

QUEEN OF CANDESCENCE [Part IV of IV]

by KARL SCHROEDER

* * * *



Illustration by George Krauter

* * * *

“The end of the world as we know it” means the beginning of the world as we don’t know it....

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.

* * * *

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.*

* * * *

Free of Spyre at last, Venera feels a huge burden lifted from her shoulders. She watches from a passenger ship as the twelve-mile-diameter open-ended cylinder that is Virga's oldest nation recedes among the clouds. But Spyre is not done with her yet.

Venera's ostensibly on a trade expedition to the principalities of Candesce on behalf of Buridan House. In fact she intends to jump ship at the nearest port and make her way back to her adoptive home of Slipstream. There, she is planning regicide, for she blames the sovereign Pilot of Slipstream for the death of her husband Chaison. Venera's not one to plan small.

Just as she's about to put her plan into action, Venera receives an unsigned letter telling her that her friend Garth Diamandis has been abducted back on

Spyre. The evil pocket nation of Sacrus has him, and they will torture and kill him unless she returns to Spyre and does what they say.

Venera pretends to be indifferent to Garth's fate, but in reality she can't leave him. She has to invent an excuse for herself, but in the end returns to Spyre to save him. Sacrus has made her mad; assassinating Slipstream's king will have to wait.

Back in Buridan, Venera enlists the aid of the insurgents led by the dashing if naive Bryce. She also returns to her former home of Liris to gain their aid, and Liris's new Botanist promises to bring in the powerful preservationist faction as well. Venera intends a strike into the very heart of Sacrus territory to rescue Garth. This would be impossible for any party traveling overland, but she intends to go underland—below the skin of Spyre and up through the basement of Sacrus's fortress, the Grey Infirmary.

What follows is a set piece of squad-scale combat as Venera's group infiltrates the building and finds Garth. In the course of this adventure, Venera has another run in with her former employer, Margit of Sacrus, who is now completely mad (Venera's fault, but something she refuses to feel guilty about). Margit has the key to Candescence and is about to kill Garth when Venera intervenes. She escapes Sacrus with both Garth and the key.

Back in safe territory, Venera complicates her life by unexpectedly falling into bed with Bryce. Whether it's just an adrenalin reaction or the sign of something deeper, she has no time to find out because Sacrus has summoned the Spyre Council to announce that Buridan, in the person of Venera Fanning, has started a war.

* * * *

17

Treble was a musician by day, and a member of Bryce's underground by night. He'd always known that he might be called upon to abandon his façade of serene artistry and fight in the Cause—though like some of the others in the secret organization, he was uneasy with the direction things had taken lately. Bryce was becoming altogether too cozy with the imposing Amandera Thrace-Guiles.

Not that it mattered anymore, as of this minute. Clinging to a knuckle of masonry high on the side of the Lesser Spyre Ministry of Justice, Treble was in an ideal position to watch the city descend into anarchy.

Treble had gained access to the building disguised as a petitioner seeking information about an imprisoned relative. His assignment was to plant some false records in a Ministry file cabinet on the twelfth floor. He evaded the guards adroitly, made his way up the creaking stairs with no difficulty, and had just ensconced himself in the records office when two things happened simultaneously: the staccato sound of gunfire echoed in through the half-open window; and three minor

bureaucrats approached the office, talking and laughing loudly.

This was why Treble found himself clutching a rounded chunk of stone that might once have been a gargoyle, and why he was staring in fascination at the streets that lay below and wrapped up and around the ring of the town wheel. He hardly knew where to look. Little puffs of smoke were appearing around the Spyre docks directly overhead. The buildings there hovered in midair like child's toys floating in a bathtub and seldom moved; now several were gliding slowly—and ominously—in collision courses. Several ships had cast off. Meanwhile, halfway up the curve of the wheel, some other commotion had sprung up around the Buridan Estate. Barnacled as it was by other buildings, he could never have identified the place had he not been familiar with the layout, but it was clearly the source of that tall pillar of smoke that stood up two hundred feet before bending over and wrapping itself in a fading spiral around and around the inner space of the wheel.

People were running in the avenue below. Ever the conscientious spy, Treble shifted his position so that he straddled the gargoyle. He checked his watch, then pulled out a frayed notebook and a stub pencil. He dabbed the pencil on the tip of his tongue then squinted around.

Item One: At four-fourteen o'clock, the preservationists broke our agreement by attempting to prevent Sacrus from occupying the docks. At least, that was what Treble assumed was happening. The hastily scrawled note from Bryce that had mobilized the resistance told of arguments during the Sacrus raid last night, hasty plans made and discarded in the heat of the moment. Thrace-Guiles wanted to rally the nations of Greater Spyre that had lost people to Sacrus. The preservationists had their own agenda, which involved cowing Sacrus into letting them run a railway line through the middle of the great nation's lands. Sacrus itself was moving and activating its allies. So much was clear; but in the background of this fairly straightforward political situation, a greater upheaval was taking place.

Bryce had said on more than one occasion that Spyre was like the mainspring of a watch wound too tight. A single tap in the right place might cause a vicious uncoiling—a *snap*. Many in Spyre had read about the Pantry War with envy; over centuries a thousand resentments and grudges had built up between the pocket nations, and it was glorious to watch someone else finally try to settle a score. Everyone kept ledgers accounting who had slighted whom and when. Nothing was forgotten and behind their ivy- and moss-softened walls, the monarchs and presidents of nations little bigger than swimming pools spent their lives plotting their revenges.

The well-planned atrocities of the resistance were little trip-hammer blows on the watch's case, each one an attempt to break the mechanism. Tap the watch, shake it, and listen. Tap it again. That had been Bryce's strategy.

Sacrus and Buridan had hit the sweet spot. Shop-fronts were slamming all over the place, like air-clams caught in a beam of sunlight, while gangs of men

carrying truncheons and knives seemed to materialize like smoke out of the alleys. It was time for a settling of scores.

Item Two: chaos in the streets. Maybe time to distribute currency?

Treble peered at the line of smoke coiling inside the wheel. *Item Three: Sacrus seems to have had more agents in place in the city than we thought. They appear to be moving against Buridan without council approval. So ... Item Four: council no longer effective?*

He underlined the last sentence, then thought better and crossed it out. *Obviously* the council was no longer in control.

He leaned over and examined the flagstoned street a hundred feet below. Some of those running figures were recognizable. In fact...

Was that Amandera Thrace-Guiles? He shaded his eyes against Candescence's fire and looked again. Yes, he recognized the shock of bleached hair that surmounted her head. She was hurrying along the avenue with one arm raised to shoulder height. Apparently she was aiming a pistol at the man walking ahead of her. Oh, that was definitely her then.

Around her a mob swirled. Treble recognized some of his compatriots; there were others, assorted preservationists, soldiers of minor nations, even one or two council guards. Were they escorting Thrace-Guiles, or protecting someone else Treble hadn't spotted?

Item Five: council meeting ended around four o'clock.

He sighted in the direction Thrace-Guiles's party was taking. They were headed for Buridan Estate. From ground level they probably couldn't tell that the place was besieged. At this rate they might walk right into a crowd of Sacrus soldiers.

Treble could still hear voices in the room behind him. He tapped the file folder in his coat pocket and frowned. Then with a shrug he swung off his masonry perch and through the opened window.

The three bureaucrats stared at him in shock. Treble felt the way he did when he dropped a note in performance; he grinned apologetically, said, "Here, file this," and tossed his now-redundant folder to one of the men. Then he ran out the door and made for the stairs.

Garth Diamandis staggered and reached out to steady himself against the wall of a building. He had to keep up; Venera Fanning was striding in great steps along the avenue, her pistol held unwaveringly to Jacoby Sarto's head. But Garth was confused; people were running and shouting while overhead even lines of smoke divided the sky. This was Lesser Spyre, he was sure of that. The granite voice of his interrogator still echoed in Garth's mind, though, and his arms and legs bellowed

pain from the many burns and cuts that ribbed them.

He had insisted on coming today and now he regretted it. Once upon a time he'd been a young man and able to bounce back from anything. Not so anymore. The gravity here weighed heavily on him and for the first time he wished he was back on Greater Spyre where he could still climb trees like a boy. Alone all those years, he had reached an accommodation with himself and his past; there'd been days when he enjoyed himself as if he really were a youth again. And then the woman who now stalked down the center of the avenue ahead of him had appeared, like a burning cross in the sky, and proceeded to turn his solitary life upside down.

He'd thought about abandoning Venera dozens of times. She was self-reliance personified, after all. She wouldn't miss him. Once or twice he had gotten as far as stepping out the door of the Buridan estate. Looking down those half-familiar, secretive streets, he had realized that he had nowhere to go—nowhere, that is, unless he could find Selene, the daughter of the woman whose love had caused Garth's exile.

Logic told him that now was the time. Venera was bound to lose this foolish war she'd started with Sacrus. The prudent course for Garth would be to run and hide, lick his wounds in secret and then...

Ah. It was this *and then* that was the problem. He had found Selene, and she had turned him over to Sacrus. She was theirs—a recruit, like the ones Moss claimed had left many of Spyre's sovereign lands. Sacrus had promised Selene something, had lied to her; they must have. But Garth was too old to fight them and too old to think of all the clever and true words that might win his daughter's heart.

Selene, his kin, had betrayed him. And Venera Fanning, who owed him nothing, had risked her life to save his.

He pushed himself off from the wall and struggled to catch up to her.

A man ran down the broad steps of the Justice ministry. He waved his arms over his head. "Don't go that way! Not safe!"

Venera paused and glanced at him. "You're one of Bryce's."

"That I am, Miss Thrace-Guiles." Garth half smiled at the man's bravado; these democrats refused to address people by their titles. Venera didn't seem to notice, and they had a hurried conversation that Garth couldn't hear.

"There you are." He turned to find the preservationist, Thinblood, sauntering up behind him. He grinned at Garth. "You ran off like a startled hare when she came out of the council chamber."

Garth grunted. Thinblood seemed to have decided he was an old man who needed coddling. It was annoying. He had to admit to himself that it was a relief to have him here, though. The rest of this motley party consisted mostly of Venera's

other freed prisoners and they made for bad company, for much the same reasons as Garth supposed he did. They all looked apprehensive and tired. It didn't help that their presence at council didn't seem to have made a dent in Sacrus's support.

Garth and Thinblood had been talking under an awning across the street when Venera Fanning appeared at the official's entrance to the council chamber. She backed out slowly, her posture strange. As she emerged further it became clear that she was holding a gun and aiming it at someone. That someone had turned out to be Jacoby Sarto.

Before he knew it Garth was by her side. "What are you doing?" he heard himself shouting. She'd merely grimaced and kept backing up.

"Things didn't go our way," she'd said. Past Sarto, the council guards were lining up with their rifles aimed at her. At the same time, the commoners' doors around the long curve of the building were thrown open. A hoard of people spilled out, some of them fighting openly. Venera's supporters ran to her side as Bryce's agents appeared from nowhere to act as crowd control. And then a gasp went up from the watching crowd as Principe Guinevera and Pamela Anseratte pushed the council guards aside and came to stand at Venera's side.

"The lines have been drawn," Anseratte said to the council guards. "Sacrus is not on the council's side. Stand down."

Reluctantly, the guards lowered their rifles.

Garth leaned close to Venera. "Did he tell them your ... secret?" But she shook her head.

Maybe it was having Thinblood's reassuring hand on his shoulder, but as Venera argued now with Bryce's spy, the fog of fatigue and pain lifted enough for Garth to begin to wonder about that. Jacoby Sarto had *not* told the council who Venera really was? That made no sense. Right now Amandera Thrace-Guiles was the darling of the old countries. She was the resurrected victim of Sacrus's historical arrogance; she was a champion. If Sarto wanted to deflate Sacrus's opposition all he had to do was reveal that she was a fake.

"Why did she do it?" he wondered aloud. Thinblood laughed.

"You're trying to second-guess our Amandera?" He shook his head. "She's got too much fire in her blood, that's clear enough. Obviously, she saw a chance to take Sarto and she went with it."

Garth shook his head. "The woman I know wouldn't see Sarto as a prize to be taken. She'd think him a burden and be happy to be rid of him. And if he's a prisoner why doesn't he seem more concerned?" Sarto was standing with his arms crossed, waiting patiently for Venera to finish her conversation. He seemed more to be *with* her than taken *by* her. Garth seemed to be the only one who had noticed

this.

“Attention!” Venera raised her pistol and for a moment he thought she was about to fire off a round. She already had the attention of everyone in sight, though, and seemed to realize it. “Buridan is under siege!” she cried. “Our ancient house is surrounded by Sacrus’s people. We can’t go back there.”

Garth hurried over. “What are we going to do? They’ve moved faster than we anticipated.”

She nodded grimly. “Apparently, their ground forces are moving to surround the elevator cables—the ones they can get to, that is.”

“Most of our allies are on Greater Spyre,” he said. If Sacrus isolated them up here in the city, they would have to rely on the preservationists, and a few clearheaded leaders such as Moss, to organize the forces down there.

For a moment that thought filled Garth with hope. If Venera was sidelined at this stage, she might be able to avoid being drawn into the heart of the coming conflagration. A checkmated Buridan might survive with honor, no matter who won.

Clearly Venera had no intention of going down that road. “We need to get down there,” she was saying. “Sacrus doesn’t control all the elevators. Pamela, your country’s line, where is it?”

Anseratte shook her head. “It’s two wheels away from here. We might make it, but if Sacrus already has men in the streets they’ve probably taken the axis cable cars as well.”

