her.

Nobody spoke. Nobody moved, and after a minute the cloud of piranhawks began to smear away into the air. They left behind a coiling cloud of black feathers and atomized red, at its heart a horrible thing bereft of blood and flesh.

“Brace yourselves! Here comes the airfall!” Venera looked up in time to see the latticework of girders that supported Buridan Tower flash past. In the next instant a fist of wind hit her.

Garth was nearly torn from her grasp by the pounding air. Two people who had refused to untie themselves from the black drapes were simply blown away, disappearing in moments into a distance blurred with barbed wire and mines. Others simply let go of their neighbors for a second and found themselves being drawn slowly, leisurely away as the airfall passed by and calmer air returned.

“Catch the rope! Catch it!” She watched the lines being tossed and frantic lunges to catch them, then one of the men who'd drifted a few yards away shuddered and spun. Dark lines stood in the air behind him for an instant before snapping and becoming thousands of red droplets. She heard machine-gun fire.

“Sacrus! Return fire!” Everybody opened up on the small knot of pipes and the machine-gun nest as it swept down and at them. Tracer rounds framed and dissected a vision of mauve cloud and amber sunlight. Venera blinked and couldn't see, waved her pistol hesitantly. Then Sacrus lofted up and away and the firing ceased.

“Get ready!”

Ready? Ready for what—the net caught her limp and unresisting, and that probably saved Venera from a broken neck. As thin cords dug into her face and hands she was hauled into speeding air again, faster and faster until all breath was sucked out of her and spots danced in her eyes. Just as the howl and tearing fingers of the hurricane became intolerable it ceased so abruptly that she just lay for a while, staring at nothing. Gradually, she made out voices, sounds of something heavy being

shut as the wind sound cut out. Lantern light glowed below a metal ceiling where shadows of people hove to and fro. She rolled over.

Garth Diamandis was sitting up next to her. He probed at the back of his head carefully, then darted his eyes back and forth at the people who surrounded them. “Where are we?”

“Among friends,” she said. “Safe. At least for now.”

* * * *

Blood slid down the drain, miniature rivers in the greater flow of water. After all that had happened, Venera was surprised to find that none of it was hers. By rights she should have been riddled with holes last night.

The facilities of Fin were primitive, but the water was wonderfully hot. She dallied in the rusted metal cabinet that stood in for a shower, letting the stuff run over and off her in sheets, holding her face under it. Not thinking, though her hands still shook.

A loud banging startled her, and she almost slipped. Venera flung open the sheet-metal door. “What?”

Bryce stood there. His glower turned to distraction as he took in her naked form. In a moment of reflected vision, she saw his gaze lower, pause, drop, pause again. Then he caught himself and met her eyes. “You’re going to use up all the hot water,” he said in a reasonable tone.

She slammed the door, but it was too late; she could practically feel the line drawn down her body by his eyes. “So what if I use it all?” she said gamely. “You’re a man—take yours cold.”

“Not if I don’t have to.” She heard rattling around the side of the enclosure. “There’s a master valve here, but I’m not sure whether it’s for the cold or the hot. I’ll give it a few turns....”

She threw the door open again and stalked past him to grab the rag they’d told her was her towel. Wrapping it around herself as best she could, she did a double take as she saw him watching her again. “Well?” she said. “What are you waiting for?”

“Huh?”

“Get in there.” She crossed her arms and waited. Bryce turned his back to her as he undressed, but she didn’t give him any relief. It was her turn to admire. With a sour glance that held more than a little humor, he stepped into the stall.

Venera leaned over to look at the side of the enclosure; there was the valve he’d mentioned. It was momentarily tempting to give a few turns—she could imagine his shouts quite vividly—but no. She was an adult, after all.

She left the enclosure and stepped gingerly over the grillwork floor. Despite the stares of those billeted in the hallway, she made her way to where Garth Diamandis lay. He was awake, but listless. Still, he half smiled as he saw her.

“Ah, that you should dress so for me,” he murmured.

Venera smoothed the hair back from his brow. “What’s wrong?”

He looked away, lips twisting. Then, “It was her. She betrayed me to them.”

“Your woman? Wife? Mistress?”

A heavy sigh escaped him. “My daughter.”

Venera stepped back, shocked. For a moment she had no idea what to say, because her whole understanding of this man had been changed in one stroke. “Oh, Garth,” she said stupidly. “I’m so sorry.” *We daughters will do that*, she thought, but she didn’t say it.