Guinevera shook his head as well. “Our line comes down about a mile from Carrangate. They’re an old ally of Sacrus. They could use us for target practice on our way down.”

“What about Liris?” It was one of Moss’s men, standing alertly with a proud look in his eye. “Lady, we are the only nation in Spyre that has recently fought a war. There may not be many of us, but...”

She turned a dazzling smile on the man. “Thank you. Yes—but your elevator is above the Fair, isn’t it?”

“And the Fair, m’lady, is six blocks up the wheel, that way.” He pointed off to the left.

“This way!” Venera gestured for Sarto to precede her, then stalked toward the distant pile of buttresses and roofs that was the Fair.

Garth followed, but as the fog of exhaustion and pain slowly lifted from him he found himself considering their chances. It was folly for Venera to involve herself in this war. Sidelined, she might be safe.

Sacrus had known what to reveal about her to draw her fangs, but they had chosen not to reveal it. The only person on this side of the conflict who knew was Garth himself. If word got out, Venera would naturally assume that it was Sacrus's doing. It would be so simple...

Troubled but determined to follow this thought to its conclusion, Garth put an extra effort into his footsteps and kept up with Venera as she made for the Fair.

* * * *

Liris perched on the very lip of the abyss. At sunoff the building's roof was soaked with light, all golds and purple and rose. The sky that opened beyond the battlement was open to all sides; Venera could almost imagine that she was back in the provinces of Meridian where the town wheels were small and manageable and you could fly through the free air whenever you chose. She leaned out, the better to lose herself in the radiance.

Tents had been set up on the rooftop behind her, and Moss was holding court to a wild variety of Spyre dignitaries. They came in all shapes and sizes, masked and unmasked, lords and ladies and diplomats and generalissimos. United by their fear of Sacrus and its allies, they were hastily assembling a battle plan while their tiny armies traveled here from across Greater Spyre. Venera had looked for those armies earlier—but who could spot a dozen men here or there making their way between the mazelike walls of the estates?

It would be an eerie journey, she knew. Garth had shown her the overgrown gates to estates whose windows were slathered with black paint, whose occupants had not been seen in generations. Smoke drifted from their chimneys; someone was home. The soldiers of her alliance might stop at one or two of those gateways and shout and rattle the iron, hoping to find allies within. But there would be no answer, unless it be a rifle shot from behind a wall.

For the first time in days, Venera found herself idle. She was too tired to look for something to do, and so as she gazed out at the endless skies that familiar deep melancholy stole over her. This time, she let it happen.

She wanted Chaison back. It was time to admit it. There were many moments every day when Venera longed to turn to him and grin and say, "Look what I did!" or "Have you ever seen anything like it?" She'd had such a moment only an hour ago, as the first of the Dali horses were led into their new paddock in the far corner of Liris's lot. The spindly steeds had been trained to be ridden, and she had mounted up herself and trotted one in a circle. Oh, she'd wanted to catch someone's eye at that moment! But she was Amandera Thrace-Guiles now. There was no one to appeal to, not even Garth, who was making himself scarce since their arrival.

She heard a footstep behind her. Bryce leaned on the stones and casually reached out to take her hand. She almost snatched it back, but his touch awoke

something in her. This was not the man she wanted, but there was some value in him wanting her. She smiled at him.

“All the pawns and knights are in play,” he said. His thumb rubbed the back of her hand. “It’s our opponent’s move. What would you like to do while we wait?”

Venera’s pulse quickened. His strong fingers were kneading her hand now, almost painfully.

“Uh...” she said, then before she could talk herself out of it, “They’ve given me an actual room this time.”

“Well.” He smiled ironically. “That’s an honor. Let’s go try it out.”

He walked toward the stairs. Venera hesitated, turning to look out at the dimming sky. No: the pang was still there, and no amount of time with Bryce was going to make it go away. But what was she to do?

Venera followed him down the stairs, her excitement mounting. Several people hailed her, but she simply waved and hurried past. “This way,” she said, grabbing Bryce’s arm as he made to descend the main stairs. She dragged him through a doorway hidden behind a faded tapestry. This led to a narrow and dusty little corridor with several doors leading off of it. Hers was at the end.

She barely had time to open the door before his arms were around her waist. He kissed her with passionate force and together they staggered back to the bed under its little pebbled-glass window.

“Shut the door!” she gasped, and as he went to comply she undid her blouse. As he knelt on the bed she guided his hand under the silk. They kept their mouths locked together as they undressed one another, then she took his cock in her hands and didn’t let go as they sank back onto the cushions.

Later as they sprawled across the demolished bed, he turned to her and said, “Are we partners?”

Venera blinked at him for a moment. Her mind had been entirely elsewhere—or more exactly, nowhere. “What?”

He shrugged onto his side and his hand casually fell on her hip. “Am I your employee? Or are we pursuing parallel interests?”

“Oh. Well, that’s your decision, isn’t it?”

“Hmm.” He smiled, but she could tell he wasn’t satisfied with that reply. “My people have been acting as your spies for the past few weeks. They’re not happy about it. Truth to tell, Amandera, *I’m* not happy about it.”

“Aaahhh...” She stretched and leaned back. “So the past hour was your way of softening me up for this conversation?”

“Well, no, but if there’s going to be a good strategic moment to raise the issue, this has got to be it.” She laughed at his audacity. He was no longer smiling, though.

“You’d be mistaken if you thought I was picking sides in this war,” he said. “I don’t give a damn whether it’s Sacrus or your faction that wins. It’s still titled nobles, and it’ll make no difference to the common people.”

Now she sat up. “You want your printing press.”

“I *have* my printing press. I forged your signature on some orders and it was delivered yesterday. Those of my people who aren’t in the field right now are running it. Turning out bills by the thousands.”

She examined his face in the candlelight. “So ... how many of your people really *are* in the field?”

“A half dozen.”

“You told me they were all out!” She glared at him as a knife of pain shot up her jaw. “A half dozen? Is this why we had no warning that the estate was being attacked? Because you were keeping a handful of people where they’d be visible to me?—So I’d think they were all out?”

“That’s about the size of it, yes.”

She punched him in the chest. “You lost me my estate! My house! What else have you given to Sacrus?”

“Sacrus is not my affair,” he said. Bryce was deadly earnest now. Clearly she had misjudged him. “Restoring emergent democracy in Virga is my only interest,” he said. “But I don’t want you to die in this war, and I’m sorry about your house, if it’s any consolation. But what choice did I have? If everything descends into chaos, when am I going to get my ink? My paper? When were you going to do what I needed you to do? Look me in the eye and tell me it was a priority for you.”

Venera groaned. “Oh, Bryce. This is the worst possible time...”

“—The only time I have!”

“All right, all right, I see your point.” She glowered at the plaster ceiling. “What if ... what if I send some of my people in to run the press? We don’t need trained insurgents to do that. All I want is to get your people out in the field! I’ll give you as much ink and paper as you want.”

He flopped onto his back. “I’ll think about that.”

There was a brief silence.

“You could have asked,” she said.

“I did!”

Venera was trying to think of some way to reply to that when there was a loud bang and she found herself inside a storm of glass, shouting in surprise and trying to jump out of the way, banging her chin while shards like claws scrawled up her ribs and along her thigh.

Scratched and stunned, she sat up to find herself on the floor. Bryce was kneeling next to her. The candle had gone out, and she sensed rather than saw the carpet of broken glass between her and her boots. The little window gaped, the leading bent and twisted to let in a puff of cold night air. “What was...” Now she heard gunfire.

“Oh shit.” Bryce stood up and reached down to draw her to her feet. “We’ve got to get out there.”

“Sacrus has arrived.”

* * * *

18

There was still a splinter in the ball of her foot, but Venera had no time to find it and dig it out. She and Bryce raced up the stairs to the roof as shouts and thundering feet began to sound on the steps below.

They reached the roof, and Bryce immediately ran off somewhere to the right. “I need to get to the semaphore!” he shouted before disappearing into the gloom. All the lanterns had been put out, Venera realized; she could just see the silhouettes of the tents where her people had been meeting. The black cut-out shapes of men roved to and fro, and she made out the gleam of a rifle barrel here and there. It was strangely quiet, though.

She found the flap to the main tent more by instinct than anything else, and stepped in. Lanterns were still lit here, and Thinblood, Pamela Anseratte, Principe Guinevera, Moss, and the other leaders were all standing around a map table. They all looked over as she entered.

“Ah, there you are,” said Guinevera in a strangely jovial tone. “We think we know what they’re up to.”

She moved over to the table to look at the map. Little counters representing Sacrus’s forces were scattered around the unrolled rectangle of Greater Spyre. A big handful of tokens was clustered at the very edge of the sheet, where Liris had its land.

“It’s an insane amount of men,” said Thinblood. He appeared strangely nervous. “We think over a thousand. Never seen anything like it in Spyre.”

Guinevera snorted. “Obviously they hope to capture our entire command all at

once and end the war before it begins. And it looks like they stand a good chance of succeeding. What do you think, Venera?"

"Well, I—" She froze.

They were all staring at her. All silent.

Guinevera reached into his brocaded coat and drew out a sheet of paper. With shocking violence he slammed it down on the table in front of her. Venera found herself looking at a poor likeness of herself—with her former hairstyle—on a poster that said, *Wanted for Extradition to Gehellen, VENERA FANNING*.

"So it's true," said Guinevera. His voice was husky with anger, and his hand, still flattening the poster, was shaking.

She chewed her lip and tried to stare him down. "This is hardly the time—"

"This *is* the time!" he bellowed. "*You have started a war!*"

"Sacrus started it," she said. "They started it when they—"

But he'd struck her full across the face, and she spun to the floor.

She tasted blood in her mouth. Where was Bryce? Why wasn't Moss rushing to her defense?

Why wasn't Chaison here?

Guinevera reared over her, his dense mass making her flinch back. "Don't try to blame others for what you've done! You brought this catastrophe on us, imposter! I say we hang her over the battlement and let Sacrus use her for target practice." He reached down to take her arm as Venera scrambled to get her feet under her.

Light knifed through the tent's entrance flap and then miraculously the whole tent lifted up as though tugged off the roof by a giant. The giant's cough was still echoing in Venera's ears as the tent sailed into the permanent maelstrom at the edge of the world, and was snatched away like a torn kerchief.

Another bright explosion, and everyone ducked. Then everyone was running and shouting at once and soldiers were popping up to fire their blunderbusses, then squatting to refill them as trails of smoke and fire corkscrewed overhead. Venera's ears were still ringing, everything strangely aloof as she stood up and watched the big map on the table lift in the sudden breeze and slide horizontally into the night.

Who had it been? she wondered dimly. Had Moss turned on her? Or had Odess said something injudicious? Probably some soldier or servant of Liris had spoken out of turn ... But then, maybe Jacoby Sarto had become bored of his confinement and decided to liven things up a bit.

Venera was half aware that the squat cube of Liris was surrounded on three sides by an arcing constellation of torches. The red light served to illuminate the grim faces of the soldiers rushing past her. She raised her hand to stop one of them, then thought better of it. What if Guinevera had remembered to order her arrest?—Or death? As she thought about her new situation, Venera began to be afraid.

Maybe she should go inside. Liris had stout walls, and she still had friends there—she was almost sure of that. She could, what—go chat with Jacoby Sarto in his cell?

And where was Bryce? Semaphore, that was it; he'd gone to send a semaphore. She forced herself to think: the semaphore station was over there ... Where a big gap now yawned in the side of the battlement. Some soldiers were laying planks across it.

“Oh no.” *No no no.*

Deep inside Venera a quiet snide voice that had always been there was saying, ‘Of course, of course. They all abandon you in the end.’ She shouldn’t be surprised at this turn of events; she had even planned for it, in the days following her confirmation. It shouldn’t come as a shock to her. So it seemed strange to watch herself, as if from outside, as she hunkered down next to the elevator mechanism at the center of the roof, and wrapped her arms around herself and cried.

I don’t do this. She wiped at her face. *I don’t.*

Maybe she did, though; she couldn’t clearly remember those minutes in Candesce after she had killed Aubri Mahallan and she had been alone. Hayden Griffin had pulled Mahallan’s body out of sight, leaving a few bright drops of blood to twirl in the weightless air. Griffin was her only way out of Candesce, and Venera had just killed his lover. It hardly mattered that she’d done it to save the world from Mahallan and her allies. No one would ever know, and she was certain she would die there; she had only to wait for Candesce to open its fusion eyes and bring morning to the world.

Griffin had asked her to come with him. He had said he wouldn’t kill her; Venera hadn’t believed him. It was too big a risk. In the end she had snuck after him and ridden out of Candesce on the cargo net he was towing. Now the thought of running to the stairs and throwing herself on the mercy of her former compatriots filled her with a similar dread. Better to make herself very small here and risk being found by Guinevera or his men than to find out that even Liris now rejected her.

“There they are!” someone pointed excitedly. Staccato runs of gunfire sounded in the distance—they were oddly distant, in fact. If Venera had cared about anything at that moment she might have stood up to look.

“We’re gonna outflank them!”

Something blew up on the outskirts of Liris's territory. The orange mushroom lit the whole world for a moment, a flicker of estates and ornamental ponds overhead. Her ground forces must have made it here just after Sacrus's.

Well. Not *her* forces, she thought bitterly. *Not anymore.*

"There she is!" Venera jerked and tried to back up, but she was already pressed against the elevator platform. A squat silhouette reared up in front of her and something whipped toward her.

She cringed. Nothing happened; after a moment she looked up.

An open hand hovered a few inches above her. A distant flicker of red lit the extended hand and behind it, the toadish features of Samson Odess. His broad face wore an expression of concern. "Venera, are you hurt?"

"N-no..." Suspiciously, she reached to take his hand. He drew her to her feet and draped an arm across her shoulder.

"Quickly now," he said as he drew her toward the stairs. "While everyone's busy."

"What—" She was having trouble finding words. "What are you doing?"

He stopped, reared back, and stared at her. "I'm taking you home."

"Home? Whose home?"

"Yours, you silly woman. Liris."

"But why are you helping me?"

Now he looked annoyed. "You never ceased to be a citizen of Liris, Venera. And technically, I never stopped being your boss. You're still my responsibility, you know. Come on."

She paused at the top of the steps and looked around. The soldiers who had crowded the roof all seemed to be leaping off one side, in momentary silhouetted flashes showing an arm brandishing a blunderbuss, another waving a sword. There was fighting down in the bramble-choked lot that surrounded Liris. Farther out, she glimpsed squads of men running back and forth, some piling up debris to form barricades, others raising archaic weapons.

"Venera! Get off the roof!" She blinked and turned to follow Odess.

They descended several levels and Venera found herself entering, of all places, the apartments of the former botanist. The furniture and art that had borne the stamp of Margit of Sacrus was gone, and there were still burn marks on the walls and ceiling. Someone had moved in new couches and chairs, and one particularly charred wall was covered with a crepuscular tapestry depicting cherry trees shooting

beams of light all over an idealized tableau of dryads and fairies.

Venera sat down under a dryad and looked around. Eilen was there, and the rest of the diplomatic corps. “Bring a blanket,” said Odess, “and a stiff drink. She’s in shock.” Eilen ran to fetch a comforter, and somebody else shoved a tumbler of amber liquid into Venera’s hand. She stared at it for a moment, then drank.

For a few minutes she listened without comprehension to their conversation; then, as if a switch had been thrown somewhere inside her, she realized where she must be and she understood something. She looked at Odess. “This is your new office,” she said.

They all stopped talking. Odess came to sit next to her. “That’s right,” he said. “The diplomatic corps has been exalted since you left.”

Eilen laughed. “We’re the new stars of Liris! Not that the cherry trees are any less important, but—”

“Moss understands that we need to open up to the outside world,” interrupted Odess. “It could never have happened under Margit.”

Venera half smiled. “I suppose I can take some credit for making that possible.”

“My dear lady!” Odess patted her hand. “The credit is all yours! Liris has come alive again because of you. You don’t think we would abandon you in your hour of need, do you?”

“You will always have a place here,” said Eilen.

Venera started to cry.

* * * *

“We would never have told,” Odess said a few minutes later. “None of us.”

Venera grimaced. She stood at a mirror where she was dabbing at her eyes, trying to erase the evidence of tears. She didn’t know what had come over her. A momentary madness; at least it was only the Lirisians who had witnessed her little breakdown. “I suppose it was Sarto,” she said. “It hardly matters now. I can’t show my face up there without Guinevera putting a bullet in me.”

Odess *hmmphed*, wrapping his arms around his barrel chest and pacing. “Guinevera has impressed no one since he arrived. Why should any of your other allies listen to him?”

She turned, raising an eyebrow. “Because he’s the ruler of a council nation?”

Odess made a flicking motion. “Aside from that.”

With a shake of her head Venera returned to the divan. She could hear gunfire

and shouting through the opened window, but it was filtered through the roar of the world-edge winds that tumbled above the courtyard shaft. You could almost ignore it.

In similar fashion, Venera could almost ignore the emotions overflowing her. She'd always survived through keeping a cool head, and this was no time to have that desert her. It was inconvenient that she felt so abandoned and lost. Inconvenient to feel so grateful for the simple company of her former coworkers. She needed to recover her poise, and then act in her own interests as she always had before.

There was a commotion in the corridor, then someone burst through the doors. He was covered in soot and dust, his hair a shock, the left arm of his jacket in tatters.

Venera leaped to her feet. "Garth!"

"There you are!" He rushed over and hugged her fiercely. "You're alive!"

"I'm—oof! Fine. But what happened to you?"

He stepped back, keeping his hands on her arms. Garth had a crazed look in his eye she'd never seen before. He wouldn't meet her gaze. "I was looking for you," he said. "Outside. The rest of them, they're all out there, fighting around the foot of the building. Sacrus has ringed us, they want something here very badly, and our relief force is trying to break through from the outside. So Anseratte and Thinblood are leading the Liris squads in an attempt to break out—make a corridor..."

Venera nodded. The irony was that this fight was almost certainly about her, but Anseratte and the others wouldn't know it. Sacrus wanted the key, and they knew Venera was here. Naturally, they would throw whatever they had at Liris to get it.

If Guinevera had tossed her off the roof half an hour ago, the battle would already be over.

Garth toyed with the ripped fringe of his coat for a moment, then burst out with, "Venera, I am so, so sorry!"

"What?" She shook her head, uncomprehending. "Things aren't so bad. Or do you mean...?" She thought of Bryce, who might be lying twisted and broken at the foot of the wall. "Oh," she said, a twisting feeling running through her.

He had just opened his mouth—doubtless to tell her that Bryce was dead—when the noises outside changed. The gunfire, which had been muffled with distance and indirection, suddenly sounded loud and close. Shouts and screams rang through the open windows.

Venera ran over, and with Odess and Eilen craned her neck to look up the

shaft of the courtyard. There were people on the roof.

She and Odess exchanged a look. “Are those our...?” she started to say, but the answer was clear.

“Sacrus is inside the walls!” The cry was taken up by the others and suddenly everyone was running for the doors, streaming past Garth Diamandis who was speaking but inaudible through the jumble of shouts.

Venera paused long enough to shrug at him, then grabbed his arm and hauled him after her into the corridor.

The whole population of Liris was running up the stairs. They carried pikes, kitchen knives, makeshift shields, and clubs. None had on more than the clothing they normally wore, but that meant they were formidably armored. There were one or two soldiers in the mix—probably the men who had been guarding Jacoby Sarto. They were frantically trying to keep order in the pushing mass of people.

Garth stared at the crowd and shook his head. “We’ll never get through that.”

Venera eyed the window. “I have an idea.”

As she slung her leg over the lintel Garth poked his head out next to her and looked up. “It’s risky,” he said. “Somebody could just kick us off before we can get to our feet.”

“In this gravity, you’re looking at a sprained ankle. Come on.” She climbed rapidly, emerging into the light of flares and the sound of gunfire. Half the country was struggling with something at the far end of the roof. Venera blinked and squinted, and realized what it was: they were trying to dislodge a stout ladder that had been swung against the battlements. Even as that came clear to her, she saw the gray crosshatch of another emerge from the darkness to thud against the stonework.

Withering fire from below prevented the Lirisians from getting near the things. They were forced to crouch a few feet back and poke at them with their pikes.

A third ladder appeared, and suddenly men were swarming onto the roof. The Lirisians stood up. Venera saw Eilen raise a rusted old sword as a figure in red-painted iron armor reared above her.

Venera raised her pistol and fired. She walked toward Eilen, firing steadily until the man who’d threatened her friend fell. He wasn’t dead—his armor was so thick that the bullets probably hadn’t penetrated—but she’d rattled his skull for sure.

She was five feet away when her pistol clicked empty. This was the gun Corinne had given her; she had no idea whether it took the same caliber of bullets as anything the Lirisians used. Examining it quickly, she decided she didn’t even know how to breach it to check. At that moment two men like metal beetles surmounted the battlement, firelight glistening off their carapaces.

She tripped Eilen, and when the woman had fallen behind her, Venera stepped between her and the two men. She drop-kicked the leader and he windmilled his arms for a moment before falling back. The force of her kick had propelled Venera back ten feet. She landed badly, located Eilen, and shouted, “Come on!”

Moss straight-armed a pike into the helmet of the other man. Beside him Odess shoved a lighted torch at a third who was stepping off the ladder. Gunfire sounded and somebody fell, but she couldn't see who through the press of bodies.

She grabbed Eilen's arm. “We need guns! Are there more in the lockers?”

Eilen shook her head. “We barely had enough for the soldiers. There's that.” She pointed.

Around the corner of the courtyard shaft, the ancient, filigreed morning gun still sat on a tripod under its little canopy. Venera started to laugh, but the sound died in her throat. “Come on!”

The two women wrestled the weapon off its stand. It was a massive thing, and though it weighed little in this gravity, it was difficult to maneuver. “Do we have shells?” Venera asked.

“Bullets, no shells,” said Eilen. “There's black powder in that bin.”

Venera opened the gun's breach. It was of a pointlessly primitive design. You poured black powder into it and then inserted the bullet and closed the breach. It had a spark wheel instead of a percussion trigger. “Well, then, come on.” Eilen grabbed up the box of bullets and a sack of powder, and they ran along the inner edge of the roof. In the darkness and confusion Eilen stumbled, and Venera watched as the bullets spilled out into the air over the courtyard. Eilen screamed in frustration.

One bullet spun on the flagstones at Venera's feet. Cradling the gun, she bent to pick up the metal slug. A wave of cold prickles swept over her shoulders and up her neck.

This bullet was identical to the one that nestled inside her jacket—identical save for the fact that it had never been fired.

She couldn't believe it. The bullet she carried—that had sailed a thousand miles through the airs and clouds of Virga, avoiding cities and farms, adeptly swerving to avoid fish and rocks and oceanic balls of water, this bullet that had lined up on Slipstream and the city of Rush and the window in the admiralty where Venera stood so innocently; had smashed the glass in a split-second and buried itself in her jaw, spinning her around and nailing a sense of injured outrage to Venera forever—it had come from here. It had not been fired in combat. Not in spite. Not for any murderous purpose, but for tradition, and to celebrate the calmness of a morning like any other.

Venera had fantasized about this moment many times. She had rehearsed what

she would say to the owner of the gun when she finally found him. It was a high, grand, and glorious speech that, in her imagination, always ended with her putting a bullet in the villain. Cradling this picture of revenge to herself had gotten her through many nights, many cocktail parties where out of the corner of her eye she could see the ladies of the admiralty pointing to her scar and murmuring to one another behind their fans.

“Huh,” she said.

“Venera? Are you all right?”

Venera shook her head violently. “Powder. Quick!” She held out the gun, and Eilen filled it. Then she jammed the clean new bullet into the breach and closed it. She lofted the gun and spun the wheel.

“Everybody down!” Nobody heard her, but luckily a gap opened in the line at the last second. The gun made a huge noise and nearly blew Venera off the roof. When the vast plume of smoke cleared she saw nearly everybody in sight recovering from having ducked.

It might not be powerful or accurate, but the thing was *loud*. That fact might just save them.

She ran toward the Lirisians. “The cannons! Start shouting stuff about cannons!” She breached the smoking weapon and handed it to Eilen. “Reload.”

“But we lost the rest of the bullets.”

“We’ve got one.” She reached into her jacket pocket. There it was, its contours familiar from years of touching. She brought out her bullet. Her fingers trembled now as she held it up to the red flare light.

“Damn you anyway,” she whispered to it.

Eilen glanced up, said, “Oh,” and held up the gun. There was no time for ceremony; Venera slid the hated slug into the breach and it fit perfectly. She clicked it shut.

“Out of my way!” She crossed the roof in great bounding steps, dodging between fighting men to reach the battlement where the ladders jutted up. The gunfire from below had stopped; the snipers didn’t want to hit their own men as they topped the wall. Venera hopped up onto a crenel and sighted nearly straight down. She saw the startled eyes of a Sacrus soldier between her feet, and half a dozen heads below his. She spun the spark wheel.

The explosion lifted her off her feet. Everything disappeared behind a ball of smoke. When she staggered to her feet some yards away, Venera found herself surrounded by cheering people. Several of Sacrus’s soldiers were being thrown off the roof, and for the moment no more were appearing. As the smoke cleared she

saw that the top of the ladder she'd fired down was missing.

"Keep filling it," she said, thrusting the gun at Eilen. "Bullets don't matter—as long as it's bright and loud."

Moss's grinning face emerged from the gloom. "They're hesitating!"

She nodded. Sacrus didn't have so many people that they could afford to sacrifice them in wave attacks. The darkness and confusion would help; and though they had probably heard it every day of their lives, the thunderous sound of the morning gun at this close range would give pause to the men holding the ladders.

"It's not going to keep them at bay for long, though," she said. "Where are the rest of our people?"

Now Moss frowned. "T-trapped, I fear. Guinevera l-led them into an ambush. Now they have their backs to the open air." He pointed toward the edge of the world and the night skies beyond.

Venera hopped up on the edge of the elevator platform and took a quick look around. Sacrus's people were spread in a thin line around two of the approaches to Liris. On their third side, ragged girders and scoured metal jutted off the end of the world. And on the fourth—behind her—a jumble of brambles, thorn-bushes, and broken masonry formed a natural barrier that Sacrus wasn't bothering to police.

In the darkness beyond, hundreds of torches lit the contours of an army small by Venera's standards, but huge for Spyre. There might be no more than a thousand men there, but that was all the forces that opposed Sacrus on this world.

Spreading away behind that army was the maze of estates that made up Greater Spyre. Somewhere out there was the long low building where the hollowed bomb hung, with its promise of escape.