She held his hand for a minute until he gently disengaged it and turned on his side. “You must be cold,” he said. “Go get some rest.” So, reluctantly, she left him on his cot in the hallway.

She mused about this surprising new Garth as she threaded her way back to her sleeping station. It was hard navigating the place; the nation of Fin was less than thirty feet wide at its broadest point. Since it was literally a fin, an aileron for controlling Spyre’s spin and direction, the place was streamlined and reinforced inside by crisscrossing girders. The citizens of the pocket nation had built floors and chambers all through the vertical wing and grudgingly added several ladder wells. Where Garth lay was not a corridor as such, however—just a more or less labyrinthine route between the rooms that were strung the length of the level. Privacy was to be had only within the sleeping chambers, where the ever-present roar of air just behind the walls drowned all other sounds.

Fin didn’t have the capacity for an extra seventy or so people. Venera had been informed by an impatient Corinne that they must all leave by nightfall. That suited her fine—she had a meeting with the council later today in any case. But she needed to sleep first. So she was grateful for the little bed they’d prepared behind a set of metal cabinets. You had to squeeze around the last cabinet to get in here and there were no windows; still, it had an air of privacy. She rolled out of the towel and under the blanket.

Venera willed herself to sleep, but she was still a mass of nerves from the events of the night. And, she had to admit, there was something else keeping her awake....

A blundering noise jolted her into sitting up. She groped for a nonexistent weapon. Somebody was blocking the light that leaked around the cabinets. “Who—”

“Oh, no! You!” Bryce stood there, his nakedness punctuated by the towel at his waist. His hands were on his hips.

Venera snatched up the blanket. “Don’t tell me they put you in with me.”

“Said there wasn’t any room. Last good place was here.” He crossed his arms. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“You’ve had at least fifteen minutes to sleep. My turn.”

“Your—?” She reached for one of her boots and threw it at him. “Get out! This is my room!” Bryce ducked adroitly and stepped up, grabbing at her wrist. She rabbit-punched him in the stomach; the only effect was that his towel fell off.

He took advantage of her surprise to make a play for the bed. She managed to keep him from taking it, but he did grab the blanket. She pulled it back. She kicked him, and he toppled onto the mattress. He sprawled, laying claim to as much of it as he could, and pushed her to the edge.

“No you don’t! My bed!” She tried to climb over him, aiming to reconquer the corner, but his hand was on her wrist, then her shoulder and her breast, and his other gripped the inside of her thigh. Bryce picked her up that way and would have thrown her off the bed if she hadn’t squirmed her way loose. She landed straddling him and grabbed for the sheets on either side of his shoulders so when he pushed at her she had a good grip.

He was getting hard against her pubic bone and his hands were on her breasts again. Venera mashed her palm against his face and reared back but now his hands were on her hips, and he was pulling her hard against him. They rocked together and she clawed at his chest.

Grabbing him around the shoulders she kissed him, feeling her nipples tease the hairs on his chest. All their movement was making him slide against her wetness and suddenly he was inside her. Venera gasped and reared up, pushing down on him with all her weight.

She leaned forward until they were nose to nose. “*My bed,*” she hissed, grinning.

They were locked together now and each motion by one made the other respond. She had a hand behind his neck and his were behind her spreading her painfully as they kissed and the bed shook and threatened to collapse. She bucked and rode him like the Buridans must have ridden their horses, all pounding muscle under her until wave after wave of pleasure mounted up her core and she came with a loud cry. Moments later he did the same, bouncing her up and nearly off of him. She held on and rode it out, then collapsed on the bellows of his chest.

“See?” he said. “You can share.”

Well.

Venera wasn't about to dignify his statement with a response; but this was certainly going to change things. Now sleep really was coming over her, though, and she had no ability to think more about it. She nuzzled his shoulder.

Damn it.

* * * *

The Spyre Council building was satisfyingly grandiose. It sprawled like a well-fed spider over an acre of town wheel, with outbuildings and annexes like black-roofed legs half encircling the nearby streets, plazas, and offices of the bureaucracy. The back of the spider was an ornate glass and wrought-iron dome surmounted by an absurdly dramatic black statue of a woman thrusting a sword into the air. The statue must have been thirty feet tall. Venera admired it as she strolled up the broad ramp that led to the council chamber.