She turned to Moss. "You need to break through Sacrus's lines. Otherwise, they'll overwhelm us, and then they can turn and face our army with a secure fortress behind them."

He nodded. "But all our leaders are t-trapped."

"Well, not all." She strode across the roof to the battlements that overlooked the bramble-choked acres. He came to stand at her side. Together they gazed out at the army that lay tantalizingly out of reach.

"If the semaphore were working—" She stopped, remembering Bryce. Moss shook his head anyway.

"S-Sacrus has encircled the t-tower. They would read every letter."

"But we need to coordinate an attack—from outside and inside at the same time. To break through..."

He shrugged. “Simple matter. If we c-can get one p-person through the lines.”

She speculated. If she showed up there among the brambles, would the generals of that army have her arrested? How far had news of her deceptions spread?

“Get them ready,” she said. “Everyone into armor, everyone armed. I’ll be back in two minutes.” She headed for the stairs.

“Where are you g-going?”

She shot him a grim smile. “To check in on our bargaining chip.”

* * * *

Venera ran through empty halls to the old prison on the main floor.

As she’d suspected, the guards had deserted their posts when the roof was attacked. The main door was ajar; Venera slowed when she saw this. Warily, she toed it open and aimed her pistol through. There was nobody in the antechamber. She sidled in.

“Hello?” That was Jacoby Sarto’s voice. Venera had never heard him sound worried, but he was clearly rattled by what was happening. *He’s never been in a battle before*, she realized—nor had any of these people. It was shocking to think that she was the veteran here.

Venera went on her tiptoes to look through the door’s little window into the green-walled reception room. Sarto was the sole occupant of a bench designed to seat thirty; he sat in the very center of a room that could have held a hundred. He squinted at the door, then said, “Fanning?”

She threw open the door and stepped in. “Did you tell them?”

He appeared puzzled. “Tell who what?”

She showed him her pistol; he wouldn’t know it was empty. “Don’t play games, Sarto. Someone told Guinevera who I really am. Was it you?”

He smiled with a trace of his usual arrogance. He stood up and adjusted the sleeves of the formal shirt he still wore. “Things not going your way out there?”

“Two points,” said Venera, holding up two fingers. “First: I’m holding a gun on you. Second: you’re rapidly becoming expendable.”

“All right, all right,” he said irritably. “Don’t be so prickly. After all, I came here of my own free will.”

“And that’s supposed to impress me?” She leaned on the doorjamb and crossed her arms.

“Think about it,” he said. “What do I have to gain from revealing who you are?”

“I don’t know. Suppose you tell me?”

Now he scowled at her, as if she were some common servant girl who’d had the temerity to interrupt him while he was talking. “I have spent thirty-two years learning the ins and outs of council politics. All that time, becoming an expert—maybe *the* expert—on Spyre, learning who is beholden to whom, who’s ambitious and who just wants to keep their heads down. I have been the public face of Sacrus for much of that time, their most important operative, because for all those years, Spyre’s politics was all that mattered. But look at what’s happening.” He waved a hand to indicate the siege and battle going on beyond Liris’s thick walls. “Everything that made me valuable is being swept away.”

This was not what Venera had been expecting to hear from him. She came into the room and sat down on a bench facing Sarto. He looked at her levelly and said, “Change is inconceivable to most people in Spyre; to them a catastrophe is a tree falling across their fence. A vast political upheaval would be somebody snubbing somebody else at a party. That’s the system I was bred and trained to work in. But my masters have always known that there’s much bigger game out there. They’ve been biding their time, lo these many centuries. Now they finally have in their grasp a tool with which to conquer the world—the *real* world, not just this squalid imitation we’re standing in. On the scale of Sacrus’s new ambitions, all of my accomplishments count for nothing.”

Venera nodded slowly. “Spyre is having all its borders redrawn around you. Even if they never get the key from me, Sacrus will be facing a new Spyre once the fighting stops. I’ll bet they’ve been grooming someone young and malleable to take your place in that new world.”

He grimaced. “No one likes to be discarded. I could see it coming, though. It was inevitable, really, unless...”

“Unless you could prove your continuing usefulness to your masters,” she said. “Say, by personally bringing them the key?”

He shrugged. “Yesterday’s council meeting would otherwise have been my last public performance. At least here, as your, uh, guest, I might have the opportunity to act as Sacrus’s negotiator. Think about it—you’re surrounded, outgunned, you’re approaching the point where you have to admit you’re going to lose. But I can tell you the semaphore codes to signal our commanders that we’ve reached an accommodation. As long as you had power here, you could have functioned as the perfect traitor. A few bad orders, your forces ordered into a trap, then it’s over the wall for you and I, the key safely into my master’s hands, you on your way home to wherever it is you came from.”

Venera tamped down on her anger. Sarto was used to dealing in cold political

equations; so was she, for that matter. What he was proposing shouldn't shock her. "But if I'm disgraced, I can't betray my people."

"Your usefulness plummets," he said with a nod. "So, no, I didn't tattle on you. You're hardly of any value now, are you? All you've got is the key. If your own side's turned against you, your only remaining option is to throw yourself on the mercy of Sacrus. Which might win me some points if I'm the one who brings you in, but not as much, and—"

"—And I have no reason to expect good treatment from them," she finished. "So why should I do it?"

He stood up—slowly, mindful of her gun—and walked a little distance away. He gazed up at the room's little windows. "What other option do you have?" he asked.

She thought at first that he'd said this rhetorically, but something about his tone ... It had sounded like a genuine question.

Venera sat there for a while, thinking. She went over the incident with the council members on the roof; who could have outted her? Everything depended on that—and on when it had happened. Sarto said nothing, merely waited patiently with his arms crossed, staring idly up at the little window.

Finally she nodded and stood up. "All right," she said. "Jacoby, I think we can still come to an ... accommodation. Here's what I'm thinking..."

* * * *

19

As sometimes happened at the worst of moments, Venera lost her sense of gravity just before she hit the ground. The upthrusting spears of brush and stunted trees flipped around and became abstract decorations on a vast wall she was approaching. Her feet dangled over sideways buildings and the pikes of soldiers. Then the wall hit her, and she bounced and tumbled like a rag doll. Strangely, it didn't hurt at all—perhaps not so strangely, granted that she was swaddled in armor.

She unscrewed her helmet and looked up into a couple of dozen gun barrels. They were all different, like a museum display taken down and offered to her; in her dazed state she almost reached to grab one. But there were hands holding them tightly and grim men behind the hands.

When she and Sarto had reached the rooftop of Liris, they found a theatrical jumble of bodies, torn tenting, and brazier fires surrounded by huddling men in outlandish armor. At the center of it all, the thick metal cable that rose up and out of sight into the turbulent mists; that cable glowed gold now as distant Candescence awoke.

She had spotted Moss and headed over, keeping her head down in case there

were snipers. He looked up, lines of exhaustion apparent around his eyes. Glancing past her, he spotted Sarto. “What’s this?”

“We need to break this siege. I’m going over the wall, and Sarto is coming with me.”

Moss blinked, but his permanently shocked expression revealed none of his thoughts. “What for?”

“I don’t know whether the commanders of our encircling force have been told that I’m an imposter and traitor. I need to bring Jacoby Sarto in case I need a ... ticket, I suppose you could call it ... into their good graces.”

He nodded reluctantly. “And how do you p-propose to reach our force? S-Sacrus is between us and them.”

Now she grinned. “Well, you couldn’t do this with all of us, but I propose that we *jump*.”

Of course they’d had help from an ancient catapult that Liris had once used to fire mail and parcels over an enemy nation to an ally some three miles away. Venera had seen it on her second day here; with a little effort, it had been refitted to seat two people. But nobody, least of all her, knew whether it would still work. Her only consolation had been the low gravity in Spyre.

Now Venera had two possible scripts she could follow, one if these were soldiers of the Council Alliance, one if they owed their allegiance to Sacrus. But which were they? The fall had been so disorienting that she couldn’t tell where they’d ended up. So she merely put up her hands and smiled and said, “Hello.”

Beside her Jacoby Sarto groaned and rolled over. Instantly another dozen guns aimed at him. “I think we’re not that much of a threat,” Venera said mildly. She received a kick in the back (which she barely felt through the metal) for her humor.

A throb of pain shot through her jaw—and an odd thing happened. Such spasms of pain had plagued her for years, ever since the day she woke up in Rush’s military infirmary, her head bandaged like a delicate vase about to be shipped via the postal system. Each stab of pain had come with its own little thought, whose content varied somewhat but always translated roughly to either *I’m all alone* or *I’m going to kill them*. Fear and fury, they stabbed her repeatedly throughout each day. The fierce headaches that often built over the hours just added to her meanness.

But she’d taken the bullet that struck her jaw and blown it back out the very same gun that had shot her. So, when her jaw cramped this time, instead of her usual misery, Venera had a flash of memory: the morning gun going off with a tremendous explosion in her hands, bucking and kicking and sending her flying backward into the Lirisians. She had no idea what the feeling accompanying that had been, but she liked it.

So she grinned crookedly and stood up. Dusting herself off, she said with dignity, “I am Amandera Thrace-Guiles, and this is Jacoby Sarto of the Spyre Council. We need to talk to your commanders.”

* * * *

“You have a reputation for being foolhardy,” said the army commander, his gray mustaches wagging. “But that was ridiculous.”

It turned out that they’d nearly overshot both Sacrus and Council Alliance positions. Luckily, several hundred pairs of eyes had tracked their progress across the rolled-up sky of Spyre and it was her army that had gotten to Venera and Jacoby first. Sarto didn’t seem too upset about the outcome, which was telling. What was even more significant was that everyone was calling her “Lady Thrace-Guiles,” which meant that word of her deceptions hadn’t made it out of Liris. Here, Venera was still a respected leader.

She preened at the commander’s backhanded compliment. He stood with his back to a brick wall, a swaying lamp nodding shadows across the buttons of his jacket. Aides and colonels bustled about, some shoving little counters across the map board, others reading or writing dispatches.

Venera smelled engine oil and wet cement. The alliance army had set up its headquarters in a preservationist roundhouse about a mile from Liris; these walls were thick enough to stop anything Sacrus had so far fired. For the first time in days, Venera felt a little safe.

“I wouldn’t have had to be foolhardy if the situation weren’t so dire,” she said. It was tempting to upbraid this man for hesitating to send his forces to relieve Liris; but Venera found herself uninterested anymore in taking such familiar pleasures. She merely said, “Tell me what’s been happening out here.”

The commander leaned over the board and began pointing at the little wooden counters. “There’ve been engagements all across Greater Spyre,” he said. “Sacrus has won most of them.”

“So what are they doing? Conquering countries?”

“In one or two cases, yes. Mostly they’ve been cutting the preservationist’s railway lines. And they’ve taken or severed all the elevator cables.”

“Severed?” Even to an outsider like her this was a startling development.

One of the aides shrugged. “Easy enough to do. They just use them for target practice—except for the ones at the edge of the world, like Liris. The winds around those lines deflect the bullets.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Why don’t they just use more high-powered guns on them?” The aide shook his head.

“Ancient treaty. Places limits on muzzle velocities. It’s to prevent accidental punctures of the world’s skin.”

“—Not significant, anyway,” said the commander with an impatient gesture. “The war will be decided here on Greater Spyre. The city will just have to wait it out.”

“No, it can’t wait,” she said. “That’s what this is all about. Not the city, but the docks.”

“The docks?” The commander stared at her. “That’s the last thing we’re going to worry about.”

“I know, and Sacrus is counting on that.” She glared at him. “Everything that’s happening down here is a diversion from their real target. Everything except...” She nodded at Liris.

Now they were looking at each other with faintly embarrassed unease. “Lady Thrace-Guiles,” said the commander, “war is a very particular art. Perhaps you should leave such details to those who’ve made it their careers.”

Venera opened her mouth to yell at him, thought better, and took a deep breath instead. “Can we at least be agreed that we need to break Sacrus’s hold on Liris?”

“Yes,” he said with a vigorous nod. “We need to ensure the safety of our leadership. For that purpose,” he pointed at the table, “I am advocating a direct assault along the innermost wall.”

A moment of great temptation made Venera hesitate. The commander was proposing to go straight for the walls and leave the group trapped at the world’s edge to its fate. He didn’t know that his objective was actually there. They’d made themselves her enemies and Venera could just ... forget to tell him. Leave Guinevera and the others to Sacrus’s mercy now that she had the army.

She couldn’t claim not to have known, though, unless the Lirisians went along with it. And she was tired of deceptions. She sighed and said, “Liris is a critical objective, yes, but the rest of our leadership is actually trapped with the Lirisian army at the edge of the world.” There were startled looks up and down the table. “Yes—Master Thinblood, Principe Guinevera, and Pamela Anseratte, among others, are among those pinned down in the hurricane zone.”

The commander frowned down at the map. On it, Liris was a square encircled by red wooden tokens representing Sacrus’s army. This circle squashed a knot of blue tokens against the bottom edge of the map: the Lirisian army, trapped at the edge of the world. Left of the encirclement was a no-man’s land of tough brush that had so far resisted burning. Left of *that*, the preservationist siding and army encampment where they now stood.

“This is a problem,” said the commander. He thought for a moment, then said, “There are certain snakes that coil around their victims and choke them to death.” She raised an eyebrow, but he continued, “One of their characteristics, so I’ve been told, is that if you try to remove them they tighten their grip. Right now Sacrus has both Liris and our leaders in its coils, and if we try to break through to one they will simply strangle the other.”