She was aware of many eyes watching her. Word had gotten around quickly of the events last night, and Lesser Spyre was quietly but visibly tense. Shops had closed early; people hurried through the streets. The architecture of the spider did not permit large assemblies—Spyre was not the sort of place to encourage mass demonstrations—but the people were a presence here nonetheless, standing in groups of two to ten to twenty on street corners and under the shadowy canopies of bridges. It was their presence, and not memory or reason, that convinced Venera that she had today done something highly significant.

Her own appearance must confirm that. She wore a high-collared black leather coat over a scarlet blouse, with her bleached shock of hair standing straight up and silver trefoil-shaped bangles the size of her hand hanging from her ears. Her make-up was dark—she'd redrawn her brows as two obsessively black lines. Trailing behind her in a V-formation like a flock of grim birds were two dozen people, all similarly startling to look upon. Some appeared pale and unsteady, their faces and exposed hands bearing bruises and burn marks. Others attended these souls, and marching behind like giant tin toys were soldiers of Liris and various preservationist factions. Venera knew that Bryce's people peppered the crowds, there to listen and give an alert if necessary.

“Do you think Jacoby Sarto brings his gun to council meetings?” she asked off-handedly. Corinne, who was walking beside her, guffawed.

“Here,” she said, handing Venera a large black pistol, “try to take this in and see what happens. No, seriously. If they don't stop you, then he's probably got one too. You may need to get the drop on him.”

“I can do that.” She took the pistol and slipped it into her jacket, which promptly dragged down her right collar. She transferred it to the back of her belt.

“Not *too* obvious,” said Corinne doubtfully.

A preservationist runner puffed to a stop next to her and saluted. “They’re on the move, ma’am. Five groups of a hundred or more each were just seen exiting the grounds of Sacrus. They’re in no-man’s land now, but they have nowhere to go except through their neighbors.... Of course, they own most of those estates....”

“What have they got?” she asked. “Artillery?” He nodded.

“We’re moving to secure the elevator cables, but they’re doing the same thing,” he continued. “There’s been no shots fired yet....”

“All right.” She dismissed the details with a wave of her hand. “Let me see what we can do in council. We’ll talk after that.” He nodded and backed off.

The big front doors of the building were for council members only. The ceremonial guards there, with their plumed helmets and giant muskets, raised their palms solemnly to exclude the people following Venera. She turned and gestured with her chin for them to go around the side; she’d been told there was a second, more traveled entrance there for diplomats, attachés, and other functionaries. She strode alone into the frescoed portico that half circled the chamber itself.

The bronze council chamber doors were open, and a small crowd was milling there. She recognized the other members; they were just filing in.

Jacoby Sarto was talking to Pamela Anseratte. He looked relaxed. She looked tense. He spotted Venera and, surprisingly, smiled.

“Ah, there you are,” he said, strolling over to her. Venera glanced around to see what other people—pillars or statues to hide behind—were nearby, and started to reach for the pistol. But Sarto simply took her arm and led her a bit to the side of the group.

“The preservationists and lesser countries are following you right now,” he said. “But I can’t see that continuing, can you? The only leverage you’ve got is the name of Buridan.”

She extricated her arm and smiled back at him. “Well, that depends on the outcome of this meeting, I should think,” she said. He nodded affably.

“I’m here to engineer a crisis,” he said. “How about you?”

“I should have thought we were already in a crisis,” she said cautiously. “Your troops are on the move.”

“...And we’ve seized the docks,” he said. “But that may not be enough to serve either of our interests.” She tried to read his expression, but Sarto was a master politician. He gave no sign that Spyre was balanced on the edge of its greatest change in centuries.

“Our interests aren’t the same,” he continued, “but they’re surprisingly ... compatible. You’re after power, but not so much power as you’d have to have if you used the key again. It’s difficult—you possess the ultimate weapon, but no way to use it to get what you want. But the blunt fact is that as long as we hold the docks, the little trinket you stole from us last night is even worse than useless to you,” he said. “It’s an active liability.”

She stared at him.

Apparently oblivious to her expression, Sarto continued as though he were discussing the budget for municipal plumbing contracts. “On the other hand, the polarization of allegiance you’re generating is useful to us. I’ve been impressed, Ms. Fanning, by your abilities—last night’s raid came as a complete surprise, advantageous as it’s turned out to be. You got what you wanted, we get what we want, which is to flush out our enemies. The only matter of dispute between us, privately, is that ivory wand you took.”

“You want it back?”

He nodded.