To relieve the Lirisian army, they would have to force a wedge under Liris, with the edge of the world at their right side. To do this they would trade off their ability to threaten Sacrus along the inner sides of Liris—freeing those troops up to assault the walls of Liris. Conversely, the best way to relieve Liris would be to come at it from the top, which meant swinging the army away from the world’s edge—thus giving Sacrus a free hand against the trapped force.

Venera examined the map. “We have to fool them into making the wrong choice,” she said.

“Yes, but how are we going to do that?” He shook his head. “Even if we did, they can maneuver just as fast as we can. They have less ground to cover than we do to redeploy their forces.”

“As to how we’ll fool the snake into uncoiling,” she said, “it helps to have your own snake to consult with.” She turned and waved to some figures standing a few yards away. Jacoby Sarto emerged from the shadows; he was a silhouette against Klieg lights that pinioned a pair of hulking locomotives in the center of the roundhouse. He was accompanied by two armed soldiers and a member of Bryce’s underground.

The commander bowed to Sarto, but then said, “I’m afraid we cannot trust this man. He is of the enemy.”

“Lord Sarto has seen the light,” said Venera. “He has agreed to help us.”

“Pah!” The commander sneered. “Sacrus are masters of deception. How can we trust him?”

“The politics are complex,” she said. “But we have very good reasons to trust him. I do. That is why I brought him.”

There were more glances thrown between the colonels and the aides. The commander twitched a frown for just a moment, then said, “No—I understand the dilemma we’re in, but my sovereign and commanding officer is Principe Guinevera, and he’s in danger. *Politically*, saving our leadership has to be the priority. I’ll not countenance any plan that weakens our chance of doing that.”

Jacoby Sarto laughed. It was an ugly, contemptuous sound, delivered by a man who had spent decades using his voice to wither other men’s courage. The commander glared at him. “I fail to see the humor in any of this, Lord Sarto.”

“Forgivable,” said Sarto dryly, “as you’re not aware of Sacrus’s objectives. They want Liris, not your management. They haven’t crushed the soldiers pinned down at the world’s edge because they’re dangling them as bait.”

“What could they possibly want with Liris?”

“Me,” said Venera, “because they surely think I’m still there—and the elevator cable. They need to cut it. All they have to do is capture me or make it impossible for me to leave Greater Spyre. Then they’ve won. It will just be a matter of time.”

Now it was the commander’s turn to laugh. “I think you vastly overrate your own value, and underrate the potential of this army,” he said, sweeping his arm to indicate the paltry hundreds gathered in the cavernous shed. “You alone can’t hold this alliance together, Lady Thrace-Guiles. And I said it before, the elevator cables are of little strategic interest.”

Venera was furious. She wanted to tell him that she’d seen more men gathered at circuses in Rush than he had in his vaunted army. But, remembering how she had thrown a lighted lamp at Garth in anger and his gentle chiding after, she bit back on what she wanted to say, and instead said, “You’ll change your mind once you know the true strategic situation. Sacrus wants—” She stopped as Sarto touched her arm.

He was shaking his head. “This is not the right audience,” he said quietly.

“Um.” In an instant her understanding of the situation flipped around. When she had walked in here she had seen this knot of officers in one corner of the roundhouse and assumed that they were debating their plan of attack. But that wasn’t what they were doing at all. They had been *huddling* here, as far as possible from the men they must command. They weren’t planning; they were hesitating.

“Hmmm...” She quirked a transparently false smile at the commander. “If you men will excuse me for a few minutes?” He looked puzzled, then annoyed, then amused. Venera took Sarto’s arm and led him away from the table.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

She stopped in an area of blank floor stained over the decades by engine oil and grease. At first Venera didn’t meet Sarto’s eyes. She was looking around at the towering wrought-iron pillars, the tessellated windows in the ceiling, the smoky beams of light that intersected on the black backs of the locomotives. A deep knot of some kind, loosened when she cried in Eilen’s arms, was unraveling.

“They talk about places as being our homes,” she mused. “It’s not the place, really, but the people.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” he said. His dry irony had no effect on Venera. She merely shrugged.

“You were right,” she said. He cocked his head to one side, crossing his

arms, and waited. “After the confirmation, when you said I was still Sacrus’s,” she went on. “And in the council chamber, even when we talked in your cell earlier tonight. Even now. As long as I wanted to leave Spyre, I was theirs. As long as they’ve known what to dangle in front of me, there was nothing I could do but what they wanted me to do.”

“Haven’t I said that repeatedly?” He sounded annoyed.

“All along, there’s been a way to break their hold on me,” she said. “I just haven’t had the courage to do it.”

He grumbled, “I’d like to think I made the right choice by throwing in with you. Takes you long enough to come to a decision, though.”

Venera laughed. “All right. Let’s do this.” She started to walk toward the locomotives.

“There you are!” Venera stumbled, cursed, and then flung out her arms.

“Bryce!” He hugged her, but hesitantly—and she knew not to display too much enthusiasm herself. No one knew they were lovers; that knowledge would be one more piece of leverage against them. So she disengaged from him quickly and stepped back. “What happened? I saw the semaphore station blown up. We all assumed you were...”

He shook his head. In the second-hand light he did look a bit disheveled and soot stained. “A bunch of us got knocked off the roof, but none of us were hurt.” He laughed. “We landed in the brambles and then had to claw our way through with Sacrus’s boys firing at our arses all the way. Damn near got shot by our own side as well, before we convinced them who we were.”

Now she did hug him and damn the consequences. “Have you been able to contact any of our—your people?”

He nodded. “There’s a semaphore station on the roof. The whole Buridan network’s in contact. Do you have orders?”

As Venera realized what was possible, she grinned. “Yes!” She took Bryce by one arm and Sarto by the other and dragged them across the floor. “I think I know a way to break the siege and save the other commanders. You need to get up there and get Buridan to send us something. Jacoby, you get up there too. You need to convince Sacrus that I’m ready to double-cross my people.” She pushed them both away.

“And what are you going to do?” asked Bryce.

She smiled past the throbbing in her jaw. “What I do best,” she said. “I’ll set the ball rolling.”

Venera stalked over to the black, bedewed snout of a locomotive and pulled herself up to stand in front of its headlamp. She was drenched in light from it and the overhead spots, aware that her pale face and hands must be as bright as lantern flames against the dark metal surrounding her. She raised her arms.

“It is *tiiiiime!*”

She screamed it with all her might, squeezed all the anger and the pain from her twisted family and poisonous intrigues of her youth, the indifferent bullet and her loss of her husband Chaison, the blood on her hands after she stabbed Aubri Mahallan, the smoke from her pistols as she shot men and women alike, all of it into that one word. As the echoes subsided everyone in the roundhouse came to their feet. All eyes were on her and that was exactly right, exactly how it should be.

“Today the old debts will be settled! Two hundred years and more the truth has waited in Buridan tower—the truth of what Sacrus is and what they have done! Nearly too late, but not too late, because you, here today, will be the ones to settle those debts and at the same time, prevent Sacrus from ever committing such atrocities again!

“Let me describe my home. Let me describe Buridan tower!” Out of the corner of her eye she saw the army commanders running from their map table, but they had to shoulder their way through hundreds of soldiers to reach her, and the soldiers were raptly attentive to her alone. “Like a vast musical instrument, a flute thrust into the sky and played on by the ceaseless hurricane winds of the airfall. Cold, its corridors decorated with grit and wavering, torn ribbons that once were tapestries. Wet, with nothing to burn except the feathers of birds. Never silent, never still as the beams it stands on sway under the onslaught of air. A roaring tomb, that is Buridan tower! That is what Sacrus made. It is what they promise to make of your homes as well, make no mistake.

“That’s right,” she nodded. “You’re fighting for far more than you may know. This isn’t just a matter of historical grudges, nor is it a skirmish over Sacrus’s kidnapping and torture of your women and children. This is about your future. Do you want all of Spyre to become like Buridan, an empty tomb, a capricious playground for the winds? Because that is what Sacrus has planned for Spyre.”

The officers had stopped at the head of the crowd. She could see that the commander was about to order her to be taken off her perch, so Venera hurried on to her main point. “You have not been told the truth about this war! Before we leave this place you need to know why Sacrus has moved against us all. It is because they believe they have outgrown Spyre the way a wasp outgrows its cocoon. Centuries ago they attacked and destroyed Buridan to gain a treasure from us. They failed to capture it, but never gave up their ambition. Ever since Buridan’s fall they have bided their time, awaiting the chance to get their hands on something Buridan has guarded for the sake of Spyre, since the very beginning of time.” She was really winding herself up now, and for the moment the officers had stopped, curious no doubt

about what she was about to say.

“Since the creation of Spyre, my family has guarded one of the most powerful relics in the world! It was for the sake of this trust that we kept to Buridan tower for generations, not venturing out because we feared Sacrus would learn that the tower is not the empty shell they believed—afraid they would learn that it can be entered. The thing we guarded is so dangerous that my brothers and sisters, my parents, grandparents, and their grandparents, all sacrificed their lives to prevent even a hint of its existence from escaping our walls.

“Time came when we could no longer sustain ourselves,” she said more softly, “and I had to venture forth.” Dimly, Venera wondered at this grand fib she was making up on the spot; it was a rousing story, and if it proved rousing enough, then nobody would believe Guinevera if he survived to accuse her of being an imposter.

“As soon as I came forth,” she said, “Sacrus knew that Buridan had survived, and they knew *why* we had stayed hidden. They knew that I carried with me the last key to Candescence!”

She stopped, letting the echoes reverberate. Crossing her arms, she gazed out at the army, waiting. Two seconds, five, ten, and then they were muttering, talking, turning to one another with frowns and nods. Some who prided themselves on knowing old legends told the men standing next to them about the keys; word began to spread through the ranks. In the front row, the officers were looking at one another in consternation.

Venera raised a hand for silence. “That is what this war is about,” she said. “Sacrus has known of the existence of this key for centuries. They tried to take it once, and Buridan and its allies resisted. Now they are after it again. If they get it, they will no longer need Spyre. To them it is like the hated chrysalis that has confined them for generations. They will shed it, and they don’t care if it unravels in pieces as they fly toward the light. At best, Spyre will prove a good capital for the world-spanning empire they plan—once they’ve scoured it clean of all the old estates, that is. Yes, this cylinder will make a fine park for the palace of Virga’s new rulers. They’ll need room for the governors of their new provinces, for prisoners, slaves, treasure houses, and barracks. They might not knock down *all* the buildings. But you and yours ... well, I hope you have relatives in one of the principalities, because rabble like us won’t be allowed to live here anymore.”

The soldiers were starting to argue and shout. Belatedly the officers had realized that they weren’t in control any more; several darted at the locomotive, but Venera crouched and glared at them, as if she was ready to pounce. They backed away.

She stood up onto her tip-toes as she flung one fist high over her head. “We have to stop them! The key must be protected, for without it, Spyre itself is

doomed. You fight for more than your lives—more than your homes. You are all that stands between Sacrus and the slow strangulation of the very world!

“Will you stop them?” They shouted yes. “*Will* you?” They screamed it.

Venera had never seen anyone give a speech like this, but she’d heard Chaison work a crowd and had read about such moments in books. It all took her back to those romantic stories she’d devoured as a little girl in her pink bedroom. Outrageous theatricality, but none of these men had ever seen its like either; few had probably ever been in a theater. For most, this roundhouse was the farthest they had ever been from home, and the looming locomotive was something they had only ever glimpsed in the far distance. They stood among peers, who before today had been dots seen through telescopes, and they were learning that however strange and foreign they were, all were united in their loyalty to Spyre itself. Of course the moment made them mad.

Fist still raised, Venera smiled down at the commander who shook his head in defeat.

Bryce and Jacoby Sarto clambered along the side of the locomotive to join her. “What’s the news?” she asked over the roar of the army at her feet.

Bryce blinked at the scene. “Uh ... they’re on their way.”

Sarto nodded. “I semaphored the Sacrus army commander. Told him you realize your situation is hopeless, that you’re going to lead your army into a trap.”

She grinned. “Good.” She turned back to the crowd and raised her fist again.

“It—is—*tiiiiiiiiime!*”

* * * *

20

The sound of bullets hitting Liris’s walls reminded Garth Diamandis of those occasional big drops that fall from trees after a rain. Silence, then a *pat* followed in this case by the distant sound of a shot. From the gunslit where he was watching he could see the army of the Council Alliance assembling next to the rust-streaked roundhouse. In the early morning light it seemed like a dark carpet moving, in ominous silence, in the direction of Liris. Little puffs of smoke arose from the Sacrus line, but the firing was undisciplined.

“Come away from there,” said Venera’s friend Eilen. They stood in a musty closet crammed with door lintels, broken drawers, cracked table legs: useless junk, but impossible for a tiny nation like Liris to throw away. Lantern light from the corridor shone through Eilen’s hair. She could have been attractive, a habitual part of his mind noted. At one time, he could have helped her with that.

“I have a good view of the Sacrus camp,” he said. “And it’s too dangerous to

be on the roof right now.”

“You’ll get a bullet in the eye,” she said. He grunted and turned back to the view, and after a moment he heard her leave.

He couldn’t tell her that he had recognized one of the uniformed figures moving down there—maybe two of them, he couldn’t be sure. Garth was sure that Eilen would tell him he was suffering an old man’s delusions if he said he’d recognized his daughter among the hundreds of crimson uniforms.

He could be imagining it. He’d had scant moments to absorb the sight of her before she’d signaled her superiors and Sacrus’s thugs had moved in on him. Yet Garth had an eye for women, was able to recall the smallest detail about how this or that one moved or held herself. He could deduce much about character and vulnerability by a woman’s stance and habitual gestures, and he damned well knew how to recognize one at a distance. That was Selene standing hipshot by that tent, he was sure of it.

Garth cursed under his breath. He’d never been one to probe at sore spots, but ever since they’d thrown him into that stinking cell in the Gray Infirmary, his thoughts had pivoted around the moment of Selene’s betrayal.

He had told her that he was her father, just before she betrayed him. In the seconds between, he’d seen the doubt in her eye—and then the mad-eyed woman with the pink hair had come to stand next to Selene.

“He said he’s my father,” Selene murmured as the soldiers cuffed Garth. The pink-haired woman behind her laughed.

“And who knows?” she’d said. “He might well be.” She had laughed again, and Garth had glimpsed a terrible light in his daughter’s eye just before he was hauled out of her sight.

There it was again, that mop of blossom-colored hair poking out from under a gray army cap. She was an officer. The last time Garth had seen her had been in a bizarre fever dream where Venera was whispering his name urgently. This woman had been there, among glass cases, but she was naked and laved with crimson from head to toe. Venera had spoken her name then, but Garth didn’t remember it.

The sound of firing suddenly intensified. Garth craned his neck to look in the direction of the roundhouse. Sacrus’s forces were moving out to engage the council troops on the inside of Liris. Behind him, though, he could see an equally large contingent of Sacrus’s soldiers circling back around the building—headed toward the edge of the world.

Garth had some inkling of what the council army was doing. They were pressing up against the no-man’s land of thorn and tumbled masonry, a scant hundred yards from the walls of Liris. From there they could turn left or

right—inward or toward world’s edge—at a moment’s notice. Sacrus would have to split their forces into two to guard against both possibilities.

It was an intelligent plan and for a moment Garth’s spirits lifted. Then he saw more of Sacrus’s men abandon their positions below him. They were leaving a noisy and smoke-wreathed band of some two hundred men to defend the inward side while the rest of their forces marched behind Liris and out of sight from the roundhouse. They clearly expected the council army to split right and try to relieve Guinevera and Anseratte at the hurricane-wracked world’s edge. But how did they know what the council was planning?

He cursed and jumped down off the ancient credenza he’d been perched upon. The corridors were stuffed with armed people, old men and women mostly (strange how he thought of other people his age as old, but not himself). He elbowed his way through them carelessly. “Where the hell is Moss?”

Someone pointed down a narrow, packed hallway. Liris’s new botanist was deep in discussion with the only one of Bryce’s men left inside the walls. “I need semaphore flags,” Garth shouted over two shoulders. “We have to warn the troops what Sacrus is doing!”

To his credit, Moss didn’t even blink. He raised a hand, pointed to one man, then held up two fingers. “Forward stores,” he said. He pointed to another man and then at Garth. “Go with.”

It took precious minutes for Garth and his new helper to locate the flags. Then they had to fight their way to the stairs. They emerged outside to the mind-numbing roar of the winds and an almost continuous sound of gunfire. Ducking low, they ran for the edge of the roof.

* * * *

“They expect you to act as if you don’t know about the key,” Venera was explaining for the tenth time. She was surrounded by nervous officers and staffers; the gray-mustachioed army commander stood with his arms crossed, glowering as she drew on the ground with a stick. “If you don’t know about it, then the obvious strategic goal is to relieve Guinevera’s force. Jacoby Sarto has told them that we are going to do that. This frees Sacrus to take Liris, their real objective.”

The commander nodded reluctantly. A bullet whined past somewhere too near for comfort. They stood behind a screen of brush on the edge of no-man’s land. An arc of soldiers surrounded them, far too few for Venera’s taste. This force would hardly qualify as a company in Chaison’s army. Yet Sacrus didn’t have much more.

“So,” she continued. “We feint right, then strike left. I humbly suggest that we start with sustained fire into Sacrus’s position on the edge side of no-man’s land.”

There was some talk among the officers—far too much of it to suit her—then the commander said, “It’s too risky. And I remain skeptical about your story.”

He didn't believe the key was real. Venera was tempted to take it out and show it to him, but that might backfire. Who could believe a whole war would be fought over an ivory wand?

While she and the commander were scowling at one another Bryce ran up, puffing. "They're here!" Venera turned to look where he pointed.

She turned back, grinning broadly. "Commander, would you be more amenable to my plan if you had a secret weapon to help with it?"

The commander and all the officers fell silent as they saw what was approaching. Slowly, the commander began to smile.

* * * *

"Damn it, they're ignoring us!" Garth ducked as another volley of fire from below raked the edge of the roof. His assistant slumped onto the flagstones next to him, shaking his head.

"Maybe they don't see us," he said.

"Oh, they see us all right. They just don't believe us." Garth risked a glance over the stones. The council army was pressing hard against the barricades hastily thrown up by Sacrus on the inward side of Liris. The bulk of their army was hovering on the far side of the building, ready to speed toward the edge as soon as they were given the word.

Another ladder thunked against the wall. That made four in as many seconds. Garth pushed his companion. "Back to the stairs!" Sacrus was moving to take Liris. There was nothing anyone could do to stop them.

Garth stood up to run, and hesitated for just a second. He couldn't stop himself from looking down through the gunfire and smoke to find his daughter. The ground around Liris was boiling with men; he couldn't see her.

Something hit him hard and he spun around, toppling to the flagstones. A bullet—was he dead? Garth clawed at his shoulder, saw a bright scar on the metal of his armor but no hole.

"Sir!" Damn him, his helper was running back to save him. "No, get to the stairs dammit!" Garth yelled, but it was too late. A dozen bullets hit the man and some of those went right through his armor. He fell and slid forward, and died at Garth's feet.

Garth had never even learned his name.

Up they came now, soldier after soldier hopping onto Liris's roof. One loped forward, ignoring rifle fire from the stairs, and pitched a firebomb into the central courtyard. The cherry trees were protected under a siege roof, but a few more of those and they would burn.

Swearing, he tried to stand. Something hit him again and he fell back. This time when he looked up, it was to see the black globe of a Sacrus helmet hovering above him, and a rifle barrel inches from his face.

Garth fell back, groaning, and closed his eyes.

* * * *

“We’ve lost our momentum,” said Bryce. He and Venera were crouched behind an upthrust block of brickwork from some ancient, abandoned building. A hundred feet ahead of them, men were dying in a futile attack on the Sacrus barricade.

She nodded, but the council officers were already ordering a retreat. For a few seconds she watched the soldiers scampering back under relentless fire. Then she cocked an eyebrow at Bryce, and grinned.

“We’ve lost *our* momentum? When did you decide this was your fight?”

“People are dying,” he said angrily. “Anyway, if what you say is true, there’s far more at stake than any of us knew.” She shrugged and glanced again at the retreat, but then noticed he was staring at her.

“What?”

“Who are you, really? Surely not Amandera Thrace-Guiles?”

Venera laughed. He hadn’t been there for her moment of humiliation at the feet of Guinevera—had, in fact, been flying through the air over brambles and scrub just about then.

She stuck out her hand for him to shake. “Venera Fanning. Pleased to meet you.”

He shook it, a puzzled expression on his face, but then a new commotion distracted him. “Look! Your friends...”

Through the drifting smoke, she could see a dozen spindly ladders wobbling against the building’s walls. Men were swarming up them and there was fighting on the roof. In seconds she could lose the people who had become most precious to her. “Come on!”

They braved rifle fire and ran back. The army commander was crouched over a map. He looked up grimly as Venera approached. “Can you feel it?” When she frowned, he pointed down at the ground. Now she realized that for some time now, she had been feeling a slow, almost subliminal sensation of rising and falling. It was the kind of faint instability of weight that you sometimes felt when a town’s engines were working to spin it back up to speed.

“I think Sacrus cut one too many cables.”

“Let the preservationists deal with it when we’re finished,” she said. “Right now we need to cut down those ladders.”

He shook his head. “Don’t you understand? This is more than just a piece or two falling off the world. Something’s happened. It—we...” She realized that he was very, very frightened. So were the officers kneeling with him.

Venera felt it again, that long slow waver, unsettling to the inner ear. Way out past the smoke, it seemed like the curving landscape of Spyre was crawling, somehow, like the itchy skin of a giant beast twitching in slow motion.

“We can’t do anything about that,” she said. “We have to focus on saving lives here and now! Look, I don’t think there’s more than three dozen men on those barricades. The rest of their men are waiting on the far side for us to try to relieve Guinevera.”

With an effort he pulled himself together. “Your plan ... Can you do it?”

“They’ll start to pull back as soon as they realize we’re concentrating here,” she said. “When they do, we’ll have them.”

“All right. We have to ... do something.” He got to his feet and began issuing orders. The frightened officers sprinted off in all directions. Venera and Bryce ran back in the direction of the roundhouse and as they passed the fringe of the no-man’s land she saw scores of men standing up from concealment in the bushes. Suddenly they were all bellowing and as more popped up from unexpected places Venera found herself being swept back by a vast mob of howling armored men. She and Bryce fought their way forward as hundreds of bodies plunged past them. She had no time to look back but could imagine the Sacrus barricades being overwhelmed in seconds; the ladders would tremble and fall, and when they rose again it would be council soldiers climbing them.

A small copse of trees stood at the end of no-man’s land; bedraggled and half-burnt, they still made a good screen for what hid behind them. Venera smelled the things before she saw them, and her spirits soared as she heard their nervous snorting and stamping.

With murmurs and an outstretched hand, she approached her Dali horse. A dozen others stood huddled together, flanks twitching, their heads a dozen feet off the earth. All were saddled and some of the horsemen were already mounted.

Bryce stopped short, a wondering expression on his face. Venera put her hand on the rope ladder that led up to her beast’s saddle, then looked back at him. “See to your people,” she said. “Run your presses. If I live, I’ll see you after.”

He smiled and for a moment looked boyishly mischievous. “The presses have been running for days, and I’ve sent my messages. But just in case ... here.” He dug inside his jacket and handed her a cloth-wrapped square. Venera unwrapped it,

puzzled, then laughed out loud. It was a brand-new copy of the book *Rights Currencies*. She raised it to her nose and smelled the fresh ink, then stuffed it in her own jacket.

She laughed again as Bryce stepped back and the rest of her force mounted up behind her. Venera turned and waved to them, and as Bryce ran back toward the roundhouse and safety, she yelled, “Come *on!* They’re not going to be expecting *this!*”

* * * *

Garth could see it all. They’d tied his hands behind him and stood him near the body of the man who’d come with him to the roof. From behind him came the sounds of Sacrus’s forces mopping up on the lower floors of Liris. Prisoners were being led onto the roof under the direction of the pink-haired woman, whose name, he now remembered, was Margit. She had climbed up the ladder with ferocious energy a few minutes before.

Garth had turned away when his daughter stepped onto the roof behind her.

Turning, he saw what was developing under the shadow of the building, and despite all the tragedy it made him smile.

A dozen horses, each one at least ten feet tall at the shoulder, were stepping daintily but rapidly through no-man’s land. The closely packed thorn bushes and tumbled masonry were no barrier to them at all. Each mount held two riders except the one in the lead. Venera Fanning rode that one, a rifle held high over her head. Garth could see that her mouth was wide open—Mother of Virga, was she howling some outlandish battle cry? Garth had to laugh.

“What’s so funny, you?” A soldier cuffed him on the side of his head. Garth looked him in the eye and nodded in Venera’s direction.

“That,” he said.

After he finished swearing, the man ran toward Margit, shouting, “Sir! Sir!” Garth turned back to the view.

Sacrus had taken Liris with a comparatively small force, and was now depleted on the Spyre side of the building. The bulk of the council army was wheeling in that direction, pushing back the few defenders on the barricades. They’d take the siege ladders on that side in no time. It shouldn’t have been a problem for Sacrus; they now held the roof and could lower ladders, ropes, and platforms to relieve their own forces from the other side of the building. Now that they knew where the council army was going, their ground forces had started running back in that direction from the world’s edge. This seemed safe because they had a large force below no-man’s land to block any access from the direction of the roundhouse.

But Venera's cavalry had just crossed *over* no-man's land and were now stepping into the strip of cleared land next to the building. Without hesitation they turned right and galloped at the rear of the Sacrus line. Simultaneously, those council troops fronting the roundhouse assaulted them head-on.

A hysterical laugh pierced the air. Garth turned to see Margit perched atop the wall. She was staring down at the horses with a wild look in her eye. "I'm seeing things in broad daylight now," she said, and laughed again. "This is a strange dream, this one. Things with four legs ... taller than a man..."

Selene reached up to take Margit's arm, but the former botanist batted her hand aside. Stepping back, her face full of doubt, Selene looked around—and her eyes met Garth's. He frowned and shook his head slowly.

Angrily, she turned away.

The twelve horses stepped over a barricade while their riders shot the men behind it. The horses were armored, Garth saw, although he was sure it wouldn't prove too effective under direct fire. Sacrus's men weren't firing, though. They were too amazed at what they were seeing. The beasts towered over them, huge masses of muscle on impossibly long legs, festooned with sheet metal barding that half hid their giant eyes and broad teeth. The monsters were overtop and past and wheeling before the defenders could organize. And by then bullets and flicking hooves were finding them, and they all fell.

Margit stood there and watched while the commanders on the ground shouted and waved. The other men on the rooftop stared at the fiasco unfolding below them, then looked to Margit. The seconds dragged.