“Go fuck yourself!” She started to stalk toward the giant doorway but couldn’t resist turning and saying, “You tortured my man Garth! You think this is a game?”

“The only way to win,” he said so quietly that the others couldn’t hear, “is to treat it as one.” Now his expression was serious, his gray eyes cold as a statue’s.

It was suddenly clear to Venera that Sacrus already knew what she had been planning to say and do here today—and they approved. She made an excellent enemy for them to rally their own forces around. If they had needed an excuse to extend martial law over their neighbors, she had provided it. If civil war came, they would have their justification for marshaling the ancient Spyre fleet. The civil war would provide a nice smokescreen behind which they could seize Candesce. It wouldn’t matter then whether they won or lost back home.

She had given them the enemy they needed. Sarto’s candid admission of the fact was a clear overture from him.

Venera hesitated. Then, deliberately clamping down on her anger, she walked back to him. They were now the only council members remaining in the hall. The others had taken their seats, and she saw one or two craning their necks to watch their confrontation.

“What do I get if I return the key?” she asked.

He smiled again. “What you want. Power. For the rest, take your satisfaction by attacking us. We know you’ll be sincere. We’re counting on it. Only return the key, and at the end of the war you’ll get everything you want. You know we can

deliver.” He held out his hand, palm up.

She laughed lightly, though she felt sick. “I don’t have it with me,” she said. “And besides, I have no reason to trust you. None at all.”

Now Sarto looked annoyed. “We thought you’d say that. You need a guarantee, a token of our sincerity. My masters have ... instructed me ... to provide you with one.”

She laughed bitterly. “What could you possibly give me that would convince me you were sincere?”

His expression darkened even further; for the first time he looked genuinely angry. Sarto spoke a single word. Venera gaped at him in undisguised astonishment, then laughed again. It was the bray of disdain she reserved for putting people down, and she was sure Sarto knew it.

However, he merely bowed slightly and turned to indicate that she should precede him into the chamber. The doors were wide, and so they entered side by side. As they did so, Venera caught sight of Sarto’s expression and was amazed. In a few seconds he underwent a gruesome transformation, from the merely dark expression he’d displayed outside to a mask of twisted fury. By the time they split up halfway across the polished marble floor, he looked like he was ready to murder someone. Venera kept her own expression neutral, her eyes straight ahead of her as she climbed the red-carpeted steps to the long-disused seat of Buridan.

The council members had been chatting, but one by one they fell silent and stared. Several of those were gazes of surprise; although they were masked, the ministers from Oxorn and Garatt were poised forward in their seats as if unsure whether to run or dive under their chairs. August Virilio’s usual expression of polite disdain was gone, in its place a brooding anger that seemed transplanted from an entirely different man.

Pamela Anseratte stood as soon as they were seated and banged her gavel on a little table. “We were supposed to be gathering today to discuss the change of stewardship of the Spyre docks,” she began. “But obviously—”

“She has started a war!”

Jacoby Sarto was on his feet before the echoes of his voice died out—and so were the rest of the ministers. For a long moment everyone was talking at once while Anseratte pounded her gavel ineffectually. Then Sarto held up one hand in a magisterial gesture. He gravely hoisted a stack of papers over his head. “I hold the signed declarations in my hand,” he rumbled. “This is nothing less than the start of that civil conflict we have all been dreading—an unprovoked, vicious attack in the heartland of Sacrus itself—”

“To rescue those people *you* kidnapped,” Venera said. She remained

obstinately in her seat. “Citizens of sovereign states, abducted from their homes by agents of Sacrus.”

“Impudence!” roared Sarto. Half the members were still on their feet; in the pillared gallery that opened up behind the council pew, the coteries of ministers, secretaries, courtiers, and generals that each council member held in reserve were glaring at one another and at her. Several clenched the pommels of half-drawn swords.

“I have a partial list of names,” continued Venera, “of those we rescued from Sacrus’s dungeon last night. They include,” she shouted to drown out hecklers from the gallery, “citizens of every nation represented on this council, including Buridan. The council will not deny that I had every right to seek the repatriation of my own kinsmen?” She looked around, locking eyes with the unmasked members.

Principe Guinevera’s jowls quivered as he thumped solidly into his seat. “You’re not going to claim that Sacrus stole one of my citizens? Surely—” He stopped as he saw her scan the list and then hold up her hand.

“Her name is Melissa Ferania,” said Venera.