In that time the horses reached a point midway between the bottled-up council leadership and the Sacrus force below no-man's land. Now they split into two squads of six. Venera led hers in a thunderous charge directly at the men who had pinned down Guinevera and the Liris army.

Selene jumped onto the wall beside Margit. She stared for a second, then cursed and whirling, shouted, "Shoot! Shoot, you idiots! They're going to—"

Margit seemed to wake out of her trance. She stepped grandly down from the wall and frowned at the line of prisoners that had been led onto the roof. She strolled over, loosening a pistol at her belt.

"Where is Venera Fanning?" she shouted.

A sick feeling came over Garth. He watched Margit walk up and down the line, saw her pause before Moss, sneer at Samson Odess, and finally stop in front of Eilen.

"You were her friend," she said. "You'll know where she is." She raised the pistol and aimed it between Eilen's eyes.

Garth tried to run over to her, but a soldier kicked his legs out from under him and only the light gravity saved him from breaking his nose as he fell. “She’s right there!” Garth hollered at Margit. “Riding a horse! You were just looking at her.”

Margit glanced back. Her eyes found Garth lying prone on the flagstones.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said with a smile. “Those things weren’t *real*.”

She shot Eilen in the head.

Venera’s friend flopped to the rooftop in a tumble of limbs. The other captives screamed and quailed. “Where is she?” shrieked Margit, waving the pistol. Now, too late, Selene was running to her side. The younger woman put her hand on Margit’s arm, spoke in her ear, tugged her away from the prisoners.

As she led Margit away Selene glanced over at Garth. It was his turn to look away.

There was a lot of running and shouting then, though little shooting because, he supposed, the men on the roof were afraid of hitting their own men. Garth didn’t care. He lay on his stomach with his cheek pressed against the cold stone and cried.

Someone hauled him to his feet. Dimly he realized that a great roaring sound was coming from beyond the roof’s edge. Now the men on the roof did start firing—and cursing, and looking at one another helplessly.

Garth knew exactly what had happened. Venera had broken the line around Guinevera’s men. They were pouring out of their defensive position and attacking Sacrus’s force beneath no-man’s land. That group was now itself isolated and surrounded.

He wouldn’t be surprised if Venera herself had moved on, perhaps circling the building to connect up with the main bulk of the council army. If she did that, then none of the ladders and elevator platforms to this roof would be safe for Sacrus.

“Come on.” Garth was hauled to his feet and pushed to the middle of the roof. He coughed and realized that smoke was pouring up from the courtyard. The prisoners were wailing and screaming.

Margit’s soldiers had set the cherry trees alight.

“Get on the platform or I’ll shoot you.” Garth blinked and saw that he was standing next to the elevator that climbed Liris’s cable. Margit and Selene were already on the platform, with a crowd of soldiers and several Liris prisoners including Moss and Odess.

He climbed aboard.

Margit smiled with supreme confidence. “This,” she said as if to no one in particular, “is where we’ll defeat her.”

* * * *

Venera looked down from her saddle at Guinevera, who stared at her with his bloody sword half raised. “You spoke out of turn, Principe,” she called down. “Even if I wasn’t Buridan before, I am now.”

He ducked his head slightly, conceding the point. “We’re grateful, Fanning,” he said.

Venera finally let herself feel her triumph and relief, and slumped a bit in her saddle. Fragmentary memories of the past minutes came and went; who would have thought that the skin of Spyre would *bounce* under the gallop of a horse?

Scattered gunfire echoed around the corner of the building, but Sacrus’s army was in full retreat. Their force below no-man’s land had surrendered. No one had any stomach for fighting anyway; Sacrus and council soldiers stood side by side, exchanging uneasy glances as another long slow undulation moved through the ground. Council troops were swarming up the sides of Liris, but there was no sound from up there, and an ominous flag of smoke was fluttering from the roof line.

Seeing that, Venera’s anxiety about her friends returned. Garth, Eilen, and Moss—what had become of them during Sacrus’s brief occupation? Her eyes were drawn to the cable that stretched from Liris up to Lesser Spyre. It seemed oddly slack, and somehow that tiny detail filled her with more fear than anything else she’d seen today.

Closer at hand, she spotted Jacoby Sarto walking, unescorted, past ranks of huddling Sacrus prisoners. He looked up at her, his face eloquently expressing the unease she too felt.

Another undulation, stronger this time. She saw trees sway and a sharp *crack!* echoed from Liris’s masonry wall. Some of the soldiers cried out.

Guinevera looked around. Ever the dramatist, his florid lips quivered as he said, “This should have been our moment of triumph. But what have we won? What have we done to Spyre?”

Venera did her best to look unimpressed, though she was worried too. “Look, there’s no way to know,” she said. That was a lie: she could feel it, they all could. Something was wrong.

A captain ran up. He saluted them both, but it was almost an afterthought. “Ma’am,” he said to Venera. “It’s ... they’re waiting for you. On the roof.”

A cold feeling came over her. For just a second she remembered lying on the marble floor of the Rush admiralty, bleeding from the mouth and sure she would die there alone. And then, curled around herself inside Candescence, feeling the Sun of Suns come to life, minutes to go before she was burnt alive. She’d almost lost it all. She could lose it all now.

She flipped down the little ladder attached to her saddle and climbed down. Her thighs and lower back spasmed with pain, but there was no echo from her jaw. She wouldn't have cared if there had been. As a tremor ran through the earth, Jacoby Sarto reached to steady her. She looked him in the eye.

“If you come with me,” she said, “whose side will you be on?”

He shrugged and staggered as the ground lurched again. “I don't think sides matter anymore,” he said.

“Then come.” They ran for the ladders.

* * * *

21

All across Spyre, metal that had been without voice for a thousand years was groaning. The distant moan seemed half real to Venera, here at the world's edge where the roar of the wind was perpetual, but it was there. Spyre was waking, trembling, and dying. Everybody knew it.

She put one hand over the other and tried to focus on the rungs above her. She could see the peaked helmets of some of Guinevera's men up there and was pathetically glad that she wouldn't have to face this alone.

Sarto was climbing a ladder next to hers. Even a month ago, the very idea of trusting him would have seemed insane to her. And anyway, if she were some romantic heroine and this were the sort of story that would turn out well, it would be her lover Bryce offering to go into danger at her side—not a man who until recently she would have been perfectly happy to see skewered on a pike.

“Pfah,” she said, and climbed out onto the roof.

Thick smoke crawled out of the broad square opening in the center of the roof. Ominous, it billowed up twenty feet and then was torn to ribbons by the world's-edge hurricanes. The smoke made an undulating tapestry behind Margit, her soldiers, and their hostages.

The elevator platform had been raised six feet. It was closely ringed by council troops whose weapons were aimed at Margit and her people. Venera recognized Garth Diamandis, Moss, and little Samson Odess among the captives. All had gun muzzles pressed against their cheeks.

A young woman in a uniform stood next to Margit. With Garth's face hovering just behind her own, Venera could be in no doubt as to who she was; she had the same high cheekbones and gray eyes as her father.

Her gaze was fixed on Margit, her face expressionless.

“Come closer, Venera,” called Margit. She held a pistol and had propped her

elbow on her hip, aiming it casually upward. “Don’t be shy.”

Venera cursed under her breath. Margit had managed to corral all of her friends—no, not all. Where was Eilen? She glanced around the roof, not seeing her among the other newly freed Lirisians. Maybe she was downstairs fighting the fires; that was probably it...

Her eye was drawn despite herself to a huddled figure lying on the roof. Freed of life, Eilen was difficult to recognize; her clothes were no longer clothes but some odd drapes of cloth covering a shape whose limbs weren’t bent in any human pose. She stared straight up, her face a blank under the burnt wound in her forehead.

“Oh no...” Venera ran to her and knelt. She reached out, hesitated, then looked up at Margit.

Smoke roiled behind the former botanist of Liris. She smiled triumphantly. “Always wanted an excuse to do that,” she said. “And I’d love an excuse to do the same to these.” Her pistol waved at the prisoners behind her. “But that’s not going to happen, is it? Because you’re going to...” She seemed to lose the thread of what she was saying, staring off into the distance for a few seconds. Then, starting, she looked at Venera again and said, “Going to give me the key to Candescence.”

Venera glanced behind her. None of the army staff who knew about the key were here. Neither was Guinevera nor Pamela Anseratte. There was no one to prevent her from making such a deal.

Margit barked a surprised laugh. “Is this your solution? You thought to do a trade, did you?” Jacoby Sarto had stepped into view, paces behind Venera. Margit was sneering at him with undisguised contempt.

“That man-shaped *thing* might have been valuable once, but not anymore. It’s not worth the least of these fools.” She flipped up the pistol and fired; instantly hundreds of weapons rose across the roof, hammers cocking, men straining. Venera’s heart was thudding painfully in her chest; she raised a hand, lowered it slowly. Gratefully, she saw the council soldiers obey her gesture and relax slightly.

She ventured a look behind her. Jacoby Sarto was staring down at a hole in the rooftop, right between his feet. His face was dark with anger, but his shoulders were slumped in defeat. He had nothing now, and he knew it.

“Your choice is clear, oh would-be queen of Candescence,” shouted Margit over the shuddering of the wind. “You can keep your trophy, and maybe even use it again if you can evade us. Maybe these soldiers will follow you all the way to Candescence, though I doubt it. But go ahead: all you have to do is give the order and they’ll fire. I’ll be dead—and so will your friends. But you can walk away with your trinket.

“Or,” she said with relish, “you can hand it to me now. Then I’ll let your friends go—well, all save one, maybe. I need *some* guarantee that you won’t have us

shot on our way up to the docks. But I promise I'll let the last one go when we get there. Sacrus keeps its promises.”

Venera played for time. “And who’s going to use the key when you get to Candesce? Not you.”

Margit shrugged. “They are wise, those that made me and healed me after you...” Her brows knit as though she were trying to remember something. “You ... Those that made me—yes, those ones, not this one and his former cronies,” she nodded to Sarto. “No, Sacrus underwent a ... change of government ... some weeks ago. People with a far better understanding of what the key represents, and who we might bargain with using it are in charge now. Their glory shall extend beyond merely cowing the principalities with some show of force from the Sun of Suns. The bargain they’ve struck ... the forces they’ve struck it with ... well, suffice it to say, Virga itself will be our toy when they’re done.”

An ugly suspicion was forming in Venera’s mind. “Do these forces have a name? Maybe—Artificial Nature?”

Margit shrugged again, looking pleased. “A lady doesn’t tell.” Then her expression hardened. She extended her hand. “Hand it over. *Now*. We have a lot to do, and you’re wasting my time.”

The rooftop trembled under Venera’s feet. Past the pall of smoke, Spyre itself shimmered like a dissolving dream.

She’d almost had the power she needed, power to take revenge against the Pilot of Slipstream for the death of her husband. Enough wealth to set herself up somewhere in independence. Maybe she was even growing past the need for vengeance. It was possible she could have stayed here with her newfound friends, maybe in the mansion of Buridan in Lesser Spyre. Such possibilities had trembled just out of reach ever since her arrival among these baroque, ancient, and inward-turned people. It had all been within her grasp.

And Margit was right: she could still turn away. The key was hers and with it, untold power and riches if she chose to exercise it. True, she would have to move immediately to secure her own safety, else the council would try to take it from her. But she was sure she could do that, with Sarto’s help and Bryce’s. Maybe Spyre would survive, if they spun its rotation down in time and repaired it under lesser gravity. She could still have Buridan, her place on the council, and power. All she had to do was give up the prisoners who stood watching her now.

The Venera Fanning who had woken in Garth Diamandis’s bed those scant weeks ago could have done that.

She reached slowly into her jacket and brought out the slim white wand that had caused so much grief—and doubtless would be the cause of much more. Step by step she closed the distance between herself and Margit’s outstretched hand.

Venera raised her hand and Margit leaned forward, but Venera would not look her in the eye.

Selene Diamandis put her foot in Margit's lower back and *pushed*.

As the former botanist sprawled onto Venera, bringing them both down, Selene pulled her own pistol and aimed it at the face of the man whose gun was touching Garth's ear. "Father, jump!" she cried.

Margit snarled and punched Venera in the chin. The explosion of pain was nothing compared to the spasms she usually got there so Venera didn't even blink. She grabbed Margit's wrist and the two rolled over and away from the platform.

"Lower your guns," Selene was shouting. Venera caught a confused glimpse of men and women stepping out of the way as she and Margit tumbled to the edge of the roof by the courtyard. Nobody moved to help her—if anyone laid a hand on either her or Margit, everyone would start shooting.

Margit elbowed Venera in the face and her head snapped back. She had an upside-down view of the courtyard below; it was an inferno.

"That red looks good on the trees, don't you think?" Margit muttered. She struck Venera again. Dazed, Venera couldn't recover fast enough and suddenly found Margit standing over her, pistol aimed at her.

"The key," she said, "or you die."

A shadow flickered from overhead. Margit glanced up, said, "What—" and then Moss collided with her and the two of them sailed off the roof. In the blink of an eye they were gone, disappearing silently into the smoke.

No one spoke. On her knees, gazing into the fire, Venera realized that she was waiting like everyone else for the end: a scream, a crash, or some other evidence that Margit and Moss had landed. It didn't come. There was only the dry crackle of the flames. Someone coughed and the spell was broken. Venera took a proffered arm and stood up.

It was Samson Odess who had helped her to her feet. A short distance away Garth Diamandis was hugging his daughter fiercely as the remaining Sacrus troops climbed down from the platform. The building was swaying, its stones cracking and grinding now. The whole landscape of Spyre was transforming as trees fell and buildings quivered on the verge of collapse. Soldiers and officers of both sides looked at one another in wonder and terror. Their alliances suddenly didn't matter.

Odess pointed to the grandly spinning town-wheels miles overhead. "Come on," he said. "Lesser Spyre will survive when the world comes apart. It'll all fall away from the town-wheels."

Venera followed his gaze, then looked around. The little elevator platform

might hold twelve or fifteen people; she could save her friends. Then what? Repeat the stand-off she'd just undergone, this time at the docks? Sacrus's leaders were there. They probably held the entire city by now.

"Who are you going to save, Samson?" she asked him. "These are your people now. You're the senior official in Liris—you're the new botanist now, do you understand? These people are your responsibility."

She saw the realization hit him, but the result wasn't what she might have expected. Samson seemed to stand a little taller. His eyes, which had always darted around nervously, were now steady. He walked over to where Eilen lay crumpled. Kneeling, he arranged her limbs and closed her eyes, so that it looked like she was sleeping with her cheek and the palm of one hand pressed against the stones of Liris. Then he looked up at Venera. "We have to save them all," he said.

It seemed hopeless, if the very fabric of Spyre was about to come apart around them. Even burying the dead in the thin earth of their ancestral home seemed pointless. In hours or minutes they would be emptied into the airs of Virga. The alternative for the living was to rise to the city, to probably become prisoners in Lesser Spyre.

The air...

"I know what to do," Venera said. "Gather all your people. We might just make it if we go now."

"Where?" he asked. "If the whole world's coming apart—"

"Fin," she shouted as she ran to the edge of the roof. "We have to get to Fin!"

* * * *

She mounted her horse and led them at a walk. At first only a trickle of people followed, just those who had been on the rooftop, but soon soldiers of Liris and Sacrus threw down their weapons and joined the crowd. Their officers trailed them. Guinevera and Anseratte appeared, but they were silent when anyone asked them what to do.

As they passed the roundhouse Bryce emerged with some of his own followers. They fell into step next to Venera's horse but, while their eyes met, they exchanged no words. Both knew that their time together had ended, as certainly as Spyre's.

In the clear daylight, Venera was able to behold the intricacies of Greater Spyre's estates for the first and last time. Always before she had skulked past them at night or raced along the few awning-covered roads that were tolerated by this paranoid civilization. Now, astride a ten-foot-tall beast walking the narrow strip of no-man's land running between the walls, she could see it all. She was glad she had

never known before what lay here.

The work of untold ages, of countless lives, had gone into the making of Spyre. There was not a square inch of it that was untouched by some lifetime of contemplation and planning. Any garden corner or low stone wall could tell a thousand tales of lovers who'd met there, children who built forts or cried alone, of petty disputes with neighbors settled there with blood or marriage. Time had never stopped in Spyre, but it had slowed like the sluggish blood of some fantastically old beast, and now for generations the people had lived nearly identical lives. Their hopes and dreams were channeled by the walls under which they walked—influenced by the same storybooks, paintings, and music as their ancestors—until they had become gray copies of their parents or grandparents. Each had added perhaps one small item to Spyre's vast stockpile of bric-a-brac, unknowingly placing one more barrier before any thoughts of flight their own children might nurture. Strange languages never spoken by more than a dozen people thrived. Venera had been told how the lightless inner rooms of some estates had become bizarre shrines as beloved patriarchs died and because of tradition or fear no one could touch the body. More than one nation had died, too, as its own mausoleum ate it from the inside, its last inhabitants living out their lives in an ivy-strangled gatehouse without once stepping beyond the walls.

Now the staggered rows of hedge and wall were toppling. From the half-hidden buildings lurking beyond came the sound of glass shattering as pillars shifted. Doors unopened for centuries suddenly gaped revealing blackness or sights that seared themselves into memory but not the understanding—glimpses, as they were, of cultures and rituals gone so insular and self-referential as to be forever opaque to outsiders.

And now the people were visible, running outside as the ground quaked and the metal skin of Spyre groaned beneath them. They were like grubs ejected from a wasp's nest split by some indifferent boy; many lay thrashing on the ground, unable to cope with the strangeness of the greater world they had been thrown into. Others ran screaming, or tore at themselves or one another, or stood mutely, or laughed.

As a many-verandaed manor collapsed in on itself Venera caught a glimpse of the people still inside: the very old, parchment hands crossed over their laps as they sat unmoved beneath their collapsing ceilings; and the panicked who stood staring wide eyed at open fields where walls had been. The building's floors came down one atop the other, pancaking in a wallop of dust, and they were all gone.

“Liris's cable has snapped,” someone said. Venera didn't look around. She felt strangely calm; after all, what lay ahead of them all but a return to the skies of Virga? She knew those skies, had flown in them many times. There, of course, lay the irony: for those who fell into the air with the cascading pieces of the great wheel, this would not be the end, but a beginning. Few, if any, could comprehend that. So she said nothing.

And for her? She had saved herself from her scheming sisters and her father's homicidal court by marrying a dashing admiral. In the end, he had lived up to her expectations, but he had also died. Venera had been taught exactly one way to deal with such crises, which was through vengeance. Now she patted the front of her jacket, where the key to Candescence nestled once again in its inner pocket. It was a useless trinket, she realized; nothing worthwhile had come of using it and nothing would.

For her, what was ending here was the luxury of being able to hide within herself. If she was to survive, she would have to begin to take other people's emotions seriously. Lacking power, she must accommodate.

Glancing affectionately at Garth, who was talking intensely with his red-uniformed daughter, Venera had to admit that the prospect wasn't so frightening as it used to be.

It became harder to walk as gravity began to vary between nearly nothing and something crushingly more than one *g*. Her horse balked, and Venera had to dismount; and when he ran off, she shrugged and fell into step next to Bryce and Sarto who were arguing politics to distract themselves. They paused to smile at her, then continued. Slowly, with many pauses and some panicked milling about as gaps appeared in the land ahead, they made their way to Fin.

They were nearly there when Buridan finally consigned itself to the air. The shouting and pointing made Venera lift her eyes from the splitting soil, and she was in time to see the black tower fold its spiderweb of girders around itself like a man spinning a robe over his shoulders. Then it lowered itself in stately majesty through the gaping rent in the land until only blue sky remained.

She looked at Bryce. He shrugged. "They knew it might happen. I told them to scatter all the copies of the book and currency to the winds if they fell. They're to seed the skies of Virga with democracy. I hope that's a good enough task to keep them sane for the next few minutes, and then, maybe, they'll be able to see to their own safety."

The tower would quickly disintegrate as it arrowed through the skies. Its pieces would become missiles that might do vast harm to the houses and farms of the neighboring principalities; so much more so would be the larger shreds of Spyre itself when it all finally went. That was tragic, but the new citizens of Buridan, and the men and women of Bryce's organization, would soon find themselves gliding through a warm blue sky. They might kick their way from stone to tumbling stone and so make their way out of the wreckage. And then they would be like everyone else in the world: sunlit and free in an endless sky.

Venera smiled. Ahead she saw the doors of the low bunker that led to Fin, and broke into a run. "We're there!"

Her logic had been simple. Fin was a wing, aerodynamic like nothing else in

Spyre. Of all the parts that might come loose and fall in the next little while, it was bound to travel fastest and farthest. So, it would almost certainly outrun the rest of the wreckage. And Venera had a hunch that Fin's inhabitants had given thought, over the centuries, about what they would do when Spyre died.

She was right. Although the guards at the door were initially reluctant to let in the mob, Corinne appeared and ordered them to stand down. As the motley collection of soldiers and citizens streamed down the steps, she turned to Venera and grinned, just a little hysterically. "We have parachutes," she said. "And the fin can be detached and let drop. It was always our plan of last resort if we ever got invaded. Now..." She shrugged.

"But do you have boats? Bikes? Any means of traveling once we're in the air?" Corinne grinned and nodded, and Venera let out a sigh of relief. She had led her people to the right place.

Spyre's final death agony began as the last were stumbling inside. Venera stood with Corinne, Bryce, and Sarto at the top of the stairs and watched a bright line start at the rim of the world, high up past the sedately spinning wheels of Lesser Spyre. The line became a visible split, its edges pulling in trees and buildings, and Spyre peeled apart from that point. Its ancient fusion engines had proven incapable of slowing it safely—it might have been the stress they generated as much as centripetal force that finally did in the titanium structure. The details didn't matter. All that Venera saw was a thousand ancient cultures ending in one stroke of burgeoning sunlight.

A trembling shockwave raced around the curve of the world. It was beautiful in the blued distance but Venera knew it was headed straight for her. She should go inside before it arrived. She didn't move.

Other splits appeared in the peeling halves of the world, and now the land simply shredded like paper. A roar like the howl of a furious god was approaching, and a tremble went through the ground as gravity failed for good.

Just before Bryce grabbed her wrist and hauled her inside, Venera saw a herd of Dali horses gallop with grace and courage off the rim of the world.

They would survive, she was sure. Kicking and neighing, they would sail through the skies of Virga until they landed in the lap of someone unsuspecting. Gravity would be found for them, somewhere; they were too mythic and beautiful to be left to die.

Corinne's men threw the levers that detached Fin from the rest of Spyre. Suddenly weightless, Venera hovered in the open doorway and watched a wall of speed-ivy recede very quickly, and disappear behind a cloud.

Nobody spoke as she drifted inside. Hollow-eyed men and women glanced at one another, all crowded together in the thin antechamber of the tiny nation. They

were all refugees now; it was clear from their faces that they expected some terrible fate to befall them, perhaps within the next few minutes. None could imagine what that might be, of course, and seeing that confusion, Venera didn't know whether to laugh or cry for them.

"Relax," she said to a weeping woman. "This is a time to hope, not to despair. You'll like where we're going."

Silence. Then somebody said, "And where is that?"

Somebody else said, "Home."

Venera looked over, puzzled. The voice hadn't been familiar, but the accent...

A man was looking back at her steadily. He held one of Fin's metal stanchions with one hand but otherwise looked quite comfortable in freefall. She did recognize the rags he was wearing, though—they marked him as one of the prisoners she had liberated from the Gray Infirmary.

"You're not from here," she said.

He grinned. "And you're not Amandera Thrace-Guiles," he said. "You're the admiral's wife."

A shock went through her. "What?"

"I only saw you from a distance when they rescued us," said the man. "And then lost sight of you when we got here to Fin. Everyone was talking about the mysterious lady of Buridan. But now I see you up close, I know you."

"Your accent," she said. "It's *Slipstream*."

He nodded. "I was part of the expedition, ma'am—aboard the *Arrest*. I was there for the big battle, when we defeated Falcon Formation. When your husband defeated them. I saw him plunge the *Rook* into the enemy's dreadnought like a knife into another man's heart. Had time to watch the bastard blow up, before they netted me out of the air and threw me into prison." He grimaced in anger.

Venera's heart was in her throat. "You saw ... Chaison die?"

"Die?" The ex-airman looked at her incredulously. "*Die?* He's not dead. I spent two weeks in the same cell with him before Falcon traded me to Sacrus like a sack of grain."

Venera's vision grayed and she would have fallen over had she been under gravity. Oblivious, the other continued: "I might've wished he were dead a couple times over those weeks. It's hard sharing your space with another man, particularly one you've respected. You come to see all his faults."

Venera recovered enough to croak, "Yes, I know how he can be." Then she

turned away to hide her tears.

The giant metal wing shuddered as it knifed through the air. Past the opened doorway, where Bryce and Sarto were silhouetted, the sky seemed to be boiling. Cloud and air were being torn by the shattering of a world. The sound of it finally caught up with Fin, a cacophony like a belfry being blown up that went on and on. It was a knell that should warn the principalities in time for them to mount some sort of emergency response. Nothing could be done, though, if square miles of metal skin were to plow into a town-wheel somewhere.

To Venera, the churning air and the noise of it all seemed to originate in her own heart. He was alive! Absurdly, the image came to her of how she would tell him this story—tell him about Garth rescuing her, about her first impressions of Spyre as seen from a roofless crumbling cube of stone, about Lesser Spyre and Sacrus and Buridan tower. Moments ago they had been mere facts, memories of a confused and drifting time. With the possibility that she could tell him about them, they suddenly became episodes of a great drama, a rousing tale she would laugh and cry to tell.

She turned to Garth, grinning wildly. “Did you hear that? He’s alive!”

Garth smiled weakly.

Venera shook him by the shoulders. “Don’t you understand? There is a place for you, for all of you, if you’ve the courage to get there. Come with me. Come to Slipstream, and on to Falcon, where he’s imprisoned. We’ll free him and then you’ll have a home again. I swear it.”

He didn’t move, just kept his grip on his daughter while the wind whistled through Fin and the rest of the refugees looked from him to Venera and back again.

“Well, what are you scared of?” she demanded. “Are you afraid I can’t do what I say?”

Now Garth smiled ruefully and shook his head. “No, Venera,” he said. “I’m afraid that you can.”

She laughed and went to the door. Bracing her hands and feet on the cold metal she looked out. The gray turbulence of Spyre’s destruction was fading with the distance. In its place was endless blue.

“You’ll see,” she said into the rushing air. “It’ll all work out.

“I’ll make sure of it.”

Copyright ©2007 Karl Schroeder