“Ferania, Ferania ... I know that name...” Guinevera’s brows knit. “It was a suicide. They never found a body.”

Venera smiled. “Well, you’ll find her right now if you turn your head.” She gestured to the gallery.

The whole council craned their necks to look. People had been filing into the Buridan section of the gallery for several minutes; in the ruckus, nobody on the council had noticed.

On cue, Melissa Ferania stood up and bowed to Guinevera.

“Oh my dear, my dear child,” he said, tears starting at the corners of his eyes.

“I have more names,” said Venera, eyeing Jacoby Sarto. Everyone else was staring into the gallery, and he took the opportunity to meet her eye and nod slightly.

Venera felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach.

She had stage-managed this confrontation for maximum effect, calling for volunteers from the recently rescued to attend the scheduled council meeting with her. Garth alone had refused to come; pale and still refusing to talk about his experience in the tower, he had remained outside in the street. But there were prisoners from Liris here as well as half a dozen other minor nations. As her trump card, she had brought people taken from the great nations of the council itself.

Sarto seemed more than unfazed at this tactic. He seemed *satisfied*.

She realized that a black silence had descended on the chamber. Everyone

was looking at her. Clearing her throat, she said—her own words sounding distant to herself—“I move for immediate censure of Sacrus and the suspension of its rights on the Council of Spyre. Pending, uh ... pending a thorough investigation of their recent activities.”

For once, Pamela Anseratte looked out of her depth. “Ah ... what?” She pulled her gaze back from the gallery.

August Virilio laughed. “She wants us to expel Sacrus. A marvelous idea if I do say so myself—however impractical it may be.”

Venera rallied herself. She shrugged. “Gain a seat, lose a seat ... besides,” she said more loudly, “it’s a matter of justice.”

Virilio toyed with a pen. “Maybe. Maybe—but Buridan forgot its own declaration of war before it invaded Sacrus. That nullifies your moral high ground, my dear.”

“It doesn’t nullify *them*.” She swept her arm to indicate the people behind her.

“Yes, marvelous grandstanding,” said Virilio dryly. “No doubt the majority of our council members are properly shocked at your revelation. Yet we must deal with practicalities. Sacrus is too important to Spyre to be turfed off the council for these misdemeanors, however serious they may seem. In fact, Jacoby Sarto was just now leveling some serious charges against *you*.”

There was more shouting and hand-waving—and yet, for a few moments, it seemed to Venera as though she were alone in the room with Jacoby Sarto. She looked to him, and he met her gaze. All expression had drained from his face.

When he opened his mouth again it would be to reveal her true identity to these people: he would name her as Venera Fanning and the sound of her name would act like a vast hand, toppling the whole edifice she had built. Though most of her allies knew or suspected she was an imposter, it had been neither polite nor expedient for them to admit it. If forced to admit what they already knew, however, they would find her the perfect person to blame for the impending war. All her allies would desert her, or if they didn’t, at least they would cease listening to her. Sarto had the power to cast her out, have her imprisoned ... if she didn’t counter with her own bombshell.

This was the great gamble she had known she would have to take if she came here today. She had rehearsed it in her mind over and over: Sarto would reveal that she was the notorious Venera Fanning, who was implicated in dastardly scandals in the principalities. Opinion would turn against her and so, in turn, she would have to tell the people of Spyre another great secret. She would reveal the existence of the key to Candescence and declare that it was the cause of the coming war—a war engineered by Sacrus for its own convenience.

And now the moment had come. Sarto blinked slowly, looked away from her, and said, "I have here my own list. It is a list of innocent civilians killed last night by Amandera Thrace-Guiles and her men."

Braced as she was for one outcome, it took Venera some seconds to understand what Sarto had said. He had called her *Amandera Thrace-Guiles*. He was not going to reveal her secret.

And in return, he expected her not to reveal his.

The council members were shouting; Guinevera was embracing his long-lost country woman and weeping openly; August Virilio had his arms crossed as he stared around in obvious disgust. Swords had been drawn in the gallery, and the ceremonial guards were rushing to do their job for the first time in their lives. Abject, shoulders slumped, Pamela Anseratte stood with gesturing people and words swirling around her, her hand holding a slip of paper that might have been her original agenda for the meeting.

It all felt distant and half real to Venera. She had to make a decision, right now.

Jacoby Sarto's eyes were drilling into her.

She cleared her throat, hesitated one last second, and reached behind her.

To be concluded.

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